Every 365 Years

My special New Year’s Eve was December 31, 1967. All New Year’s Eves are December 31, but something made that one highly unusual.

In 1967, New Year’s Eve coincided with the last day of Ramadan, which marks the end of the movable Muslim month of fasting. On average, such coincidences should come along every 365 years or so. But as we’ve been counting for only fifteen hundred years, the averages don’t mean much yet. There have been only four of these coincidences since we started keeping count. The others were in 762, 990, and 1283, all C.E./A.D. That’s an average of 275 years apart. So you have a better chance of seeing Halley’s Comet than of being around for another of these.

The end of Ramadan is a very big deal throughout the Muslim world, the occasion for big parties and festivities. In 1967, if you were any place frequented by both Muslims and Christians on New Year’s Eve, that place would be jumping.

I was almost 21 and American and of course I didn’t know this. I had been hitchhiking around southern Spain post-Christmas, blue jeans and government issue field jacket, got myself down to the dismal British outpost at Gibraltar, and thought that Morocco had to be more fun than a Rock that, well, didn’t rock. You can see Morocco from The Rock, and the part you can see is Tangier.

The plane to Tangier was a DC-3: small, tail-down, props, and packed, every seat taken. The flight was so short—I know people who have *swum* across Hercules’s little waterway—that I got the barest of introductions to my seat-mate. His name was Albert Sanguinetti, a “barrister” from what was then the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong, about my parents’ age. That’s all I knew.

Getting off the plane, he asked where I was staying. Hmmmm. I hadn’t given it much thought. Everywhere else there had been plenty of *pensiones* and B&B’s; surely that would work in Morocco, too.

“Gee, I don’t know. I’ll find something.”

“Well,” said Mr. Sanguinetti, “I have a hotel reservation and my friend has cancelled. So there’s an extra bed, if you’d like a room in a nice place. No charge.”

The depths of my naiveté were such that in 1967, going on 1968, I never considered this to be more than a straightforward offer of a place to stay. My 2011 radar would have picked up on the handkerchief stashed in his shirt cuff, the slightly dandy-ish clothes, the cologne, and the older man/boy situation….and looked for a *pension*. But this was 1967, and none of that registered with me.

“Uh, thank you, that would be great.”
“Splendid! I’ll get us a cab to the hotel.”

And so he did. Nice, modern hotel, not palatial, two beds. What’s not to like?

“You know it’s New Year’s Eve, don’t you?”

“Sure.” Having graduated from a good American high school, I knew that much.

“And you know it’s the Eid al Fitr, the end of Ramadan?”

“Nope. What’s Ramadan?”

So began my education—best course I never enrolled in.

Albert (as he became) sure seemed to know his way around Tangier. And he seemed to have a lot of friends. First night—New Year’s Eve—he went out to meet them, with me in tow.

Where does one go to ring in the New Year in Tangier? The place of choice was a boîte de nuit on the second floor of a small Moroccan-style hotel, the Hotel Ibn Battuta, named after the greatest traveler of the medieval world. Born in Tangier in 1304, he purposively wandered over most of the Muslim world, as far as China and southeast Asia, and wrote extensively about it all. I didn’t know that, either.

Albert was dressed up in rather dapper fashion, and seemed not the least distressed that my best was a clean sweatshirt over my cleanest jeans. Just walking out of our hotel, the party had already begun. Le tout Tanger was in the street, everyone seemingly celebrating something. Morocco may be a Muslim country, but there seemed to be no shortage of alcoholic beverages available for consumption, and no prohibition on the consumers getting behind the wheel to toot their own horns (as it were).

Fending off the crowds in the street, we finally made it to the Ibn Battuta. Leaving the noisome street, trekking up to the second floor, and into another world.

The salon is a square, low ceilinged room, painted in subdued pastels of light (lime?) green and soft pink. There are sculptured plaster Islamic motifs around the walls where they meet the ceiling, and low benches around the room, with cushions covered with Moroccan weavings and embroidery. Dim lighting, Moroccan music, lots of soft, pleasant chatter.

The talk is coming from Albert’s friends. Most of them Europeans, or at least dressed that way. All men, most of his age but a few slightly younger. None as young as me.

There was a meal of some sort, but what I remember was the tea being served afterwards. It was served by a Moroccan boy, who came out with an enormous silver platter—in memory it seems four feet across—with tea pots and tea cups. The tea is poured, and then the band strikes up. Not actually a band, but a small traditional Moroccan musical ensemble of oud (lute), violin, flute, and drum.
For what seemed like an hour, but was probably just ten minutes, our “waiter” spins about the room, the entire tray and tea service balanced on his head, dancing to the music. He is....beautiful to watch. There is some slightly erotic undertone to this that I don’t quite understand, but the whole performance is entrancing. When the music ends to generous applause, he brings us our tea—and of course has spilled not a drop.

The next two days were delightfully uneventful. Albert hooked me up with some Moroccans of my age who escorted me to a nearby town to see the weekly market, and I made some touristy purchases in Tangier’s souk—Moroccan leather book covers that eventually ended up on my paperback editions of Madame Bovary and an histoire de France. He even saw me off at the ferry, making my way back to Algeciras and Spain and school in France. Mostly he went his way, and allowed me to go my own, aimless way. Nothing more untoward that the occasional caricatured English-isms of “By Jove!” and “Jolly good!”

This wasn’t my last visit to the Hotel Ibn Battuta. For some reason, I kept coming back to it. In 1971, my wife and I landed in Tangier, fresh off the student charter from London, red backpacks with Canadian flags sewn on, all set for our year wandering, Ibn Battuta-style, around Africa. After I allowed a tout to lead us through the old town to a “nice place, not far now”, my wife put her foot down. “Enough of this guy! We’re stopping right here.” And we just happened—total coincidence, really—to be standing at the modest front door of the Ibn Battuta.

In we go and, yes, it’s the same place. Four years shabbier, but definitely the site of my New Year’s soirée. A gently decaying feel to it. Not a past of grandeur, but one that probably had held a certain colonial gentility. Twelve-foot high ceilings, large wooden lattice windows opening on to the central courtyard with its banana trees and potted flowers. An occasionally clean squat toilet in the bathroom down the hall. Great coffee and baguettes for breakfast in that “salon”. Good for four or five days while we get the hang of being travelers in Morocco.

But that’s not my last visit. Nine years later, accompanying a small tour group to Morocco, I get one more look—again, totally by chance--at the Hotel Ibn Battuta. Now it’s really gone to pot, definitely not the kind of place that Albert Sanguinetti would choose for a New Year’s Eve revel.

And Albert? I never saw or heard from him again, but I have often thought of him, especially around New Years. And when I finally tracked him down, it became clear—as you’ll see when you read the obituary that follows—how much I had missed by not really talking with him. That would have been the real adventure, a bountiful addition to my education from a special person. Too bad that I missed it. An opportunity like that comes along only once every 365 years.
Hong Kong's 'Rumpole' was tireless in the search for justice
8 November 2009   South China Morning Post

One of the enduring memories of former barrister and acting District Court judge, Albert Sanguinetti, who died on October 27 aged 86, is of him, fittingly, in court.

With his case not proceeding well, Sanguinetti disappeared under his table. The confused judge asked him what he was doing. "I am simply searching for justice my lord," came the response. Above the general laughter, even the judge was seen to smile wryly at a lawyer well known for his wit and intellect.

On another occasion, a farmer he was representing whispered to Sanguinetti's interpreter. The judge asked what was said. He replied that he could not repeat the private message. When the judge demanded he do so, Sanguinetti said: "My client asks why I am wearing a cauliflower on my head."

Sanguinetti later said: "It made me realise how ridiculous it was to have wigs in court."

Before arriving in Hong Kong in 1958, Sanguinetti spent two years in Kenya with Britain's Colonial Legal Service. He was assistant attorney general of Gibraltar from 1952.

Arriving in Hong Kong aged 35, he soon became a magistrate. His experiences here had a profound influence. He believed that the law had a responsibility to rehabilitate people, not condemn them. "I remember the venerable Hin Shing-lo, who for years sat in the Magistrates' Court," Sanguinetti recalled. "He was much respected and loved by the Chinese and others and was a merciful person indeed; invariably he gave the offender a chance."

Sanguinetti came to believe that the harsher the punishment, the less chance it had of being either a deterrent, or useful for rehabilitation. His philosophy was a direct challenge to the prevailing colonial justice system, in which corporal punishment was common. He relentlessly pursued its abolition.

Last year he said: "I was absolutely stunned when I first came here in 1958. They were given the cane, simply for begging. For being destitute - for not having parents to look after you. Can you believe that?"

A close associate was Elsie Tu (then Elsie Elliott), one of Hong Kong's most influential social campaigners throughout the 1960s and '70s. The matter of five HK cents brought them together. In 1965, the Star Ferry applied to raise its fare from 20 to 25 cents. Despite Tu collecting 20,000 signatures, the Transport Advisory Committee approved the price rise in March 1966.

The Kowloon riots began a month later. Tu was called to give information to a court of inquiry. She recalled: "Since the police were determined to attribute those causes to me, for having led an
entirely disconnected earlier protest against the fare increase, I sensed from the outset that I would be transformed from witness into defendant."

Sanguinetti agreed to represent Tu for just HK$1. As she predicted, the inquiry quickly turned into a de facto trial. Disgusted, his summing-up was one of the shortest in the history of Hong Kong jurisprudence. Placing a large Bible in front of him, he read: "Whoever finds this person guilty is passing judgment unto himself."

The final judgment of the court was that Tu be sent, in the judge's words, "before the court of public opinion for censure".

A short time later, she was elected to the Urban Council with, as she recounted, "the highest number of votes on record".

"For ever after, Albert would tease me that I still owed him his dollar. I will always be personally indebted to him for the role he played in representing me."

Sanguinetti was one of the two founding members of the Hong Kong Section of the International Commission of Jurists, a NGO dedicated to law and human rights. He represented Amnesty International as an observer in South Korea and Vietnam.

"Unofficially, I was Amnesty's man in Hong Kong," he said.

He was awarded life membership of the Bar Association on its 50th anniversary in 1996. Ever the rebel, he twice declined the title of Queen's Counsel, believing it superfluous given the imminent handover, which he supported, telling anyone who would listen: "The sooner the better."

He never married, dedicating himself to the law. In doing so he reminded many of Rumpole of the Bailey, his arms swinging out of the sleeves of his tattered gown and his disintegrating wig slightly askew. His pipe and gold-rimmed monocle added to the effect. And like John Mortimer's fictional character, Sanguinetti had an astute legal brain.

According to his friend Brian McElney, former president of the Law Society, work as a barrister brought out the best in him.

"Albert flourished greatly, building up one of the best practices in Hong Kong," he said. "He was tenacious fighter and would do all in his power to fight for his client and ensure he had a fair trial. Albert was truly an expert on the law of evidence in criminal cases {hellip} Hong Kong's real life 'Rumpole'."

A compassionate and generous man, the self-styled Robin Hood of Hong Kong lawyers charged the wealthy while taking on cases of the poor that no other lawyer wanted.

When Au Pui-kuen, a police detective, shot a youth dead for asking him to drive more carefully, Sanguinetti represented the poor youth's family on a pro-bono basis.

He retired from the Bar in 1994.

Albert J.J. Sanguinetti's ashes will be scattered across the waters of Hong Kong, according to his wishes.

Remembering Albert Sanguinetti, Mr. Justice Bokhary, Permanent Judge of the Court of Final Appeal said: "His feet followed the law, but his eyes were lifted up to justice.”