Visiting Stamp Shops Around the World – Article #2
By Chris Dorn - (Beryllium Guy) - (click on images for a larger picture)

This article is the second in a series about stamp shops which I was lucky enough to be able to visit when I traveled regularly around the world on business.
Since stamp shops are becoming less and less common all the time, being replaced by “virtual” stamp shops on the internet, it has now become more challenging than ever to find traditional stamp shops. In my experience, however, I have enjoyed these opportunities so much, that I have found it to be well worth the effort it takes to find these jewels of the stamp collecting hobby where they still exist.
Featured in this article are shops in: Tokyo, Japan; Karlsruhe, Germany; and Las Vegas, Nevada, U.S.A.

Hidden Gem in Tokyo

Tokyo has been a regular business travel destination for me for more than 25 years, so it stood to reason that I would have some free time over weekends during which I was looking for things to do, and finding stamp shops was high on my list.
There were two places in Tokyo (that I could find) where more than one dealer was located in the same place. And one of those places was also co-located with a Philatelic Museum.
So, I went to check out the museum and try my luck with the dealers.
The museum and dealers are in a rather unobtrusive building located in the Toshima neighborhood of Tokyo, and fortunately for me, there was a simple “straight shot” connection on one of the subway lines between my usual hotel in central Tokyo and one of the two nearby train stations.
I first went to the Philatelic Museum several years ago, and returned there again in September 2017. The museum has a combination of display boards which show both permanent features and temporary ones which change every three months. The seasonal display at the time of my visit was a topical collection of “Working Vehicles” on stamps from around the world, which showed a variety of trucks, fire engines, police cars, earth-moving and construction equipment, and more.
It was very well assembled and nicely displayed, but I had forgotten that everything written on the boards is only in Japanese, so although I could admire the stamps, I could not easily understand the descriptive text, which was too bad.

On the second floor of the museum is a library with a very extensive collection of catalogues, reference books, and periodicals. I was able to spend a few minutes relaxing quietly there and reading through some of the periodicals, several of which were in English. They also had a full set of the latest standard Scott catalogues, and many, many more. There were some collectors seated at the tables with stock cards full of stamps which they were busily identifying using the catalogues.
After having a good look around at the displays and the library, I went next to the museum shop, where they have a good selection of stamp-related ephemera and packets of modern stamps, largely arranged by topical subjects. After looking there for awhile, I decided it was time to see the dealers, in search of some older, classic stamps, and I was not disappointed!

My first stop was at a dealer named Toshio Wada. Mr. Wada has his classic Japan material organized into large binders with stock pages, and I had a good look through those. I was able to find a couple of early issues that I needed, and I also spent some time studying his Japan Offices in China overprints. I have a few of those stamps already in my collection, but as I am a big fan of overprints and surcharges, I could not resist trying to fill some of those empty spaces in my albums.
Wada-san (Japanese equivalent of “Mr. Wada”) had recently acquired two collections which had nearly full sets of the Offices in China stamps, so I was able to look through those for very fine or better copies to add to my collection, and he offered me a substantial discount, so I chose quite a few stamps.

After reaching my limit with Wada-san, I went to the next stall to my old favorite, Mona Lisa Stamps, owned and operated by Charles Bernard, an American ex-patriate who has lived in Japan more than 40 years.

Charles is always interesting and fun to talk to, and he usually has some clearance items with special discounted prices which are a very good deal.

On this occasion, he offered me a wide selection of mint, never-hinged souvenir sheets from the 1960s through 1980s at face value, so I picked up 10-20 of those to use as trading material with a friend of mine who loves souvenir sheets.

Then I moved on the Japan classic material, where I found a copy of Scott #88 in mint, hinged condition, with beautifully bright deep ultramarine color, and great centering. It is simply the nicest copy of this stamp that I have ever been able to find, after many years of looking.

I was also able to find a very fine used copy of Scott #110, which was issued in 1905 to commemorate the forced joining of the Japan and Korea postal services. This stamp was issued on the 1st of July that year, on the day after Korean stamps were officially withdrawn from sale. This stamp was used in Japan itself, but also in the Japan Offices in China and Korea.

Charles and his wife, who works by his side at the stamp shop, kindly allowed me to take a photo of them with their display, and told me to come and visit them again the next time I am in Tokyo, which I promised to do. If you look in the photo just behind Charles, you will see a picture of the Mona Lisa on the wall, after which the shop is named.
When in Baden…

Perhaps readers of the TSF Newsletter have noticed that in my posts about visits to stamps shops, I have the tendency to “go local” in material that I seek out and acquire, and Baden was no exception. During my month-long work trip in Germany in June and July 2017, I spent most of my time there in the town of Karlsruhe, located in the state of Baden-Württemberg, in southwestern Germany, not too far from the border with France. The city has a population of just over 300,000 people.

On one sultry Friday afternoon in July, I left work early and went to downtown Karlsruhe with my good friend and work colleague who, knowing my love of stamps, took me to the Walsch Stamp-Coin-Weapons-Gold & Silver shop, which he told me, to his knowledge, was the only remaining brick-and-mortar stamp shop left in town.

Walsch is a family-run business that has operated for a few decades, and today is run by Marco Walsch, the son of the founder and original owner. Marco explained to me that stamp business, which once was the shop’s biggest revenue area, is today smaller than precious metals, coins, and old weapons & military items.

Despite that explanation, as I began to ask Marco about his stamp inventory, it was clear that he knew his stuff when it came to stamps, especially those of classic Germany and German States.

Since Karlsruhe is located in the original state of Baden (prior to the amalgamation of Baden with Württemberg and Hohenzollern to form present-day Baden-Württemberg), and I had virtually no stamps of classic Baden in my collection, this seemed like a good opportunity to add to my collection without the need to check my current holdings.

Marco handed me a couple of large-format stock books, and I saw upon opening them that they were packed with many copies of the early issues of Baden. I was especially pleased by this since I was looking for stamps of higher than average quality, and I knew that a larger stock gave me better odds of finding individual examples to my liking. I was able to find several 4-margin copies of the earliest issues of Baden (Scott #1-10) to add to my collection at very fair prices.

I am already planning to visit Walsch again whenever I next find myself back in Karlsruhe!
Gambling in Las Vegas?
As a member of the APS (American Philatelic Society) for the past 17 years or so, I have become a regular reader of the Society’s monthly magazine, The American Philatelist (AP). As with all stamp periodicals that I read, I always peruse the classified ads in the back, whether I am truly seriously looking for anything or not! Who knows what I might find there?

I have noted over some time that there has been a regular advertisement in the AP which asks the question: “VISITING LAS VEGAS? Stamps, Covers, and More.” Well, who could resist an opening like that? Not me, that’s for sure! From my home in northern Arizona, I live about a 4-hour drive away from Las Vegas, so it is a nice place to go for a 2-3 day getaway. Neither my wife nor I are big gamblers, but we have been known to patronize a casino now and again, typically donating our hard-earned money to what we used to call “one-armed bandits”, but which these days are effectively electronic video games designed as paid, personal entertainment machines.

To prevent ourselves from getting too carried away by the “gambling bug” while we are in Las Vegas, my wife and I normally set a daily vacation spending limit while we are here. My wife generally uses her daily allowance in the casinos, while I take mine to the Jim Forte Postal History and Stamps Plus shop out on West Sahara Avenue, a few miles away from the Las Vegas Strip.

As the first business name suggests, the shop specializes in postal history, and as near as I can tell, they have some beautiful pieces there. Thanks to my time on TSF over the past year, I have learned to appreciate postal history much more than I ever thought that I would. As I cannot even keep up with my stamp collection, however, I have no plans to expand my collection to include postal history, despite its obvious attractions!

In addition to the postal history, Jim Forte also owns a business called Stamps Plus, which handles selling of individual stamps, sets, collections, and accumulations. Jim’s associate, Allan Solnik, is in charge of the Stamps Plus operation, and he has been my primary contact during my visits to the shop. As I have now been there a few times, Allan knows my collecting interests, and he is able to steer me towards the pre-1930 worldwide issues which can potentially fit into my collection.

The shop is easy enough to find if you have the address, but it is located in what I would call either a business or office park, so it is not readily visible from the street. One needs to drive into the office park and proceed along the rows of low buildings to find number 8919, Suite 140. But the shop is well worth the finding, as I have had some excellent experiences at Stamps Plus, buying premium-quality items at very fair prices.

Stamps Plus also now runs a monthly stamp auction on-line, and is one of the primary sponsors of a local stamp show in the Las Vegas area. I have found a few very nice items in the on-line auction, and I will continue to visit Jim and Allan whenever I am in town, and I hope to make it out to one of their stamp shows one of these days, too.