

My Taiwan Impression

By
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Introduction

Instead of hunting for bargains in Black Friday Crows, our family visited the beautiful island of Taiwan from November 21st to November 28th, 2004. On this one-week short but enjoyable trip, we had an opportunity to visit its capital - Taipei and the scenic mountain city of Hualien and its surroundings. During the visit, we experienced many differences that existed between the both sides of the Taiwan Strait. After all, the two sides have been separated and ruled by two distinguished systems, politically and culturally, for almost sixty years. The intent of this write up is to relate some of my personal experience and observations to you, the readers. Hopefully, it can be taken as some type of reference to assist you to better plan for your Taiwan vacation.



The City

Taipei is the bustling center of Taiwan's commerce, government and culture. About six million people currently live in and around this capital of Taiwan. There are countless number of buses, cars and mopeds to jam the streets almost all the time, so much so, the word “堵” had been incorporated in the local names. For example, “八堵” along, obviously, with “一堵” through “七堵” are the local names near Taipei’s suburbia to signify the traffic jams near the city. Besides the world’s tallest building, Taipei 101, that is set to open in March 2005, and its immediate surroundings, the streets are narrow with many dated buildings that could use a thorough cleaning. The city is very much condensed which reminds me of New York’s Queens Borough by the large numbers of old buildings, street side vendors, pedestrians and elevated steel pedestrian over crossings.



Food

Taiwan has a very diverse population due to the historical reasons, which undoubtedly offers wide variety of fine cuisines as well as street snack food, mainly influenced by Mainland China. My favorite snacks are hot pot, BBQ stinky tofu, chive boxes, giant fried chicken, Fuzhou pepper cake and much more. I know that one is not supposed to have more than one favorite, but it is hard to pick out just one. I did try the well-known Taiwanese Oyster Omelet but did not feel anything special about it. The name of the famous or infamous “coffin bread” was something that turned me off despite of the fact that the content has nothing to do with what our knowledge of the use of coffins. I also wasn’t brave enough to try snake meat or snake blood.

Due to its subtropical climate, Taiwan produces a large variety of fruits. In addition to the ones we have used to have every day, there are many different types of fruits that I have never knew nor tasted before, like Bale, Lianwu, Fire Dragon Guo, Passion Fruits and Durian.



Transportation

The public transportation system in Taipei is advanced. There are seven bus routes conveniently connecting the CKS (Chiang Kai Shek) International Airport and downtown Taipei at cost that range from NT70 to NT140. The buses are running every 15 to 20 minutes from 5:00 am to midnight daily. What impressed me was that there were personnel at each bus stop along the way to monitor the number of passengers on the buses and use radio to inform the number of vacant seats available for the next stop.



The Taipei City MRT (mass rapid transit system) and City Bus operate together. The charges are based on the distance one travels, which range from NT7 to NT65. Single ride tickets can be purchased at the MRT stations or on buses. For travelers, the best way of using the system is to purchase an Easy Card. Users swipe the card at the station entrances and swipe it again when exit the stations. The charges are automatically calculated and deducted from the card base on the distance traveled. This would eliminate the hassle of carrying change, figuring out exact fare, and purchasing tickets each time. The Easy Card also gives 20% discount. There are machines at all stations that one can use to check the card balance and add fund to it, if needed. Any unused balance left on the card can be refunded at any MRT stations.

Currency Exchange

Banks prefer to receive traveler's checks over cash due to faster money transfer and less chance of getting counterfeit bills. For these reasons, banks offer a slightly higher exchange rate for traveler's checks. Cash on the other hand would give you unfavorable exchange rates and many headaches. With the US dollars on the decline, most banks put on even more strict exchange policies.

The first bank I went to had an exchange amount limit of \$100. A teller checked my \$20 bills like a stamp collector examining his specimens. He looked for markings, folding lines, missing corners and, of course, authenticity of the bills. Among sixteen \$20 bills I submitted, only five met his satisfaction.

The second bank charges NT79 for every disqualified \$100 bills. This time, only seven out of fifteen of my \$100 bills passed the inspection. The disqualified bills are as follows: bills that dated in 1996; bills with small presidential portrait; bills with serial number start with "CB" (god knows why); of course, bills with any markings, any missing corners, any discoloring, any folding lines, any...etc.



People

Most people are very friendly and polite. Children behave very well. Although the streets and MRT stations are packed with people but you would not feel crowded at all. People line up automatically to board trains and buses. You hardly hear any loud talking and nobody spits.

Streets are clean and safe even at nights. People start to come out to the night markets at dusk because it is much cooler compared to the hot and humid days. In fact, there are more people on the streets at nights than during the days.



The locals do have an unfavorable attitude towards the mainlanders. They often complain about how the mainlanders behave, and they, of course, always have their opinions about the mainland's political system. Being a mainlander myself, I usually announce that fact right away to avoid any unnecessary awkward moments.

Taroko Gorge

Taroko National Park is situated in the northeastern part of Taiwan near Hualian. It features high mountain terrines and sheer gorges of the Central Mountain Range. Many of its peaks towering above 3,000 meters in elevation, with many natural wonders. The highway cut through the park is also the east end of the Central Cross Island Highway built in the late nineteen fifties. Judging from its high mountainous terrines and hard granite rocks, the highway was certainly a giant engineering undertaking, at least at the time.

The Main Taroko Gorge is the creation of both geological uplifting and river erosion by the Liwu River. The unique marble gorge at some points raise hundreds of meters high are spectacular and astonishing. According to the park information, there is a large outdoor hot spring pool, many waterfalls, narrow gorges and sheer cliffs that can only be accessed by foot.





Yeliou Scenic Area

Yeliou is a place of geological wonder — rocks of various shapes resulting from millions of years of erosion by the pounding waves. I always had desire to visit it since it is a place that I have learned about when I was little.

A large number of the rocks are the so-called mushroom rocks, which are also the most eye-catching. The most famous of the mushroom rocks is the Queen's Head, which many say reminded them of Queen Cleopatra. There were also candlestick rocks and ginger rocks that formed similar way except its hard calcium core was squeezed further by earth's movements to take on the shape of candlestick and ginger.



The Negatives

Unfortunately, it seems that some locals admire the Japanese very much. For merely fifty years of Japanese Occupation (1895 to 1945), which ended almost sixty years ago, the Japanese certainly left a deep influence that is hard to change. For example, while visiting the Gugong one day, in a short conversation, a foreigner told me that I looked like a Japanese which infuriated me very much. I angrily asked him: "Have you ever met a Japanese who is this tall and handsome?" Some locals nearby noticed my discontent, came and said: "why are you upset? You should be happy, it's a compliment." That statement itself saddened me. After being colonized for fifty years, some still pathetically feel glorified being told that their looks resemble their aggressors.

I have learned since childhood that the Japanese do not pay too much attention to what they wear on their feet. Sure enough, we saw even grown men in their forties and fifties wear cheap sandals bare footed. They walk around with them everywhere ignoring the "No Sandals" signs at the entrance of all the respectable places.

Some locals don't seem to mind to have their meals right next to raw meats, seafood and nauseating photos. At the famous Snake Alley Night Market near Ximending, we saw some people having dinner right by a busy street surrounded by raw fish heads, chicken feet, and pig rectums. On top of all, there is a hemorrhoid clinic right next door with an oversized poster showing what the doctors can cure.

I was surprised to observe that food handlers also handle money openly with their bare hands. Perhaps due to either the lack of basic hygienic conscious or the extreme love for money. It seems that some people just don't realize nor have the knowledge of how dirty (physically) the money can be.

Conclusion

Taiwan is a beautiful place to visit, just as its Portuguese name, Formosa ("beautiful island") portrayed. Like all of our previous vacations, Taiwan's friendly people, delicious food, sophisticated transportation systems and spectacular scenery will left me with long lasting memories. Nevertheless, my experience and observations are obviously limited since we were in Taiwan for only one week. What I have written down are just a few areas that I saw and my personal impressions, which should be absorbed at readers' discretion. Hopefully, you will have an opportunity to combine your experience with mine and put them into your own perspective. My ultimate advice is: "If you want to know the taste of the grapes, then you should taste them yourself".