

“TAIWAN — TOUCH YOUR HEART”

An Experience of Our Family’s Summer Vacation in Taiwan

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It was 3:00a.m. on August 1, 2008. We had intended to wake up at 4:00a.m. Somehow the alarm was accidentally set ahead of the actual time by one hour. No wonder when we hurried to drive our car to catch the famous Alishan train, one of the only three mountain railways in the world, my wife was observant enough to note that there was no other hotel guest in a similar hurry.



We finally witnessed the sunrise at about half an hour after five o’clock. Although we still felt a bit chilly in the early morning in the high mountain area that is more than 2,200 metres above the sea level, it was a fascinating and heart-pounding scene to see the sun gradually rise above the edge of the mountain. This was all our very first time to see the sunrise at Alishan. Nonetheless, the kids were complaining about waking them up too early, not to mention the extra hour wasted due to the alarm clock’s mischief.

Besides sunrises and the mini mountain train, Alishan National Scenic Area (阿里山國家風景區) offers some fantastic scenic views that you may not catch elsewhere: seas of clouds, sunsets, and old forests. During the dark nights, we got to see little and large stars alike shining clearly in the sky. I almost felt like reaching out to touch the stars appearing not too far from the high mountains.



It has been seventeen years since I left Taiwan to pursue my graduate studies in the U.S. I had traveled here and there in Taiwan during my childhood. This was really the first time that I, along with my family, traveled around the entire island. Over the past seventeen years, Taiwan certainly has changed a great deal. Politically, the ruling party has changed hands twice. The democratic movements, though still have room to catch up with the western democracies, continue to advance. Like it or not, unofficially or officially, the interactions with mainland China have increased over time. Economically, Taiwan has been transforming from the labour and manufacturing intensive industries to the more high-tech, knowledge-based industries over the

past decades. The export-driven economy in the past has gradually geared toward a more balanced one with emphases in both production and consumption, and in both economy and the environment. Tourism has particularly benefited in recent years to cater to both domestic and foreign travelers. Socially, as the younger generations get more educated, the people can hopefully continue to learn democratic and lawful values and be more tolerant in diversities while maintaining high ethical standards and some traditional merits.



Back to our family's trip, we spent about one month vacationing in Taiwan in the past summer. Our kids, growing up in North America, had some adjustments to make for the hot and humid weather there. The kids also had the hands-on experience for the first time dealing with the couple of typhoons during our stay. I noted that the highway traffic flows were quite good, thanks to the build-up of more highways in recent years, and, in part, the sky high gasoline price and economic slow-down.

We started our island tour from the northeast coast, where my hometown Yilan is located. Major scenic points in Yilan include Northeast Coast National Scenic Area (東北角海岸國家風景區) and Taipingshan National Forest Recreation Area (太平山國家森林遊樂區). It was also when the Yilan International Rain Festival (宜蘭國際蘭雨節) took place. Yilan used to have farming, fishery, and light manufacturing industries as its major economic lifeline. It was one of the pioneer counties in Taiwan building, promoting and emphasizing the tourism industry. The recently built Highway 5 has shortened the traffic time from Taipei to Yilan to about half an hour from one to two hours in the past. This makes single-day trips practical for tourists coming from Taipei. It was here in Yilan and Keelung that our kids got to enjoy some quality playing time with their cousins. To date, people in Yilan still hold many of the traditional values of an agriculture society, such as hard-working, saving for the future, and maintaining down-to-earth lifestyles.



We continued our south-bound trip to Hualien. This was the day after a typhoon had just swept through the area. Typically, there would be at least a couple of typhoons, similar to hurricanes in North America, that would hit Taiwan every summer. The gusty wind blows and heavy rainfalls would do quite some damages to the areas that a typhoon passes through. I

remember during my childhood my dad used to secure windows and hanging objects and prepare for the necessities if power electricity should be out of supply whenever a typhoon was coming. At some point, as I learned to get used to these kinds of natural disasters, I was sort of looking forward to typhoon's coming as I could stay home without going to school.

In Hualien, we visited the famous Taroko National Park (太魯閣國家公園). We followed the roads creeping up along the Liwu River (立霧溪) to enjoy numerous breath-taking scenes of gorgeous, steep stone cliffs. We enjoyed our stay at the Grand Formosa Taroko (天祥晶華度假酒店) and Cloud Top Landscape (雲頂精緻民宿), a B&B (bed and breakfast) situated on top of a hill overlooking the Hualien City. The dancing performances by the aboriginal people offered additional entertainments during the evenings. We also took a boat cruise on Carp Lake (花蓮鯉魚潭). Special thanks to Frank Lin, my previous co-worker at Arthur Andersen. His family spent one week traveling with us and had pre-booked the hotels along the way. A special mention in Hualien goes to the water dances that utilized lighting, music and technology to please our eyes and ears.



We drove through the East Rift Valley National Scenic Area (花東縱谷國家風景區) from Hualien to Taitung. The East Rift Valley divides the Coastal Mountains from the east and the Central Mountains to the west. I was looking forward to doing some water rafting along Siouguluan River (秀姑巒溪). We had to give up that idea due to insufficient interest, however. We did make a special stop at the Hongye Elementary School (紅葉國小

), the origin of a winning little league baseball team that sparked the baseball sports interest in Taiwan for decades ensuing. My kids and I got to throw and hit some baseballs there with the school rep team, although some players from the team looked to be more interested in taking a nap than doing anything else during the noon time. We stayed at the Parkview Hotel (花蓮美侖大飯店) that offered hot spring water spas. The kids also got to enjoy swimming in the pool to escape the summer heat.

In Taitung, we enjoyed quite a bit of sporting activities such as arrow shooting, downhill grass sliding, simulating bird flying, and trampoline jumping. The National Museum of Prehistory (國立臺灣史前文化博物館) offered some in-depth information about the

rescue and excavation of the Peinan Site (卑南遺址) and other interesting exhibitions about Taiwanese history and its aboriginal people.



We got to take peeks at the Pacific Ocean along the coastal drive from Taitung to Pingdong, my wife's hometown. It was in the area of Kenting National Park (墾丁國家公園) that we spent our next couple of days. Kenting is at the southern tip of the Taiwan island. There is no shortage of water related activities to cool us off in this tropical area. Even Howard Hotels Resorts Suites (福華大飯店), the hotel we stayed for the next two days, offered an indoor amusement water park. I got up early in a morning to stroll along a beach nearby the hotel, picking up treasure pebbles and shells along the way. It was after dark when the night market started to come alive. Street vendors lined up on both sides of a long street corridor, selling clothing, toys, household items and all kinds of refreshments and food. Kids were more attracted to the fun games. My friend Frank was perfect in a couple of toy gun

shootings, thanks to the compulsory military training and services we both had two decades ago. Our kids were more than happy to take the water guns that were awarded to Frank for his excellent shooting skills. The National Museum of Marine Biology and Aquarium (國立海洋生物博物館) offered excellent educational and entertainment values in exhibiting marine lives and ecology.



We started to travel northbound after covering Pingdong. In general, the western part of Taiwan is more industrialized and developed. I had been to many places in this part of Taiwan when I was young. Therefore, our coverage this time was more selective. Our visit to the National Science and Technology Museum (國立科學工藝博物館) in Kaohsiung was highlighted by my son Jonathan's short conversation in English with a robot there. We also enjoyed an interactive activity area in which ball games were used to educate various diseases and health issues.





Sun Moon Lake (日月潭), situated in the middle of Taiwan, is a highly rated destination for both domestic and foreign tourists alike. We did not have sufficient time to take a cruise on the lake that would presumably be enjoyable. The Peacock Zoo (孔雀園) located on the ring road of the lake offered a free visit to see hundreds of peacocks and special birds, thanks to the late president Chiang Kai-shek's instruction to build this zoo some four decades ago.

By this time, we had driven many miles of the long winding mountain roads. Before we came back to the plains, we did stop by a creek, its name unknown, to play in the cold and refreshing mountain water, with our kids enjoying their stone-skipping games. We visited Tunghai University (東海大學), the alma mater for both me and my wife, in Taichung. As an alumnus, I got the privilege of driving our car into the campus, one of the largest in Taiwan. The university campus, including the landmark Luce Chapel (路思義教堂), still looked familiar to me and my wife. However, many new educational facilities have mushroomed during the past two decades.



Toward the end of our month-long trip, we stayed mostly in the northern part of Taiwan. We visited the awarding winning Window on China Theme Park (小人國). We had been to this theme park when my wife and I were still dating during our university studying days. We noted that a vast area has been dedicated to the newly developed water wonderlands, a cool place for kids and adults alike during the hot summer.

Taipei, capital city of Taiwan, typically is the first and most visited place in Taiwan. It offers many unique and popular tourist destinations, including the attractions we visited this time: Yangmingshan National Park (陽明山國家公園), National Palace Museum (國立故宮博物院), Maokong Gondola (貓空纜車), Taipei 101, and Taipei Zoo (臺北動物園).

Spring is probably the best time to visit Yangmingshan National Park when the park has all kinds of flowers blossoming. The National Palace Museum houses many precious artwork and treasures preserved from the five thousand years of Chinese civilization. While the experience of getting to see some of the unique and amazing ancient artifacts proved to be fond memories, I thought the museum could further improve by offering a children's playground for entertainment and educational purposes, a gift shop

selling replica or museum related merchandise for visitors to take home, better managed and more affordable restaurants, and uses of modern technology to enhance the audio and visual effects of the visiting tour.



Maokong Gondola offered cable car rides to overlook the beautiful mountains and villages. This reminded me of similar rides in Central, Hong Kong and Blue Mountains, Australia. Taipei has come out of its dark age of crowded traffic in the early nineteen nineties by building impressive mass public transit systems encompassing underground subway and overpass cable car. Taipei 101, the world's tallest completed skyscraper with 101 floors above the ground, offered an even more impressive overview of the

surroundings of the Taipei basin. We got to enjoy a free personal panoramic view of the Taipei infrastructure and scenery as one of our close friends works in the Taipei 101 office building. Finally, Taipei Zoo, similar to many zoos around the globe, houses many animals and offered education, entertainment, research, and preservation of popular and some near distinct animals.

Overall, this family trip was fun, exciting and memorable. Although my wife and I both grew up in Taiwan, we got to visit quite a few places in Taiwan that we have never been before. Taiwan has made a lot of progress over the past two decades after I went overseas in 1991. It is a small island country with many nice, diligent, friendly and peace-aspiring people. It lacks natural resources to depend on and still needs to put up with the tremendous diplomatic pressure from China in international affairs. Nonetheless, it has evolved from the early on agriculture economy, to an industrialized and now more so knowledge-based and service-oriented economy. It is emphasizing the balance between economy and the environment, in contrast to the old days when I could see plenty of water and air pollution.

Sometimes it may look more chaotic than it actually is, but Taiwan's democracy and the political systems advance well. As people get more educated and matured, more of them probably can tell which politicians are really working for the people and which politicians are actually using the political platform to have their individual shows and advance their personal interests. Foreigners can also see lots of road signs, brochures and websites in English, making the language barrier less of an issue during their visits. After years' of cultivation, the hardware and software of tourism is highly developed, offering a unique traveling experience that cannot be missed. Welcome to Taiwan. The beautiful Formosa touches your heart!