

Republic of China, Formosa, or Taiwan

I left Israel on September 20th on a flight to Hong Kong in order to start a one month trip to China. My trip companions (yet to be introduced) will arrive in HKG only on 25 and 26 of September. Nevertheless, I decided to take the September 20th flight in order to avoid adding \$300 to my free bonus ticket as the price jumped dramatically in the Rosh Hashana week. Since I did not want to be stuck in HKG for a whole week, I decided to fly to visit an old friend of mine in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, which is a short flight away from HKG.

So here I am writing to you now from a place that never appears on the wish list of travelers (I can't imagine anyone say "... and I still want to see the Taj Mahal, sail down the Amazon, visit Prague and be in Kaohsiung ..."). However, apart from the benefit of seeing a friend that I haven't seen for a long time, I simply enjoy visiting new places, off the beaten track, and see what they are like. What do I really know about the "Made In..." country, this "other China"?

Taiwan, an island in the sea of China, was called by Portuguese sailors in the 17th century "Ilha Formosa", namely "a beautiful island". Alas, 400 years can do miracles to islands, I can tell you that. Taiwan is the second most populated country in the world and that really shows. There are still national parks in the island that retain the original virgin beauty of its mountainous landscape, but most of its surface is completely covered with TACHSIT rather than TAVLIT (remember those terms from GADNA lessons?). Richard, a friend that I know from my Los Angeles years who now lives again in his homeland (don't let the American name fool you, he's fully Taiwanese) took me to the south edge of the island to a beautiful place called Kenting. Along the 3-hour ride I saw no untouched land. Only at the very south you realize that this is a tropical island with lush vegetation, banana and coconut trees and beautiful rugged coastline. A typhoon storm hit close to the island 3 weeks ago and its trace shows all over. Consequently, it rained heavily and Richard told me that these annual typhoons that only get near the island but do not hit it directly, have usually no death toll, on one hand, but are responsible for the blessed rain on the other hand.

Kaohsiung is a busy city and a major port (the world's third largest container port, if you must know). It is not a charming city, or a beautiful one and its air is heavily polluted. But like Tel Aviv, "Bechol zot yesh bah mashehu" (still, it has something). In how many cities one can spend a day like I did today? Within 8 hours I was in a museum of fine arts, a true tropical jungle with monkeys, and a wide sandy beach. The museum boasted first class architecture, original and very good paintings and especially sculptures of local artists, one of the best modes of presentation I have ever seen in an art museum and a superb air-condition; all this for free! It gets 2 stars in my guide book (i.e., worth a visit, if you happen to be in the area). The jungle, on Shou-Shan Mountain, was an awesome surprise. Richard came from his office to pick me up. He was dressed with a suit and a tie and I was misled to believe that we'd drive up the mountain, take 2 pictures and then eat something. However, we began a trek of more than 1 hour in each direction through a lush jungle that would not shame any Costa Rican jungle, with dozens

of macaque monkeys as companions. It was humid and hard and I couldn't believe that 40 minutes before I was walking in the cool corridors of an art museum! The views of the huge city and the ocean from atop were most rewarding. Many locals climb up for meditation, praying and reflecting on life. That was a truly great place! Then we continued to Chin-chin Island - a long sandy island off the shores of Kaohsiung, with a thriving seafood market and wide quiet beaches. The beach was basically deserted and apart from soft Chinese music that was carried by the wind from afar, and the soothing sound of the waves, there was no other sound. Another terrific refuge to escape to from the city. The views of the Kaohsiung skyline from the ferry do not match those that the Staten-island ferry has to offer, but nevertheless they were very nice.

The food here is strange. I had no problem of leaving things on my plate even if it sometimes offended my hosts a little bit. But some things, like the dim-sum or the noodle soups are great. The most interesting thing I ate here is the Taiwanese ice "cream". When you get to one of those ice stands, you get to select from a wide array of bowls with strange jelly-things in them, that come in various colors and shapes: White almond-based crescent-shaped jellies, orange sweet-potato-based square jellies, yellow God-knows-what-based noodle-shaped (or actually worm-shaped) jellies, brown beans (yes, beans!), white puffy rice-grains etc. After your bowl is half full, it is passed to a young kid (it is always a young kid) that grinds a big ice cube on top of the bowl that quickly becomes covered with a white snowy cloud of ice flakes. On that they pour sweet caramel sauce and off you go. As I said - interesting, I ate most of it, but I wasn't ashamed to leave some in the plate.

Being a western visitor in Taiwan is, in general, a delight for people who like to feel a little bit like "an Englishman in New York". There are not too many visitors in Taiwan and the friendly locals are excited to see such. One day I took Richard's scooter and drove to the Lotus lake and spend there few hours. My fellow scooter drivers smiled to me in the stop lights through their mouth masks and the people who picnicked around the lake yelled at me excited "Hello! How are you!". The strange language, completely incomprehensible and, what's even worse, utterly unpronounceable, together with the fact that almost no one speaks English, makes one feel even more foreign and clueless. This makes the traveling and discovering experience even more intense. Of-course, I have to admit that having a local host as a safety net helps (I remember that in Japan there were few times in which I lost my "joy-of-discovery" when the level of cluelessness got on my nerves).

I will conclude this letter with a story about Liuho street-market that I visited in my first night here right after I landed. It is a lively street market, with much to see, to hear, to smell and to eat. It reminded me a lot of the street markets in Bangkok. But what I saw there, in one of the food stands, I never saw elsewhere. As the following description is detailed and not very pleasant, think twice before going any further. A man and a woman were standing near a heap of live snakes, outside their food stand that specialized in snake dishes, and prepared those 1-1.5 meter long snakes to be served for eating. The woman took a snake from the floor, put its head in a little rope loop that was hanging from the roof of the hut, held its other end so that it became straight, and then took scissors and opened the snake from one end to the other like a tailor tears a piece of cloth. Then she reached with her hand and pulled out the entire inside package to the ground, and cleaned the emptied snake under running water. At this point she would hand the snake to her husband who made two cuts in the skin from both sides of

the head and pulled the skin off in two precise motions - one from each side of the snake. This is when I discovered, to my horror, that the snake was still alive! When the man left it to hang, it was trembling and shaking like a frozen man in T-shirt in a cold January Siberian night! The ordeal did not end there. The man continued to do the same thing with the flesh of the unfortunate creature. Two cuts in both sides of the head, two precise motions and, voila, he had two long and nice pieces of fillet thrown into the wok! The horror was three-fold: the snake was still left with some muscular tissue around its skeleton so that it continued with its chilling dance of death; its face and frozen eyes remained intact; and its mouth was wide open in a silent painful cry. The monsters could have first killed their victims, of-course, by a quick removal of the head. But then they would loose the show that, indeed, had many spectators. A big sign forbad taking pictures and Richard told me that it is because the evil practice that I witnessed was illegal.

I will conclude here. True, a trip report on Taiwan is not complete without relating to the delicate situation between Taiwan and China, especially when here I am hosted by a Taiwanese and soon I will enter China with a Chinese friend of mine (not all the Taiwanese with whom I spoke liked the idea that I'm going to travel for a whole month in the giant daunting neighbor). A trip report on Taiwan should also dedicate a paragraph to the Falun-Dafa movement that has hundreds of thousands of practitioners in its native Taiwan and also millions in China, but it suffers from a fierce and lethal fight from the Beijing government. However, I am tired, so I will bid you farewell at this point and wish you all a happy new year.

Yours,
Tamir