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TAIWAN: In the heart of Asia

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The name Formosa dates back to 1542 when Portuguese sailors sighted an uncharted land and included it in their maps as the "beautiful Island." It's a destination that I have always wanted to visit.

And after a gruelling ten hour flight, we landed at Taipei Taoyuan International Airport, slightly past noon and immediately embarked to explore the places of interest. Taipei has a blend of modern and ancient Chinese culture coexisting in harmony. Yet, despite the drastic modernisation, it remains one of the most traditional cities in the region. Unlike Hong Kong or Singapore, Taipei has not succumbed to the creeping Westernisation. The Taiwanese highly value their heritage and the heart that keeps Taipei moving is unquestionably Chinese.

We were staying downtown close to the iconic Taipei 101. It was the tallest building in the world until dwarfed by the opening of Burj Khalifa in Dubai. Taipei 101 comprises 101 floors above ground and five floors underground. The glass enclosed observation platform on the 89th floor offers magnificent views of the surrounding city, mountains and the horizon. We climbed up two more floors to reach the open air platform on the 91st floor—a multi-level shopping mall that houses hundreds of fashion stores, restaurants, movie houses and clubs. Nearby are the equally grand Taiwan International Convention Centre and the imposing World Trade Centre. Skyscrapers are missing partly because the island is frequented by earthquakes and typhoons.

Our first visit was to Sun Yat-Sen Memorial located, with beautiful sculptures, in one of the grandest parks of the city. The imposing memorial is dedicated to the man considered to be the founder of modern China. A huge statue of Dr Sen sits in the lobby flanked by two ever vigilant guards. It contains displays of Sun's life and the revolution he led, and is also a multipurpose social, educational and cultural centre.

Next in our list was the Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall, a majestic marble monument, surrounded by landscaped

gardens and placid ponds built to commemorate the late President. On the third floor is an imposing huge bronze statue of sitting Chiang flanked by two motionless guards. The museum dedicated to Chiang's life with historic documents and photographs is on the ground floor. The National Opera House and the Concert Hall also house cultural centres within beautiful parks. We also found time to visit the original residence of Chiang Kai-Shek and its adjoining park.

The National Revolutionary Martyr's Shrine on the outskirts of the city is dedicated to the lost heroes of China's war. The structure of the shrine includes the arched main gate, a vast courtyard, guest pavilions and bell towers. The names of those fallen heroes are inscribed beside murals at the main shrine, depicting their feats. It was a treat to watch the highly impressive display of changing of guards by impeccably white uniformed military police.

The National Palace Museum was

pig organs to frog legs. No wonder it's so popular! Taiwan is a shopper's paradise, particularly when it comes to electronic goods. While browsing at some of the trendiest malls, we were surprised and overwhelmed to find "Made in Bangladesh" garments and leather goods being sold. It made us proud.

We also found time to visit the impressive Taipei Grand Mosque and offer our prayers. Afterwards, we drowned ourselves in endless gossip as we relished sumptuous lunch at the Masala Art Restaurant owned by a South Indian Muslim and later dined at a "Halal" restaurant owned by a local Taiwanese Muslim with mouth-watering dishes of bamboo shoots with duck, king lobster, seafood salad, kabab and chicken fried rice.

One of the premier destinations in northern Taiwan, Yehliu Geopark, is home to a number of unique geological formations including the iconic "Queen's Head" and is located along a mesmerising Cape formed as thousands



Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall, a majestic marble monument

worth visiting—with a permanent collection of nearly 700,000 pieces of ancient Chinese imperial artefacts and artworks, it is regarded as the greatest treasure house of Chinese cultural relics in the world. The collection encompasses over 10,000 years of Chinese history from the Neolithic age to the late Qing Dynasty. Most of the collections are high quality pieces collected by China's emperors.

Taipei is home to hundreds of temples. We did not miss the opportunity to visit the Confucius temple to pay tribute to one of the most influential sages, scholars and philosophers throughout the ages. The Confucius values of ethics, education and simplicity are beautifully embodied in the temple which also displays ritual implements and musical instruments used in ceremonies.

Later, we spent some time in the majestic eighteenth century Longshan Temple, the oldest and most famous of Taipei's myriad temples. Enormous bronze incense burners and crowds of worshippers could be seen engaged in offerings and hypnotic chanting.

The Shilin Night Market, a nightly carnival of shopping and snacking, remains vibrant till the wee hours. Crowded and lively like our Gausia or Bongo Bazar, in the evening it transforms into an open air restaurant, with hundreds of vendors selling all types of cuisine from roasted duck to snake meat,

of years of geological movement forced the Datun Mountains to change their shape, jutting out into the ocean. Besides the Queen's Head, other remarkable formations include Elephant Rock, Kissing Rock and Princess' Head.

The Taiwanese relish *paan* (betel leaves). The shopkeepers, taxi drivers and every third man in the street are found chewing *paan*. Highly decorated *paan* shops (Pinang Tien) identified by colourful neon lights are ubiquitous with the delicacy being sold by smartly dressed girls. A betel leaf smeared with lime is wrapped around a single green raw betel nut and chewed. They have not learned to add tobacco (*zarda*) as yet. Better yet, they have not learned to spit either!

Language can be a serious barrier as they speak mostly Mandarin, and English is hardly understood. However, we were able to overcome the problem with the aid of "sign" language and calculators. What impressed me most was that the Taiwanese highly value their rich culture despite the phenomenal modernisation. Taiwanese kindness and modesty is worth mentioning. Unlike its "industrious" and "workaholic" neighbours, the Taiwanese are by and large "friendly" and "relaxed". Formosa is indeed "beautiful" and inviting.

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