

## Armchair Traveller Presentation – Bill Parris – July 2021

### 'Jane's Journal'

#### TAIWAN

We flew out of Melbourne at 2.30pm on Sunday August 10<sup>th</sup> 2014 and landed in KL for a 4 hour stop over and to change aircraft. We left KL at 1.30am and landed in Taipei at 5.45am seriously sleep deprived, having not had enough time on the second leg to get much shut eye. We were met at the airport and driven into the CBD where we joined a 5 day tour of Taiwan. There are 23 people on our tour and 6 of us are Aussies – the other four are from Melbourne, Malaysian born of Chinese heritage who have been in Australia for nearly 50years. Apart from Bill and me, a Canadian girl in her 20s and a Spanish family, all the rest have Chinese backgrounds and speak Mandarin as well as the language where they live. We have some from the US and France.

Our guide Peter Lee was born in Taiwan and lived in California for many years. He started his career as a guide in the States taking groups of Asian tourists on tour around the States to places like the Grand Canyon etc. He speaks fluent Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese and English.



#### Overview of Taiwan

Taiwan is an island off the coast of China about half the size of Tasmania. With a population of 23 million it is one of the most densely settled countries in the world. Taipei, the capital, is at the north of the island and has a population of 7 million. Taiwanese Chinese make up 84% of the population, mainland Chinese 14% and the other 2% are indigenous tribes who resemble Pacific islanders rather than ethnic Chinese people. The predominant religion is Buddhist. From 1662 Taiwan was a state of mainland China but in 1895 until after WWII Taiwan was ceded to Japan and everyone spoke only Japanese. After 1945 Taiwan was returned to mainland China. In 1949, with Mao and the communist party taking control of mainland China, the Nationalist Party under the control of Chiang Kai Chek fled to Taiwan and set up a government in exile, hoping one day to return to take back control of the mainland. The island is very mountainous. It sits on the Tropic of Cancer and the weather has been around 30 degs and quite humid.

#### DAY 1 Monday August 11

We left Taipei at 9.00am and drove south for three hours towards the centre of the island to Sun Moon Lake. This is the largest body of fresh water on the island and is Taiwan's number one tourist attraction. On the way we travelled through agricultural areas with tropical fruit and rice. As we turned inland we found large areas of betel nut palms. The Sun Moon Lake is at 750m above sea level. We arrived at about lunch time and went down to the lake side to pick up some food from the street stalls.



Then we boarded a boat for a short 45 min cruise around. After lunch we visited the Wenwu Temple dedicated to Confucious. About half of our party, including Bill, took up our guide's challenge to walk for 1 km and climb a couple of hundred steps up to the Ci En Pagoda, built by Chiang Kai Chek in honour of his mother. The top is exactly 1000m above sea level. It was a grey and overcast day with some light drizzle and the mountains around were not clearly visible so the view from the pagoda was not as good as it could have been.

After this exercise we booked into our lakeside hotel and rested!

## **DAY 2 Tuesday August 12**

We left the hotel at the civilised hour of 9.00am and travelled to the nearby town of Jiji. Taiwan sits on the conjunction of the Asian and Pacific plates and is subject to earthquakes. In 1999 an earthquake of over 7 on the Richter scale struck this town and area, and one temple collapsed without damaging a single statue of a god! We visited the damaged temple and the new one which was built next door after 10 years of fund raising. We then travelled into Jiji township to see the old railway station built by the Japanese. It is now part of a tourist rail branch line.

As we left Jiji we started to experience heavy rain. Apparently there is a typhoon off the coast of Japan which is causing the rainfall. After a couple of hours drive south we reached the Foguangshan Monastery, the most famous Buddhist sacred site in southern Taiwan. It has the tallest Buddha in the world, although that claim may be open to challenge! It certainly has an enormous one sitting on the top of a hill. From the entrance gate there is nearly a 1 km walk up hill along covered colonnades to reach the base of the Buddha. Near the entrance there is a large hall with a number of eating places selling a range of various priced vegetarian food – including a 7 Eleven and a Starbucks. We chose to eat our lunch in a rather large restaurant run by a hotel chain, which turned out to be the hotel we stayed at later that day in Kaohsiung, the second largest city in Taiwan with 3 million inhabitants. Apparently Taipei and Kaohsiung have a similar north/south love hate relationship as Sydney and Melbourne.

We arrived in Kaohsiung at 5.00pm just as the Liuhe Night market was opening for business. This market is famous for the sea food and other street stalls and it had been anticipated that we would make our evening meal here. However, we had had quite a filling lunch at the Buddhist temple at about 2.00pm and were not yet ready to eat again. As it was still raining, we did a quick circuit of part of the market and then moved on.

Our hotel is 45 floors of 5 star luxury built above a 10 floor department store which includes Dior, Gucci, Prada and a number of other luxury goods stores. On the third floor there is a food hall which included lots of Asian foods and the ubiquitous McDonalds, so we managed to find ourselves a small snack a couple of hours later. There was also a very interesting supermarket which we wandered around in.

## **DAY 3 Wednesday August 13**

The typhoon near Japan is still sending steady rain over us which is a shame since today we are driving south along the west coast to a lighthouse on the most southern point of the island. We drove through the Kenting National Park past a number of fish farms, with plenty of mango farms and other tropical fruit orchards. We stopped at a couple of coastal scenic areas and luckily the rain had eased off to showers and nearly stopped at that time.

After seeing the lighthouse, we drove north again along the coast to the town of Kenting to have lunch and then entered a different part of the Kenting NP uphill with a walk to a viewing point overlooking the most southern point. Some of us chose to stay on the bus as the rain had started again, and soon after the others, including Bill, had left, it really came down heavily with very poor visibility! Needless to say, they came back drenched and with not having seen much. The wind was blowing a gale and there wasn't much point in carrying an umbrella because they blew inside out.

From there it was a 3 ½ hour drive to Taitung on the east coast via the Southern Link Highway. We stayed in a spa hotel at a hot springs centre. We were entertained by a concert from some members of the local indigenous tribes.

#### **DAY 4 Thursday August 14**

We set off this morning driving north along the east coast through what Taiwan tourism calls “The East Coast National Scenic Area” or “Taiwan's last unspoiled land”. For some 170 km we travelled along the Pacific coast and stopped in several places to see weathered and eroded rock formations. The second stop was at an off shore island connected with a seven humped bridge. The rain had stopped and the sun was warm, temp around 30 with 85% humidity. We were given 45 mins to look around, paddle in the Pacific, walk to the island if we wished. Most of us didn't, but our Canadian girl Donna decided to and set off without water or an umbrella for shade. When she hadn't returned to the bus we started to get concerned and it turned out that she had suffered heat stroke out on the island and was lucky that some American tourists found her collapsed near a path and were able to give her some water and call for help. In the meantime we still didn't know what had happened to her so Bill and another young American Chinese man stayed in the car park in case she returned, while the rest of us went off about an hour late for a pre-arranged dumpling lunch at a typical Taiwanese roadside lunch place in a nearby town. During lunch we heard that Donna had been found and taken by ambulance to the hospital in the same town, so we drove to the hospital to pick up Bill and Gerald and wait another hour for Donna to be rehydrated and released to us. Luckily she came through this frightening experience okay and it didn't inconvenience the rest of us too much – we all started talking to each other and empathising with her predicament, glad that it hadn't happened to any of us. On the road once more we travelled further north to Taroko NP where we drove up the most amazing road carved into the mountain side to another spa hotel for the night. We had to leave our big bus and transfer to smaller buses for the drive up the mountain as a typhoon a few weeks ago had caused a landslide which has partly closed the road.

#### **DAY 5 Friday August 15**

We drove down into the NP to view a bridge over one of the gorges which Chiang Kai Chek had built in honour of his mother. The mountains are made from marble. We walked for about 45 minutes along a section of Swallow Grotto to a bridge. Taroko Gorge is an exceptionally beautiful narrow ravine created by the Liwu river which has cut deep into the mountains of solid marble.

After driving back down to the coast we visited a marble factory and then drove north along the Pacific ocean on a section called “The Highway of Death” where the mountains come down to the sea and the road is cut into the edge. This is particularly obvious at Qingshui Cliff.

We returned to Taipei in the late afternoon after driving through the Hsuehshan Tunnel, the longest tunnel in Taiwan, located on the Taipei-Yilan Freeway. The tunnel is bored through the Hsuehshan Range. The road connects the city of Taipei to the north eastern county of Yilan cutting down the journey time from two hours to just half an hour. One of the key aims of constructing the tunnel was to connect the western coast of Taiwan, where 95% of the population lives, to the eastern coast of the island and in doing so tackle the unbalanced development on the island. It is constructed with one pilot tunnel and two main tunnels for eastbound and westbound traffic. The total length is 12.9km making the Hsuehshan Tunnel the second longest road tunnel in Asia and the fifth longest road tunnel in the world. The tunnel opened in June 2006 to severe traffic jams.

We arrived at our hotel at about 6.30pm

#### **Day 6 Saturday August 16**

We joined a half day tour of Taipei this morning, since we so far have not seen anything of the capital city. There were only four of us and the guide took us first to Chiang Kai Shek's memorial park and hall so that we were there by 8.45 am so that we could climb the 89 steps to the top to see the changing of the guard. National service is compulsory in Taiwan for 12 months and it is the young 19 and 20 year olds who are trained to act as the guards here and at other places such as the Martyrs' shrine we visited next. They have to stand to attention for one hour before they are relieved and as the humidity is about 85% and the temperature about 30, it can be rather gruelling. Our guide spoke from experience as he had had to do it when he did national service.

We finished the morning tour with an hour at the National Palace Museum where 5000 years of the cream of Chinese Imperial art and jade collections is exhibited. When Chiang Kai Shek brought the Nationalist Government in exile to Taiwan, he stripped over 600,000 historic items from the Forbidden City in Beijing and other museums and government collections and brought them with him. It was a Saturday and summer holidays and there were long queues to the third floor to see in particular an 8" high carved jade cabbage which the Qing emperor of 600 years ago gave to his empress when they married. As there was no way we could get near it in the time available, we purchased a postcard to see what all the fuss was about – it is the 'Mona Lisa' of this museum!

We returned to our hotel at about midday and were picked up about an hour later to be taken to the airport for our flight to Seoul in South Korea.