



Travels in Taiwan & Zhejiang Province, China

Travelogues

2006 was the year that I was caught up in flight delays and stuck overnight at the Taipei airport due to a Typhoon that had hit the island the day before. This year is the year of the earthquake. It was a very small tremor that lasted only a couple of minutes. Something like this catches you off guard, as it isn't something that we are very familiar with in the Toronto area. For the locals, the tremor was acknowledged but not something that they were concerned about. It appears that these small shakes occur off and on, and they haven't been hit by a big one for about 30 years.



This week also provided for some additional driving excitement. Cherron, the business contact I work with was responsible for picking me up at my hotel in the morning for the 40 minute drive to office. She is barely tall enough to reach the pedals and she is a somewhat of a nervous driver. We almost had 2 accidents at intersections plus the screeching halt due to a dog crossing our path when we crossed a bridge. We made it unscathed to the office, but everyone commented on my frightened look. We had a great laugh, and for the rest of the week, I was given a regular driver.

During the week I did find out why Asian people drive the way they do. They do not learn or practice driving on the streets. The government sets up driving roads with fake buildings and obstacles and that is where they go to driving school. Once they do this for a certain amount of time, then drive their test on the same course and WHAMO, they are qualified to drive, that is if they can get their hands on a car, and some REALLY good insurance.

There certainly is one discernable difference between Taiwan and mainland China. In Taiwan you can see the blue sky each and every day and this is from a heavily industrialized Asian country. I guess that because it is an island, the winds must blow the pollution across onto the ocean somewhere one does not seem to feel the effects of it.

In China you get up in the morning and the haze is so strong that the sun is barely visible. The glow is unique as I have not witnessed this type of sunshine anywhere else in the western hemisphere. Even at night you would think that things would clear up and you would be able to see the stars. No such luck. This brings up another interesting point. Night time in Asia is very different. I do stay in cities of many millions of people, but at night you get the feeling that no one lives here. Street lights are far and few between, the wattage is very low and they tend to use the new energy saving fluorescent bulbs for everything. It certainly makes any city in North America look like they are wasting huge amounts of electricity lighting up streets and buildings. It does take some getting used to because as darkness falls upon the city, the surroundings tend to take a different look.





During my stay I had the opportunity to visit two very different temples. The first was in a small mid Taiwan town. We had to walk down some old traditional china town streets that were no more than four feet wide. Along the way there were many small stores that sold items focused only on items needed when one goes to the temple to pray. These items were primarily candles of various sizes – small to humongous (found at all temples) however, the difference between temples in Taiwan and China is that they also have an offering of money for the long departed. You buy these bundles that look like

an offering to a lost loved one. This helps them support themselves in the afterlife. The temple was hundreds of years old and was being visited primarily by the elderly. I was told that the current generation was not supportive of any religious beliefs and fewer and fewer people were visiting and praying to the dead.

On the Sunday (my only day off on this trip) I was invited by a local Shangyu businessman to accompany him on some local sight seeing. He picked up Lisa, Cherron and I at the hotel in his Audi S4 and headed to the outskirts of the city and towards the mountains. The view of this was like entering the Canadian landscape. The rolling hills thickly populated with green trees (or so I thought), small streams, rivers and water falls and the presence of Chinese communities that have not changed with the times. We stopped and parked the car at the bottom of the mountains and proceeded to follow a path up this mountain. It was amazing to see people living in homes that were more than 100 years old and perched on the side of the hills, and I mean 100 years old, as they looked and were as dilapidated as homes could be if they lacked maintenance for half a century or more. In addition, there were chickens and ducks running around loose awaiting their turn to be dinner. Since this was late in the afternoon, there were many local people sitting squatting along the streams with a chicken or duck, gutting or feathering the birds for the evening's dinner. Further along the stream someone else was washing the lettuce and other assorted vegetables that they eat with their meals.



We walked up this mountain for at least 45 minutes to get to the top, and at the top there was a building several centuries old temple housing a very old Buddha. The old people from the local community walk up this path each and every day to pray to Buddha for good fortune. It was fascinating to witness how very old customs are thriving in very old and remote communities within China. The mountain side was populated with huge bamboo trees. From afar you would mistake the trees for any deciduous tree that grows in Canada, but here the forest are predominantly are filled with the bamboo variety.

As remote as this temple may have been, there is evidence of modern society. I noticed a plastic bag under the candle holders, not that this is very unusual, except that the logo on the bag indicated that

the bag came from a retail store in China called “Wu-Mart.” You guessed it, the China based retailing arm of America - Wal-Mart.

One of the most entertaining dinners that I have ever had in Asia was in Taichung on Wednesday night. Another client for a supplier that I work with, three French guys (Andre, Silvain et Romul) all from the island of Mauritius, just off the east coast of Africa, in the South-West Indian Ocean. It was the first time that there were more people at the table that spoke a language other than Taiwanese or Chinese. We had a great time teasing the hosts because it was their turn to have to be the attentive ones and work hard at understanding a language that is not their mother tongue for longer than five minutes. The most interesting thing is that they called their French dialect Cajun. They new I certainly was not Cajun, but they also recognized that I wasn't French from France or Quebec. Toasting using “Santee” instead of Gambei was a pleasure because was not part of the Ile of Maurice culture, so we could control the alcohol consumption. Four Frenchman, 3 Taiwanese guys in a traditional Japanese restaurant. We were a must look for all the locals.

As usual, it is difficult to not write one of these diaries and not discuss the meals that one participates in. The amount of food that is served and consumed at mealtime is astounding. I really don't know how they can eat so much and stay relatively lean. I am constantly being asked why I eat so little. As a big guy they would expect me to be the guy most likely to lick the dinner plates clean. It's not unusual to have 4 plates of something or other for each person sitting at the table, and this does not include the 2 or 3 bowls of soups that are also brought in between platters. Every fish, animal and vegetable is fresh and prepared on the spot and in the case where my host for the day of travel into the mountains – Mr. Shir, the food was prepared in the open right next to you, and yes this included the expiration of the live duck and chicken before they became their own separate dishes.



At this same dinner I encountered and ad the opportunity to taste a different type of Chinese beer. It was bottled like beer, its colour was that of a Sleeman's Honey Brown and texture was missing the foaming in the glass. This was one dinner where I was drinking tea, however when our host Mr. Shir asked that I try this beer, I thought why not, as there Chinese do make decent beer. Boy what a mistake I made. This stuff was the most vile, disgusting and gut wrenching liquid I have ever put anywhere near my lips. In fact it was so bad, the normal wine that one toast with – Mao Tai would be considered a champagne of wine next to this so called beer. In fact it the first time that I have tasted an alcohol by only putting it to my lips and having it touch my tongue and decide that there is NO WAY that this is going into my body. The host drank his glass and I gladly surrendered my glass to the sideline and went back to drinking Wu Long Tea.

Woohoo.... It's Thursday night and I'm off to bed knowing that in the am the driver will be picking me up and driving me to Hangzhou – for the first leg of my journey to Hong Kong. Will see everyone soon....

Well I thought I was going home. To my surprise, the International Terminal at the Hangzhou airport was closed. I arrived well ahead of my scheduled 11:00 am flight only to find out that I had a ticket out of China on an airline that did not fly out that day from China to Hong Kong and on a flight that did not exist. Two hours after my arrival, the terminal opened and the security guards let me into the terminal. One had to go through security in order to get to the airline desks. It is important to also recognize that within China, airlines do not have permanent kiosk to attend to their customers. Whenever a flight is scheduled, the airlines post an 8.5 inch x 11 inch piece of paper with their airline logo on it. It is like

watching a game of musical chairs at the top of every hour. Since my airline did not have any scheduled flights that day I had to run around and find someone to assist me in rebooking. Once I did find the right person, they advised me that they were expecting to see me. They said that my flight had been cancelled and that I would have to rebook to a different airline for my flight to Hong Kong and connection to Toronto, Canada with Cathay Pacific.

When I inquired as to why my flight was not posted on the terminal screens, they advised me that when a flight is cancelled they remove it from the screens because it isn't a good thing to advertise cancelled flights. The end result was that I had to be rescheduled on a late afternoon flight to Hong Kong, which would have me arrive well after my connecting flight to Canada. This meant rescheduling my flight to Canada, finding a room in Hong Kong for the night and spending more time in Asia than I had planned.

The next day, all went well and my flight left as scheduled from Hong Kong to Canada. Was I glad to be back....