

Isle of plenty

Taipei is not just the home of notebook computers but also a place for exotic culinary experiences, literary and cultural pursuits

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Nine out of the thirty-two contending soccer teams at the 2010 FIFA World Cup were wearing made-in-Taiwan uniforms. The jerseys were made from recycled PET plastic bottles. Taiwan is the largest producer in the world of notebook computers and the home of the brand Acer. Boulevards of neon lit signs, millions of motorcyclists with surgical masks, the omnipresent flavours of street food in the air — at first glance Taipei seems to be ‘another China’. But in my short sojourn there, I discover a beguiling culture and a sense of national identity that presents itself at every corner.

A Taiwanese proverb says, ‘that a small temple can be found every three steps and a large one every five’- it’s not hard to believe that! We see atmospheric temples with the motifs of dragons and red faced gods, gilded beams as well as makeshift altars with locals burning incense seeking divine guidance. We drive past local parks filled with graceful Tai Chi practitioners balancing their ying and yang! Our guide Ivy Cheng tells us that the Taiwanese use the more complicated traditional Chinese characters as against the simplified version of Mandarin used in Mainland China. Weddings are serious business in Taipei. The whole stretch of Zhongshan Road is lined with wedding ‘one-stop’ shops offering a bouquet of services from hiring a wedding dress to rental cars and flowers and the all important bridal album. Taipei is a reader’s heaven and abounds in literary stores; it also hosts Asia’s biggest book fair. Particularly interesting is the Eslite 24-hour book store for the sleepless owls and serious bibliophiles, which even has a cafe.



Clockwise from top: An atmospheric Tao temple; the Jade cabbage kept in the National Palace Museum; the Shilin night market and (below) the museum

FOOD IN THE STREETS

Makeshift grills with strong armed cooks and clouds of steam — the Shilin food market is a sensory overload. It’s crammed with eateries serving culinary delights like stinky tofu and squid soup, people jostling in queues, and a fairground with games like netting the goldfish. Taiwanese cuisine is a melting pot of Japanese

and Chinese influences. The best meal I have is at the opulent glass-walled Silks Palace Restaurant attached to the National Palace Museum. The ‘Imperial Treasures’ feast at the restaurant is a fine dining experience where replicas of many of the Museum’s treasures are served like the Jade cabbage with insects. We find our own slice



A colourful performance of the Peking Opera by an artiste at the Taipei Eye

of ‘Little India’ at Andy Arya’s ‘Out of India’ a colourful ethnic restaurant with warm furnishings and a Bollywood sound track. Andy is fluent in Mandarin and his reasonably priced Indian meals are very popular even with the locals.

Come evening, we visit the Taipei Eye, a restored theatre for a performance of the Peking Opera. As the elevator doors open, a riot of colour catches our eyes: red paper decorations, a huge dragon head and some local boys playing Chinese yo-yo. A young lady plays the Chinese lute; in another corner are the actors applying make-up and the final touches to their elaborate costumes. I talk to the Business Director Sunny Koo, who explains that the artistes spend many years learning the nuances of Chinese Opera — from make-up to movements and specific skills like singing and acrobatics. She bemoans the fact that it is foreigners who attend these performances and the Taiwanese youth are more interested in Western culture! The first half has the traditional drummers, gongs and the energetic lion dance incorporating music, dancing and even martial arts. In the interval, several performers pose obligingly for a photo-op with the audience with all their finery and costumes which are replicas of the royal outfits of the Ming Dynasty. The second half is the boisterous opera telling the tale of the Green Rocky Hill about a nine tailed fox who transforms himself into a girl!

stores, tea-houses, even a chocolate shop! The philosophy of the district is said to be ‘earning life rather than just money’. Ye Tang is an atmospheric tea culture shop set in a Zen surrounding with lush green bonsais, large ceramic containers and the all pervading fragrance of tea. As we walk, in the couple inside greet us with a smile and bowls of tea. There are paintings, calligraphy and pottery inviting us to spend a few hours. There is Earth Tree selling hand-crafts from all over the world, which is Taiwan’s first fair trade shop: on every product in the store there is a story with the name of the country of its origin.

Our last night in Taipei is memorable because of another stellar foodie experience. Ivy takes us to a branch of the global chain of Dumplings restaurant- Din Tai Fung, where we learn the ‘fine art’ of eating these delicacies: how to place the dumpling in the spoon without breaking the paper-thin skin and then dip it into ginger spiced vinegar. In fact dumplings are a good metaphor for Taipei: plain and uninspiring at first glance but offering myriad flavours when you delve deeper!



Shilin night market is a sensory overload, with eateries serving stinky tofu and squid soup

OF TEA AND CULTURE

We walk with Ivy through Kang Qing Long (KQL), an area behind the Taiwan National University, developed by the Tourism Board and the Ministry of Communications and Transportation. The network of streets with a bohemian ambience is filled with antique shops, quaint book-

