

Thursday, March 27, 2014

We woke rather early today, but did have a good night's sleep. We made our way down to breakfast and were greeted by a buffet that meandered around the large dining hall. There was dim sum, rice, miso, salad, cheese, meats, fruit, fresh egg bar, waffles, French toast, pancakes, duck eggs (cured or salted), different types of tofu, etc etc. In other words, a typical Asian and Western breakfast.



For our first adventure, we grabbed a cab and headed to the National Palace Museum. The NPM, as it is known, has the largest collection of Chinese artifacts in the world. It was originally founded in 1925 in Beijing in the Forbidden City, which is why it is called Palace Museum. As different wars raged in China, the collection was moved first to the south and then to Taiwan.



Only 3 stories of exhibit halls, it somehow manages to feel huge. The art was displayed beautifully, with 3-D images in some of the galleries. The collection includes bronze, calligraphy and painting, jade, ceramics, furniture and rare books. We bought our tickets and an audio guide and made our way in. There was a running LED board announcing that 3000 people had already entered the museum – and it was only 10:00am! Imagine wall to wall people and that was the scene. Flags were everywhere as tour guides tried to keep their groups together. You would walk into an exhibit hall and there would be people 3 thick in front of the art. Patience. It took lots of patience. But we got to see everything we wanted. Some of the pieces were unbelievable,

like the carved olive-wood boat that was 3 cm long and the entire inside was carved with moving parts. There were a whole gallery of snuff bottles (my mom love those). We spent several hours walking around, trying to avoid the crowds (they would go one way, we would go the other). But worth it.



It seems that crowds are a natural part of Taiwan. Taiwan is smaller than California being only 13,855 sq mi, but very little of it is flat, accessible land. With a population of over 23 million, there are crowds everywhere. As the guide book says: You never feel alone in Taiwan.

When we finished at the museum, we walked around the botanical garden which contrary to the museum which was crowded and loud, was empty and peaceful. It was a nice change. Small families were picnicking all around, they were sculptures, coi ponds, black and white swans, and pretty trees and flowers.

We grabbed a taxi to head back to the hotel. By the way taxis are incredibly inexpensive here.





the crowd had not reached us yet and we were the only ones walking around. The road leading to the shrine was lined with Taiwan's flags and flowers.

The National Revolutionary Martyrs' Shrine is built on Chingshan Mountain. The architecture is reminiscent of the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City in Beijing. The structure houses the spirit tablets of about 390,000 persons killed during the many wars.

We started walking back to the hotel along the road, passing businesses, the American Taipei club, a park it looked like it had lots of hiking trails (more on that tomorrow), made our way through a smaller park and up a lot of steps to the hotel back to what is our home for the week.

But not for long. We rested for just a bit and then headed down to take the free shuttle from the hotel to the nearest subway station. Our destination was Longshan (Dragon Mountain) Temple. We got off the shuttle with a group of local women who had lunch at the hotel. We asked them where the train station was and one immediately started talking to us, walking with us to the train. "Come with me. I am going there too." We had a lovely conversation all the way to the station. People here are so very friendly.

We figured out how to buy our train coins (not cards, but plastic coins) and made our way to the platform. The subways here have glass gates between you and the track (sort of like the train at DFW airport). The train always stops at the same place, and the two doors (train door and track door) open together. Nobody pushed, but rather stood on line to enter the train. The train was immaculately clean. Directions were in English and easy to follow. There is even a light above the door that is going to open so you know which side to get off. And it cost us \$1.50 round trip.

We had to change subways from the red line to the blue line and even that was easy. The station was filled with shops, including one selling chicken feet and other unusual parts (not unusual here and not unusual for Anthony Bourdain, but unusual for us).

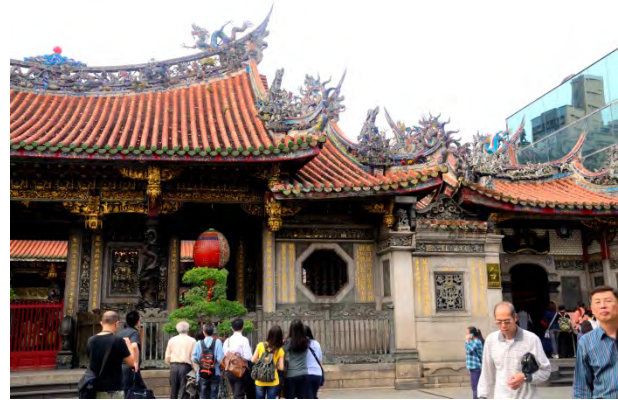


We walked outside onto a large plaza. This is the oldest part of town, and it looked like it. The sidewalks were narrow and crowded with vendors, food carts and people. The temple is in the middle of all this, with apartment buildings on either side.

Longshan Temple is the oldest in Taiwan. It was originally built in 1738 but over the years it has been destroyed by fire, earthquake, bombs. And each time it was rebuilt. Like most temples in Taiwan, it is a mixture of Buddhist, Taoist and folk deities. It is known for its amazing bronze work, and stone and wood carvings. Yes, the gold Buddha was beautiful.

Yes the carved stone columns were beautiful. But for me it was the people (lots of people) in fervent prayer. They held their incense sticks (and would throw what looked like red wooden fortune cookies, look at how they fell, and pick them up, just to throw them down again), and bowed and prayed. They were men and women and children. There were old people and young people. It was so packed, that it was a challenge for them to

find quiet places to pray, although one woman did (see picture). There were long tables filled covered with all sorts of food as gifts to Buddha. There were flowers everywhere. It had a festive feel to it, but yet it was very serious.



We watched for a while and then went in search of lunch. We had read that in the Wanhua district there were several things, in addition to the Longshan Temple, not to be missed. We didn't have time to visit snake alley (where yes, they sell snake for lunch or dinner). Lunch, the guide book said, should be had at Yadong Tianbula, a clean, air conditioned (that is very important) restaurant specializing in Taiwanese food, especially vermicelli soup with clams. We walked under the covered streets, streets filled with souvenir shops and many street food carts. Finally we happened upon the restaurant. We think it was the right place, but all the signage was in Chinese, so..... It looked like a fast food joint. Plastic tables and chairs. Along the back wall stood 3 women in front of large, very large pots, spooning out soup. And so we had soup with different types of tofu and vegetables in it (we are pretty sure it was tofu and vegetables). We opted not to have the vermicelli soup with clams. Our soup was delicious, filled our stomachs and we were ready to head out again.

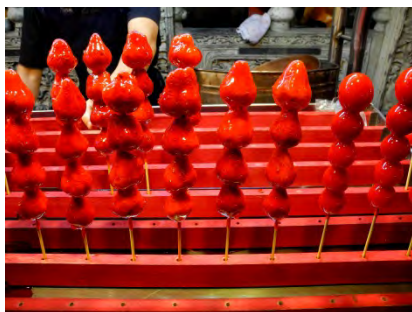


On the way back to the subway station, we heard Fur Elise coming from somewhere. And it was loud. We realized it was the garbage truck announcing its arrival. There were groups of men and women from the shops and homes standing around with their garbage bags, and when the garbage truck arrived, they all went to throw their trash in. The truck would then begin its music again as it headed down to its next stop.

The plaza for the train was now filled with people, particularly large groups of men surrounding something we couldn't see. We think it was like a lottery or gambling, but to this day are not sure.

We got back to the hotel via train and shuttle. We showered (we seem to be doing that several times a day because it is so humid) and got ready for dinner. We were being picked up by Rayleigh Chiang, a colleague of mine here in Taiwan. He took us to one of the best Japanese restaurants in town, where we were met by the dean of the dental school. He was there having dinner with another group but kept stopping in to see us as well. We had a small private room where we ordered all sorts of sushi and sashimi and lots of other wonderful food. Dessert was a hot, sweet red bean soup. Delicious. At the end of dinner, the dean came back in with the gift for us (tea). He said he hadn't realized we would be meeting and so he ran out to buy us a gift. Rayleigh also gave me a gift of his recently published book.

After dinner Rayleigh took us to the Shilin night market. The night markets here are more about street food than anything else. We have been to many night markets around Asia, including in Thailand and Vietnam. This was the most beautiful, clean, polite night market we have ever seen. That really seems to define Taiwan. People are very friendly, it is very safe, and although crowded, very clean.





At the night market, Rayleigh bought us some ice milk. Very refreshing, not as heavy as ice cream, but creamier than ices. My flavor was called egg and milk. It reminded me of a drink my mother used to make for us when we were sick, called gogel mogel. It was made by beating an egg yolk with sugar and pouring hot milk over it. This tasted the same way, except cold (Myra - no brandy). The flavor took me right into my past. The picture is of me with the shop owner.

