

Monday

This morning we hung around the room, relaxing, catching up on the diary, reading. We knew we had to be back by 12:30 for our next tour, so rather than running around, we enjoyed our room with our large terrace and magnificent view.



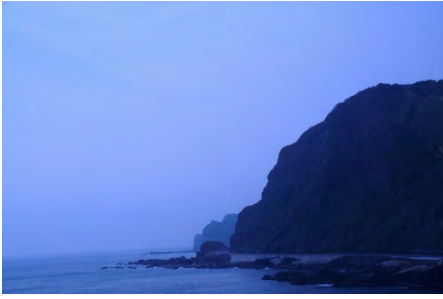
At 12:30 we were picked up in the lobby to set off in a van on a tour of the Northeast coast of Taiwan. The description of the tour promised fascinating rock formations, lighthouses, fishing villages, pastoral farmlands and temples. We were the first pick-up we we drove into town to pick up another couple from Hawaii. She is a flight attendant on Hawaiian Air and was a regular on the Honolulu-Taipei flights, but her boyfriend had never been. As we were leaving town, we passed the obligatory Ferris wheel (seems every city in Japan and Taiwan has one). We drove along the coast, heading north. There were no longer any chimneys everywhere or buildings surrounding us (remember I mentioned how dense Taipei is). Instead we saw rising mountain peaks, ocean, unique erosion landforms from the waves hitting the rocks over the centuries, fishing villages and little villages nestled in the crooks of the mountains. The road was narrow with short tunnels cut into the mountains. The views were beautiful of the water and the green mountains with their tips covered in fog, boats on the water, and a lighthouse (I guess the one they promised we would see).



Our first stop was Pitou Bay (also translated as Bitou). The name, Bitou Cape, meaning Tip-of-the-Nose in Chinese, comes from the cape landform that protrudes into the ocean in the shape of a nose. There are many hiking trails here, but we only stopped for a few minutes to see the view. There was a Buddhist temple with its brightly colored roof. I don't think I mentioned this previous, but the temples here remind me more of the Indian temples that we saw in Singapore than traditional Buddhist temples that we have seen in Japan or Bhutan.



There was a walkway along the water with waves crashing on the rocks and on the hundreds of pilings. It was a bit overcast, but that lent a mystical feel to the sea and mountains. There was a fish restaurant on the water with large tanks filled with exotic fish such as jelly fish, but most I could not identify; but there were all there for guests to choose their favorite for dinner.



Much of the northeast coast of Taiwan has been eroded by the sea resulting in interesting formations, sea cliffs and bluffs. Our next stop was Nanya to see some of nature's amazing sculptures. Nanya is the northern gateway to the Northeast Coast National Scenic Area. The books describe these rock formations as mushroom shaped rocks, honeycomb rocks and tofu rocks – only in Asia would they think of tofu shaped rocks! But it fits! The rocks were not only beautiful shapes, but were striped because of the oxidation of ore within the stones.



From there we drove up the mountain towards the village of Chiufen (also called Jiufen). During the first years of the Qing Dynasty, there were nine families in the village, thus the village would request "nine portions" every time shipments arrived from town. Later Jiufen ("nine portions" in Chinese) became the name of the village. Chiufen was once a gold mining center. The village was forgotten until a film, A City of Sadness, was filmed here. So although the gold is now gone, Chiufen rose again, as a tourist attraction, so that people can see what the villages of old looked like. At the entrance to the town there is a temple on the side of the mountain overlooking the sea. Chiufen is built of closely-packed houses clinging to steep mountainsides, with beautiful views. While it is described as having unique teahouses and fascinating glimpses into the lifestyles of the past, it really was just a crowded tourist trap.



We did have a nice lunch - noodle soup in a local noodle shop where our guide had to order for us. The bowl was so large, we shared one. We managed to use sign language to ask for an empty bowl so we could share. We sat at a small table with others slurping their soup, dogs were wandering around our legs,

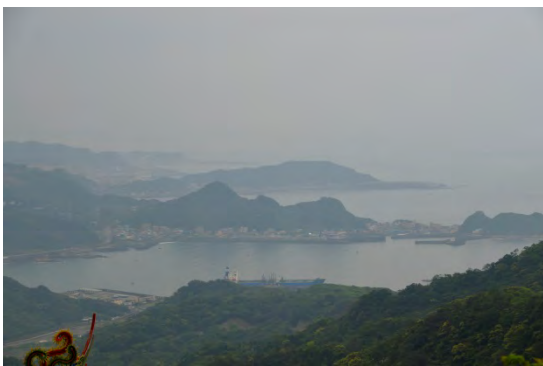


but the food was delicious. It was another one of those local experiences that help us understand others in the world. Not every restaurant has to be fancy. Not all food has to be served on a white tablecloth (although those are great too). But this was one of those experiences where we get to watch the people and see at least a snapshot of how they live.



The guide has given us about an hour to walk through the famous “old street.” It took us about 15 minutes, partly because we walk fast, but mostly because there was little to see. Yes, we could see how the houses were built close together on the edge of the mountain. Yes, we could tell it was once quaint. But it was really just one tourist shop filled with tsochkes after another (although you can see my favorite sign – Made in Taiwan!). There were narrow streets off the main street, and, since we were on the side of a mountain, lots of stairs. We walked to the end of the street to see the view and, once we were able to push through the crowds, we did enjoy the sight of the houses built upon the mountain and the water down below. Because of its location, Chiufen is often foggy, which gives it a romantic feel when seen from far away, or when looking back down the mountain.

We met up with the guide and he led us down the narrow steps, past the Chiufen Tea House (with all the latterns), and the Shengpang Theater, all the way back down to meet our driver. The Shengpang Theater is an old theater that was kept as it first appeared when it built. The original projector is still there and posters from the movies line the walls (Andy F – I have the pictures for you!).



That night we got lazy and had dinner at the hotel. The restaurant we chose (out of the 3 there) was adjacent to the lobby. We sat near the window overlooking the gate, not far from the front door. The doormen (door ladies) were standing guard. You noticed on day one the picture of Andy between two of them in their red outfits with their red berets on the women and red hats on the men. I didn't mention however that whenever someone walks through the door, they greet you, in their singsong voices, by singing: “Good morning.” The funny part is they do this day *and* night. I don't think they really know what it means. Tonight, as we sat there having dinner, the entire time, we listened to the doorman inging good morning as busload after busload of Chinese tourists walked in. Andy and I were absolutely hysterical, laughing so hard we almost cried.