

Tuesday March 31, 2014

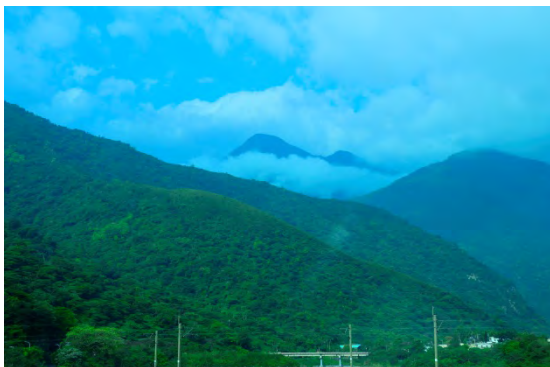
One of the benefits of this blog and of posting on facebook now and then, is the comments we get back. When I sent out the blog on our first day in Taiwan, one of my followers emailed back and said, "Don't miss Taroka Gorge!" Well Alvin, we took your advice. We had one day left with no plans, and while everyone told us that it was too far for one day, we found a tour that would fly us down and train us back.

So we got up at 5:00AM, got box breakfasts from the hotel kitchen and headed in the van to the local airport in Taipei. We boarded the ATR 72 prop plane and headed south. As we took off, the ground crew lined up and waved good bye in the typical Japanese manner. There is still quite the Japanese influence here. We watched the sun rise, ate our box breakfast, and before we knew it, we had arrived.



The plane ride was only 25 minutes to Hualien. Although it had been raining in Taipei, the sun came out and the skies were blue. We were met up by our guide, Josafina and our driver, an older woman. Quite unusual to have a woman driver! Josafina was a firecracker. She grew up in Hualien and kept telling us how she is the best guide there. For example, why doesn't she give us any brochures? Because she knows all the answers. She certainly made the day fun.

As we drove from the airport, the views of the mountains were magnificent.

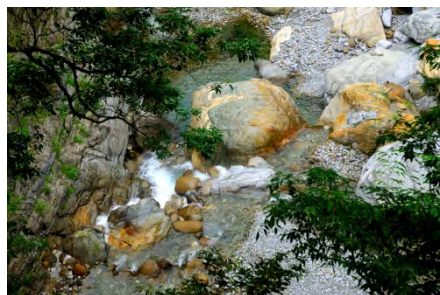
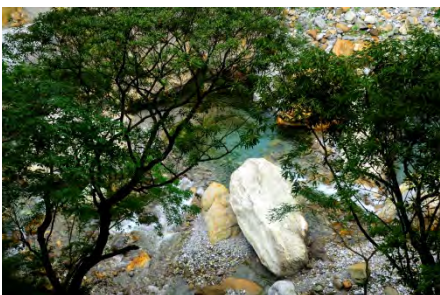


The plan was to spend the day exploring Taroko National Park. Taroko was established in 1986, is over 227,000 acres and is famous for its marble gorge. In our one day, we would get to explore parts of it.

Our first stop was the Taroko Arch, the entrance to the Taroko National Park. We spent a few minutes there looking at the river (which was at very low tide), the arch, and the beautiful mountains. There was also a stone carving to memorialize the men that died building the roads and tunnels (more on this later). From there it was back into the van to the foot of the Shakadang Trail.



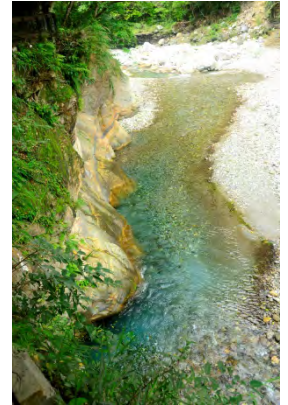
The Shakadang Trail, formerly called the Mysterious Valley Trail, follows the crystal-clear Shakadang River as it winds through marble canyons and areas covered with large, colorful boulders. The term Shakadang comes from the Sedik (Taroko Atayal) word for molar. You might ask why name this gorgeous place after a tooth? Well, about 250 years ago, the Atayal people settled the area and began planting along the riverside. They pulled out many rocks and boulders which they thought resembled large molars. Thus the name of the river and of their village became the Shakadang. As we walked the trail, we saw the huge and beautiful boulders on the side of pools of water in blues and greens that seemed almost iridescent. The trail was fairly quiet, although there were other large tour groups there. But the hike is long and the farther we went, the fewer the numbers of people. While the trail is flat and easy to walk, we did have to climb down 5 flights of stairs to get to the foot of the trail. That wasn't so bad, except at the end of course, we had to climb back up.



The trail meanders along the river with tunnels cut through the mountains. As it explains in our guidebook, the trails were cut out of the face of the mountain by the Japanese in the early 1900s. So, since the Japanese of the time were substantially shorter, you have to be careful not to bump your head on the overhanging rocks. For me of course, it was not a problem.



Taroko Gorge itself began as coral deposits deep under the sea. The pressure from geological forces transformed the coral into limestone and then marble. When Taiwan rose from the sea 5 million years ago, the gorge began to form. Now it is known for its sheer marble cliffs, deep, winding tunnels, and the Liwu River, which flows through the craggy landscape.



After we backtracked and came back up the five flights of stairs, we crossed the Bridge of 100 Lions, a red bridge lined with marble figures of lions and other creatures. It leads into a large tunnel, one of many we would be seeing that day. By the way, I asked Josafina why the bridge was red. She said there is no significance to the color, the Taiwanese just think it is pretty to paint bridges red, blue, yellow etc.



