

The Taiwan Experience Book One

By late January 1986, when I had first arrived in Hong Kong, I already considered myself a dyed-in-the-wool traveller. My travels had begun in 1981 with a 'work experience' stint at a kibbutz in Israel on the border with Lebanon, and I had never looked back. I had travelled to - and within - dozens of countries from Sweden to Sudan, and worked in a good few of them in order to pay for my travels.

Naturally, to be able to live such a lifestyle, I was 'footloose and fancy-free'. Or almost so. Before arriving in Hong Kong, I had fallen head over heels in love. The one I had fallen in love with was named 'Thailand'. I loved everything about her: her climate, her food, her people, even the Thai rock band Carabao, whose songs I had tried to learn in order to learn Thai.

I had been teaching English in Bangkok for some time before coming to the difficult decision to leave that city for Hong Kong. The problem was, although the pay for teaching English there was excellent by Thai standards, I knew that my hard-earned money would not go far internationally, and though I loved Thailand, I still had a seemingly unquenchable thirst for travel elsewhere as well. With great reluctance, I had decided to leave Thailand and once again hit the road. But my intention was not to go too far. Hong Kong was within relatively easy reach of Thailand, and I imagined myself going back that southeast Asian country at every opportunity.

I had arrived in the British-administered territory the previous evening, and by the time I woke up in a window-side hostel bed in Kowloon's Cameron Road, I had to look out of the window for some moments before it all came back to me. Oh, yes, I told myself, I was in Hong Kong. Not Hong Kong Island, which is where the territory's financial centre was located, but Kowloon, where all the cheap backpackers' hostels are.

It was raining lightly outside and much cooler than Bangkok. I fell out of bed and reached automatically for, first, the few remaining cigarettes in my crumpled-up packet of Marlboros, and second, the Lonely Planet guidebook to Hong Kong and Macau tucked away in my heavy shoulder bag. I was in a small dorm room, but I was the only guest in this room at a clean, newly opened guesthouse, the Lee Garden.

There was no-one else around to ask for advice, so I would just have to go and take a look around the place and find things out for myself, I decided. But the manager was an amiable character, and as I sat in the common room sipping a coffee, he placed a newspaper, the South China Morning Post on the table in front of me.

"A lot of news from the Philippines today", he commented.

I ran my eyes over the front page news reports. Huge anti-government protests were taking place in

Manila, the capital of the Philippines; they would evolve into the 'People Power Revolution' that would ultimately depose the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. I wondered if it were possible that this infamous despot would actually be thrown out of power? I almost felt like getting onto the first plane to Manila - I wanted to see all this first-hand. But I reminded myself that I neither had the money, nor was that a part of my travel plans.

However much I may have wanted to see democracy replace dictatorship, I had to be realistic.

My plans were to find work in Hong Kong, then I would be able to visit Thailand - or the Philippines for that matter - whenever I wanted to. Salaries in Hong Kong were far higher on average than either of those two countries. But I decided that I would give myself a one-day holiday in Hong Kong before I started looking around for work. That would also give me a chance to find out exactly where I was in relation to everything else in Hong Kong.

I walked out of the guesthouse, and down towards the Kowloon waterfront, the direction of which I could easily see without having to ask. Hong Kong Island was a short ferry ride from there, and I would begin my wonderings around the British-administered territory there before returning to cover Kowloon. I re-affirmed to myself my intention to spend at least one day looking around the city. I didn't have the energy or the focus to start looking for work in Hong Kong that very day, and I also had absolutely no idea where to begin. The weather was cool, and very comfortable after Bangkok. I was thoroughly enjoying that and wanted to make the most of it.

Acting on information from my Lonely Planet guidebook for the territory, which I expected to temporarily replace my dog-eared Southeast Asia on a Shoestring by the same publishers, my plan was to first visit Hong Kong Island's Victoria Peak, the highest point on the island overlooking the city. From there, I reasoned, I would literally be able to get the lay of the land.

However, one of those serendipitous encounters of the kind that happen to travellers from time to time was just about to occur. I saw the Star Ferry terminal - from which I would take a ferry to Hong Kong Island - and was just approaching it when I noticed a lanky, long-haired American a few years older than myself coming towards me. His name was Don, and he had stayed in the same dorm room as myself in Bangkok a couple of months earlier. He instantly recognised me. We greeted each other, and as I knew very little about Hong Kong, I naturally had a few questions which I wanted to put to him. I also asked whether he was planning to stay long in the territory, or if he was on his way back the US?

"Well, I'm on my way back, but slowly. Just going to do just one more milk run from here to Tokyo, then I'll be flying back from there. This'll be my tenth. I figure that's enough."

A *what* run, I asked myself? I had no idea what he was talking about, but didn't want to reveal my ignorance; I had already revealed enough ignorance about Hong Kong. "So, you've done a few milk runs by now, then..." I prompted him.

"Yeh, the first started out from Bangkok, but all the others I' ve done from here. They're good fun for a while, but I don't want to end up doing nothing else."

I nodded. "So, how do the milk runs from here compare to those starting out from Bangkok?" I asked.

"They're more lucrative from here," he replied. "You can't make much money carrying stuff from Bangkok to Hong Kong. Bangkok' s much cheaper overall, but so many things here are tax-free here to begin with..."

The more he talked about these "milk runs", the more I was interested. It transpired that they involved carrying goods from Hong Kong to Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, particularly those luxury items that were highly taxed in those other three locations. It sounded like only a step or two from smuggling. But it was legal, though it pushed the limits of legality a little. For your effort in carrying the goods, the Hong Kong travel agency would give you a free return ticket, some spending money, and some basic accommodation at the other end, or ends. They worked in a relay; if you only wanted to go as far a Taiwan, you could do that, or the agency they worked in conjunction with in Taiwan could fix you up with a ticket and accommodation in Seoul, or Tokyo, or both. Generally, Tokyo was the last stop.

There were people doing nothing else but this, Don assured me, and making a good living. My plans to look for work in Hong Kong evaporated there and then. The idea of getting paid just to travel was far more enticing than looking around Hong Kong for work, starting the next day. I asked what the chances were of getting a start in this?

"I'm going to the travel agency this afternoon", Don replied, "You're welcome to come with me if you like..."

We arranged to meet at 2:00 pm outside a building called Chungking Mansions on Nathan Road, Kowloon, only a few minutes walk from the guesthouse where I was staying. He took me with him to the travel agency to arrange my flight.

Pretty Schizophrenic

On Don's advice, I then went directly to an address he had given me on Hong Kong Island, where I could apply for my Taiwan visa. He warned me there was no fixed time within which my visa would be approved; it could be the same afternoon or a week later, so it was better if I applied as soon as possible. If I didn't get it by the next day, the flight time arranged with the travel agents would have to be put back. He went on his way, and I took the Star Ferry across the harbour to Hong Kong Island.

At the time, I knew absolutely nothing about Taiwan beyond its geographical location, which I had noticed on maps, and the fact that it had a capitalist economy. I knew this only because of a Newsweek article I had read a year or so earlier, in which it was termed a capitalist 'Asian Tiger', along with Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore.

When I reached the address of the 'consulate' that Don had written, I thought he had made a mistake. Instead of a consulate, I found a travel agency, called 'Chung Hwa Travel Service'. Yet, when I looked again at the piece of paper my American friend had written on, I saw that it did in fact say "Chung Hwa". I was thoroughly perplexed. I stood outside the ground floor office for perhaps 10 minutes, unsure what to do.

Finally, I decided that there could be no mistake in Don's writing of "Chung Hwa" ; if this wasn't the place to get a visa, perhaps the agency arranged it or something like that (in those days, visas applications tended to be fairly complicated, and travel agencies handling them on their customers behalf were not yet very common). I walked in, and told one of the counter staff that I wanted to travel to Taiwan and had heard that this was the place to apply for a visa.

The counter clerk I spoke to confirmed that was indeed the case, and handed me an application form. As I walked away to fill the form out, I noticed that it was, in fact, an application form for a tourist visa to the Republic of China (which I assumed to be the same as the Peoples Republic of China). I walked back to the same counter and explained that I wanted a form for Taiwan, not China. "This is the form for Taiwan", the man told me with a smile, handing the form back to me. I walked slowly away from the counter, more confused than ever.

As I spread out the application form - which was by far the longest visa application form I had ever seen - on a shelf mounted at elbow height on the wall, provided for filling forms, I thought this situation over. I had clearly shown the man at the counter that the form he had given me was for the Republic of China, and he surely couldn't be wrong that this was the form for Taiwan. After all, he worked there. Most of the blame, it seemed, lay with myself. Inwardly, I cursed myself for not being more like Michel, my former travel companion in India. The Frenchman had impressed me by the fact that he had done his homework thoroughly beforehand and knew all about the places we would visit and the problems we would likely encounter before we did. In comparison, I felt that I may just as well have been some alien beamed down from another planet, and now this familiar feeling came back to me. Apparently, Taiwan was a part of the Republic of China; yet it was a capitalist part, despite the fact that China itself was a hardline communist state. How could I be planning to travel to this place, I asked myself, without knowing such basic information?

As I struggled to complete the 3-page application form, I noticed a blond girl of my own age next to me, speedily filling her own form out, mostly in Chinese. I wanted to glean some information from her, but was momentarily stuck for words. After all, I would seem pretty dim asking, for example, if she was going to Taiwan, or if the language of Taiwan, where I was heading, was Chinese! And yet,

to be honest, I couldn't really be sure she had been writing in Chinese; it may have been Japanese for all I knew. Finally, before she made to leave my side, I quickly put in: "I guess you've been there for a while, to be able to write so well?"

"Oh, a few months," she answered, turning towards me, and giving me a disarming smile. "Will this be your first visit?"

"Yeh...I must say, though, er, I thought the application form would say 'Taiwan' on it," I said, waving my form, "I was confused for a moment."

"Oh, you'll get used to that," she came back, and I noticed the north American accent. "The Taiwanese are pretty schizophrenic in that way, but you don't need to take that too seriously. When are you going?"

"Hopefully about noon tomorrow morning, if I can get the visa in time..."

"My ticket's booked for tomorrow lunchtime too," she told me, again with her charming smile, as she turned to leave. "I hope I can get this visa by tomorrow morning."

I wondered what the chances were of me being on the same plane as her? As she went to hand in her form, I realised they were extremely slim, but she had at least put me somewhat more at ease. I would take her advice, and not take things too seriously. After I got to Taiwan I would no doubt have more opportunities to find out what that place was all about.

Where is Your Flight to, Sir?

The following day, I did indeed get my visa shortly after 9.00 am. I then rushed back to the hostel in Kowloon's Tsimshatsui district to check out and go to the travel agency, where I found Don, the agency manager and his wife in the process of stuffing an enormous amount of items into two suitcases and a carry-on case (hand luggage). The contents of my sports shoulder bag was emptied into another such case, the bag folded up and put into yet another. The manager, who had broken a sweat with all the effort, explained that we would both be over the weight limit (by nearly 10 kilos, as it turned out), but only slightly, so the airline ground staff would let it pass. If they didn't, and we had to pay, we could get the money back from our connection at the Taipei end. The carry-on cases were designed to fit in overhead lockers, "But, you know, very full so may need some pushing!" he added. I had never in my life travelled so heavy, but thankfully it was only a short trip, less than an hour and a half in the air. A few minutes later, Don and I were in a taxi bound for Kaitak International Airport. The airport, built on reclaimed land in the harbour was a mere 10 minutes drive away from the agency.

We both checked in our heavy suitcases with no problem and an hour later we were on a China

Airlines flight to Taipei. Don was seated somewhere towards the front of the plane. I had been told not to act as if I knew him after the plane arrived in Taipei, but rather to head for one of two customs clearance desks alone after arrival and reclaiming my two suitcases. Don assured me that everything about our milk run was 100% legal and above board. It was completely legal for us to carry all these luxury goods into Taiwan, but whether they should be allowed to pass customs was up to the discretion of the particular customs officer who inspected the luggage. Most wouldn't, but the designated officers were 'friends of the agency' !

Before the flight, I had tried to glean some information on Taiwan from Don in the departure lounge. He had stated that Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese government was "still holding out in Taiwan", or some such thing. I thought the man had to be either joking or was as thoroughly confused about Taiwan as I was, despite all his previous visits. I had heard of Chiang Kai-shek, and his war against Mao's 'Red Chinese', and remembered seeing a film that featured this story, but that was the Chinese Civil War, shortly after the Second World War or so, as far as I was aware. This was 1986. Obviously, Communist China was now on at least fairly good terms with Taiwan, even if the island remained capitalist, otherwise there wouldn't be travel links between the two. I mistakenly took China Airlines to be the PRC's national carrier.

During the flight, after browsing *Time* magazine, I decided to take a look at the travel booklet in the seat pocket in front of me, a guide to the Republic of China. Judging by its mediocre design, I decided it had to be a government publication.

I thought this guide book - perhaps 50 or 60 pages long - would be able to fill me in on the relationship between Taiwan and the rest of the Republic of China, while also providing some useful travel info. I was right on both counts, but it was the travel information that first grabbed my attention. I was pleased to see that Taiwan came first in this, and Taipei first in Taiwan. I became engrossed in reading about various attractions in Taipei, such as the National Palace Museum, and the Sun Yet-sen Memorial. Then, I went on to the various other tourist attractions in Taiwan; Taroko Gorge near Hualien, Alishan in the Central Mountain Range, and so on. Gradually, I began to feel there was something not quite right about this publication. I wanted to know about Taiwan in particular, so I was glad to have so much information on Taiwan, but where was the information on the rest of China?

I flicked through the pages towards the back of the book, trying to find information on mainland China. Because I was thoroughly unfamiliar with Taiwan at that time, this took some time, as I usually had to read a little way into the description of each sightseeing location before I realised it was also located in Taiwan. Finally, I got through to the last few pages, on the Pescadores (now better known as Penghu), a group of islands to the west of Taiwan itself. So, where was the info on mainland China, I asked myself? I checked the title of the guidebook again. It did indeed claim to be a guide to the Republic of China. I looked back at the last page of the book and finally noticed a one-sentence paragraph that had originally escaped my attention: Under the title 'Mainland China', the sentence read 'As the mainland region is temporarily under the control of Communist Bandits,

there is at present no reliable travel information on mainland China.'

Good God! The entire area of continental China had been summed up one sentence! I was staggered. Suddenly, the clouds began to clear: the reason this island called itself the Republic of China was because it actually did claim to be the legitimate government of China! Don had not been joking about Chiang Kai-shek's government holding out in Taiwan! The entire existence of Communist China for three and a half decades had been summed up and disregarded in one sentence in this guidebook. This seemed almost too far-fetched to be real. Where on Earth was I going to?