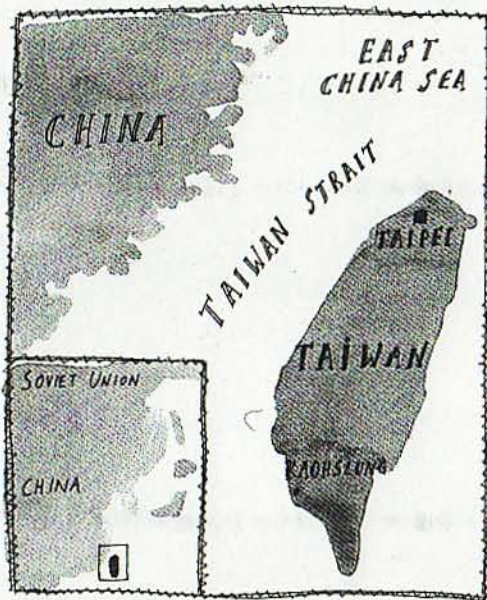


Taiwan

Not least among the many anachronisms of Taiwan is its pretensions to be the legitimate Republic of China. At the end of the 1949 Revolution the defeated nationalists fled the mainland for the island and took full political and economic control. Their party, the Kuomintang, has remained in power ever since and, under the guise of securing the country from Communist invasion, held it under martial law for close on four decades. This has now been lifted, and a certain element of electoral reform has been introduced, but many Kuomintang deputies remain those who were voted in on the mainland in pre-revolution ballots. Significant change is unlikely.

Political rights, however, have not been a predominant issue in Taiwan. This is first and foremost an entrepreneurial society – money is an abiding obsession and consumerism rampant. Visitors expecting a harmonious and gentle taste of the East will be sorely disappointed. The massive overdevelopment of the main cities, crowded with ugly high-rise blocks and choked with traffic and pollution, can come as a shock, as can the incredibly high cost of living. Taiwan is second only to Tokyo in expense.

Travelling alone, however, is relatively safe. The strong military presence has meant that street crime is uncommon and Western foreigners are generally treated with great courtesy and kindness. Although the country has a fairly large community of expatriates (mainly American businessmen and itinerant English teachers), most tend to lead rarefied and isolated lives. In the less commercial districts of the main cities and throughout the countryside



you are likely to attract a great deal of attention. People may well stare and point at you but this rarely leads to more than friendly interest.

As in Hong Kong and South Korea, **women in Taiwan** are caught between the conflicting demands of a modern, Westernised and highly competitive culture and traditional Confucianist values. In constitutional terms women are supposed to have equal rights in work and education but the reality is that they face entrenched discrimination, are ghettoised in poorly paid jobs and are expected to take a subservient role within marriage. Prostitution is illegal but exists on a massive scale (you'll be warned against wandering alone in the red light district of Taipei) and Taiwan has remained a fairly popular destination for Japanese businessmen in search of cheap sex. Under the authoritarian rule of the Kuomintang, autonomous political groups, including feminist initiatives, have been suppressed.

Taipei without Maps

Kate Hanniker travelled to Taiwan to stay with a friend who was working there on a temporary contract. She spent a month exploring the capital, Taipei, and made a few trips to the south of the island.

Taiwan is a little island with big ideas. Physically it is half the size of Ireland, with a population of only nineteen million, yet the Nationalist Kuomintang Government still considers itself the only legitimate ruler of the vast mainland and it convenes regularly to pass legislation for the Peoples' Republic. In spite of, or perhaps because of, its exaggerated sense of self importance, it is extremely successful in other ways.

Within the last forty years the country has leapt from rags to riches. Its people are a disconcerting mixture of those men and women who have been caught up in the whirlpool of money-making activity and of those – largely the older generation – whom this frenzied activity has utterly passed by. Life

for this latter category is noticeably more comfortable than it was thirty years ago but essentially their lifestyles remain little altered by the new wave of consumerism.

The bulk of the wealth is concentrated in the five major Taiwanese cities, and especially in Taipei, where the women are streets ahead of their country cousins in their Western dress. For the nouveau riche, life in Taiwan is luxurious and massively consumer-oriented with all shops open daily until 10pm. Unemployment stands at two percent and beggars, touts and pimps are noticeable by their absence. Towards the end of my visit I was thrown by the sight of a beggar and the word suddenly reeled back into my vocabulary (though squalor had not left it).

The cost, inevitably, of this surge of economic growth is overdevelopment, scant accommodation and appalling pollution. In Taipei, apartment blocks stand high and virtually back to back. On the outskirts of the city, homes are little more inviting than chicken shacks and three generations of a family are often crammed into one flat. Traffic is choking and anarchic. The Taiwanese prefer to call it "flamboyant" and the surprisingly low level of road accidents

indicate that they employ not a little skill in getting about as quickly and as economically as possible. This same sixth sense is used by the Taiwanese when conducting their business affairs.

What struck me most during my four-week stay was how immediately secure I felt, despite the fact that I had only a limited Chinese vocabulary and a roughly sketched street-plan in English characters which at times impeded, rather than guided, my progress. Being able to roam freely and unaccommodated was something I had not expected in Asia.

"Since I was possibly the only redhead in Taipei, I caused something of a stir"

On one of the numerous occasions when I lost not only my way, but also all sense of direction, I felt safe enough to accept a lift from a man I had asked for directions. He spoke no English and was kind enough to leave his work and drive me to my destination on the other side of Taipei.

Whenever I asked the way (most people speak Chinglish to match my English) I would be drawn into a lengthy confab and on occasions an entire family joined me on the street to mull over my map. At times the sense of obligation the Chinese showed towards me as a stranger transcended my (cynical) belief. Finally they would point me in any direction to save the important Chinese "face" and I would embark unknowingly on a vast detour. Yet again I'd have to hail a taxi, defeating my purpose of familiarising myself with the city. With time I came to accept this as simply the most reliable method of getting from A to B without travelling via C and D.

My novelty value as a foreigner was seemingly endless. And since I was possibly the only redhead in Taipei, I caused something of a stir. Children ran up to me grinning as if I was a long lost friend. "Hey, Okay, Number One," they would holler. All foreigners are

American to the Taiwanese. "Ingwor" ("I'm English") was a phrase I soon mastered, but it made no odds, their reaction was still as fervent.

Westerners seem to embody some kind of utopia for the Taiwanese. The fashionable Chinese women have rejected their traditional clothing, opting instead for bolstered shoulder pads. And Western images and models are used to promote even the most oriental of products. It's easy to see how this emulation is interpreted as adulation by the resident ex-pats, who live in isolated splendour in the north of Taipei. Their arrogance translates itself into maudlin attempts to recreate mini-Europes and USAs, epitomised by the disconcerting appearance of a pub or *bierkeller*.

As a European woman I seemed to inspire respect and admiration, especially since I was negotiating the city by myself, unescorted. This is quite contrary to Chinese custom, rooted as it is in Confucianism and chauvinism. Attitudes, I'm assured, are gradually changing, but beyond the more sophisticated work places, sexual discrimination and harassment are still everyday problems. Women may rule over the home, traditionally a power base in Taiwanese society, but they have much less status in public life and double standards are very obvious. For example, it is accepted that men will have "other women" – prostitutes or mistresses – but a wife will be reviled and cast out if she is found to be "unfaithful".

In custodial cases the children will automatically stay with their father. And even where a woman has been subjected to domestic violence, she is ill-advised to seek a divorce, which may result in her social ostracism. Although Taiwanese businesswomen wield considerable power, they are often paid less and work longer hours than their male counterparts and many working-class women suffer harsh conditions in the nation's sweatshops.

The only time that I felt ill at ease in Taiwan was on my final morning when I visited the Lungshan Temple area. There was no obvious threat but the atmosphere unnerved me. A dog twitched to death on the sidewalk and a crowd of old men looked on and shouted useless encouragement. Younger men in string vests stood entranced around a streethawk who measured up a white powder in brass scales. Schoolgirls hovered half-naked in doorways. Later I learnt that I was a street away from the notorious Snake Alley, where women are sold to Japanese businessmen for \$1.25 a day and where turtles are tortured for their blood, which is guzzled by the same men to increase their virility.

"Hairdressers and tearooms often operate as hostess-type joints"

The sex industry is big business in Taiwan. All except the most expensive hotels increase their profit margins by letting out rooms by the afternoon and by transmitting soft porn day and night. Hairdressers and tearooms often operate as hostess-type joints, not necessarily brothels, but places where the lonely businessman can fork out large sums of money in exchange for a few hours of female company.

My great joy in Taipei was looking around the temples. The Confucian Temple seemed to be the only public place to have escaped the rest of the city's haphazard development. The Taoist temples on the other hand were home to the same bedlam to be found in the streets. Chickens, children and dogs run amok through the endless passages, up into the small sub-temples. The tiered levels offer panoramic views of the city.

The temples throw up constant surprises to the Western eye accustomed to uniform architecture and solemn devotion. On one floor multi-coloured puppets rotate in a perpetual

electronic parade, offering gifts to the gods. Somewhere in the grounds an opera may break out. Old men sit around a table playing cards and watching TV rigged up precariously on an altar. A businessman waves joss sticks and throws crescent-shaped pieces of wood to find out if he should change his car.

The state is just beginning to invest money in tourism but as yet there are few concessions to the Western traveller. This has its advantages and its drawbacks. It is pleasant to find areas of natural beauty still unspoiled by the commercialism which has so ravaged the cities. But it can be frustrating when travelling to be faced with the options of a state-run tour or of getting lost trying to decipher Chinese town names. The tours are blatantly commercial, whisking you from site to site with a final compulsory stop at a local factory, where you will be assailed by pretty girls hoping to persuade you to part with your money.

Initially I was irritated by the persistence of the sales people, not only in the tourist shops but also in the village stores, where the shopkeepers wave excitedly and shout at any foreigner passing within ten metres of their shops to come inside and spend. Finally I learnt to laugh at the unashamedness of it all.

Getting around by public transport is cheap and efficient but you're restricted in where you go and what you see. I hired a car which is relatively inexpensive. Cheaper are the mopeds which clog up the streets of Taipei (and often with an entire family aboard one bike), but you have to be brave to contend with the traffic. Driving down the East Coast I found wild and untouched beaches. Central Taiwan was a visual feast – the tranquility of the huge mountains chilling the lakes and paddy fields by night gave way to the intense heat of the March sun and lizards and creepers and luscious foliage.