

Taichung, Taiwan Exchange (October 23 – 30, 2012)



The exchange to Taichung, Taiwan started October 23, 2012 after a week-long tour around Taiwan. The visiting group consisted of many FF clubs, with the majority of us coming from FF of Northern Illinois (FFNI) of the United States. Many of us have even traveled together before. But some of us were also new to Friendship Force and were traveling for the first time in the FF way! We were a merry bunch taking the high-speed train to Taichung!

The first morning of the exchange, we got true local flavor with a visit to a Da Jia high school. We were welcomed with a demonstration of the dragon lion dancers, followed by a music performance of traditional string instruments from the music students. Our travel weariness was diminished with a shoulder massage from the cosmetology students. In addition, we watched the performance of a tea ceremony from the hospitality students, and with the art students, we tried to make reed weavings into animals and to write ink calligraphy on red envelopes. One of our Ambassadors, Pat Meyer, could not help herself from dropping into a classroom and starting to teach English! Once a teacher, always a teacher!



After a boxed lunch, a number of students continued their personal ambassadorial mission and accompanied us to visit the Da Jia Zhen Lan Temple, a temple that was built in 1770 for the worship of the sea goddess, Mazu.



The second day was a focus on what made the Taichung region distinctive: Sun Moon Lake. A famed place for honeymooners, the romantic name applied to the lake formation is actually more imaginary as the lake does not resemble a “sun” or “moon” at all. After an introductory video at the visitor’s center, we had lunch.



Following lunch, we took a cable car down into the Formosan Aboriginal Culture Village. The Village was divided up into sections highlighting nine aboriginal tribes found in Taiwan, with their distinctive houses and dance styles.



The third day, we visited a Buddhist organization housed in a modern rococo-style building. A Q&A with the nuns elicited interesting responses to why people would choose to dedicate their lives to the service of their religion. This Buddhist sect believed in four pillars of life—education, music, art and food. Therefore, the building housed an art gallery, which we toured after the Q&A, and a vegetarian restaurant of limited selection but absolutely delicious food, which we had for dinner.



Mid-exchange respite: Friday morning was spent at National Museum of Natural Science. We continued the respite day with a buffet lunch at Taichung FF President's home, Martin Liao. After a nap, we spent a leisurely afternoon doing hands-on arts and crafts—ink calligraphy demonstration and Chinese-style thread wrapping to make a hanging ornament of a rice dumpling, and aboriginal dancing lessons!



After a Saturday of a free day with our hosts, we all returned Sunday morning with a too brief visit to Sanyi, a region outside of Taichung, the origins of camphor wood carvings. A rushed visit to the Sanyi Wood Sculpture Museum followed by a brief stroll through the shops took us to a barbecue lunch hosted by the founder of the Taichung FF Club, Mr. Wu Gui Sen. The style of BBQ is quite different than how it is done in the United States. Thinly sliced meat is cooked over a wire grate over hot coals in a box in the center of the table. Vegetables and potatoes are also cooked.



In the afternoon, we made a brief visit to the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts located in the Arts District in Taichung. Followed by a stroll down to the Art Street, several blocks flanked by innovative, architecturally-different, and diverse types of restaurants and shops, we toured the Street with a volunteer from the Art Street's Chamber of Commerce.

The exchange was finished with a visit to Taichung City Government housed in its new multi-million dollar, green-energy government building. In 2010, Taichung city and county were unified under one government administration resulting in a population of more than 2.6 million, making Taichung the second-largest city in Taiwan and a government building was needed to serve this population.



That afternoon, we went to a bakery and made our own “sun cakes”, a Taichung specialty of layers of flaky pastry and malt sugar. Last minute purchases of baked goods were made to take home the next day.



The farewell dinner was an eight-course dinner hosted by Taichung City Government’s Deputy Mayor, Mr. Tsia Ping-Kun. After speeches from the Deputy Mayor, the President of FF of Northern Illinois, Joan Harrington, and from FF Taichung’s Exchange Director, Johnson Cheng, members of FF Taichung and of the various participants of the exchange performed an aboriginal dance.



Almost none of the Ambassadors escaped some kind of physical illness, whether a cold or severe allergies or of the intestinal kind. Every exchange is different and no matter how much planning goes into it, none go through without problems. If one says that the purpose of Friendship Force is to further world peace by creating friendships between individuals, I am sure many of us will remain friends with our hosts, many warm and hospitable despite their limited English ability, for the long-term. If one says that the purpose of Friendship Force is not to be a travel club but to give a visitor a personal, local perspective, whether this exchange achieved this goal is debatable. Parts of the itinerary were very local but other parts seemed pointless and even bizarre. But perhaps, that is the point—while bizarre to us, to the hosts, this was something they wanted us to see. All in all, one cannot please everyone. And since one part of Friendship Force’s mission is to further goodwill, one can begin by being forgiving problems that occurred and to acknowledge the effort that were put into the exchange.

