

Taipei:

Snake Alley, Magnificent Museum and Lantern Festival

> By DOMINICK A. MERLE

TAIPEI, Taiwan---"Don't go Snake Alley---no more snakes!" the lady sitting aside me on the plane strongly advised.

"Government stop," she muttered, half to herself. "They say bad for tourists."

We were on our descent into Taipei on China Airlines and those were her parting tips after a 13-hour flight from Los Angeles.

"You want good snake---I show you where."

It wasn't exactly high on my list of things to do, or eat, but you can learn a lot on a national airline returning home with locals. She also told me how much to tip (10 percent), what to eat (dim sum, sushi and Mongolian barbeque) and the best buys (electronics, pearls and jade).

I hadn't been to Taiwan since the early '90s, but the lady was right, the infamous Snake Alley is a lot tamer today than it was back then. Today, it's a covered walkway lined with restaurants specializing in serpent cuisine, believed to be beneficial for male virility along with curing a laundry list of medical problems.

Back then, it was a dirt alley lined with live snakes dangling from hooks. The snakes were killed and certain parts eaten on the spot, minus the cooking. I'll spare the details, but the strange scene is still lodged in a nightmarish corner of my mind.

The lady was also right in her "other" food recommendations of dim sum, as good as any in Hong Kong; sushi, tasty like Tokyo's, and Mongolian barbeque, particularly in a second-floor neighborhood restaurant called Tang Kung on Sung-Chiang Road. Quite frankly, bad food is practically non-existent in Taipei.

But I had returned for two things the lady didn't mention, the annual Lantern Festival, second only to Chinese New Year's as a celebration, and another visit to the National Palace Museum which contains the finest display of Chinese arts and culture ▶



Pagoda in southern Taiwan

باغودا في جنوب تايوان



Tiny boat carved from olive pit

مركب صغير جدا محفور في نواة الزيتون



Colorful temple top

زخرفة في أعلى المعبد

found anywhere in the world. The museum was our first stop, and being a Saturday, was extremely crowded. I would suggest scheduling it for a weekday. There are more than 650,000 priceless objects owned by the museum, but only about 4,500 are on display at any given time, with the rest stored in honeycomb-like caverns tunneled into the mountains behind the three-story structure. These are the treasures that had been hoarded by Chinese emperors in the Forbidden City for five dynasties. But in 1949, the collection was removed from China in to Taiwan. Today, the National Palace Museum is Taiwan's No. 1 tourist attraction (Snake Alley is a close second). It would take the better part of a day to explore the treasures.

There are rooms filled solely with Ming vases, endless cases of porcelain, jade, silk, gold silver, rubies, sapphires, rare calligraphy and carvings so small it takes an extremely strong magnifying glass to view the details. That night, after the Mongolian barbeque, we went for a foot massage. It turned out to be both relaxing and disturbing. Many locals believe there are 72 pressure points on your feet and toes that correlate to other parts of your body. When a sensitive point is probed, one that is a little painful, the masseur will indicate a problem in another part of your body. In my case, he was correct with three specific injuries I have had over the years. But more frightening, he cited some other

problems that were "in the works." My fellow travellers had similar eerie experiences. They don't sugarcoat in Taipei's foot massage parlors. The main venue for the "Year of the Pig" Lantern Festival was at Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Plaza where more than 700,000 people gathered the next day, despite the rain, to witness the lighting of the theme lanterns. There were colorful floats and a giant fireworks spectacle despite the dreary weather. I was surprised to read the next morning in the English newspaper, The China Post, that there was a political movement afoot to tear down the walls surrounding the plaza---seems they look too much like those in mainland China---and actually remove the name of Chiang Kai- ▶



Palace Museum

متحف القصر الوطني

shek---seems some think he wasn't such a hero after all. Strange how famous people's legacies keep changing after they're dead.

Since the Lantern Festival is a weeklong event, we took a high-speed train south to the city of Chiayi, another main celebration site. The highlight here was the construction of a Taiwan boar that stood 18 meters tall, weighed 20 metric tons and was able to rotate 360 degrees. This magnificent "creature" was perched 18 meters high on a platform in the middle of a field. After a series of performances by folk dancers and acrobats, there was a dazzling light and fireworks display with the giant boar seemingly rotating in the sky.

Later, in nearby Yenshui township, there was another fireworks spectacle known locally as "The Beehive." Rightly so, because if spectators venture too close to the explosion site, they risk being "stung" by the nonstop popping of firecrackers that lasts for almost an hour. Protective clothing resembling firefighters' gear is available for rent. I took a raincheck on this event.

Back in Taipei, after our almost obligatory stop at now fang-less Snake Alley, we toured the 101 Tower, currently the tallest building in the world (but not for long as Dubai is nearing completion of an even taller one). The 101 also has the world's fastest elevator---it takes just 38 seconds to rocket to the top.

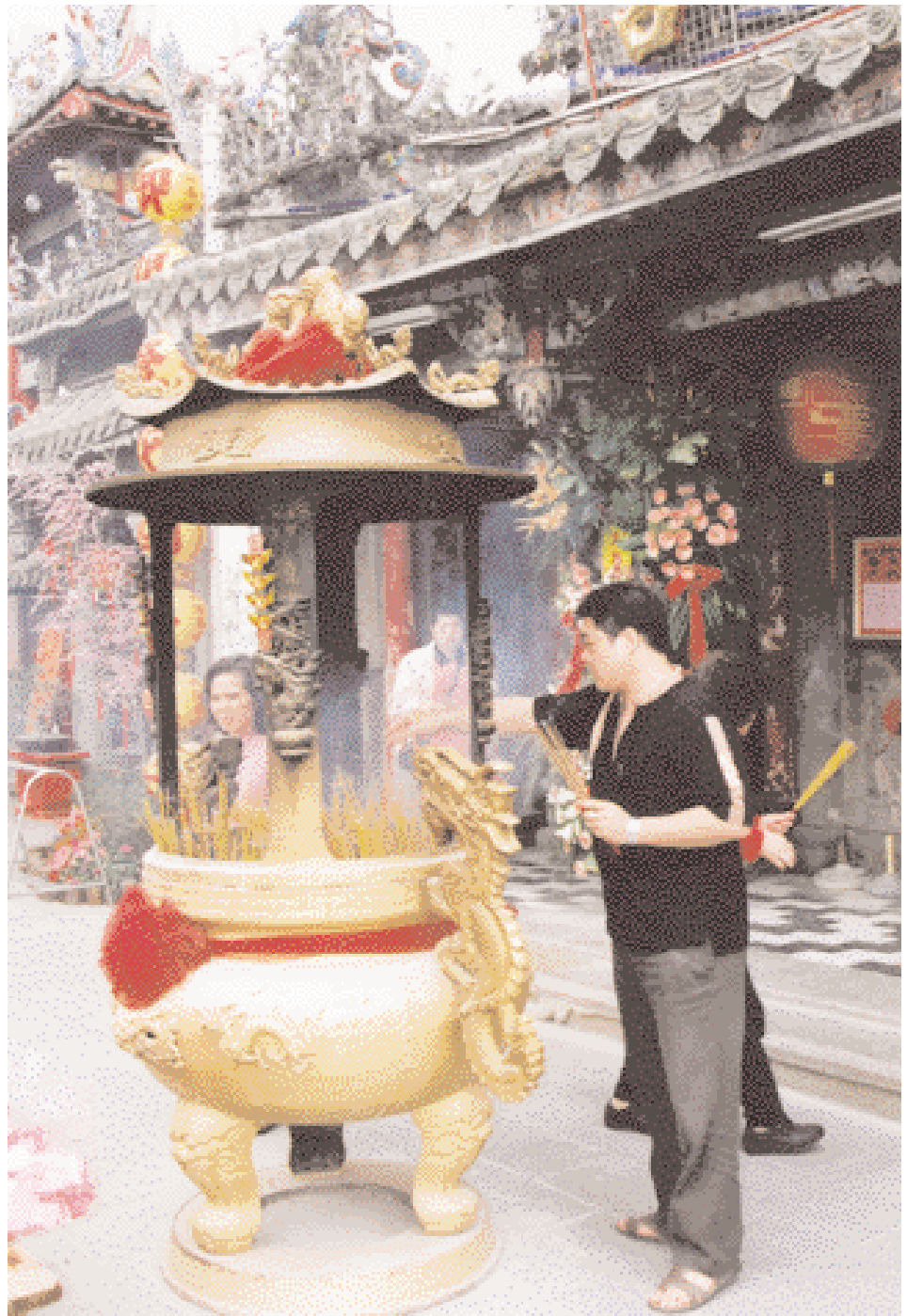
While driving through the bustling capital city, we noticed a number of garish buildings studded with neon signs and brightly illuminated striped poles. They looked a bit like small casinos, but we were told they were actually barbershops.

Well, not quite like your uncle's barbershop. In Taipei, a man can spend the better part of a day getting pampered in one of those shops, sometimes even getting a haircut.

On our final night, we had what is known as a Lantern Festival banquet, consisting of at least two dozen dishes served over three hours on a revolving table. Almost everything was delicious, and later we were given a loose English translation of some of the delicacies.

Seems like we had horse hooves, stinky tofu, heads & tails and a dish called coffin which I'm sure they saved for last. Beats live snake. ■

(Dominick Merle is a Montreal-based travel writer and consultant.)



A prayer at a temple

صلاة في معبد

IF YOU GO;

No visas are required for North Americans, only a passport with at least six months until expiration.

We flew China Airlines from Los Angeles to Taipei. Service and food were very good, the attendants friendly and industrious, and best of all I was upgraded to Dynasty Class

on the return because economy was oversold.

The island is small enough to be covered from top to bottom and side to side in less than a week. The rugged interior has a number of high peaks leading up to Jade Mountain which reaches 4,000 meters. That's higher than Japan's famous Mount Fuji.