

Taiwan

A Visit to the Treasures of the Chinese Emperors

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TAIPEI, TAIWAN

Midnight off the coast of China.

Two cargo ships without lights
steam into the South China Sea.

Their destination: Taiwan. The
cargo: More than 600,000 priceless
art objects representing the cream
of Chinese creativity for the past
5,000 years.

The year was 1949, and the dark voyage
marked the final chapter in a 16-year
odyssey to preserve the vast treasure chest
that had been hoarded by Chinese emperors
in the Forbidden City for five dynasties. This
was a real-life thriller that would dwarf
anything Hollywood has ever brought to the
screen.

Today; the incredible collection is on rotating
display at the National Palace Museum in
Taipei and has become Taiwan's No 1 tourist
attraction. No finer display of Chinese arts
and culture can be found anywhere on earth.
It would literally take decades to see it all.
Only about 4,000 objects are on display at
any given time, with the rest of the collection
stored in honeycomb-like caverns tunneled
into the mountains behind the three-story
museum. Every three months, the collection
is rotated under heavy guard. Only a handful
of people have clearance to enter the
connecting tunnels and make the switch.

The museum was in the midst of a renovation
project when I visited in August, but
remained open to the public. Virginia Yen-Ju
Chang, one of the museum officials, told me
that upon completion of the interior
renovation, the number of objects on view
may increase to 5,000.

"But it will still take many years to see them
all," she said, adding that she had been ➤



Colorful performer at the Lantern Festival in Taipei

ممثل في مهرجان الفوانيس في تايبي

employed there for six years and has only seen a fraction herself. "I've never even been in the tunnels."

At last count, the number of items in the collection had exceeded 650,000, the vast majority of them archival documents and rare books. The Chinese regard calligraphy, painting, and poetry as the only true arts. All other endeavors, like sculpturing and carving, are considered to be refined crafts. Be that as it may, no object in the museum seemed anything less than a masterpiece to my untrained eye.

At one time or another, we probably have all seen or heard the phrase "a priceless Ming vase." Now imagine entering a room where hundreds of them are on display.

Nearby was a section filled with jade, exquisitely carved in shades of green, yellow, black, lavender and white, and fashioned into swords, buttons, pots, tables, jewelry and armor: intricate items carved from one solid piece of jade that almost defied belief.

One piece in particular---perhaps the star of the collection---had been transformed into a bok-choy vegetable, complete with two small insects camouflaged within the leaves. One would have to look long and hard to find them, but they were there. It looked good enough to eat, bugs and all.

There are endless glass cases of porcelain, ancient bronzes, calligraphy, rare books, documents, palace records, ceramics and accessories worn by men and women of the royal court---silk, gold, silver, pearls, jade, rubies, sapphires, coral, turquoise and agate. It goes on and on.

Some of the carvings are so small and intricate that large magnifying glasses surround them to view the details. Consider, for example, a tiny boat carved from an olive stone that is fully equipped with a covered deck and moveable windows. And in the interior, eight passengers, chairs and even dishes on the table. All this carved into an area less than two inches long and one inch high! And still the carver was not considered a true artist by the Chinese.

Yet, throughout the centuries, calligraphers have been revered. The written Chinese language is not merely used for the transmission of information. It is an object of



Taiwanese sculptor finalizing his work

نحات تايواني يضع لمساته الأخيرة

aesthetic consideration, like a painting. In fact, many famous Chinese calligraphers were also either artists or painters; sometimes all three. But a chosen few were highly regarded for their script alone.

The Chinese described the various styles of famous calligraphers in glowing, poetic terms, such as: "His brush strokes are like a startled snake slithering through the grass," while another "contains the strength and fury of a whirlwind and driving rain." Another script was likened to "slender gold" and yet another "captured the essence and genius of the ancients."

Paintings, tapestries, wood carvings, fans, embroideries, lacquer wares, snuff bottles...even a bowl made from the top half of a human skull...the creations are all here or tucked away in the mountains for future viewing.

There were actually three parts to this thrilling past.

In 1924, the Nationalist Government gave the last Manchu emperor, Pu Yi, and his entourage of 2,000 eunuchs and ladies two hours to leave the Forbidden City, a walled section of Peking (now Beijing) containing the royal palaces. The government promptly sent in 30 young scholars to identify and

categorize the art treasures that had been hoarded by Chinese emperors down through the centuries. This classification took six years.

By 1931, the Japanese had moved in and were poised to take Peking. The Chinese packed the entire collection in 20,000 cases and transported it by rail to Nanking. Thus began the 16-year odyssey which saw the prized collection shuttled back and forth across the war-torn country---by truck, by ox-cart, by raft and even hand-to-hand.

Incredibly, throughout this ordeal, records would eventually show that not one piece was lost or broken.

All during the Japanese invasion, the treasures were hidden in Szechwan and central China, mostly in caves and warehouses. After the Japanese defeat in 1945, the entire collection was reassembled in Nanking.

But by 1948, fighting continued to escalate between the Nationalist Chinese and Communist armies.

The Nationalists decided to select the most precious objects in the collection and send them to Taiwan. And then the final chapter in 1949 with the cargo ships steaming away in the dead of night. Again, not one piece ➤



Taiwan's rocky northern coas

الساحل الصخري في شمال تايوان

was lost or damaged.

The items shipped to Taiwan represented only about 25 percent of the treasures moved out of the Forbidden City. But what a selection it was-- the cream of the collection, hand-picked by some of the same scholars who originally categorized the treasures.

The items were initially stored in sugar warehouses in central Taiwan, and a bomb shelter was built at the site to ensure their safety. They remained there until the National Palace Museum was opened in Taipei in 1965.

While most believe the collection was saved from probable destruction by the Communist regime, there are many mainlanders to this day who feel the prized possessions were stolen-not saved. But there is no quarrel as to the magnificence of the centuries-old objects.

Shaped roughly like a leaf, the island of Taiwan is a mere 160 kilometers from mainland China. The maximum length of the island is about 400 kilometers and its maximum width is 144 kilometers. It is small enough and with enough good superhighways to see a great deal of tourist attractions within a few days.

In spite of its small size, the mountains are extremely high, reaching almost 4,000

meters at one peak known as Jade Mountain. That is higher than Japan's famous Mt. Fuji.

Taipei, near the northern tip, is the largest city and seat of government. In addition to the National Palace Museum, other attractions include Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, site of many colorful festivals; several lively night markets (including one known as Snake Alley but its name implies); a number of elaborate temples (there are more than 10,000 temples throughout tiny Taiwan), and the Taipei 101 building, currently the world's tallest building (but not for long as Dubai is building a taller one).

For an interesting and tasty meal, try the Tang Kung Mongolian Bar-B-Q at 283 Sung-Chiang Road, a second-floor neighborhood favorite I first visited 15 years ago.

Things haven't changed much. You fill your bowl with various meats, vegetables and seasonings, and give it to the cook at the end of the line standing in front of a circular hot grill about the size of a huge tractor-trailer tire.

He whisks the combination around on the hot plate for a few seconds with a long mixing stick, and then, in a flash, sends it flying into your bowl with a flick of the stick, rarely spilling a drop. He may not be ready for the

museum, but to me, he was an artist in his own right. ■

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

IF YOU GO;

No visas are required for North Americans; only a valid passport.

We flew China Airlines from New York to Taipei, with a stop in Anchorage, Alaska. Flying time was about 20 hours. Airlines from the West Coast have nonstop service to Taipei.

Taiwanese are very familiar with North American customs. No special protocol is required, except when entering certain temples. Be civil and friendly and you'll get along just fine.

Taiwan is a subtropical island. In the north, including Taipei, there is really no dry season. Winter is cool with frequent drizzle. Although more rain statistically falls during summer, the downpours end quickly followed by long periods of sunny skies.

For more information on the National Palace Museum, go to the website www.npm.gov.tw For Taiwan and Taipei, go to www.taiwan.net.tw.