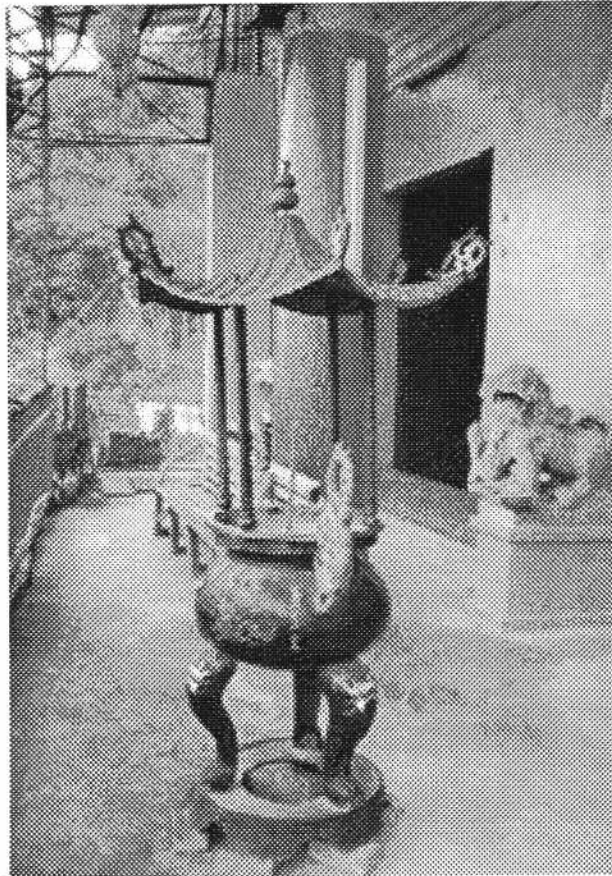


The Asian Trail

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Picture: incense burner near Taipei, Taiwan

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Taiwan

NAVIGATING TAIPEI

by
Bradford G. Boyle

A visitor to the capital city of Taiwan will quickly discover that its traffic can be summed up in a two-syllable word: gridlock. In fact, linguists believe the word comes from the Chinese "gwidlouca," meaning "thousands of cars idling bumper-to-bumper while the sun sets in a man-made haze." The Chinese character for the word looks like an addition sign (+) but on close inspection, is comprised of tens of thousands of tiny cars all attempting to get through the same intersection. It's amazing what they can do with those calligraphy brushes!

Taipei's arteries are clogged with metallic plaque. Roads run to and from its heart, the business district. Renting a car is out, unless you prefer "adventure vacations." Actually it might be sellable. "Trekking Nepal? Rafted the Colorado? Ridden the Trans-Siberian? Then take the ultimate adventure vacation: facing rush-hour traffic in Taipei! We supply you with life-saving tips, a map, a car, and gas. (Please list beneficiaries)

If concerns over your health and the availability of insurance outweigh the desire for adventure, you have little choice but to be subjected to one of the three available mass transit systems. A clean, cool, fast subway is not an option. One is being built, but is under permanent construction, with a projected completion date that sounds like a doomsdayist explaining when the world will end. Tomorrow. Oh, maybe not tomorrow,

but the next day. Soon. Just wait. In a year, maybe two. You'll see. In 2010! Promise!

The subway will run along Taipei's major arteries, which are few. Many thoroughfares, because of the construction, have been reduced from three lanes to one, not helping speed traffic along that wasn't moving in the first place. Taipei's population is over three million, but you could squeeze the city into the Superdome if you raised its roof. This combination of size and citizens causes an anthill-like population density. Ants with cars. The island of twenty million has over ten million registered motor vehicle; most are in Taipei.

Taxis are the first option. And a good one, if you have ever wanted to ride with Mario Andretti in a Grand Prix. The trip will consist of long periods spent in massive public parking lots, where all vehicles keep their motors running. The English translation for these lots is "streets." Also, it appears to be a national law to have the radio tuned to some Chinese pop singer belting out The Carpenter's greatest hits. These periods of musical appreciation are occasionally interrupted by rocket-like accelerations, followed by plane crash like deceleration, as drivers rush forward to claim another ten feet of pavement.

There are no traffic laws in Taiwan, only suggestions. Remember a red light means

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caution; green, watch out for the other driver running the red.

Most drivers do not speak English, nor any language with an alphabet. Carry your intended destination in Chinese, so the driver knows the longest route. One danger is that many drivers own their taxis, which look suspiciously like the family car. Make, model, and color vary dramatically. Beware of waving your arm, and hopping into the nearest car-that-looks-like-a-taxi. You will know if you have made a mistake if the driver eyes you strangely, and does not ask for a destination.

Cabs charge both by the kilometer and for stationary time. Some drivers have small TV sets on the dashboard so they can watch sitcoms (often American, dubbed into Mandarin) while stuck in traffic jams, and more exciting, during high speed U-turns. The average cross-town fare (approximately one episode of *The Cosby Show*) is about 150 New Taiwanese dollars (NT), or \$6.00 American. While this seems inexpensive, remember sitcoms are free at home.

Taipei has the highest per-capita taxi ratio in the world (one for every seventy-three people) but for unknown reasons, cabs will not stop in the rain. Unfortunately, since Taiwan is a semi-tropical island, it rains all the time. Rumor is drivers don't stop because their wives get mad when the car is brought home with wet upholstery. Some cabbies solve this problem by shrink-wrapping the entire interior of the car in plastic, so you feel like a ziplocked leftover, especially when the driver cranks the air-conditioner.

Being a foreigner is both an advantage and a disadvantage when flagging a cab. On the bad side, some drivers will not stop because they do not want to face the communication

hurdle. On the good side, since you are taller than everybody, you will stand out. But beware: the driver may be looking for a free English conversation lesson. You will recognize this when, during commercials, the driver asks, "How long you Taipei?"

A common masticatory habit among Taipei taxi drivers is the chewing of betel nut, a bean-like simulate that causes large amounts of red saliva to accumulate in the users mouth, often on the chin, too. Betel nut chewers are easily recognized by red-stained teeth, Tony Perkins-like laughing at surely fatal high speed near-misses, and by how they lean out their door when idling, expectorating copious amounts of red liquid onto the road. It looks like they are bleeding internally, but they're not. (I think.)

The driver may offer you some betel nut. If you decide to try it some words of advice: keep the window down as nausea often accompanies the first bite. Also wipe the red spittle off your chin before you get back to the hotel or people will think you have been drinking too much Taiwan "pei-jo" (beer) and your ulcer is acting up.

The next option is the bus. On the good side, most have route numbers posted in English (well, Arabic) numbers. Also, some are even air-conditioned, which can be important since Taipei's temperature in the summer can reach surface-of-Venus-like levels. On the bad side, there are many bus companies, and some use the same route numbers — for different routes. A good rule of thumb is that if you see rice paddies, you have caught the wrong bus. Also, some are not air-conditioned, and human beings cannot survive on the surface of Venus. Buses are crowded, perhaps more than roadways. Meteor-strike odds exists if you hope to find a seat.

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Fares are inexpensive, less than \$1 American. However, when you pay is a question no foreigner has deciphered, despite the attempts of researchers. Sometimes you pay when you get on. Sometimes when you get off. Sometimes both. Sometimes you get in through the front door; sometimes the rear. Experienced travelers have discovered some workable strategies to handle the enigma. If possible, get on after a local. Go in the door they do. Pay if they do. If no locals are handy, get on through the closest door that opens, smile at the bus driver, and pay only if he screams.

Keep a firm grasp on the silver support bar. Traffic rules in Taipei revolve around vehicular mass: the more, the better. Buses yield only to semi trucks. The bus driver's ability to swerve in and out of traffic while driving a forty foot vehicle will bring your admiration. Unfortunately most traffic jams cause even buses to stop, something the driver can accomplish in ten meters, at speeds of to fifty kilometers an hour. The previously accelerating passengers, obeying Newtonian laws, are thrust forward. This is why a good grip on the support bar is necessary; when your feet leave the ground, you will not be projected through the windshield like an ignorant foreigner.

Taipei's gridlock will cause you to consider a third option, one practiced by forefathers, but forgotten in modern times. It uses little energy, and better, is free. This unique mass transit system involves concrete path's that are conveniently located adjacent to roadways, and uses bi-pedal locomotion something Homo Sapiens were once proficient at. The English translation for this option is "Walking."

Taipei is small; buy a map and get some exercise. Or at least hop out of the taxi in traffic jams (drivers are used to it — be sure

to pay) and walk the rest of the way. After all, you can only watch Cosby reruns so many times, especially in Mandarin. Walking will save time and money, and you'll see more of the city and its people.

If the pollution is really bad, do what locals do: buy a Doctor Dick surgical mask, available at convenience stores. (There are 7-11s everywhere.) I don't know if they actually help, but at least you will feel like an extra in Blade Runner.

Actually, the best solution may be to not leave your hotel. It's cleaner, drier, safer, cooler, and you are not forced to listen to Taiwanese renditions of Carpenter songs, which were bad enough in the first place. Buy a guidebook, lean back on those cool sheets, order some peijo from room service, and look at the pictures.

But if you want to experience the local culture, go out into the haze and explore Taipei by taxi, bus, or foot. While breathing polluted air or sitting in traffic jams may not seem like a good way to experience the culture, let me assure you it is. It's what the natives do.

And if you have seen all of The Cosby Show episodes, and plan to catch a cab, go a half hour later when Baywatch is on.

Bradford G. Boyle is the man behind Walkabout Travel Gear.

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