

Our Taiwan Adventure – Andrew Nicol

During December and January the Nicol family were privileged to spend nine weeks in Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Five weeks of Study Leave were spent in Tainan, a city in the South West of Taiwan with our hosts the *Tainan Theological College and Seminary*. 'TTCS' is one of three in a network of *Presbyterian Church of Taiwan* colleges around the country.

This was the first time our four children (14, 12, 9 and 7) had ever been out of the country and a first time in this part of the world for Charissa and me. After a relaxing treat around some Malaysian hotspots we arrived late one night in mid-December after a long day of travel. We did not really know what to expect and I think in all honesty it was a bit hard when we crawled into some very firm beds in what was, at least to begin with, our sparsely equipped 'home-away-from-home'. We would learn a lot over the coming weeks about just what a family needs to get by, about the kindness of our neighbours, and about the gift we had been given.



Taiwan is a fascinating and beautiful country with a complex history. During our time there Tsai Ing-wen was re-elected as President—only the seventh since free Presidential elections began in 1996—on a firm platform of independence for Taiwan (or the Republic of China). As you can imagine Taiwan is heavily invested in the issues brought to the fore in the Hong Kong protests, but we were only getting the first inkling that COVID-19 would become so devastating. Approximately 1.2 million Chinese nationals had come across to Taiwan in the late 40's and early 50's after the ROC lost the civil war to the communists. They in turn came to a country which had endured fifty years of Japanese rule (until their defeat in WW2 in 1945). Combine this with other colonial Dutch and Spanish influences as well as a rich yet suppressed indigenous cultures and you start to get some picture for this beautiful place and the determined, industrious, and friendly people it is home to.

Tainan is on the South-West coast and is a former ancient capital. It is full of history and fascinating alleyway streets. One of the

highlights of our time were the many hours a day we were able to spend simply walking the streets. So, we mostly walked and used the affordable taxis when we needed to. There are quite a few parks although they tend to be more on the slightly dusty side compared to what New Zealanders might be used to. On this note we came to understand that our apartment lay within a large college compound in the centre of the city which was in fact a very privileged location in terms of space and greenery. The historic college buildings and church are a landmark (I even got to play a priest for a Taiwanese film crew using the historic buildings!).

We loved getting away ourselves and discovering some of the island. The country itself is easy to get around and we always felt safe. It was a really good context for encouraging the children to engage and navigate trains and exchange, to take turns at directing us and build confidence in an unfamiliar environment. The West coast is mostly a string of cities and is quite built up. This is the side of the island facing the China strait. It can be quite polluted—I struggled with the air quality in Tainan at some stages. This side also has the exciting high-speed train (about 280km/hr) running up to Taipei at the top. The south has some beaches and the National Park area of Kenting (where the water was very warm, and the island meets the Pacific ocean). The east coast has a mountainous backdrop and rugged beautiful coastline. We spent some time at one of the other colleges Yushan in Lake Lyu near Hualien on the east coast (and also visited the famous Taroko Gorge). Another stunning spot is Alishan forest on the West Coast. Taipei is the bustling capital city with plenty to see and do.

It was a great experience for us all to be immersed in an environment where we did not know the language (mostly Mandarin, with some Taiwanese). This certainly gave us more empathy for the Chinese student we host here in NZ! Whilst this taught us plenty, it was undeniably, a barrier too. We spent some time with students and staff who could speak English and some who appreciated improving it, however there were of course limits to participation in classes, conversing, ordering food, and getting to know people more deeply. At times this resulted in more adventure and at other times it inhibited deeper participation. Taiwanese people meet others out and usually do not invite friends back to their home in quite the same way we are used to. So, this means learning to connect differently too.



In the mountains of Alishan Forest Park

December/January is winter and it was quite dry, sometimes overcast, with hardly any rain. Temperature was mild between 16-24ish. There were more mosquitos than we expected, and we had to learn to be careful closing up our apartment! The predominant religious expression in Taiwan is Chinese folk religion and Tainan is full of colourful intricate temples. If we are a café culture, they are a tea culture on steroids! It seemed as if every third shop was a tea shop (evenly spaced between

scooter repair depots). People here walk around with long drinks of 'bubble (sweet tapioca pearls) milk tea' or some other fruit variant (my fav was passionfruit green tea). The food in Taiwan is famous and eating out was very affordable even for the six of us. There are restaurants spilling onto the streets everywhere—it is not always easy to figure out what is on offer, but there are lots of fish, noodles, dumplings, 'hot-pot', fruit and sweet treats. They love sweet potato! In summer there are pineapples, mangoes and melons. During our winter stay we enjoyed bananas, oranges, and custard fruit. Another 'must-do' activity here are the colourful night markets where you can sample lots of local food and wares.

Scientists now believe that the forbears of the Maori travelled from Taiwan thousands of years ago. You can certainly see cultural echoes in the indigenous peoples and some of our most vivid memories come from the time visiting indigenous communities in the South of Taiwan with ministers Vavauni and Ubuk (who plan to come to New Zealand for PhD study if possible). We also joined in a little English-speaking church community on Sundays (which had numerous international students from the nearby university). I preached there and we got to know some families. Christmas held some treats and some challenges for the kids. Everyone works and goes to school so it felt like a bit of a non-event compared to what they are used to. On the other hand, it was valuable to gain some perspective on just how busy and stress our holiday rituals could be.

We are enormously grateful for our time in Taiwan and the generosity of our hosts and the people of Tainan Theological College and Seminary especially. The church there faces the ongoing challenge of minority status in a culture permeated with folk religion. The ministers, missionaries, and chaplains (there are a number of church schools) we met worked extremely hard and it was encouraging to meet a number of vibrant and visionary young people exploring faith and ministry, some of whom you may have found visit New Zealand on bi-annual exchange. Taiwan has made an indelible mark on our family, both for the space gifted to us and for the relationships we formed and hope to foster going forward (despite the challenge that COVID-19 currently presents to international relations!).

Andrew and Charissa are ordained ministers living in Christchurch. Andrew serves at St. Margaret's Presbyterian Church in Bishopdale, and Charissa is chaplain at Rangī Ruru Girls School.



With indigenous ministers Vavauni and Ubuk and church members during a visit to their village