
THE LONG JOURNEY

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Winter edition

"A traveler without observation is a bird without wings" – Moslih Eddin Saadi

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We sometimes do not open our eyes even as we go about our journeys. Such mindless wander could be seen as being a flightless bird. Do you agree?

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About this Edition

An epic journey had just been completed. And we have to say we've made quite some observations that Moslih would have been proud of. If you need to be reminded, well we were in Jordan and Israel. Yes! One more bucket list item checked.

Definitely time to let our little bank account recuperate. We keep saying it but this time it is a new year's resolution. Do you have yours?

So, we are back again!

How's life?

First up. Happy 2018.

It is the new year and time for some resolutions. Did you make any? These last 3 months had been hectic for work. And we did not have any visitors again! Hey you. Why don't you folks stopover here?

This should be fun! Meeting friends from lands afar and linking up to share experience!

For our red dotter friends, perhaps we should meet up for the coming lunar new year!

Yeah. Soon it will be the zodiac year of the dog. We'll be spending some time outside of the little red dot again. What will be your plans?

Night markets of Taipei

One of the things to really do in Taipei (or indeed in all Taiwan) is to eat at its many many night markets.

In fact, if one looks up the internet, you will find so many people writing and blogging about their experiences eating here, there...



Can you imagine all of these for just NT\$150?

Many years ago, Mel had traveled to Taiwan as a young

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national serviceman. That was more than 25 years ago. During his 4 days of R&R, he made stops in Kaohsiung, Taichung and eventually 2 days in Taipei itself.

All those nights were filled with exploring the night markets seeking out food and cheap knick knacks to buy for the then girlfriend. Who is the boss now. To be exact the full title is: **Editor-in-Chief, Expert Procurer of fine things and Finance Director at home. AKA Princess Queenie Suan.**

Fast forward to 2016. Today Taiwan is a vastly different place. Even though Mel had visited for business in the last few years, there had been little if any opportunity to explore these night markets on his own.



NT\$170 for all of this food!

Then came the journey where Suan joined in. With two persons, there is sufficient courage and mouths to walk through these markets seeking out the best morsels.

And this we did!

There are many side streets if you just wonder off the main shopping streets. In fact, at Tong Hua (通化), you are more than likely to find food not just in the form of temporary carts, but also as little eateries on the ground floor of the buildings.



NT\$150 for a 6oz slab of beef

Remarkably for a city where real estate prices can also be rather high, the cost of street food is much more affordable than it appears on the surface.

And it survives side by side with "modern" cafes and

restaurants that also dot the landscape.



NT\$50 for this portion of stinky tofu

In fact, it would be a farce to say that there is a lot of innovation around the street food. Evidence from our journey to three separate night market across the city suggests the majority of the offer is quite similar though the preparation could differ.

The main thing is - price. In all of the markets, we have found that pricing is relatively consistent.



NT\$65 for this oyster omelette

For example, it appears that fried stinky tofu is served in portions that are priced at a constant NT\$50. Also, the servings come with a good amount of cabbage too that has been pickled or served with vinegar, cannot remember which.

So if it is reasonable price and relatively tasty eats you are looking for, night markets are you answer.

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Graveyard of the Moai

One of the most iconic photos in the world is that of giant statues "stuck" in the earth - as if they were buried there or planted into the earth.

In actual fact, these are not just statues as we found out

DID YOU KNOW?

If there is one thing about Chinese culture, it is the food. And Taiwan is unique. Not because of its stance on being distinct from the mainland. Far from it. In fact it embodies what the mainland is – culinary wise.

SERIOUS FOOD PLACES

For the longest time, Taiwan was an island that did not see mass migration of folks. That changed from the 1500s when the island first became part of the Portuguese and later the Dutch empires. But the Chinese did not accept that and took over the island. Then the Japanese came and occupied it for 50 years before the end of WWII ignited a wave of migrants from all over China.

So, today the island is a paradise of both Chinese and Japanese influences where it comes to food. And nowhere is it better than to use this illustration lifted from the web.



And so it is today. When one visits Taiwan, one of the "critical" places to visit its night markets. Where tradition meets innovation and evolution. Of course not all are to be found in these places, for there are also countless other small eateries that proffer one both a sensual feast for the eyes and palette.

We love to trawl the markets and streets for places to eat. And walk it off looking for yet more. Could this be something you like too?

when we visited the site of Rano Raraku. In traditional beliefs of Europe and Asia, the spirits of the deceased are often represented by burial tablets. Well, the Moai is the equivalent of such.

At this site, there are said to be 397 Moai statues in various positions and state of completion. They all face downhill, so obviously was intended to be delivered down the mountain slope to the folks who ordered them.



Moai facing the sea in tranquility

This site was actually a "factory", where orders for these ancestral "tablets" were produced, evidently in large quantity. Why is it that this is such a good place? Well, for one thing the raw materials are in close proximity. This helps a lot to reduce cost of transport (supply chain comes to mind). But if the Moai were being "manufactured", why are they buried in the ground?

The answer is - that the statues were originally sited on a exposed mound, where craftsmen would carve the iconic facial expressions that we see today.

However, these mounds were filled in over the years with earth and dirt. This finally led to the Moai being covered, some up to the neck. Who knows how many more could be buried beneath our feet!



Smile, you're in Mel & Suan's camera

The Moai came in many sizes, but generally are elongated stone mastiffs. Some are very tall (~10m), while the smallest are said

to be just 2.5m tall. Well it depends on your budget right? Many theories abound how the statues were moved to their final resting places. Sled, carried or "walked", we will probably not know how. But at least we know why.

It's an interesting thing that the building of such structures probably stopped around the year 1350, as researchers claim this is the "youngest" found. It is believed (so means no scientific proof) that the Moai were built around 1000 years ago when the Polynesians first arrived.

To spare resources of labor to the work of creating such structures is testament to a time of plenty, where surplus (ie wealth) was available to facilitate such efforts.



Marching the Moai

It should be noted that these Moai were carved out of the volcanic rock on the mountain slope.

Making these Moai was serious business and not an easy task. The first thing to know is that the volcanic rock here on Rapa Nui is brittle. The craftsmen had to first identify a vein of rock in the mountain face that did not contain any cracks or fissures.

Otherwise subsequent work may be wasted when the structure splits up when it is chiseled. Mostly the Moai is worked on (to give it the "basic" features) when it is being hollowed out from the mountain side.

As that part of the production process is completed, the Moai is moved down-slope to open mounds where the craftsmen put in final touches to the eyes, ears and mouth expressions.



Carving still in progress

Did you know that to insult another Rapa Nui family, you just have to push over the Moai of that family so that it falls flat? It's the equivalent of smashing your enemy's family tomb stone. Not exactly very friendly, cause the stone's brittle and will most probably break apart when it falls to the ground.

This was exactly how most of the Moai all over the island were found at the time that the colonial powers came.

Interneccine warfare had reduced the island population (said to number up to 15,000 people at its peak) down to a couple of thousand. By the late 19th century, a mere 100+ native folks remain.

While the sites elsewhere restored the Moai, it will be impossible to really know where they were exactly located. But here in the graveyard of the Moai, we know exactly where they were sited, as they wait to be completed and revered. Wanna buy one?



A philosophical looking Moai

See the Moai that seem to be looking up to the sky in deep thought? Well, go join him on the island of Rapa Nui. Go sit in the same compound engaged in profound thinking.

Is he thinking of when his descendents will come to pick him up and "install" him in the family home or land? Or is he thinking about all those giggling tourists coming with tiny

boxes where they stand in front of and make silly poses?

We know what we were thinking. We thought of how nice it would be to spend even more days here.

Rapa Nui is small. It is also quiet. But it is big in the heart. Big in the sense that it welcomes you wholeheartedly. It is not an easy place to get to, but it will be unforgettable when you get there.

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Escape from Hong Kong!

Once known as the Pearl of the orient (until China opened up and Shanghai reclaimed it), this is a bustling city with wild contrasts between third world and first world.

One of the things to do when you have a free day in Hong Kong while on business is to visit some of its best known sights. So on to the Peak is where we went.

It does not cost a lot - HK\$40pp (good as of Nov-13) was all it takes. Getting on after nearly 1.5 hours of lining up to buy the tickets, the funicular ride up was just 5+ minutes! Every single funicular trip was full as you can see:



The mandatory tram Selfie!

You need not be told that the panorama from the peak is dazzling. Imagine this in the evening.

One thing about the peak is to enjoy it while walking along its numerous paths. Many are shrouded with greenery and very refreshing. It would be less crowded too! We saw many people walking their dogs or simply strolling, some jogging along the pathways. It's like the equivalent of Bukit Timah nature reserve in Singapore.

However if you do not have sufficient time, then take a trip up the elevator to the sky terrace. For a small additional fee (HK\$35pp), you can view the panorama in the comfort of an air conditioned gallery.



Peak Panorama

Another icon to explore is the ferry service between Hong Kong island and Kowloon. Started in the 1870s, it was the only mode of transport between the island and the mainland until 1972.

Today it still carries ~70,000 passengers per day (~26 million per year), even though there is the MTR and a number of undersea tunnels connecting the two sides of Victoria harbor. Take a trip for just HK2.50... Buy a token from booths at the ferry terminals and slot them into the gantry to enter the boarding area. Or buy one as a souvenir...

There are two levels to the ferry, the higher one costing more (obviously). Free seating, with backs that recline both ways. The trip itself takes only 7-8 minutes but the view of the harbor and two sides (island vs mainland) is always fascinating even after many trips.



A star on the Ferry!

Taking a stroll along the waterfront on Kowloon affords a view of the bay. Fortunately for us, the air quality was good and there was no smog or haze when we revisited.

The best times of the year to visit probably is in the spring time according a lot of travel experts. It is also probably the month with better air quality. Someone needs to verify that... Any later and the typhoons are a menace, while anything around July could be hot and humid.

We were in Hong Kong in October and enjoyed the great sunny weather peppered with occasional showers that helped cleared up the air. The evenings are cool and not humid too.



Bay view of Hong Kong

Every day in the evening, the skyscrapers on both sides of the harbor collaborate with the tourism authority to conjure up a show using the lights on the buildings.

Dubbed the "Symphony of lights", it takes place each day at 8pm and is said to involve more than 40 buildings. We did not get to view the show from the Hong Kong side, but from the Kowloon side – it's said to be a better choice.

You can also charter or join in a group cruise along the harbor viewing the lights while sipping on some champagne.

For us it was a good thing to stroll along the harbor front in the evening after a hearty Cantonese dinner - which usually can be luxurious. Got to work off the calories while enjoying some sightseeing!



Dazzling beauty in front of the beauties

In this article, we had not delved into the wonder world of culinary treasures that can be discovered in Hong Kong. For that deserves a full article on its own.

We have also not mentioned about the shopping experience that can be had spending a few days pounding the streets of Causeway bay too.

Like any major city, most sights we get to experience will be urban. However, Hong Kong has more. If we come back yet again, we will certainly extend our reach to the outer islands - where it is quieter, charming and where quaint villages can still be found, literally miles from the bustling city!



What's in our next issue?

Well, we are back to Thailand for the next quarter. For we spent some time back in school. What? Yup, look out for that sharing the next time and,



We'll be watching you! LOL.