

# **National Taiwan University, Taiwan 2009**

## **Introduction**

To say that my experiences in Taiwan have been life changing is an understatement. Taiwan, simply put, has given me a new perspective, a great deal of experience, and a very healthy amount of personal growth that I will carry with me for a long time. From the beginning I've wanted to experience Taiwan from the most local point of view. That's why the moment I got to Taiwan, I repacked my things again and traveled the west and south of Taiwan with people I had just met. On our way, we met many Taiwanese people and got more than just a couple of stares from the locals and made great friendships with fellow travelers.

## **Preparing to Leave**

Before coming to Taiwan I remember doing a lot of research. Everything from the history, to the culture to even looking at Google map to look at the view of Taipei city from satellite images. I came to Taiwan with a very open mind and as few presumptions as possible. Everything I learned I took as new, even if I'd read about it or heard about it somewhere before. What I could not pick up from a book was the extent of friendliness the people of Taiwan have. As a traveler, asking for directions or help in general is so crucial and people in Taiwan genuinely go out of their way to help you. Something I would have never learned until coming here and actually being in the situation. The importance of asking politely and stepping out of your own comfort zone to reach your goal or destination has really been imprinted on my mind. The worst that could happen is people will say "no" and all you need to do is move on to the next person.

## **Campus Life**

When school started, the first thing I looked for was the Tae Kwon Do club on campus. This was my way of connecting with local students with a common interest. Tae Kwon Do is an official Olympic sport full of high power, fast paced kicking and punching. At San Francisco State our team trains very hard; we train to deal with real life situations and learn how to play the sport. But this is where we differ from the Taiwanese, where we focused on self defense in Taiwan their time was strictly given only to Olympic sparring. The change of pace was strenuous. I'm not going to lie, I had the time of my life punching and kicking, getting punched and kicked. In Tae Kwon Do very strong friendships are made in this team-oriented environment and atmosphere. National Taiwan University has a very high caliber team; they have close connections to the Olympic team; I myself got beat by an Olympic athlete! In the end, the pace of training with NTU Tae Kwon Do team was too hard on some previous injuries I developed when I was training in California, so I had to quit.

In the meantime, ICLP courses were going at a pretty good pace. You can feel your Chinese improving all the time. All you have to do is use it. I also made good friendships with other California students; at the end of the day, it's not a bad thing to come back to the dorms and have someone to relate to. When the NTU students were too busy to go out because they had exams or their schedule did not match mine, California students and other foreign students are good people to hang out with. During the semester, I was also co-MC for this international concert, and it was a blast! Foreign and local students get to show off their musical talents and it was so much fun

representing them. Also living expenses in Taiwan can be very affordable so I was able to save up some money and made a quick trip to Japan and Hong Kong for Christmas and new years, it was an experience that I will never forget. I got so much from it.

## **Travel**

For me, traveling is best when done in small groups. Going to places like Alishan, Kaoshiung, Jiayi, and the Penghu islands are just a few of the places I have been to besides all around Taipei County. Taiwan's railroad and transportation system is so well connected. It wasn't too hard to get around with very limited use of the Mandarin language. One of my most favorite experiences while in Taiwan happened right at the beginning of my travels. I was on this small island named Penghu at a traveler's hostel. One night while coming back from a night market, we met up with a group of local Taiwanese University students hanging out in the lobby of the hostel. We began to make small talk. Since my Mandarin was not good at all at the time, I made big hand gestures and funny reenactments making the experience all the more pleasant. At first the local students were a bit shy, but the next thing you know it, were talking politics, pop culture, what it's like to live in a city like San Francisco, race, gender and I even got to teach them a little bit of Spanish! We talked for hours, and after, they let us ride their scooters and took us to their favorite beaches at night. We played in the sand at night and to cap the night off, they treated us to midnight sushi. If that isn't hospitality, then I don't know what is. Another memorable experience that I've had was when my good friend visited me, she is American born Chinese, who only knows how to speak the Cantonese dialect. I remember when people approached her; she would tell them she didn't speak Mandarin. I would speak, but people still spoke to her. I found it funny to be the completely foreign-looking person and yet be the translator for my Asian friend! It was a nice blow to conventional wisdom. We had some people really confused. At the end of her stay she told me she was applying to Taiwan to come learn Mandarin.

## **Closing**

In one semester in Taiwan, I believe I have seen myself grow more mature than most of my peers back at home. It might take some of them years and years to catch up to even see or experience half the things I have seen or experienced. Taiwan in many ways has re-energized my goals and ideals to go to law school, practice law and eventually become a public servant. Taiwan has given me a new sense of self, pride in my heritage, newfound respect and pride for the country that has given me the opportunity to be here: America, the people of Taiwan for who they are, and what is like to see the world through their eyes. To say that Taiwan has changed my life so far is an understatement. I will go back to the United States with new tools in the form of a language, a better sense of identity, a more mature personality thanks to all my experiences and a new sense of purpose; to give back to my community and make the place we live in a better place for those of us who live in it today and for those who will inherit it in the future. I can see American politics (I am a political science major after all) not just from the left or right point of view, but from a more humanistic point of view; an international point of view. In the end we take for granted how influential American politics can be to people outside our borders, on every corner of the globe. Taiwan has so far been an unforgettable experience. I am forever grateful for this new person I am growing up to be. I am forever grateful to people who helped me get to Taiwan and all their support. Most importantly, I am forever grateful to the people of Taiwan; truly a beautiful people.