

AUSTRONESIAN FESTIVAL IN TAITUNG

AUSTRONESIAN FESTIVAL IN TAITUNG (930 words) Part I

“The First Austronesian Festival,” a book by ProVigor Publishing, 2000

“The sleepy town of Taitung is not a common tourist destination” reads the Taiwan Visitors Guide... not an appealing introduction.

Indeed, much of Taitung’s appeal is the unspoiled, peaceful atmosphere of this small town of 100,000. To the east, lies the rocky, untamed coast, the Asian frontier of the Pacific Ocean. To the west, ferns, palms and tangled brush carpet the rugged Central Mountain range, their peaks often shrouded in mist as thick cottony clouds blow swiftly across the narrow, fertile valley.

Every couple of months, I get an overwhelming urge to escape Taipei and head for the country, but this time was different. My pal, Shelly Anderson, had invited me down for Taitong’s first ever, “International Austronesian Festival.”

The brochure promised week-long festivities - dancing, music, lectures, cultural exhibits, arts and crafts – and all for free. All nine Taiwanese tribes would perform, as well as troupes from Hawaii, Fiji, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Solomon Islands, Guam, and Palauan. Wow! What a fascinating opportunity too, to view all of these tribes side by side, – comparing faces, dances, art, dress, tools, language...

And just who are these Austronesians? They are the seafaring people of the South Seas. Their name is from the Greek, “Austro” meaning south (ie: Australia, the southern land) and “-nesia” meaning archipelago (ie: Polynesia, many islands).

Surprisingly, the far-flung Austronesian tribes may have actually originated in Taiwan. A recent theory holds that, five thousand years ago, the native Taiwanese began migrating to SE Asia, and to the Indian and Pacific Oceans. They went as far as Easter Island in western South America, Madagascar in eastern Africa, and south to the tip of New Zealand.

The common link between these diverse cultures is language – they all originated from the same Austronesian roots. Some 900 languages, spoken by 280 million people, share similar words attesting to seafaring lifestyles in the tropics; for example: boat, sails, oars, sharks, lobsters, turtles, sugar cane, coconuts, bananas and bamboo.

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There are other similarities, such as the building of meeting halls and barns on posts - to keep them dry and to prevent access by wild animals. A common custom is the ritual pulling of upper teeth, practiced here in Taiwan, Mainland China and in SE Asia.

So why was Taitung selected to hold this international event? Taitung has the highest aboriginal population of Taiwan, and numerous tribes reside here, such as the Ami and the Pyuma or Beinan.

Taiwan's oldest artifacts, dating back 5-15,000 years (the Neolithic and Paleolithic eras) have been discovered along Taitung's Peinan River. These prove that the indigenous people lived here long before the Chinese arrived.

When I arrived in Taitung, the sleepy town was buzzing with excitement. Colorful banners billowed at each intersection, and downtown was crowded with families headed to the street fair.

The cultural exhibition at the County Cultural Center was a great place to begin. Beautifully crafted exhibits explained Austronesian origins simply and artfully, using bamboo, woven grasses and wood. Each included historical information, photographs, tools, crafts, and even mannequins in traditional costumes and natural settings.

The inaugural festivities began June 27th, hosted by President Lee Teng Hwei. It also opened a week-long series of lectures by noted speakers such as Professor Peter Bellwood of Australia's National University. He addressed "5000 years of Austronesian History, from Taiwan to Easter Island." Other lecturers examined diet, migratory patterns and the challenges of integration, faced by indigenous people worldwide.

The big event was Saturday night's "Hit Songs and Hot Dances: the Austro Carnival". County Governor Mr. Chen Chien Nien welcomed the crowd and the performances began. And what a show!

While the Taiwanese tribes were the most serious, the dances all felt consistently authentic, and the costumes displayed great complexity and variety. New Zealand's fierce Maori warriors were impressive, with their painted faces and tattoos.

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Naturally, Hawaii's warm welcome and gorgeous, sexy hulas were a big hit. But the real showstopper was the Solomon Islanders' primitive, exuberant performance that had the whole auditorium cheering.

Their gleaming black bodies were like canvases, covered with white paint in geometric patterns, and each wore only a tiny g-string. Their jungle rhythms were joyous and infectious.

After the last encore, we all slumped in our seats with exhaustion, palms and throats sore, and giddy from all the excitement. What a night!

Sunday's closing celebration seemed tame by comparison – just a big aboriginal dance party with fireworks. This time the music began with group sing-alongs, pairing Fiji with the Solomon Islanders and Malaysia with New Zealand – wonderfully off-kilter...

They segued into a massive chain dance. Even the fun-loving Governor and his wife latched on - until there were more dancers than onlookers.

An international, "twenty-something" hip hop and reggae dance bash followed. It was wonderfully strange to see costumed Austronesians hip hopping to the same 90's beat. It seemed very un-Asian too, to see this uninhibited crowd, of all ages, beaming at friends and strangers alike

My most memorable moment was when I noticed the slender, balding, 85 year-old Chinese man standing next to me, nodding to the music... Shelly chuckled and told me he was dying to dance with me. I couldn't believe it.

So I started to swing a little, and motioned to him to join me. Sure enough, he beamed with surprised delight, and began stepping and swaying to the beat, proudly demonstrating his best free style.

And so a magical weekend came to a close, on a surreal summer night in '99 when a forty-something waiguo nuren and an eighty-something Taiwanese agong boogied on down at the Taitung Austronesian festival...

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THE EAST COAST SCENIC ROUTE (700 words)

Part II

Getting to Taitung is half the fun. I catch the earliest train possible and leave at 6:45 AM on the TC Express, NT\$850 one way for a 5 ½ hour glorious excursion. The slower trains take 7-8 hours and cost only NT\$650. The drive is even more breathtaking, especially between Suao and Hualien. If you're short on time, the flight to Taitung is only 50 minutes, costing about NT\$2500 RT. I prefer the relaxed, leisurely pace of the train - by the time you arrive, you've decompressed.

About 40 minutes out of Taipei, I begin to notice the scenery and realize my holiday has begun. We ride through narrow valleys, snaking our way through the dense olive mountains, to a wide silvery river and finally join the ocean near Ilan. The eastern coastline is stunning and reminds me of California's Big Sur. The mountains hug the sea, and the train tracks follow narrow roads that barely cling to steep stone cliffs. Below, the breakers crash and churn along a rocky, weather-beaten shore, a reminder of the frequent typhoons.

As you travel south from Hualien, the train leaves the coast and meanders inland through lush, green valleys. Finally, we arrive in Taitung, a quiet seaside town, blessed with cooling ocean breezes and sunny blue skies.

Here you can walk down quiet country lanes, soak in the Jrben Hot Springs, examine ancient 5-10,000 year-old artifacts at the County Culture Center, bodysurf at a long, amber-colored beach, or just take an invigorating hike into the magnificent mountains. It's a peaceful getaway that's far from the tourist crowds of Taipei.

Nearby Green Island offers tranquil hiking and superb water sports, such as reef diving, snorkeling, swimming and fishing. It's easily accessed by ferry or plane.

For travellers seeking the less-travelled road, take the short flight to Orchid Island or Lanyu, at the southern tip of Taiwan. Step back in time as you explore the primitive culture of the Yami. Their handicrafts and boats are exquisitely decorated, and their semi-underground homes are intriguing. Tourists are a rarity from July to March, and the Yami are warm and welcoming. The two hotels offer simple lodging and meals.

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You'll find breathtaking vistas along the scenic Southern Cross-Island Highway as it twists and turns through the mountains, revealing aboriginal villages, hot springs, and even waterfalls.

A soak at Chihpen Hot Springs, just 14 km south of Taitung, is always a good way to start a holiday, but this time Shelly, her son William and I got soaked fully dressed – when we ran into the Pyuma tribe's water celebration.

A boisterous parade of scooters and blue pick-up trucks crowded Chihpen's narrow main street. The revelers, mostly moms and kids were dressed in colorful Pyuma costumes and flower garlands. They shrieked gaily as they doused each other with water – and us.

The best hotels in the county are here in Chihpen, Taiwan's oldest and most remote hot spring resort. The Japanese developed it in the 1900's, dubbing it "The Source of Wisdom.

The older Chihpen Hotel offers hot, warm and cold pools - the biggest outdoor mineral pools in Taiwan, set against a cliff of hanging banyans, swaying palms and a waterfall. Nonmembers may bathe too, for a nominal fee.

The acclaimed, Royal Chihpen Spa Hotel offers luxurious accommodation and superb food. It sits on a peaceful, verdant terrace, high upon the mountain overlooking Chihpen and Taitung's green valley.

The neighboring Chinghuh Temple is quite a gem. Two magnificent white elephants stand at the foot of the steps. Inside, sit two of the most exquisite Buddhas in Taiwan, one in white jade from Myanmar, the other of brass from Thailand.

If you're on a budget, dip into the large public mineral baths, next to the new Hoya Hotel, for only \$150 each. The hot, warm and cold pools are most peaceful early morning. But families will prefer late afternoon, when a dozen monkeys appear in the trees overhead, swinging Tarzan-style, and screeching as they pluck their leafy dinners

If you prefer to lodge in downtown Taitung, there are numerous moderate hotels near the old train station. I can personally recommend the no-frills Teacher's Hostel, a spotless, high-rise motel adjacent to the County Culture Center.

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FUTURE AUSTRONESIAN EVENTS IN TAIWAN (330 words) potential SIDEBAR

The arts are an international medium that speaks equally to everyone, transcending ethnic origins. This event was a means for festival organizers to tap into aboriginal cultural energy, potentially inspiring others and stimulating an artistic renaissance.

Taitung County Governor Chen, Chien Nien, has high hopes for future events, "We hope the Festival of Austronesian Culture in Taitung 1999 can serve as a starting point to open up a long-term exchange among Austronesian tribes, enabling traditional cultures to shine and linger..." Chung Wen Pan, Director of Taitung County Cultural Center, hopes this will also bring Taiwanese aboriginal cultures into the international arena.

Council Chairwoman, Helan Chen-Chi Lin provides the national perspective, "Since 1981, the Executive Yuan's Council for Cultural Affairs has been the bridge between the government and cultural and arts circles. As part of the "Twelve Construction Projects", the Council is to guide counties and municipalities in sponsoring small-scale international cultural/arts activities.

This can only enhance the tourism industry, while inspiring artists throughout Taiwan and both educating and entertaining the Taiwanese public.

Each county or municipality will hold a top-notch cultural activity every two to three years, using local resources and inviting domestic and international arts groups. These festivals will include performances, exhibitions, forums and lectures. They will also guarantee ongoing sites for local performers to display and share their talents, and to learn from their peers around the globe.

Over the past five decades, our agrarian past has given way to a technologically advanced industrial society. As part of the Global Village, international cultural exchanges promote our image and status, while enhancing our spiritual culture."

Governor Chen believes that the multiple native tribes in Taiwan will provide a treasure house of anthropological and sociological history. Modern society has impacted and integrated many facets of the native people and cultures. Many traditional skills, rituals and customs have died out as a result. With gatherings such as this, Taiwan hopes to preserve and maintain her traditions and values for future generations.

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DANCE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE MAIN EVENT (680 words) Back-up if you desire more color on individual dances

The Malaysian troupe opened with a fierce headhunter war dance led by a tanned, lithe muscular dancer. He was bare-chested, clad in a short loin cloth, ankle wrappings, and a headband with a feather, American Indian style. He stomped and shrieked as he and his female retinue circled a rattan cage holding a fake head – yes, this used to hold a real head.

New Zealand's Maori warriors followed, shouting the "Kiora" welcoming cry. These were sturdy men with black-striped faces, tattooed shoulders, and knee-length straw skirts. They leaped forward, yelling ferociously and stuck out their tongues. The crowd roared.

The Maori ladies were next, dressed in similar skirts and beaded tops of red, black and white geometric designs, rather like the Yami patterns. They swayed their hips, swinging traditional "poi" balls, and singing a soft melody.

Taitung's Amis opened with a slow war dance of their own. The multicolored costumes reminded me of Guatemalan dress, with a gold brocade trim, and their heads were adorned with white-feathered crowns. Their second number was a "step and kick" chain dance, simple and moving.

The enchanting Fiji troupe was composed of gentle women and tall, muscular, bare-chested men, wearing floor-length grass skirts and green armbands. The women swayed their hips and waved, Polynesian style, as the men thrust their spears and stomped.

Lanyu's (Orchid Island) lovely Yami ladies appeared in white skirts with striking black and white striped tops and bright sashes. They made a circle for the unusual "Long Hair Dance", sweeping their long hair forwards and backwards as they chanted and pounded their feet.

The sweet, young ladies of Palauan (near Madagascar) seemed to be a cross between Tahiti and India, with big round eyes, straight black hair and high cheekbones. They swayed gracefully to soft, slow melodies, clad in 90's blue, green and pink grass skirts, and each with a flower tucked behind her ear.

Taiwan's Paiwan tribe opened with a sublime operatic refrain by a handsome brother and sister duo. Then, chanting softly, the whole troupe performed a graceful, traditional line dance.

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The dancers and costumes were stunning: willowy lasses in long, crimson sheaths, and young men in silky, royal blue and white striped ensembles, rich with embroidery, bound with red sashes. This was a highly stylized performance, commercially potent, yet not in the least bit disappointing.

“Aloha.” The audience applauded loudly as the flirtatious Hawaiians’ emerged. This was their second and much awaited visit to Taitung. And though the hula has been danced to death, these talented performers exuded a genuine warmth and delight that quickly infected the entire hall.

The guys were tanned, tall and lanky, with big biceps and lazy smiles. Their girlish partners were tall and slender too, each with a red flower behind one ear, and scantily clad in a long grass skirt, exposing flat waists and sensuous hips.

And what an exhilarating close! As the beat of the drums grew more and more frenzied, and hips whipped faster and faster, the crowd roared with astonished pleasure, hands clapping loudly, inhibitions forgotten...

Amazingly enough, the best was yet to come. A dozen Solomon Islanders leapt onto the stage, shouting “Roara Hyushiyami” and surely winning the award for most primitive (and smallest) costume. Their gleaming black bodies were like canvases, covered with white paint in geometric patterns, and each wore only a tiny g-string.

These were the handsome, fun-loving Solomon Islanders, beaming like children, eyes sparkling, and their music gay and infectious - full of joie de vivre... The crowd cheered wildly.

They followed the opening with a very traditional number. The men paired up, face to face, and grasped each other by the leg. As the pairs revolved, each man would chant and slap his partner’s thigh, like a kind of skin drum.

But it was the intoxicating jungle rhythms that brought the house down. These were exuberant tunes sung as the dancers circled the drummers, joyously leaping and gyrating. Meanwhile, Mr. Charm, their song-leader with a Louis Armstrong smile, cheered the audience on... an aboriginal cheerleader in a g-string... it was incongruous but the audience’s response was deafening.