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Mopeds in Taiwan

By Ieuan Dolby

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Mopeds are viscous two-wheelers that have become the heart and soul of daily life in Taiwan. Not so much in Taipei as the underground system has provided a cheaper and faster means of travel within the city. All the other cities though rely heavily on the moped, scooter or motorbike (call them what you may) as the means to keep the city alive and functioning!

When I first arrived in Kaohsiung, Taiwan many years ago, (joining a ship in Kaohsiung) I was amazed and dumbfounded as I stood at the traffic lights in what had been an attempt of mine to get to the other side. I reached the crossing and looked around, looked at a wasp's nest of little two wheelers on the road and going in every direction possible! How on earth was I supposed to get across the road, how was anybody ever supposed to cross a road in Kaohsiung?

Mopeds everywhere, hundreds of them, millions of them, going every which way but loose. At no time in the fifteen minutes that I stood there with my mouth open did the crossing become even remotely clear of the buzzing creatures. At no time did I feel safe or secure in the prospects of crossing that road. The motorbikes were just everywhere like locusts in a field. Other pedestrians I eventually noticed where crossing this melee, before they stepped off the pavement though they did look at me with my mouth open, in wonder!

Nowadays, I don't think twice about crossing the road. The 'swarm of bees' no longer frightens or shocks me and I understand the system completely. This is how you cross the road: Wait until the road parallel to you is flowing (green light ahead) and then just step off into the road, close your eyes and walk quickly across. Close your eyes? Yes, this is the only way to do it; otherwise you may panic, turn around and be mowed down by a moped or sliced up by a Vesper. Somehow the controllers of these two-wheeled monstrosities have excellent knowledge and foresight as to where a pedestrian will be twenty or so seconds ahead of where they are now. Confused?

Try it this way! If we know the time at which a pedestrian starts to walk across the road and we know the speed at which they are walking then it will be easy to work out the time at which said pedestrian will reach the other side.

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Moped drivers have a sixth sense for this. They do not need help using this mathematical formula: as it is in-built into their brains when they purchase their first bike. They will see you crossing the road and will automatically work out where you will be when they cross your path. In this way they work out instantly where you will be when they reach the crossing so that they will pass easily in front or behind you. You as the pedestrian must walk at the same rate otherwise you will confuse the driver and he may get it all wrong.

Ach, I am getting tied up in knots. Listen, when crossing the road in Taiwan, wait for the green light and then just walk smartly and quickly across the road with your eyes shut. Just do it!

Mopeds provide the means to a way of life for about 90% of people living in Taiwan. The ten percent

that does not use a moped are people like me - too afraid to do it. And the rest are rich enough to have a car or too young to drive (younger than 12 years old it seems). Mopeds are the means through which gas bottles are delivered to your house, chickens are delivered to the slaughterhouse, and the mail is brought to your doorstep and through which Policemen patrol the streets. Mopeds are used to go to work, visit friends and to do the shopping. Mopeds are used to snatch handbags from pedestrians and used to make the getaway after the bank robbery. Mopeds are used to collect the children from school or to go on a family outing and they are used to collect garbage and recycling material for the scavenger. Mopeds pull stalls of all shapes and sizes and mopeds pull trailers bowed under with wood or bags of cement. Mopeds are used for everything that can possibly be dreamt up.

My favorite picture regarding the uses of the Scooter is the rubbish collection lady. She has the moped completely covered in plastic bottles of all shapes and sizes. Anywhere that a bottle can be tied or a plastic bag can be hung then there was one. The moped itself could not be seen, so complete was the job that she had done. Another is the Live Chicken delivery boy who is seen every morning on his way to the market. His moped has six large size crates stacked up on the rear, filled to choking with live chickens. At the front are another three or so crates - these filled with eggs. Being so top heavy I often wonder how he never has an accident: what if there is a gust of wind one fine day, my what a mess that would be. I am also surprised that the chickens were not dead before they arrived at the market!

Yes, motorbikes are used for everything and in most cities push all other means of transport into the background. Bus systems are more or less useless for the average person! Considering a moped journey of twenty minutes, it could take two buses or more to cover the same trail and take well over an hour. Buses are unreliable and far and few between, they do not go where you want them to go and they are typically old and falling apart. Taxis are okay and plenty of them but are generally too expensive for everyday use. Bicycles are too dangerous and cars are only for the rich.

Yes, Mopeds are the business and until more Transport Systems are built or better bus routes and frequency are provided they will continue to be the vein and connection system for the majority of the population.

A typical off the shelf Scooter costs upwards of 30,000NT dollars. That is about 600 UK Pounds or 900 US Dollars. So large is the market, thus so cheap can they cost to buy. A teenager's first priority is the moped. As soon as they are sixteen a moped comes into every conversation until the mother, tiring of

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having hers used all the time, persuades the father to buy one. Teenagers go to school on them and in this way they have become a status symbol. Adverts on the television use sexy woman to push forwards the usefulness and need to have a moped. Adverts use fashion and self-importance to promote the ownership of a moped and so the end result is that if you have a moped you are "hip", and if you don't have one then you are not worth talking to.

For the price they are not expensive to the typical household in Taiwan and anyway, cheap second hand mopeds are easily found or ones that have been dumped are often in fully working condition and easily appropriated by the wise.

Every single available space outside of houses, buildings, apartments and office blocks are covered in parked mopeds. Car Parks everywhere are stuffed to overflowing with the two wheelers, most in use but some having been forgotten about or just left to waste in preference for a newer model. Mopeds are parked everywhere and anywhere that pedestrians ever thought of walking on. Pathways and walkways, pavements and curbs are all festooned with parked two wheelers. Once again pedestrians come second and are forced onto the roadside to join the mass of moving vehicles and the dangers

involved thus.

Something that I have often wondered about, with so many mopeds is it not easy to forget where you parked the damned thing? Must ask somebody about that and if it ever happens! Where in Taiwan did I park that infernal machine?

It is dangerous on the roads, there is no doubt about that and one of the reasons why I have refused to drive or even consider driving a moped around.

Taiwan law states that at any accident the vehicles must remain in the accident position until the Police arrive - which means that traffic flow is seriously disrupted for another two hours or so.

Accidents are common and no Moped Driver has escaped the turmoil of being knocked off his seat. Some with broken legs and arms put it down to experience and climb warily into the saddle others just laugh their cuts and bruises off and carry on driving recklessly until the next fall. Kids are the worst, they scream around the roads regardless of any safety rules and regulations and regardless of traffic lights and pedestrians. And they get away with it all! They are the ultimate in danger yet the Police just watch them zooming by probably knowing that they could not catch them but doing nothing all the same.

One of my favorite accidents was where the Policeman swerved around the corner on his moped in chase of a poor woman who had run a red light! But in doing so the Policeman ran headfirst into this other poor lady whose shopping went flying all over the road and the Policeman fell off his bike. They are to me not the authoritative figure that we associate with back home. Like the other day a woman and her kid did something wrong, maybe turned the corner at the wrong time or did not stop at the red light. Mr. Policeman happened to be standing nearby with his pumped up chest and I am "king" attitude. Seeing what he saw he majestically clicked his fingers and through sign language told the woman to pull over beside him. She was only going slowly, was not far away from him and obviously saw what he wanted. Back home one would pull over - don't mess with the law, but this lady just

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looked at him, smiled politely and slammed the throttle to full. She was gone before the Policeman could think about what to do next. I saw his hand going to his radio, then it went for his notebook, then he started towards his own moped and then he just sank into himself. Nothing he could do, she was out of sight and what information had he to pass across, what was that damned license plate number again? No, the Police are not really the best when concerned with traffic violators and speeders.

Helmet wearing is now law and enforced as far as they can do it. Most people do wear helmets and those without are easy for the Police to pass the message along. They have this habit of hiding behind signs and around corners and taking photographs of the criminals and thus catching them that way. If they can get their expensive cameras up and focused that is!

There is no rule about using the side mirrors that all mopeds come equipped with. Most mopeds seem to have had these removed either personally when they bought the bike or through accidents along the way. In fact many mirrors just hang sadly neglected downwards but saying to the world, "I am here but nobody is interested in using me". And along with this lack of attention to using mirrors comes the typical and forceful manner of driving in Taiwan. Drivers look forwards, they do not look backwards. The rear is the responsibility of those behind and absolutely nothing to do with those ahead. Should the person ahead wish to move out of lane and turn a corner, what happens behind is of no consequence and should a faster driver be coming up and into the path of the one ahead, well that is their problem. At no point in a driver's education does it say, "make sure nothing is coming up behind you before moving out". Simply put, mirrors are not required and in fact are so "Not hip".

Mopeds come in all shapes and sizes. The sleek Italian Design to the 'odds and ends' wreck that is home built. They are driven by people of all shapes and sizes from rather large persons who drape themselves over the seat and potter along at a curvy pace, old ladies who could walk faster, teenagers who zoom along and secretaries who are followed by admiring gazes. Some bikes groan as they are pushed to their limits and other bikes seem to stifle the power that they possess. Some bikes are used as human transporters, father driving with the mother behind, two kids standing in the well at the front and one kid holding on for dear life at the back. Others still puff out a horrendous cloud of white smoke signaling that a repair is needed to all but the drivers themselves. Some bikes weave uncontrollably as the driver falls asleep or wanders off into a land of his creation, and others still go the wrong way as drivers get confused or attempt shortcuts that could shave seconds off their journey.

Many bikes can't be started as batteries run down. Petrol stations are filled with callers for more juice and proud people wash their bikes down, buffing up the seat that they spend so many hours sitting in. Dogs ride in the wells as their owners take them out for a walk, children sit on specially designed seats fitting snugly into the well and electricians keep their tools all over the bike as they attend to some call or other. Ladies try to keep their skirts from billowing up and showing to the world the color of their underwear. Food falls out from the front basket as the wind catches it, another drink is dropped as it rolls from between the feet of a forgetful driver and yet another kid nearly falls off the back as his mother guns the throttle in excess.

People struggle to find parking spaces, whilst others scratch their heads over how to extract their moped from the pack. Others still annoy taxi drivers as they cut across them and yet another pedestrian gets in the way. Passengers stepping off a bus narrowly escape being mowed down as a

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moped scrapes past and yet another driver parks his machine in the middle of the road thus causing a bottleneck to occur.

Mopeds are the distribution system the veins and arteries of society that keep it functioning, in motion and fed. Mopeds are the means to conduct business, to do the shopping, to get around and to be free. They are the lifelines for a whole society and one that without would just cease to function. Mopeds are the bread and butter for an entire culture.

For me as the lone pedestrian I am assigned to the road to join the melee, forced to sit on buses for endless hours and induced to spending large sums of money on taxis. For me as the odd one out of millions I am looked upon as "weird" and receive strange looks for the masses. I as the pedestrian fight against society to live on my own two feet and find it hard. I as the odd one out am thinking of riding a moped! If you can't beat them join them.

Then again I may wait for the Underground system that is now being built in Kaohsiung - should I find the courage to wait the estimated eight years it will take to complete

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. As a Chief Engineer in the Merchant Navy

he has sailed the world for fifteen years. Now living in Taiwan he writes about cultures across the globe and life as he sees it.

Expand Your Global Horizons: Travel To Taiwan

By Frank Johnson

A gem in the China Seas, Taiwan embodies a unique entangling of ancient and modern, East and West. From the bustling commercial center of the capital city, Taipei, to the cascading volcanic mountains of Yushan National Park, Taiwan offers the world traveler an unmatched experience. It is no coincidence that Portuguese explorers named this island 'Ilha Formosa', or the beautiful island.

To Travel to Taiwan is to Understand Diversity

Officially known as the Republic of China (R.O.C.), Taiwan should not be confused with the People's Republic of China, which refers to mainland China. Within the past 200 years the island has been ruled by the Dutch, become part of Japan, has been "returned" to China and is currently striving to become an internationally recognized sovereign nation. Taiwan's tumultuous and fascinating history of the Aboriginal, Taiwanese and Chinese people is revealed through the many cultural festivals held throughout the year. Travel to the island in February for the Taiwan Lantern Festival or in June to watch the world-famous Dragon Boat Races during the Dragon Boat Festival.

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One of Taiwan's most prominent cultural symbols is Taipei 101, the world's tallest building, measuring 508 meters and 101 floors. Finished in 2003, the tower signifies Taiwan's substantial economic growth from the periphery of the global economy to become one of the four Asian Tigers, as well as the government's dedication to a democratic society separate from that of China. Tainan, the oldest and fourth largest city on the island, offers a more authentic and less commercialized window into Taiwanese culture. Temples and Memorial Arches define this city where the Ching Dynasty once prayed to the God of War.

The Taiwan Terrain: Recreation and Ecotourism

Exploration of the thriving urban centers is only one of many ways to get in touch with Taiwan. The rugged topography of Taiwan is adorned with magnificent peaks, lush valleys and dramatic waterfalls. Yushan National Park is home to the island's tallest peak, Jade Mountain, which towers at 2,610 meters. Hike to the summit and take the more technical route down or simply enjoy the breathtaking view from the Tatchia Visitor Center, accessible directly from the new Central Cross-Island Highway. From Jade Mountain, descend deep into Taroko Gorge on Taiwan's rocky and secluded east coast. This 12-mile-long canyon is home to the natural open-air Wenshan hot springs and the Atayal people, one of Taiwan's remaining aboriginal tribes. The rocky cliffs at the canyon's end are a starting point for those who wish to travel farther into Taiwan's history. The surrounding Pacific Ocean is sprinkled with beautiful green islands that have unique native histories and are mostly accessible by plane or ferry. Most of the pristine and dramatic destinations are protected by Taiwan's National Park Department, which offers an array of lodging and guiding services and has proven to be a well-organized resource for the outdoor sightseer.

>From the island's tallest building to its tallest peak, Taiwan has something exceptional to offer every kind traveler. Travel Taiwan's thriving society and come face-to-face with an Asian Tiger.

For more information on travel to Taiwan and other locations in Asia, and discount airfare to Taiwan, visit

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