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Visiting Taipei

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Introduction

Nestled in the heart of East Asia, Taipei emerges as a vibrant tapestry of innovation and tradition, offering a unique blend of experiences for tourists around the globe. As the capital city of Taiwan, Taipei stands as a testament to the island's storied past and dynamic future, making it a captivating destination for any traveler seeking both adventure and cultural enrichment. Its allure transcends the bustling night markets and the iconic skyline dominated by Taipei 101, inviting visitors to explore beyond the surface.

Situated in the lush landscapes of northern Taiwan, Taipei is not just a city bound by geographical coordinates but a living mosaic of cultures, histories, and aspirations. Its strategic location has historically been a meeting point for various cultures, resulting in a melting pot of ideas and traditions. The city's charm lies in its ability to reflect a multicultural society that embraces modernity while cherishing its rich heritage. This symbiosis is palpable in every corner of the city, from its traditional temples to its cutting-edge architectural feats.

Exploring Taipei is akin to embarking on a sensory journey where past and present coexist in harmony. The city's streets pulse with an energy that is both palpable and inviting, offering glimpses into the daily lives of its diverse populace. Whether wandering through the lively streets of Ximending or the serene paths of the Elephant Mountain, visitors are enveloped in an atmosphere of warmth and hospitality that is distinctively Taiwanese. This genuine congeniality often leaves an indelible mark on the hearts of those who visit.

The culinary landscape of Taipei further exemplifies the city's dynamic nature, offering a delectable array of flavors that reflect its multicultural identity. From the humble street stalls serving stinky tofu to upscale restaurants offering haute cuisine, Taipei is a veritable paradise for food enthusiasts. Night markets such as Shilin and Raohe are not just gastronomic destinations but cultural experiences that encapsulate the city's zest for life. Each dish tells a story, inviting tourists to partake in a culinary dialogue steeped in history and innovation.

Equally compelling is Taipei's dedication to preserving its natural surroundings amidst the urban sprawl. The city's commitment to sustainability and green living is evidenced by its abundant parks and emphasis on public transportation. Visitors can easily escape the hustle and bustle of city life by venturing into the tranquil landscapes of Yangmingshan National Park or enjoying a leisurely ride on the Maokong Gondola. These natural retreats serve as sanctuaries of tranquility, offering moments of reflection and connection with Taiwan's lush landscapes.

Finally, Taipei's robust infrastructure and tourist-friendly amenities make it an accessible and welcoming destination for travelers from across the globe. The city's efficient transportation systems, diverse accommodations, and wealth of attractions cater to a wide range of interests and budgets. As this guide unfolds, it aims to provide a comprehensive roadmap for navigating Taipei's many offerings, ensuring that every visitor departs with a deeper understanding and appreciation of this remarkable city. Whether you are a seasoned globetrotter or embarking on your first international adventure, Taipei promises a journey that is unforgettable, promising memories that will linger long after your visit.

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CHAPTER ONE: Getting There & Away

Your journey to the vibrant heart of Taiwan inevitably begins with navigating your arrival, most likely through one of the two primary airports serving the capital: Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport (TPE) or Taipei Songshan Airport (TSA). Understanding the distinctions between these gateways, their locations, and the transport links connecting them to Taipei city is the first crucial step in ensuring a smooth and hassle-free start to your adventure. While both serve the capital region, they offer quite different experiences, largely dictated by their scale and geographical positioning relative to the downtown buzz.

Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport, universally known by its code TPE, handles the lion's share of international flights into and out of Taiwan. Located approximately 40 kilometers west of Taipei's city center in Taoyuan City, it's a major regional hub and the facility most international visitors will find themselves using. Conversely, Taipei Songshan Airport (TSA) sits conveniently right within the city limits in the Songshan District. It primarily caters to domestic flights, along with a smaller, but growing, number of international routes to specific destinations in China, Japan, and South Korea, often favored by business travelers or those on shorter regional hops due to its unparalleled proximity to the city core. Your point of entry will likely be determined by your origin and airline, but knowing the characteristics of each will help you anticipate the final leg of your journey into Taipei proper.

Arriving at Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport (TPE) places you in a large, modern facility equipped to handle millions of passengers annually. The airport currently operates primarily from two main terminals, Terminal 1 and Terminal 2, which are connected by the Skytrain people mover system, making transfers between them relatively straightforward if needed, though most passengers will only experience the terminal their airline uses. Terminal 1 generally houses airlines like China Airlines (partial), Cathay Pacific, and many budget carriers, while Terminal 2 is home to EVA Air, China Airlines (partial), Star Alliance members, and others. A third terminal is under construction, promising future expansion. Familiarize yourself with your arrival terminal beforehand; signage is excellent and bilingual (Chinese and English), guiding you clearly through the arrival procedures.

Upon disembarking your flight at TPE, the process follows the standard international sequence: immigration, baggage claim, and finally customs. Taiwan's immigration officers are generally efficient and professional. Ensure you have your passport, completed arrival card (often distributed on the flight, but readily available in the immigration hall), and any necessary visa documentation ready. Electronic gates (e-Gates) are available for eligible passport holders, significantly speeding up the

process. Remember to look presentable and answer any questions directly. After clearing immigration, follow the signs to the baggage reclaim carousels corresponding to your flight number. Large display screens indicate which carousel is assigned to which flight.

Once you've collected your luggage, you'll proceed through customs. Taiwan has a dual-channel system (Red Channel for goods to declare, Green Channel for nothing to declare). Be aware of duty-free allowances and prohibited items; information is clearly displayed. If you have nothing to declare, walk through the Green Channel. Customs checks are typically random but can occur. After clearing customs, you emerge into the Arrivals Hall. This bustling area is where you'll find essential services for newly arrived travelers: currency exchange counters offering New Taiwan Dollars (NTD), ATMs compatible with international cards, and counters for purchasing local SIM cards or renting portable Wi-Fi devices – all highly recommended for staying connected during your trip. Tourist information desks are also available here to answer initial queries.

Preparing for departure from TPE requires planning, especially given its distance from the city. Allow ample travel time; recommendations usually suggest arriving three hours before international flights. Check-in counters typically open 2.5 to 3 hours prior to departure, but confirm with your airline. Many airlines also offer online check-in. After checking your bags, you'll proceed to security screening, followed by departure immigration. Again, the process is generally efficient, but queues can form during peak travel periods. Have your passport and boarding pass ready. Once through immigration, you enter the airside departure area.

The departure areas in both Terminal 1 and Terminal 2 offer a wide array of amenities to occupy your time before boarding. You'll find extensive duty-free shopping, numerous restaurants and cafes serving both Taiwanese and international cuisine, comfortable waiting lounges (including airline and pay-per-use options), children's play areas, and even themed waiting gates showcasing Taiwanese culture or interests like Hello Kitty (an EVA Air specialty). Free Wi-Fi is available throughout the airport, and charging stations for electronic devices are plentiful. It's a comfortable and well-equipped environment for waiting for your flight.

The most significant development in transport between TPE and Taipei in recent years has been the Taoyuan Airport MRT. Inaugurated in 2017, this modern, efficient rail link has revolutionized the journey, offering a predictable and comfortable alternative to road transport. The MRT station is conveniently located beneath the airport terminals, accessible via escalators and elevators from the Arrivals Halls of both Terminal 1 (station A12) and Terminal 2 (station A13). Clear signage directs passengers towards the MRT platforms.

The Airport MRT operates two types of services: the Express Train (purple) and the

Commuter Train (blue). The Express train is the faster option, specifically designed for airport passengers. It travels directly to Taipei Main Station (station A1) with only a few stops at major stations connecting key industrial parks and high-speed rail links. The journey time on the Express train from Terminal 2 to Taipei Main Station is approximately 36-39 minutes, and slightly longer from Terminal 1. These trains offer comfortable seating arranged in a 2x2 configuration, ample luggage storage racks, and even onboard Wi-Fi and charging ports, making for a pleasant ride.

The Commuter train, on the other hand, stops at every station along the line, serving local residents and airport workers as well as travelers. Consequently, the journey time to Taipei Main Station is longer, typically around 50-55 minutes from Terminal 2. While seating is longitudinal (like typical metro trains) and luggage space is more limited, it can be a useful option if your final destination is closer to one of the intermediate stops. Both Express and Commuter trains generally run frequently, usually every 15 minutes during peak hours for each type, ensuring you won't have a long wait.

Tickets for the Airport MRT can be purchased from machines or service counters at the airport station. The fare is distance-based; a one-way ticket from either TPE terminal to Taipei Main Station currently costs NT\$160 for both Express and Commuter services. Payment can be made using cash or credit cards at the machines. Perhaps more conveniently for tourists planning to use public transport extensively in Taipei, the MRT accepts payment via Taiwan's popular stored-value travel cards, the EasyCard or iPASS. These cards can be purchased and topped up at the airport MRT station or convenience stores, and simply tapped on the reader at the entry and exit gates. Using these cards often provides a slight discount on fares compared to single-journey tokens.

Operating hours for the Taoyuan Airport MRT are generally from around 6:00 AM to approximately 11:30 PM or midnight, varying slightly depending on the station and train type. It's crucial to check the exact schedule, especially if you have a very early morning or late-night flight, as the MRT may not be an option outside these hours. Taipei Main Station serves as a major transport hub, offering seamless connections to the city's Metro system (Blue and Red lines), regular TRA trains, and the High-Speed Rail (HSR) for onward travel throughout Taiwan. This makes the Airport MRT an exceptionally convenient choice for reaching many parts of Taipei and beyond.

A unique feature benefitting departing passengers is the In-Town Check-In (ITCI) service available at the Taipei Main Station (A1) Airport MRT station. Passengers flying with participating airlines (primarily China Airlines, EVA Air, and their subsidiaries Mandarin Airlines and UNI Air) can check in their luggage and receive their boarding passes several hours before their flight, typically from 6:00 AM up to 3 hours before flight departure time on the same day. This allows you to travel luggage-free on the Airport MRT Express train to the airport, providing significant convenience, especially if

you plan some last-minute sightseeing or shopping in the city before heading to TPE. Check the official Taoyuan Airport MRT website or your airline for eligibility and operating hours.

Before the advent of the Airport MRT, airport buses were the primary mode of public transport between TPE and Taipei. They remain a viable and often economical option, particularly if your accommodation isn't conveniently located near an Airport MRT stop or if you're traveling outside the MRT's operating hours. Several private bus companies operate routes connecting TPE to various key destinations within Taipei and even to other cities across Taiwan. The main bus operators serving Taipei city include Kuo-Kuang Motor Transport and CitiAir Bus (formerly Dayou Bus).

Bus platforms are located outside the Arrivals Halls of both Terminal 1 (basement level) and Terminal 2 (ground level, east side). Ticket counters for the various bus companies are situated nearby within the terminal building. You purchase your ticket for a specific route before boarding. Fares are generally lower than the Airport MRT, typically ranging from NT\$125 to NT\$150 depending on the route and destination within Taipei. Staff at the counters can usually provide basic assistance in English to help you find the correct bus for your destination.

Popular routes include those terminating at Taipei Main Station, offering connections to the wider transport network, as well as routes serving major hotel districts like Xinyi (near Taipei 101), Zhongshan, and Neihu. Some routes operate 24 hours a day, albeit with reduced frequency overnight, making them essential for travelers arriving or departing on very late or early flights when the MRT is not running. This round-the-clock availability is a significant advantage buses hold over the MRT.

The journey time by bus is highly variable and depends heavily on traffic conditions. While the drive can take as little as 50-60 minutes in smooth traffic, it can easily stretch to 90 minutes or even longer during peak rush hours or if there are accidents on the highway. This unpredictability is the main drawback compared to the fixed schedule of the MRT. However, buses offer the advantage of potentially dropping you closer to your specific hotel or destination if it lies directly along one of the routes, saving you a transfer from Taipei Main Station.

Buses used on airport routes are typically comfortable coaches equipped with luggage storage compartments underneath. Ensure your luggage is tagged correctly and loaded into the hold. Onboard announcements are usually made in Mandarin, English, Japanese, and Korean, indicating upcoming stops. However, it's always wise to keep an eye on the route map or use a GPS app on your phone to track your location and know when to signal for your stop, usually by pressing a button above your seat. Keep your ticket handy as you may need to show it upon disembarking.

For those prioritizing direct, door-to-door convenience, especially when traveling with

significant luggage, children, or in a small group, taxis are readily available at TPE. Official taxi queues are located just outside the Arrivals Halls of both terminals. Follow the signs for "Taxi." Airport taxis operate on a metered basis, adhering to fares set by the Taoyuan City government. In addition to the metered fare, there is an airport surcharge applied (typically around 15%), adding to the total cost.

The journey time by taxi to central Taipei mirrors that of the buses, ranging from 50 minutes to over 90 minutes depending entirely on traffic. The cost will consequently vary but generally falls between NT\$1,100 and NT\$1,500 for a ride to most central Taipei locations. Toll charges for the highway are included in the final fare displayed on the meter. While more expensive than the MRT or bus, the cost can be reasonable when split among three or four passengers. Ensure the driver uses the meter; reputable airport taxi drivers will always do so. It's helpful to have your destination address written down in Chinese characters, although most drivers will recognize major hotels or landmarks spoken in English.

Ride-sharing services like Uber are also operational in Taiwan and can be requested from TPE. Designated pick-up points for ride-sharing services are usually signposted within the airport complex, often slightly removed from the main taxi queues. Fares can sometimes be competitive with taxis, especially during non-surge periods, and offer the convenience of in-app payment and communication. However, availability might fluctuate, and finding your designated pick-up spot can sometimes be slightly challenging amidst the airport's bustle. Pre-booked private transfer services are another alternative, offering fixed prices and meet-and-greet services, often preferred by those seeking maximum convenience and predictability upon arrival.

Now, let's turn our attention to Taipei Songshan Airport (TSA). Situated within the city limits, TSA offers a vastly different arrival experience primarily due to its location. If your flight happens to land here—perhaps a regional connector from Tokyo Haneda, Seoul Gimpo, or Shanghai Hongqiao, or a domestic flight from another part of Taiwan—you'll benefit from significantly shorter transfer times to most parts of Taipei. The airport itself is much smaller and more compact than TPE, making navigation simpler and quicker.

The arrival process at TSA is generally faster due to the lower volume of international passengers compared to TPE. Immigration, baggage claim, and customs procedures are similar but usually involve shorter queues. The single main terminal building is easy to navigate, with clear bilingual signage. Essential services like currency exchange, ATMs, and SIM card/Wi-Fi rental counters are available, though perhaps with fewer options than at the larger TPE. The smaller scale contributes to a less overwhelming arrival experience.

Departure from TSA is similarly streamlined. Check-in counters, security, and immigration are typically less congested. While the selection of shops and restaurants

airside is more limited than at TPE, it's adequate for the shorter dwell times usually associated with the regional and domestic flights it serves. Its main selling point remains its unbeatable convenience for accessing the city quickly. For those staying in northern or central Taipei districts, getting to TSA might take as little as 15-30 minutes from their hotel.

Transportation from Songshan Airport (TSA) into the city is remarkably easy, thanks primarily to its direct link with the Taipei Metro system. The Songshan Airport MRT station is directly connected to the terminal building and serves the Wenhua Line (Brown Line). This elevated, automated line provides swift access across the northern and eastern parts of Taipei, intersecting with several other major MRT lines (such as the Red, Blue, and Green lines) facilitating easy transfers to reach virtually anywhere in the city grid.

A ride on the Wenhua Line from Songshan Airport station to central locations like Zhongxiao Fuxing (transfer station for the Blue Line) takes only about 10-15 minutes. Fares are significantly cheaper than any transport from TPE, typically costing between NT\$20 and NT\$35 depending on your final destination within the Metro network. Payment is seamless using an EasyCard or iPASS, or by purchasing single-journey tokens. The convenience and low cost make the MRT the overwhelmingly preferred method for traveling between TSA and the city for most solo travelers and couples.

Beyond the MRT, numerous city bus routes serve Songshan Airport, stopping directly outside the terminal. These can be useful if your destination happens to be on a direct bus route not easily served by the Wenhua MRT line, or if you prefer surface travel. Information on routes and schedules can be found at the airport bus stops or using Taipei public transport apps. Fares are typically NT\$15 per segment, payable with coins or an EasyCard/iPASS.

Taxis are readily available outside the TSA terminal building. Given the airport's location within the city, taxi rides to most central districts are much shorter and therefore considerably cheaper than from TPE. A trip to areas like Xinyi, Da'an, or Taipei Main Station might cost between NT\$150 and NT\$300, depending on distance and traffic. Ride-sharing services like Uber also serve TSA, offering another convenient door-to-door option. The short distances make taxis a very practical choice, especially if you have luggage or are traveling in a small group.

If you find yourself with a choice of flying into either TPE or TSA (perhaps choosing between different connecting flights or airlines), the decision often boils down to weighing proximity against flight options and airport amenities. TSA offers unparalleled speed and ease of access to the city center, potentially saving you an hour or more in transit time. However, TPE serves a vastly wider range of international destinations and airlines, and its larger size means more extensive shopping, dining, and lounge facilities, which might be preferable for longer layovers or if you enjoy the

full airport experience. Cost differences in flights might also play a role. For most long-haul international travelers, TPE will be the designated gateway, but awareness of TSA is useful, especially if considering regional side trips.

Finally, a few practical tips for departure from either airport. Always double-check your flight details and terminal information. Allocate sufficient time for travel to the airport, check-in, security, and immigration – the recommended three hours for international flights from TPE is wise, while perhaps 1.5-2 hours might suffice for TSA's regional or domestic flights, though checking airline advice is best. If you are eligible for a Value Added Tax (VAT) refund on significant purchases made in Taiwan (check the criteria and participating stores), ensure you arrive at the airport even earlier to allow time for processing the refund claim at the designated counters before checking your luggage, as customs officials may need to inspect the goods. With bags checked, security cleared, and passport stamped, you can relax, perhaps enjoy a final taste of Taiwanese snacks or browse the shops, before heading to your gate, concluding the 'getting there and away' chapter of your Taipei visit.

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