

National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan.
Exchange: Semester Two 2015

My name is Imogen Walker, and I just recently completed my exchange at Taipei's National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU). I believe I was the first Otago student to do so, which is a great honour, and I know for certain I will not be the last to take up this amazing experience.

Taiwan while being even smaller than New Zealand's North Island holds a much larger population of 23.46 million. Taipei, where I was located, is estimated to contain 2.7 million people, over half of New Zealand's population. Despite this I found Taipei to be an interesting mix of both excitement and relaxation, with bustling night markets, amazingly friendly people, technological parks, and the most gorgeous themed cafes.

Campus life:

I found NTNU to be immensely welcoming to its exchange students, always eager to help. Nicole Hisung (in charge of the exchange students) kept us informed of university events (like Sport's Day and the Cultural Fair), and even outings, like a weekend trip to the beautiful Sun Moon Lake. If at any point you have a timetable query, an accommodation issue, or dealing with serve homesickness they are the right people to contact.

What's more the campus is quite pretty, with greenery abundant, multiple statues and a beautiful entrance gate. The buildings interested me in that a few were of a similar style to Otago University's gorgeous Clock Tower.

Accommodation:

The university offers campus dormitories, however, since I choose to live elsewhere, I don't have much knowledge on how the dorms operate. I do know though that it's a good inexpensive option, and allows easy mingling with fellow exchange students, as four to five are stationed in one room. I, however, choose to stay elsewhere. My reasoning for this was that I wanted to stay in a room by myself, as I've never had to share a room before and I rather enjoy my privacy. The accommodation I choose was one recommended by NTNU, located in Xiaonanmen, the "World Scholar House." I really enjoyed living there, as not only was it reasonably cheap, the hostel manager Lethe was lovely. Her English was very good, yet she always made an effort to speak Chinese with me in order to help me practise. The location of the hostel is also very convenient, as it's only two metro stops away from the University (along the Green Line - Xiaonanmen station to Guting station), also it's only a 10 minute walk from the trendy shopping Ximending district.

I will admit that those living in the dorms had easier access to fellow exchange students, however, my classes gave me the opportunity to befriend both exchange and local students.

Another accommodation option is to rent out an apartment, NTNU provides plenty of advice both in the welcoming paper packages and in person if you choose this option.

Classes:

I choose to focus on Chinese language classes, and during the first few weeks of online course approval (information will be detailed in your welcoming packs) I applied for a massive amount of classes. This is a good tactic to take, as classes fill up quickly, and you never know which one you will enjoy until you attend a few classes. Once classes start you have almost two weeks to work out your timetable. Also, don't feel like you are restrained to the department that you end up under, for instance I was assigned to "Chinese as a Second Language" however, I was permitted to pick up classes under the Art Department (upon teacher's approval).

I ended up with three classes – MTC, Chinese Language, and one Language and Cultural Class.

MTC (Mandarin Training Center) – Is held twice a week for three hours each time, depending on your language level (assigned due to your test scores) you will be assigned to different grades. The class sizes are kept small which leads to better one on one time with the teacher. MTC is a voluntary class, and for the first semester it's free to exchange students. I really enjoyed my time at MTC, and would definitely recommend this class. One thing to note, however, is that while MTC is connected to NTNU, their class scheduling often clashes, so be careful when selecting courses.

Chinese Language (NTNU) – Two hours, two times a week this class was held. I also really enjoyed this class, as despite the large class size, my teacher always made an effort to make sure every student participated in class.

Language and Cultural Class (NTNU) – Three hours once a week, and was taught in English. Unlike my other two classes which contained fellow exchange students, this class allowed me to meet local Taiwanese students. I found this class to be immensely interesting, and since its aim was to compare Taiwan cultural with Western cultures, it even helped me understand better how to adapt to a foreign culture.

Three classes led to a fairly relaxed schedule, which I wanted as while my aim was to better my Chinese, I wanted many opportunities to practise Chinese outside of the classroom. That being said I did challenge myself classes-wise. My Chinese Language paper was vastly above my level (I had to beg to be allowed in) and for the first few months I was completely and utterly lost. Over time though, due to the patient nature of my teacher and fellow classmates my comprehension of class material started to improve.

Despite the initial stress this caused, pushing myself so far out of my comfort zone did do wonders to my Chinese ability.

Taipei Eating:

I love food, and most of all I love cheap and yummy food, and Taiwan is full of it.

Located across the road from NTNU is Shida Night Market (open all day, but more shops are active from 4pm onwards), which is crammed full of eating options.

One of my personal favourite places there was Minimal Café, my attraction to it is largely due to the many cats that can be found there. The food is yummy too, and for someone who grew up in a household crawling with animals the occasional cat on the food preparing bench makes me feel right at home.

Minimal café was not the only café that I regularly frequented, in Taipei I developed a rather intense habit of café hunting.

A few favourite haunts were:

- Alice is Coming: Located in Ximending District, near metro exit three. This café as its name suggests is full of Alice in Wonderland designs, adorably dressed staff and delicious food and drinks. Themed cafes, like Alice, are always a little expensive, but so worth that extra dollar.
- Paddington Garden: Located close to Zhongxiao Dunhua Station (along the Blue Line), this café is famous for its delicious pancakes and open style sandwiches. The Zhongxiao Dunhua area also contains many other cafes and interesting stores (quite fun and easy to get lost in it).
- Yong Kang Street: Located at Dongmen station (along the Red Line, or the Yellow Line), and its full of gorgeous cafes, cute little local stores, and a very popular scallion pancake stand.

Taiwan is literally bursting at the seams with amazing eatery places, you definitely won't go hungry there.

Taiwan Travel:

Taipei as of right now is the only city in Taiwan that has a working metro, however, that is soon to change with Taichung planning to open its metro in 2017. If you want to travel outside of Taipei it's not an issue though, as trains are both easy to use and extremely convenient. For instance, Taichung is only a two hour train trip from Taipei, and that's using a slow train.

I didn't travel too much during my exchange, as my longest holiday was a three day weekend. Once my study finished though, I travelled to Houtong (Cat Village), Pingxi and Taichung with my visiting parents.

I would recommend all three as great travel options:

- Houtong, used to be an old mining town, and not only is it's mountainous scenery beautiful, it's also full of friendly cats. Many cute cat related souvenirs can be bought there too.
- Pingxi, is a beautiful tiny traditional town, filled with gorgeous windy steep alleyways. It's also famous for its Sky Lanterns, that can be released anyday (not just during Sky Lantern Festival).
- Taichung, contains many attractive tourist options, from Rainbow Village to Sun Moon Lake.

If you are looking for beautiful scenery closer to home (Taipei), then I would suggest Tamshui (located at the end of the Red Line). This area looks out into the sea, and sells the most delicious fried crispy squid.

Taiwan Visa:

Because I was only studying for one semester at NTNU I applied for a Visitor Visa, and did not apply for a Resident visa upon arrival there. The only issue with the visitor visa that I encountered was that if you want to travel after study ends (17th of February for the Winter semester), you must find a way to extend your visa. I could have chosen to apply for a Resident Visa then, however, I choose to instead leave Taiwan and enter back in. I did this as I really wanted to explore Hong Kong, which was only a cheap and quick flight away. Upon entry back into Taiwan, as a New Zealander I was eligible for a Free 90 Day Visa.

Conclusion:

My semester in Taiwan, wasn't my first time experiencing one, as for the first semester in 2015 I'd been studying at Shanghai's Fudan University. I really enjoyed my time at the two universities, and would recommend them to others in a heartbeat. Given I had prior experience to settling into an exchange in a completely foreign environment I was fairly confident that my immersion process would be smooth. My expectations were proven correct, as even on the first day I felt like I was in a home away from home. I do think, however, that was largely due to the lovely friendly nature of Taiwanese people, and the relaxed vibe of the country itself. NTNU's amazing staff and students also contributed, and helped improve my language skills immensely.

I would recommend an NTNU exchange to anyone, regardless of if you are learning a language or studying accounting, as it's just such a relaxing environment and everyone is so helpful. Also, the benefits I have gained from my exchange aren't just restricted to language skills, as I've also become more confident and assured of myself thanks to it.

I honestly can't wait to do another exchange!



Located just inside the university campus during orientation.



Famous Red House in Ximending



Alice themed cafe during Halloween