

Tour Bus Torture

by Joshua K. Hartshorne

1979 words.

“Aren’t you glad we didn’t rent a scooter?” my wife asked me, as I, white-knuckled, avoided watching our bus pass an oncoming vehicle on what seemed barely a bicycle trail but was the only way in, out or through the Taroko Gorge, Taiwan’s gleaming marble-clad answer to the Grand Canyon. This remote gorge cuts a narrow sliver between the steep mountains encrusting the eastern coast of the banana-shaped island. The vertical landscape leaves little room for the precariously-perched road.

The bus scooted around a missing section of road that had joined the river below. “Very glad,” I exhaled. Our driver maneuvered the bus as if he could drive Taroko’s twists and turns in his sleep. This was the public transportation we had come to love in Taiwan: efficient, cheap and with incredible coverage. “Why drive?” we laughed at the occasional scooter-born tourist.

Two days later, huddling in the high-altitude night on the narrow mountain road between cliff and gorge, dodging painful headlights attached to cars invisible in the blackness, praying for the bus that never came to take us home, we were not laughing.

Taroko had been everything promised. Its sheer, age-smoothed marble walls are like the pillars of a cathedral. The famously sapphire stream below swirls around polished, striated, fine-grained marble boulders. The mountains

above are green and lush. It was December, cool enough that we shared the trails with few tourists, heightening the beautiful isolation.

The final hike that day alone had been reason enough to visit Taroko. It began with a short, steep road up from the highway to a Zen Buddhist temple overlooking the ravine. From there, narrow switchback stairs rise up the rocky mountainside, past two small, uninhabited shrines at the low summit. The path then snakes down the other side to the tiny martyrs' shrine built over a narrow cascade of water, commemorating the treacherous birth of the treacherous gorge roads.

Looking out over Taroko, we joked about the tourists spilling from buses on the other side to snap pictures. The shrine itself does not make a good picture, but the view from it – and from the path to it – is spectacular. “Why do people go on tours?” we wondered. “They don’t get to do anything fun.”

From there, a series of tiny, rough-hewn tunnels and a small bridge led us back across the gorge to the road. We quickly saw that this was one of the rare places the road divided to run down both sides of the canyon. The bus would take only one, but we recognized neither and there were no signs.

Luckily, a construction crew was working at the intersection. We asked in Chinese (Mandarin?) where to catch the bus back to our hotel in Tianxiang, a small village perched over the center of the Gorge.

“Bus? The last bus was at noon,” came the reply. It was now about 4:30.

The schedule in the hotel listed buses into the early evening. Hearing this, the crew conferred and decided that there perhaps still was another bus, which they said would stop where earlier the tour buses had stopped as their occupants

snapped pictures of us (and the shrine) from across the Gorge. The buses were now gone and the area deserted.

Heading back, Helen asked, "Do you trust them?"

"Why would they lie?" I asked.

"They could be laughing at the stupid idiot tourists," Helen suggested, darkly. (Confusing to me; are you Chinese?) "Perhaps we should just walk back," I suggested. "If a bus comes, we'll flag it down." (sounds unnatural)

Helen stared down the road, which entered a tunnel. We had walked down many of these poorly-lit, stagnant-air highway tunnels in the last two days, dodging trucks as they barreled through. "We aren't even sure if this is the right way. I don't want to spend the night wandering through these mountains."

So we waited, watching the occasional vehicle enter or exit the tunnels. Allowing for regular traffic required honeycombing Taroko; even the hiking trails must bore through rock. Some were so long and daylight so far away, that the inky blackness and the pinpoints of light at either end were disorienting and dizzying. Once, we heard in the darkness a family held back by a child refusing to go further. "*Pa pa! Mama, pa pa!*" ("Scary. Mommy, scary!")

Anyone who has lived in a Taiwanese city would understand. My wife once explained the term "inky black" to one of her English students in Taipei, the capital, thus: "At night, when you turn off the lights, it's so black you feel you could cut it with a knife, right?"

"No," he replied. "not really." And it isn't, at least not anymore. Not so long ago, Helen's parents grew up in downtown Taiwan with chickens in their yard.

The sun began to disappear behind the mountains. "Where is the bus?" Helen worried.

I assured her it was coming; we had only been waiting half an hour. "At worst," I said, "we can always get a cab." I had seen a few going down the other fork.

As the air cooled, the mist, which trades turns with the rain in covering Taiwan all winter, began to descend. Chinese paintings are highly stylized: vertical landscapes rising from pools to cascades, through clouds in tall valleys to mountain peaks, misty throughout. I had always found them too artificial, too unrealistic...that is, until seeing these scenes in full color in Taiwan.

The traffic on our fork petered out to nothing. Although the bus hadn't come down the other way either and the construction crew continued to vouch for the stop, Helen suggested waiting *at* the fork, "just in case the construction workers are wrong about where the bus comes from."

This might have seemed an obvious choice from the beginning, but except for the rare scenic lookout point, the road is too stingy with space to waste it on shoulders. Walking along the road between tail heads, as we had, required constant vigilance.

This was so ingrained that when we had explored the "Trail of Nine Bends" – a superceded, pedestrianized section of road that runs like stitching in and out of the marble cliff along one of the gorge's most spectacular sections – I had been unable to suppress the constant glances over my shoulder.

However, the time had come. We moved past the crew to the narrow, shoulderless road just before the fork. We squeezed against the jagged cliff when traffic – now very light – passed. "I'm worried," Helen said.

Now it was dark – not inky black yet, but getting there. We pressed closer to the cliff. In the blackness, the isolation of Taroko and the sense of having this treasure to ourselves had lost its charm.

“What do we do if the bus doesn’t come?” Helen asked. “It’s been almost two hours.”

“The crew is still here, at least,” I offered out of desperation. “At worst, we can see if they can give us a ride somewhere when they leave.”

“Are you crazy?” Helen demanded. “They’ve been laughing at us, I’m sure.”

I studied them. In the dim light, they were even seedier than they had seemed in the light.

We waited. Shivering, not just from the cold, we joked about the headlines the next day. *American tourists eaten by wolves. Couple freezes in Taroko.*

“Maybe we should just hitch,” I suggested after a while.

Helen considered it. “We look safe enough. They might actually stop.”

They didn’t. They sped up – what few cars there still were.

“I’m scared,” Helen said. We discussed our other options. “There’s the Martyrs’ Shrine. It wouldn’t be warm, but it would be sheltered,” I suggested. “It wouldn’t be fun, but we should be ok.” But I knew we weren’t dressed for the cold; and stranded hikers freeze to death in mountains all the time.

I considered and rejected the return journey across the mountain to the Zen shrine in the dark fog over narrow, wet stone steps. The monks, I reasoned, would be less scary than the construction workers, but the two-hour path had been treacherous even in the light.

Then suddenly there was a bright light and a lot of noise. I was so lost in disaster planning that I did not register what it was. Helen was quicker and flagged the bus coming out of the tunnel. The driver stopped and opened the door. He was headed to Taroko Village, at the mouth of the Gorge.

“When is the last bus to Tianxiang?” we asked.

The driver startled. “It was at 3.”

We had no idea whether there would be a hotel vacancy in that tiny town, but anything was better than where we were. We gratefully clambered aboard.

We spent the long, dark ride on the empty bus alternating between relief and debating what we had done wrong. Should we have believed the construction crew? But they later told us there *would* be a bus? And who would have ever guessed the last bus was at 3? In Taiwan! Which has buses everywhere, all the time!

Reaching town, we found a room and slowly regained our orientation as if emerging from a long Taroko tunnel. The room wasn't great, but we were too relieved to have a room at all to care.

We rose early to reenter the Gorge and retrieve our luggage in time for our mid-day train North. We were at the stop ten minutes early for the 7:00 bus. By 6:58, we were already agitated. At 7:05, we were cursing. At 7:10 an old woman showed up. She confirmed that the bus had not yet come.

At 7:15, a car stopped. “The bus was at 7. The next one is in two hours.”

We explained it must be late, as we had been waiting. A little later, I noticed the old woman who had been waiting with us was gone. At 7:30 another car stopped. “The bus was at 7!” a woman shouted. We explained it hadn't come. “It was ahead of me on this road,” she countered. “It must have gone by.”

How it had slipped by us, we had no idea, but we'd had enough of standing by roadsides. We went back to the hotel to wait before the next bus, startling the hotel hostess. We explained what had happened.

"How could you have missed the bus?" she shouted.

It hadn't come, we insisted.

"Did you see that little old lady who was waiting there?" she demanded.

"She's gone now. She must have gotten on the bus."

"But she knew we were waiting, too!"

"Well, she wouldn't have told *you*," the hostess scoffed.

We decided it would be nicer to wait at the nearby park headquarters.

"Was she right?" we wondered. Had the old woman snuck on the bus, laughing at us?

Along the way to the headquarters, we ran into the little old lady, hawking souvenirs to a tour. "Hi guys!" she said. "The 7 am bus broke down."

This barely consoled us. We wanted the city, civilization.

We caught the 9:00 bus and without further adventure got to Tianxiang, checked out of our hotel, and got out of Taroko as fast as we could.

"It was beautiful," Helen said.

"Beautiful," I exhaled.

"Next time," she continued, "let's rent a scooter."

"Or a tour bus," I agreed.

Bio: Joshua K. Hartshorne has spent the last several years traveling and living in Europe and Asia. He has nearly died of thirst amongst 1/5 of the world's fresh water, been stranded penniless in Hokkaido, had his apartment set on fire during a Russian friend's bachelor's party and had surprising difficulties with Hertz rentals. He looks forward to settling down in Cambridge in September of 2006.

Pictures:

Taroko1

White Sun Falls, a Chinese painting in color.

Taroko2

A bend in the river.

Taroko3

Helen in an inky black tunnel.

Taroko4

There are few bridges across Taroko, many of them rope. How the Taiwanese aborigines crossed it before the Chinese arrived, I have no idea.

Taroko5

Some of the gorge is striated marble. Elsewhere, as in this picture, the base is chalk-white.

Taroko6

Helen on the Path of Nine Bends.

Taroko7

Calcium carbonate and other minerals dissolved in the Liwu River turn it striking shades of azure and malachite.