A Lawyer’s Survival Guide to Taipei
By Stephen D. Dunn

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With service industries becoming an ever-larger part of Taiwan’s economy, the number of business travelers from the legal and banking fields also is growing. Most spend their entire trip in the island’s capital, Taipei.

Mandarin Chinese is the most commonly spoken of Taiwan’s official languages. While English is widely spoken in the capital, outside Taipei you’ll need an interpreter. Most international standard hotels have broadband connections, and wireless Internet is available in coffee shops around the city. Cellular service is GSM.

Business Hours and Practices
Office hours in service businesses generally run from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. Banks, government offices, and some other businesses also open from 9 a.m. until noon on alternate Saturdays. Retail hours are 10 a.m. until 10 p.m., seven days a week. Restaurants and bars outside hotels are often 24/7.

It’s not unusual for meetings among locals to begin after dinner and run until 10 p.m. Mercifully, meetings with foreign contacts usually are held during normal business hours.

You’ll be expected to have a business card (preferably bilingual), and to present it, using both hands, at the first encounter with a business contact.

You can expect to be presented with a small gift at the conclusion of a final business meeting, and it is good form to reciprocate.

Your business contacts will ask you to dinner. While it’s considered rude to refuse such an invitation, they may be secretly relieved if you do.

Thankfully, the old practice of drinking the foreign guest under the table is fading away. If you find yourself in that situation, it is possible to escape by saying, with an appropriate note of regret, that you don’t drink alcohol. If, however, you start the “bottoms-up” game and have even one drink, it will be very difficult to extricate yourself short of intoxication or extreme rudeness.

Transportation
While self-drive rental cars are available, don’t attempt driving unless you have nerves of steel and very good insurance.

Taxis are readily available and inexpensive, but most drivers do not speak English and their driving skills vary from marginal to horrendous. Fares are strictly by the meter, and tipping is not expected. Women traveling alone should not use taxis after dark.

Public transportation is cheap, comprehensive, and safe, but it is not user-friendly for the non-Chinese speaker. For business travelers who don’t speak Chinese, hotel transportation is the best way to get about.

Allow at least one hour to get to the airport during normal traffic and longer during rush hours.
**Safety and Health**

There is little violent street crime in Taipei, so a traveler who exercises the normal caution required in any large city is unlikely to have a problem.

However, anyone looking for trouble can easily find it: Karaoke lounges, KTVs, and Japanese-style nightclubs often are controlled by organized crime or are fronts for prostitution. The unwary patron can quickly run up a bill of several thousand dollars, and refusing to pay is not an option. If you want to partake of local-style nightlife, do so in the company of Taiwanese friends.

Western-style pubs and bars are everywhere and are generally friendly and safe. Seek local guidance for the best available options. They typically add a 10 percent service charge to the bill.

All large police stations have foreign affairs officers who speak English and whose job it is to deal with business travelers and tourists. If you happen to find yourself at a police station without a foreign affairs officer, the officer on duty will summon one.

Tap water is not safe to drink. Ice cubes in bars and restaurants are made from purified water and are safe. No visit to Taiwan is complete without a taste of the local street food, but ask the advice of a Taiwanese friend before indulging because some vendors are cleaner than others. Usually, anything cooked right in front of you is safe.

Taipei has Western-trained physicians, but its medical infrastructure is overburdened. Hospitals are nearly impossible for a non-Chinese speaker to navigate without help. If you need medical attention, ask your hotel or business contacts to arrange it. No vaccinations are required unless you arrive from Africa or South America.

**Sights and Shopping**

For that “must have” souvenir, try the jade market, which operates weekends and public holidays underneath the Jianguo overpass near Ren Ai Road. The jewelry’s quality, which ranges from junk to genuine, is often indistinguishable to the untrained eye. Bargain ruthlessly and buyer beware. There’s also a flower and handicraft market further along the overpass.

Taipei has two sights not to be missed. The National Palace Museum in the northern suburbs contains the finest examples of Chinese arts and antiquities in existence. If you are interested in Chinese history or art, allot half a day for this sight.

Taipei’s other landmark is the Taipei 101 building, which is the tallest building in the world. The skyscraper itself is not yet open to the public, but the gigantic shopping mall on the lower floors dispenses retail therapy in the form of expensive designer goods seven days a week.

**This and That**

The currency is the New Taiwan dollar, which currently trades at NT $33 to US $1. Credit cards are accepted at all but the smallest shops. ATM machines are easily found.

Visas are not required for U.S. passport holders for visits of up to 15 days.

Taiwan has a well-developed commercial law system, and the courts are generally free from corruption and political interference. However, the wheels of justice grind exceedingly slowly because of a shortage of judges and prosecutors. Taiwan’s courts will enforce the decisions of competent foreign courts on a reciprocal basis.
Tipping is neither expected nor necessary, except for valet parking attendants and bellhops.

**Hotels**

There are a number of five-star hotels in Taipei. The astute traveler chooses the one closest to meeting venues.

East Taipei, World Trade Center, Taipei city government, or Taipei 101 area:

Grand Hyatt Taipei  
2 Sung Shou Road  
Taipei 110  
+886-2-2720-1234  
+886-2-2720-1111 (fax)  
info@hyatt.com.tw

La Petit Sherwood  
370 Tun Hua South Road, Section 1  
Taipei  
+886-2-2754-1166  
+886-2-2754-3399 (fax)  
lps@sherwood.com.tw

Central Taipei, Nanking East Road, Tunhua North Road:

Westin Taipei  
133 Nanking East Road, Section 4  
Taipei 104  
+886-2-8770-6565  
+886-2-8770-6555 (fax)

Sherwood Hotel  
111 Minsheng East Road, Section 3  
Taipei  
+886-2-2718-1188  
+886-2-2713-0707 (fax)  
Sherwood@sherwood.com.tw

South Taipei, central government buildings, American Institute in Taiwan main offices:

Far Eastern Plaza Hotel  
201 Tunhua South Road, Section 2  
Taipei 106  
+886-2-2378-8888  
+886-2-2377-7777 (fax)  
tpe@shangri-la.com