



PIGEON POST

NIA celebrates culture ahead of International Migrants Day

CRIME

The National Immigration Agency (NIA) announced last Wednesday that it would hold a series of activities to introduce the cultures of new immigrants, paving the way for International Migrants Day next month. Under the five-week program titled "Immigration Service and Multi-cultural Feast," which will be held at NIA headquarters, each of the top six home countries of new immigrants will take turns hosting exhibitions displaying their arts, food and lifestyles, NIA officials said. Performances featuring each country's traditional culture will be staged every Wednesday, it said. "Apart from the NT\$300 million [US\$9.09 million] spent on counseling for immigrants every year, the government is making additional efforts to help new immigrants integrate into our society," NIA Deputy Director-General Hsieh Li-kung (謝立功) said. Vietnam will be the first country featured, followed by Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar, and ending with China on Dec. 17. Hsieh said a large-scale activity would be staged on Dec. 18, which is International Migrants Day. The agency said there were currently 270,000 Chinese spouses of Taiwanese living in Taiwan and 140,000 other foreign spouses, mostly from Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia.

European School plans annual Christmas Bazaar

The annual Taipei European School Christmas Bazaar will be held at the Shilin campus on Saturday from 11am to 5:30pm.

The much-anticipated event will feature Christmas handicrafts and booths of delicious international food. Visitors can participate in raffles and other activities are planned such as the lighting of the Christmas tree. Part of the proceeds will be donated to local and international charities devoted to helping less fortunate children with their education. Parking is limited and all bazaar-goers are encouraged to take public transportation or taxi. The nearest MRT stop is Zhishan Station. For more information, check out www.taipeieuropeanschool.com.

STAFF WRITER, WITH CNA

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A lesson in life for TAS students

HELPING HANDS: Thirty-four Taipei American School students recently spent less than two days building 10 houses in rural Cambodia as part of an aid program

BY J. MICHAEL COLE
STAFF REPORTER

It is often said that young people have it easy, that they have everything served on a silver platter and that they do not know what it means to live in hardship. But for a group of 34 students at Taipei American School (TAS), a recent trip to Cambodia not only taught them a lesson in hardship — it also changed how they look at Taiwan.

For eight years TAS, in cooperation with the Tabitha Foundation, has dispatched teams of students to rural Cambodia to build houses for families in need. While the foundation provides the building materials, the families of the students pay for the plane tickets and the students give their time.

Armed with little more than nails and hammers and a desire to do some good, what awaits the students is much more than blisters, hammered fingers and crushing heat.

"Hard to forget," 17-year-old Stephanie Hsu said after returning from her second trip to Cambodia in as many years.

"We don't really get lots of chances to go to exotic places," said 16-year-old Catherine Tung, adding that the Cambodia trip was "a great opportunity to help out" as well as a way to make new friends.

In less than two days, the army of 34 dedicated students — the school's biggest showing so far — built 10 houses in a marathon they said often turned into a deafening cacophony of hammering.

Asked what aspect of homebuilding was the most difficult, all agreed that getting the nails straight was the greatest challenge.

"As we pretty much hit the ground running, the first house was the most difficult," 17-year-old Christine Aurlund said, adding that locals looked on and laughed as they riddled it with crooked nails.

But they learned their lessons. "You really want the second

house to look good," she said.

For Andrew Crawford, a teacher in the English department at TAS who took charge of the initiative this year, the greatest reward was seeing the immediate results of their hard work.

"These people have nothing," he said.

So the moment a house is completed, the entire family moves in. The green-paneled houses are elevated on long wooden legs to deal with flooding, with animals — goats, cows — often living underneath the structure.

"They get to go home," Catherine said, her eyes aglimmer.

But the eye-opening did not end there. In fact, for all the muscle-numbing hard work, building the houses may have been the easy part. Cambodia had other things in store for them. First, it was the poverty, which could shock anyone who

had never seen it before, especially young TAS students, who have lived in Taiwan, the US, Canada and other more developed countries where poverty is of a different gradient.

"It's sad to see how little they have," Christine said. "And yet, they never complain."

"It made me realize how truly lucky, how well provided for we are in Taiwan," said Stephanie Lin, another chaperon.

Children run around naked and nothing is wasted, something else youngsters from an affluent society were not used to. In fact, so destitute were the people there that it sometimes complicated exchanges with them. Among other things, it meant not holding young children — especially the good-looking ones — as parents might feel pressured to repay you with them.

Janne Ritskes, the Tabitha Foundation representative in the country, drilled the rules into the young minds from day one. It also meant not giving out any presents, Andrew said, recounting how the



Above: Students from Taipei American School build houses in Prey Veng, Cambodia, on Oct. 10.

PHOTO COURTESY OF STEPHANIE LIN

Right: The students, their chaperons and Cambodians are pictured in front of completed houses on Oct. 11.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANDREW CRAWFORD

simple gift of a soccer ball the previous year had created a commotion in the village.

"It's hard," Stephanie Lin said, "but you have to tell them that their kids are ugly" so that they won't give them to you. "But they're all so beautiful."

Still, the students were able to organize simple games with the local children and partake in the simple joys of a different life.

The second unexpected thing for many students was Cambodia's history, which is still very visible today. The scars of war and the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot have not been hidden or forgotten. In fact, the infamous "killing fields" are still dappled with human remains, the odd bone, a piece of clothing at the bottom of a tree once used to hang people, an open-air museum of atrocity.



General Michaelle Jean, continues with its efforts, of which the annual TAS trip is but one part.

Among other things, its integrated development initiatives provide help safely delivering newborns and building wells, adequate sewage and roads. It also provides assistance for small businesses and sells various hand-made items to help local women. According to its Web site, as of this month, 63,280 families, representing 506,240 Cambodians, had graduated from poverty through the Tabitha Savings Program.

More information about the foundation is available at www.tabitha.ca.

For the students, all of this was transformative and, beyond serving as a contrast to their couched lives in Taiwan, where the ghosts of its own troubled history are often hidden, it gave them a new perspective on education.

"In school, there is so much focus on academics," Stephanie Hsu said, that we tend to lose sight of everything else that's out there. Christine concurred.

Trips like this one "teach you to learn about something else. Not everything is in books," she said.

The foundation, founded and organized by Ritskes in 1994 and whose patron is Canadian Governor



WEIGHT ADVANTAGE

Retired sumo grand champion Akebono, who now fights for the All Japan Pro Wrestling League, takes on two students at the Taipei Japanese School when a team of Japanese pro wrestlers from Japan visited the school on Nov. 13.

PHOTO: LIU CHUN-WEI, TAIPEI TIMES

Well-wishers raise glasses to toast Sultanate of Oman

BY JENNY W. HSU
STAFF REPORTER

More than 300 well-wishers extended their congratulations to the Sultanate of Oman from Taipei last Tuesday as the Arab country celebrated its 38th year of nationhood.

The special day also marked the birthday of its leader, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who ascended to power in 1970.

In an elaborate reception complete with music and dance

performed by local students and musicians, guests from various embassies, representative offices and other members of the international community raised their glasses to wish the country a happy birthday and a prosperous future.

"Today represents a new beginning in development and a new era for the people Oman," said Sulaiman bin Sultan al-Mughairy, director of the Commercial Office of the Sultanate of Oman in Taiwan, who

made his remarks in Hoklo (also known as Taiwanese).

Taiwan and Oman do not share formal relations, but non-political ties between the two countries are strong, he said, noting that bilateral trade volume between them has averaged US\$1 billion in recent years; a drastic improvement compared with the less than US\$100 million 17 years ago when the representative office was first set up in Taipei.

The director also touted the

frequent exchanges in the areas of education, culture and tourism, encouraging more Taiwanese to explore the beauty of his homeland.

Deputy Foreign Minister Javier Hou (侯清山) greeted the guests in Arabic and said that Oman was a crucial economic partner to Taiwan, adding that the trade volume between the two sides so far this year had already reached US\$890 million. Last year bilateral trade stood at US\$860 million.

The way of the Baboons

NO PAIN NO GAIN: Players for Taipei's largest rugby club said that camaraderie kept them on the pitch despite accumulating many injuries over the years

BY SHELLEY SHAN
STAFF REPORTER

To South African Adrian Brink, playing rugby is a "way of life," but he never thought that his love for the sport could be sustained when he came to Taiwan, where rugby is not anywhere near as popular as in his home country. He was wrong.

"I moved in with a guy who played in the Baboons," Brink said. "I arrived on Wednesday and I started rugby practice the very next day."

An outdoor activity instructor at a private school in Taipei, Brink is also captain of the Taipei Baboons.

"It's like a home away from home ... There is something about home that you can actually do here," he said.

The history of the city's largest rugby club — mostly comprising foreigners working in Taiwan — is something of a mystery. Australian Max Murphy, a restaurant manager, joined the Baboons in 2001. He said all he knew was that the team was started "by a bunch of French who played rugby."

Murphy didn't have a difficult time locating the club either.

"It doesn't matter where you are ... once you arrive in a city, you go to a bar and ask 'Where's the rugby team?' and there you go. Rugby players are always together," he said.

INTERACTION

The team practices every Thursday at Taipei's Minchuan Park

and Saturday at the Bailin Bridge Rugby Fields (台北市百齡橋運動公園橄欖球場). In these two venues, they get the opportunity to meet with many other local players, such as those from the Giants Rugby Football Club (巨人橄欖球俱樂部) and university rugby teams. From time to time, the Baboons get to

have one or two practice matches with them.

"The rugby scene in Taiwan is actually not that small, it's just that not too many people know about it," Brink said.

The team's amicable interaction with local players came with time. The Baboons, Brink said, used to have a very bad reputation — either they would get into fights with local players or scream at the referees. It took the team about a year to reshape their image and build relationships with local teams.

"We started taking those players [that misbehaved] off the field," Brink said.

"Not that we now play soft, but we want to play matches against the local teams every week. You have to show good sportsmanship," Brink said, adding that the team now has a committee that drafts regulations for on-field behavior.

"It's a rugby team. We are not a bunch of sissies. If you've got a really bad attitude, guys will tell you out front and sort you out," he said.

Brink says the game puzzles some of his Taiwanese friends.

"A friend asked me, 'Why did you guys run all over the field and tackle each other just to get the ball?'" Brink said.

And when Murphy tells his local friends that he plays rugby, the first response he gets is most likely to be about the violence of the sport.

Brink said the lack of popularity for rugby in Taiwan is mostly because people don't know the rules, and the Baboons hope to promote the sport by holding regular games with Taiwanese teams.

Both Brink and Murphy cited camaraderie as the main motivation to keep playing despite the many

injuries they have accumulated over the years.

"There's a saying that 'It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.' I think that applies to rugby," Murphy said.

To Brink, playing rugby is a perfect way to get rid of frustration and let off steam.

"What better way to do that than to tackle some people?" Brink said.

Occasionally, the team also finds members like Swede Anders Haraldsson, who had never played rugby before he joined the Baboons.

Haraldsson, a school manager, watched the 1995 Rugby World Cup on TV and thought it looked like fun. He had

played with a soccer team for a short time after moving to Taiwan. A friend who happened to live across the street from the rugby pitch told him he should try joining the Baboons.

NO FEAR

Haraldsson said that while it took a while to learn the skills of game, the violence didn't bother him.

"In Sweden, we played ice hockey as kids, where you could get a lot more serious injuries than you do in rugby," he said.

Haraldsson broke his collarbone in a rugby game once, but that did not stop him from playing.

"[Rugby] is for young and tough men. There is a certain amount of pain involved, but there is always a learning curve," he said. "After the game, you just drink beer and forget all about the pain."

The Taipei Baboons will host a game on Saturday at the Bailin Bridge Rugby Fields that pits South African players from across Taiwan against those from the rest of the world. The main game kicks off at 3:30pm, but as a curtain-raiser, the Baboons will play against the Giants at 2pm.

For more information, visit www.taipeirugby.com.