

ALEX AROUND the WORLD to Taiwan

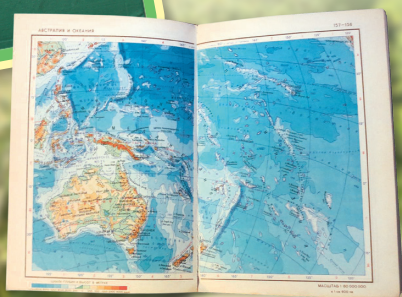
by Alexander Waits

For my 6th birthday I got a World Atlas, a special present from a family friend with the handwritten inscription: "The happiest people are those who travel. Wish you to be among them, travelling a lot when you grow up". At that time, living in the Soviet Russia closed totalitarian state, the idea of travelling around the world was no more than a child's fantasy. Nevertheless, this little green book with maps and detailed information on all the countries has inspired me a lot. Back then, I could hardly imagine that at the age of 16 I would leave Russia forever, immigrate to Israel, travel frequently to visit more than 30



countries and end up living in Taiwan for the past 3 years.

Israel is a very small country, about half the size of Taiwan, and is surrounded by 4 countries. Due to the political situation, the state borders with Lebanon and Syria are completely closed. Even though travelling to Jordan and Egypt is possible, it is not the Israeli citizens' first choice due to the hostile attitude of the Arab population of those countries. Thus, going abroad has always been attractive to me. I literally became addicted to travelling just as soon as I finished



● A big world inside a small book





● In the high mountains of Taiwan

● Cambodia

● International potluck party

● International encounter

my 3 years of military service. In my undergraduate studies I would save money and plan for the whole year to go abroad during the summer vacation. Backpacking on a low budget taught me ways to sustain myself and one way to do so was busking in foreign countries. I learned music in my childhood and this proved to be rewarding at the age of 23, when I got myself a little flute and began playing it on the streets of European cities to get some cash while travelling. Learning more about different cultures and musical traditions, I later on fell in love with the bagpipes. Most people attribute this peculiar instrument to Scotland, but it is far

from being so. Bagpipes are an old instrument, a distant relative of Chinese Suo-na. Each European country has its own bagpipes tradition and this musical instrument is spread from North Africa to Scandinavia and from Iceland to the Middle Eastern countries. I got my bagpipes in Galicia, a north-western province of Spain, 10 years ago and brought it with me to Taiwan.

The idea of moving to Taiwan came from my wife, when her company offered her a position in its



● Suo-na, the Chinese ancestor of the European bagpipes

Taipei office. It was exciting and frightening at the same time to once again leave family, friends and colleagues for an alien culture, unknown country and unfamiliar people. I had to quit my job in Israel as a psychotherapist. It was clear that my professional life in Taiwan would be challenging to say the least, however, I was open to the change. I was extremely lucky to meet Eason Lin, an outstanding Taiwanese drummer with deep and keen interest in world music. We successfully applied for the street performance license in Taipei city. Last year people could often see the two of us performing in Ximen or in XinYi shopping area. This year I got too busy to play music, studying at the Yang Ming University International Health Program, so when I first heard about the University International Night event, I was delighted to invite Eason to perform together for the international audience.

- Three continents represented in one selfie



Living in Taiwan turned out to be the greatest adventure of my life with invaluable learning about internationality and tolerance. Today, when asked a common question: *“Where do you come from?”* – And when you are a foreigner, people are especially curious about your origin – I reply with a question: *“What do you want to know?”* If you want to know where I was born and what my mother tongue is, I was born in St. Petersburg and I speak Russian. If you ask which country's passport I have, I have in Israeli passport, and I speak Hebrew at the level of native speakers after living in Jerusalem for nearly 20 years. But now I am living in Taiwan and doing my best to master Mandarin Chinese.

While living in Russia, I was often hated for being “Jewish”. In Israel I was often hated for being “Russian”. In Taiwan I am being respected for who I am, a foreigner, regardless of ethnicity or my poor knowledge of the local language and customs. In almost 3 years I have never experienced any hostile attitude from local people. On the



• Taipei street performance



● International students community



● "Remarkable Indonesia" festival in Taipei



● International family



● Beautiful Taiwan nature

contrary, my new friends and colleagues have always provided lots of help and support and this is not only my case, as my international friends can agree when talking about their experiences in Taiwan. Another striking feature of Taiwan for me is the honesty of its people. I remember this brief incident shortly after arriving here. Me and my friend were about to enter a coffee shop near Taipei Main station. The place had some tables outside and I noticed a person, carelessly placing his phone and car keys on a table and going inside to order a drink. I was literally speechless,

as this situation would not be possible in main station area of any big city that I visited previously. My Dutch friend confirmed my amusement. Later on I learned to trust local people and local customs to such an extent so next time I go back to Israel, or elsewhere, I will have to remind myself to take better care of my belongings.

At the end of this brief article, I would love to express my sincere gratitude to all Taiwanese and international friends that I was honored to meet during my stay here. 