

# Putting Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's U.S. Transit in Context

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Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen is transiting through the United States in late March and early April of 2023. This marks her 7th transit through the United States during her time as Taiwan's leader, and is the 29th U.S. transit by a sitting president of Taiwan since the first in 1994. Due to the unofficial nature of U.S.-Taiwan relations, these trips are designated as private unofficial transits rather than official government-to-government visits. Tsai's 2023 transit is set to be distinguished by an in-person meeting between President Tsai and U.S. Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy, which will mark the highest-level meeting to take place during such a transit.

China strongly opposes these transits, [arguing](#) that they are violations of China's "one-China principle" and an attempt to "propagate 'Taiwan independence.'" In the past, China has enacted a wide range of punitive measures against Taiwan and the United States after such transits. The scale and intensity of Beijing's actions tends to be based on their perceptions of the current state of U.S.-China-Taiwan dynamics and other linked geopolitical events, as well as the specific details of the transit itself.

It is possible that Beijing could mount a significant response to Tsai's transit and meeting with Speaker McCarthy. This ChinaPower feature contextualizes Tsai's 2023 transit by breaking down the facts surrounding past transits and analyzing China's past behavior.

## What We Know (So Far) about President Tsai's 2023 Transit

During her 2023 transit, Tsai is stopping in New York City from March 29–31 on her way to Guatemala and Belize. The following week, she is scheduled to stop in Los Angeles from April 4-6 as she returns to Taiwan. The most defining and critically watched aspect of her trip will occur during her stopover in Los Angeles. Tsai is [expected](#) to have an in-person meeting with Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy and other congressional leaders such as Representative Mike Gallagher at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum.

## The New York Stop

Tsai arrived by plane in New York on Wednesday, March 29, where she was received at John F. Kennedy International Airport by Taiwan Representative to the United States Hsiao Bixhim and Laura Rosenberger, the newly appointed Chairperson of the American Institute in Taiwan (the unofficial de facto U.S. embassy in Taiwan). In the evening, Tsai attended and spoke at a banquet dinner with Taiwan expatriates and Taiwanese-Americans. In her speech, Tsai [lauded](#) Taiwan's resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic, remarked that Taiwan is "rising in global importance," and described U.S.-Taiwan relations as "closer than ever." State and local officials were in attendance, including New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, Deputy Speaker of the New Jersey General Assembly Raj Mukherji, State Senator of New Jersey Gordon Johnson, and State Senator of New York Iwen Chu.

During her only full day in New York on March 30, Tsai met with Taiwan expatriates and Taiwanese-Americans at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO). While at TECO, Tsai also [met](#) with AIT Chairperson Laura Rosenberge, as well as permanent representatives to the United Nations of countries that have diplomatic relations with Taiwan. She also [visited](#) businesses owned by young Taiwanese-Americans. In the evening, Tsai attended a private reception and event hosted by the Hudson Institute, where she received the organization's Global Leadership Award. On the morning of March 31, Tsai's transit through New York concluded as she embarked to Guatemala.

### The Los Angeles Stop

Among other activities, Tsai is expected to meet with Speaker McCarthy during her stop in Los Angeles. The meeting has been framed as an alternative to an immediate visit by Speaker McCarthy to Taiwan, at least postponing his intended travel to the island. By having Tsai and McCarthy meet during an unofficial Taiwan transit of the United States, there are hopes that Beijing will be more constrained in its response

than it was when Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022.

China used the visit by Speaker Pelosi to provoke the [Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis](#), which included unprecedented military exercises around the island. Compared to the previous Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–1996, the August 2022 exercises were closer to the main island of Taiwan—with some of the exercise zones extending into Taiwan's territorial waters. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Rocket Force also fired multiple ballistic missiles over the main island of Taiwan, with some of them landing into the exclusive economic zones of Japan and the Philippines. Beijing also embraced limited economic punishments against Taiwan and cancelled and postponed select areas of U.S.-China engagement and cooperation.

While there are hopes that Beijing will respond in a more limited fashion to the Tsai-McCarthy meeting during her transit compared to a McCarthy visit to Taiwan, it is possible China could still take major action. It is unclear if the Chinese military exercises against Taiwan after Speaker Pelosi's 2022 visit were primarily aimed



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at her visit to the island (the travel and location) or targeting the meeting between Tsai and Pelosi (the *engagement* itself). If it is the latter, then Beijing could be on track for a sharp and substantial escalation to the upcoming Tsai meeting with McCarthy.

Some [assess](#) that the Pelosi visit at most gave China a “pretext” to execute planned escalation and aggression against Taiwan. If that is the case, there is no reason to assume that Beijing would act any differently this time around. It is also worth noting that U.S. and Chinese media have pointed out that this transit does not preclude a potential visit by Speaker McCarthy to Taiwan in the future.

### The Geopolitical Backdrop

More broadly, Tsai’s transit is occurring amid worsening U.S.-China relations and growing Chinese [concern](#) that the United States is “playing the ‘Taiwan card’ and using Taiwan to contain China.” In February 2023, in a reversal of typical low-profile U.S.-Taiwan engagements, it was publicly reported that Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu met with senior U.S. officials—including Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman—in Arlington, Virginia. Later that month, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Chase visited Taiwan, marking the second senior Pentagon official to visit Taiwan since 2019.

In a reflection of deepening tensions, Chinese President Xi Jinping took the unprecedented step of explicitly calling out the United States during the annual “Two Sessions” meetings in Beijing in March 2023. In his remarks, Xi [stated](#) “Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-round containment, encirclement and suppression of China.” Similarly, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang [warned](#) that “mishandling the Taiwan question will shake the very foundation of China-U.S. relations.”

### U.S. Approaches to Transits

The United States has not had official ties with Taiwan since it formally established

diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China in 1979. As a result, Taiwan presidents have only been able to travel to the United States in the form of private visits and unofficial transits rather than official government-to-government visits.

Although Taiwan presidential transits are private and unofficial, the U.S. government plays a significant role in shaping the nature and content of transits given their potential impact on cross-Strait dynamics, U.S.-Taiwan relations, and U.S.-China relations. The Clinton administration, for example, initially denied then-President Lee Teng-hui a visa but was pressured by Congress to allow him a private visit. In 2001, then-President Chen Shui-bian was not allowed to hold public events. This was reversed by President Bush in 2002, but the Bush Administration began limiting Chen’s activities by 2006 due to concerns of Chen’s policies towards China.

U.S. treatment of these transits became more consistent under Taiwan’s then-President Ma Ying-jeou, during which he met with local and congressional leaders and held public events. Since 2016, the United States has gradually granted President Tsai Ing-wen more flexibility and time to [engage in activities](#) in the United States during her stops.

### Trends in Past Transits

Understanding Tsai’s 2023 transit requires situating it in the broader history of past Taiwan presidential transits. For much of the last three decades, Taiwan’s presidents have frequently conducted transits through the United States on their way to and from countries that have formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> These transits occur under the practical purpose of needing to refuel during long-haul flights, but they also provide opportunities for Taiwan’s leaders to engage with the United States. Over time, these transits have evolved in terms of frequency and duration, location, and format.

### Frequency and Duration

The first transit through the United States occurred in 1994 and was short-lived. Taiwan’s

then-President Lee Teng-hui was [scheduled](#) to make a refueling stop in Honolulu while on his way to Central America and South Africa. Concerned about the thorny politics of such a move and the potential backlash from China, the Clinton administration denied Lee a visa to enter the country and did not permit him to spend the night in Honolulu. While refueling, Lee chose not to leave the plane in protest of his treatment.

In the years following this inaugural transit, the stopovers eventually became much more commonplace and normalized. Tsai's 2023 transit will mark the 29th. On average, the transits have taken place on a near-annual basis, with some years seeing two transits. The last three years were an exception to this. Due primarily to the Covid-19 pandemic, no transits took place between 2020 and 2022.

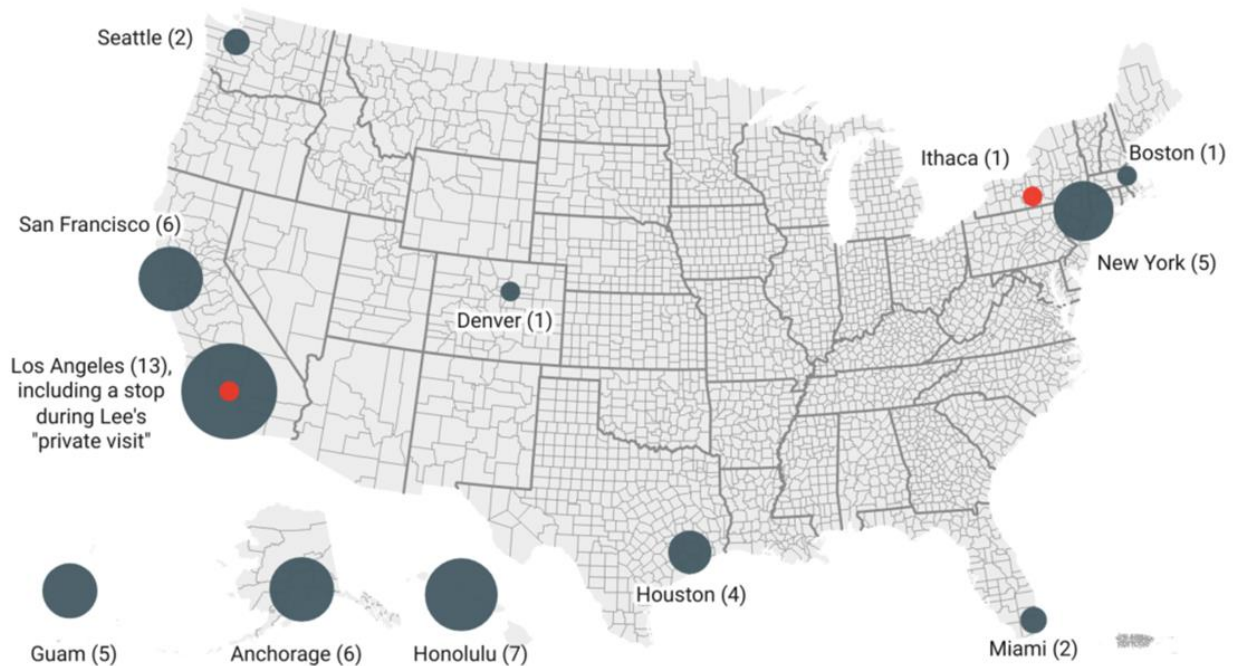
Under Tsai, the length of time spent in the United States has increased notably. Some of her predecessors' transits were measured in minutes or hours, with several isolated to the airport. By comparison, all of Tsai's visits have included overnight stays and a greater variety of activities. Tsai's July 2019 transit stretched out over five days and four nights, making it the longest of any transit.

### Location

It has also become common practice for presidents to stop in two U.S. cities while transiting. All but one of Tsai's six previous transits have included two locations, and her 2023 transit will follow this trend. Transits have largely been concentrated on the western side of the United States. Tsai's 2023 visit will mark the 13th stop at Los Angeles. San Francisco has hosted six transits. New York (five stops) and Houston (four stops) have also been popular

## U.S. Locations Transited by Taiwan Presidents (1994-2023)

Bubbles are sized based on the number of times a city was included as a presidential stopover location. President Lee's 1995 trip was a "private visit," not a transit.



Source: CSIS China Power Project; Office of the President, R.O.C. (Taiwan)

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locations. To date, there has been no Taiwan presidential transits that involved stops in the larger Washington, D.C. metropolitan and capital region (D.C., Virginia, or Maryland).

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Transit stops gravitate toward cities with large populations of overseas-Taiwan citizens and Taiwanese-Americans. In 2021, the U.S. Census Bureau [estimated](#) there were 210,429 people of Taiwan ancestry in the U.S., with the largest populations in California (94,727), New York (18,425), and Texas (16,211). The greater Los Angeles area alone has upwards of 45,000 Taiwanese people, contributing to the frequency of transits through the city.

It is worth noting that Taiwan's presidents have infrequently transited through other countries besides the United States. In 2006, then-President Chen Shui-bian briefly [stopped](#) in Abu Dhabi and Amsterdam on his way to Paraguay. Chen was denied transit through San Francisco and New York and was only offered stops in Honolulu or Anchorage—locations that were believed to be less provocative to China. Chen ultimately chose to transit through other countries.

### Transit Activity

As transits have become more regularized, they have involved more types of activities, especially under President Tsai. During her past transits, Tsai held in-person meetings and spoke on the phone with local and state government officials, some members of Congress, as well as leaders of the American Institute in Taiwan. Taiwan presidents also meet with members of the Taiwan-American community during their transits.

To date, the highest-ranking U.S. congressional official she has [met](#) in-person during her transits has been Senator Robert Menendez, who was then ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during her most recent transit in July 2019. U.S. protocol and desire to keep Taiwan transits private and

unofficial have precluded Tsai from meeting with U.S. executive branch officials during her transits.

However, Tsai has opted to have phone calls with high-level congressional officials, including then-House Speakers Nancy Pelosi and Paul Ryan. Although no Taiwan president has met a Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives on U.S. territory, both Newt Gingrich and Nancy Pelosi have met with Taiwan Presidents in Taiwan. Thus, for Tsai's upcoming trip, engaging with senior U.S. Congressional leaders is rooted in precedent, and in-person meetings with House Speakers have occurred before.

In addition to congressional leaders, Tsai and her predecessors have also engaged with current and former U.S. government officials. Tsai called former President Bill Clinton during her June 2016 transit. Her predecessor Chen Shui-bian had [called](#) then-Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage during his transit in 2003.

Overall, Tsai's 2023 transit is in line with prior transits in terms of location and matches her prior transit in July 2019 in terms of longest duration. The major difference is that she is likely to meet Speaker McCarthy in person—the first such meeting between a Taiwan President and House Speaker on U.S. soil.

### Chinese Actions against Past Transits

It is difficult to predict what actions Beijing will take after Tsai's 2023 transit, but an examination of past transits provides helpful context. China's immediate reactions to Taiwan Presidential activities in the United States have varied in severity.<sup>3</sup> Three main factors tend to affect China's behavior: Beijing's overall perception of political relations within the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle, the specific details of the transit (such as timing, duration, and location), and linkages to other major events.

## Overall Chinese Perception of U.S.-China-Taiwan Relations

The most significant factor impacting China's calculus is the state of U.S.-China-Taiwan relations and political dynamics in Washington. This is especially the case when decisions surrounding transits are perceived by Beijing (whether correctly or incorrectly) as changing U.S. policy toward Taiwan or approaching what Beijing views as "official" engagements between the United States and Taiwan.

Former President Lee Teng-hui's [experience](#) is illustrative of how China could overreact. Lee's initial attempts at securing a visa for a 1995 visit were rebuffed by the Clinton administration, which had conducted a policy review that concluded Lee should not be allowed to make private visits to the United States. However, Congress intervened and the administration relented. In June 1995, Lee was approved for a "private visit" to the United States with stops in Los Angeles and then Ithaca, New York, to attend a class reunion at his alma mater Cornell University. This was the first time a Taiwan leader had stepped foot in the United States since 1979 (when Washington formally switched official ties from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China). During the trip, Lee had a series of private meetings with local and state officials, and he delivered public remarks at Cornell.

Beijing interpreted Washington's move as a major shift in policy and considered Lee's [remarks](#) at Cornell as highly provocative. China strongly publicly and privately [protested](#) the visit, cancelled U.S.-China military and high-level exchanges, and recalled China's ambassador to the United States. Scheduled discussions between U.S. and Chinese leaders on nuclear energy cooperation were also postponed. After the visit, the People's Liberation Army conducted a series of large-scale military exercises and live-fire drills—including missile tests off the coast of northern Taiwan—starting in late July. Amid building tensions, China continued with

additional exercises in March 1996, and the events collectively became known as the [Third Taiwan Strait Crisis](#). Since 1995, there have been no additional "private visits" of the United States by Taiwan Presidents—only "transits."

Overall, China has typically acted more assertively against transits by Taiwan leaders that Beijing perceives as pushing for Taiwan independence. Beijing worries that a successful transit showcases U.S. political and public support of the Taiwan leader. China harbors deep suspicion of Lee Teng-hui and Taiwan's Democratic Progress Party (DPP) leaders since him, including Chen Shui-bian and Tsai Ing-wen. This pattern of greater Chinese assertiveness is not unique to transits of the United States. Under President Xi Jinping, China has demonstrated greater willingness to punish Taiwan and the United States for any perceived "pro-independence" moves or actions and generally views actions by DPP leaders in a negative light.

In contrast, Beijing has largely turned a blind eye to Taiwan leaders it views as more willing to work with the mainland. For example, China [responded](#) mildly, if at all, to Kuomintang (KMT) president Ma Ying-jeou's transits. As president, Ma engaged with Beijing to develop cross-Strait relations, and his administration improved upon communication and economic cooperation with China. Yet, Ma's stopovers were still diplomatically significant. During his 2013 stopover in New York, for example, Beijing did not publicly condemn the transit, despite Ma's several meetings with members of Congress and local officials.

## Format and Activities of Transits

The nature of meetings and events also influence China's actions. Beijing is more concerned with longer transits than short stopovers. Presidential transits consist of a combination of phone calls, in-person meetings, and public events. China is most wary of meetings with U.S. government officials that could be viewed as official contacts and high-profile public remarks, where Taiwan presidents

have the opportunity to address a large audience and influence U.S. and global public opinion.

Geography matters too. China objected the most when Taiwan's transits are through the continental United States in comparison to when the stops are in Alaska, Hawaii, or Guam. Honolulu was chosen as the inaugural transit location in 1994, highlighting the lower stakes associated with transiting outside of the continental United States. In an effort to limit the profile of one transit by Chen Shui-bian, the Bush administration also [denied](#) him transits through San Francisco and New York City, which were seen as a high-profile destination. Instead, Chen was offered a refueling stop in Anchorage, which Chen turned down, choosing to stop in Abu Dhabi and Amsterdam instead.

Tellingly, Chinese officials have publicly and privately indicated that the most provocative location for a transit would be in or near Washington, D.C. A move there would be seen as bringing Taiwan's leader to the nation's capital, where official business is typically done. To date, no transits have occurred there.

### Linkages to Other Major Events

China's perception of transits are also shaped by other major geopolitical developments happening around the same time. In July 2019, President Tsai made stopovers in New York and Denver on her way to and from the Caribbean. Two days prior to Tsai's transit through New York, the U.S. Department of Defense certified the planned sale of a \$2.2 billion package of [Abrams tanks](#) and [Stinger missiles](#) to Taiwan, which made the timing of her stopovers more sensitive and provocative to China.

China leveraged the full range of diplomatic, economic, and military tools to threaten and punish Taiwan and the United States. On July 31, China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism [announced](#) it would suspend a pilot program that permitted visits to Taiwan for travelers from 47 cities, including the major metropolitan centers of Shanghai and Beijing. On July 12, as Tsai was transiting New York, China

[threatened](#) sanctions on the U.S. firms that were selling arms to Taiwan. On the military front, from July 28 to August 2, China [conducted](#) drills on both ends of the Taiwan Strait, off the coasts of Guangdong and Zhejiang Provinces. This was the first time since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis that exercises were held in more than one location at the same time. In response, Taiwan deployed two F-16 fighter jets and fired 117 medium and long-range missiles in its own military exercise from July 29 to 30. Ultimately, however, the situation did not escalate to the level of the 1995-1996 crisis.

### What to Expect from China

China already began taking action before Tsai's arrival in the United States, and Beijing has potentially laid the groundwork for substantial actions during or after her transit. The Chinese government has not censored Chinese netizens calling for a strong response to the Tsai transit. Some netizens have [suggested](#) a PLA military response even stronger than that of August 2022. Others have [highlighted](#) the increased PLA activities to the north, south, and east of Taiwan in the recent couple of weeks.

In the days leading up to Tsai's transit China publicly and privately issued strong and stern warnings about the transit. The Chinese foreign ministry labelled Tsai as "the head of Taiwan independence secessionist forces," [claiming](#) that the visit violates the United States's one-China policy.<sup>4</sup> Chinese media [criticized](#) the Tsai transit as giving "credence to her pro-independence stance," "bolster[ing] the collusion between the anti-China hawks in Washington and her pro-independence forces," and allowing for "a kind of official contact" between the United States and Taiwan.

Additionally, China has been slow to respond to U.S. calls for high-level engagement, including the U.S. desire for President Biden to have a phone call with Xi after China's Two Sessions. China has yet to send its designated ambassador to the United States to Washington, despite speculation that Vice Foreign Minister

Xie Feng is likely to be the ambassador and that he was supposed to arrive in Washington in either February or mid-March. However, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and China's top diplomat Wang Yi spoke on the phone on Friday, March 24, just days before Tsai was scheduled to begin her transit. In a departure from typical practice, neither side publicized the call and the U.S. and Chinese media did not report on it until Tsai was en route. While details of the conversation have not been revealed, the timing of the call suggests they discussed Tsai's transit.

Hours before Tsai left Taiwan, Chinese officials ratcheted up rhetoric surrounding the transit. The spokesperson for China's Taiwan Affairs Office, Zhu Fengliang, firmly [stated](#) that, "The so-called 'transit' by leaders of the Taiwan authorities is essentially a provocative act of 'relying on the United States to seek independence.'" In the strongest warning against the expected Tsai-McCarthy meeting in Los Angeles, Zhu warned that such contact, "will be another provocation that seriously violates the one-China principle, harms China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and destroys peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" and said China "will take resolute countermeasures."

As Tsai arrived in New York, Chargé d'Affaires Xu Xueyuan of the Chinese embassy in Washington [warned](#) that regardless of whether it is "Taiwan leaders coming to the United States or the U.S. leaders visiting Taiwan, it could lead to another serious, serious, serious, I repeat, confrontation in the China-U.S. relationship." She describes the "Taiwan question" as the "first red line that must not be crossed."

In terms of actions, China poached another Taiwan diplomatic ally, Honduras. Prior to Tsai's planned transit, Honduran President Xiomara Castro announced that Honduras would be establishing diplomatic relations with China, leaving only Guatemala and Paraguay as

remaining Taiwan partners in Latin America. China [reportedly](#) offered Honduras as much as \$2.95 billion to establish relations. Shortly after, Honduran foreign minister Eduardo Enrique Reina embarked on a trip to Beijing. This is not the first time China has timed the poaching of Taiwan's diplomatic partners to coincide with a transit through the United States. Two days after Tsai [returned](#) from her 2018 transit, China succeeded in getting El Salvador to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. This follows a broader trend of Chinese actions to pressure Taiwan since President Tsai Ing-wen has been in power. Since 2016, China has convinced Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and now Honduras to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China.

Likely at the encouragement of Beijing, former Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou is visiting mainland China from March 27 to April 7. This is a significant move and the first visit to China by a former Taiwan President. His visit begins before Tsai transits the United States and lasts until after she is back to Taiwan, providing Beijing with flexibility to engage with him after seeing the full nature of Tsai's transit. Ma remains a senior member of the KMT party, the leading opposition party to Tsai's ruling DPP.

Additionally, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense [reported](#) that on March 31 (Taiwan time), nine PLA aircraft crossed the northern, central, and southern areas of the Taiwan Strait median line in five batches.

China is likely to reserve the bulk of its actions against the transit for after Tsai's meeting with McCarthy, which is the most significant and high-profile aspect of her trip.

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