



LIFE OF TAIWAN

An introduction to
the beautiful island



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LIFE OF TAIWAN

Thank you for contacting Life of Taiwan

We pride ourselves on creating unique first class travel experiences for visitors to the beautiful island of Taiwan.

In many ways our unique offering is unique. We were founded by a group of long-term English speaking expats who are supported by a wonderful team of Taiwanese travel professionals, itinerary designers and cultural experts. We are united by the common goal of sharing our appreciation of the island with our guests.

We take you away from the tourist spots and sightseeing crowds into the vibrant life of Taiwan and its remarkable people and culture. Whether you're looking to explore the islands breathtaking nature, tour the imperious mountains or sample foods from the bustling night markets, we can create the perfect itinerary for you.

Our tour curators will create amazing travel experiences for you. They understand that no two tours are the same and will tailor your itinerary to your specific needs, not to a pre-determined tour package.

This information pack has been created for you Steven Crook, the author of many books on the island including Taiwan: The Bradt Travel Guide. He's acknowledged as one of the worlds leading experts on travel in Taiwan, and he has been living on and writing about the beautiful island for more than twenty years.

We hope it is of use to you! If you need any assistance, please get in touch.

Kind regards,

Mark Sinclair, Founder, Life of Taiwan

An Introduction to Taiwan

There is more information on our website, but for your convenience here is a brief introduction to the key destinations on the island. It will give you a taste of which places you feel would of most interest to you.

Taiwan is a semi-tropical island in East Asia, one of the world's most exciting and rapidly changing regions.

Like many other places in Asia, Taiwan is densely populated and highly developed in terms of economics, technology and transport. Its people are highly educated and well-travelled. Nonetheless, exotic cultures thrive throughout the island, and breathtakingly unspoiled scenery can be found in its mountainous interior.

Until recently, Taiwan was thought of mainly as a destination for business people. However, thanks to its blend of Chinese tradition and modern influences – not to mention its fabulous ecological treasures and exceptionally friendly people – it's becoming a very popular destination for international tourists.

The Island

Taiwan covers an area of 36,191 km². The main island, Taiwan, accounts for all but a tiny part of the country's land area. It's slightly bigger than the US state of Maryland and around half the size of Scotland.

Some 394 km long and 144 km wide, Taiwan's shape has been compared to both a tobacco leaf and a sweet potato. The western half of Taiwan is well-watered and mostly flat, and thus suitable for farming, although agriculture is no longer an important part of the economy.

Mountain ranges run almost the entire length of the island, with 258 peaks higher than 3,000 m (9,842 feet). These mountains mean that journeys from west to east are slow but offer breathtaking scenery. Much of the highlands are forested, and national parks, notably Taroko and Yushan, showcase Taiwan's alpine beauty.

Taiwan's Population

Taiwan's population of 23.2 million is concentrated in the western lowlands, with the main cities of Taipei, New Taipei, Taoyuan, Taichung, Tainan and Kaohsiung accounting for over 15 million people.

More people live in the north than the south, and the population of the western half outnumbers that of the east by over ten to one. Also, Taiwan's human population is much more diverse than you might think when you step off the airplane. Many Taiwanese have mixed ancestry because intermarriage was common in the 17th and 18th centuries and has become very common again recently. However, individuals are still usually placed in one of four categories, including the island's original inhabitants and those who settled in Taiwan over the past 400 years. There are also 300,000-plus immigrants from other Asian countries.

Taiwan's population is ageing rapidly. As recently as the 1960s, most families had five or more children. Taiwan is now said to have the lowest birth rate in the world, around 0.9 to 1.07 children per couple, far below replacement rate. Some predict the island's total population will begin falling within three decades.

Taiwan's rivers are short and fast. There are few natural lakes of any size, Sun Moon Lake being the result of human intervention. The main island has 1,566 km of coast, including sand and shale beaches, wetlands full of water birds, plus some of the world's tallest cliffs.

People of Taiwan



The Indigenous Tribes

Taiwan's indigenous tribes have been on the island for thousands of years, but are now a tiny minority. Just one in fifty Taiwanese is officially aboriginal, yet a far greater proportion – possibly a majority of the population – has some aboriginal heritage.

All of Taiwan's aboriginal tribes – officially there are 16 – are Austronesian, and many experts believe Taiwan is where the Austronesian branch of mankind started out. Each tribe has its own language, yet many young aborigines can't speak more than a few words in their ancestral tongue.

Well into the 20th century, most Taiwanese of Han Chinese origin (be they Hoklo or Hakka) regarded aborigines as savages, and it's true that as recently as the 1930s some indigenous groups hadn't given up their old head-hunting ways. The Japanese colonial authorities tried to stamp out certain cultural practices, such as the tattooing of women's faces.

Indigenous clans in the mountains lived by hunting and gathering (hunting remains a popular pastime among aborigines living in the highlands), but lowland aborigines farmed and raised livestock. Nowadays, aborigines can be found doing all kinds of jobs. They're especially well-represented in sport and music; many become professional soldiers or police officers.

Aboriginal villages are transformed during celebrations such as the Amis Harvest Festival held in several villages in the East Rift Valley. Residents of all ages don traditional costumes and take part in outdoor dances; beautiful polyphonic melodies are sung; and young men engage in contests to show off their strength and skill.

Unlike their Han compatriots, most Taiwanese aborigines are Christian.

Cultural differences between the tribes include facial tattooing (customary among the Atayal, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saisiyat, Sediq and Truku) and hand tattooing (confined to the Paiwan and Rukai tribes). Because the Japanese authorities regarded tattooing as a savage custom, the only aborigines now alive with traditional face tattoos are a handful of women now aged over 90. All of the tribes have strong musical traditions (one reason why aborigines are especially prominent in Taiwan's pop music) and distinctive costumes. Traditional clothing is often worn during festivals or on Sundays when attending church.



Taiwan's aboriginal tribes are struggling to preserve their cultures because of the influence of mass media (although some TV and radio shows are broadcast in aboriginal languages), an education system which until recently stressed Mandarin at the expense of every other language, and migration. A great many young aborigines leave their home villages to work or attend school in a city, although it's common for them to return and enthusiastically participate in tribal festivals.

Compared to other Taiwanese, aborigines are poorly off. Not many graduate from college, and their life expectancy is shorter. To improve their lot, various government programs help indigenous people get scholarships and jobs.

The Hoklo People

About three quarters of Taiwan's population think of themselves as 'ordinary Taiwanese', meaning they're neither aboriginal, Hakka, nor mainlander. The ancestors of Taiwan's Hoklo population migrated to the island from Fujian – the mainland Chinese province nearest Taiwan – sometime between the early 1600s and the Japanese takeover in 1895. Most of them speak Taiwanese (a language very similar to Minnanhua in Fujian), and many reject the idea that Taiwan is part of China, even though they recognise they are of Han Chinese descent.

The overwhelming majority of people in Chiayi, Tainan and Pingtung are Hoklo. In east Taiwan, because there are large Hakka, aboriginal and mainlander minorities, Hoklo people account for less than half the population. Despite their numbers, only one Hoklo has won the presidency, Chen Shui-bian (b1950, president 2000-2008).

The Hakka People

Hakka people, who are found throughout the Chinese mainland and southeast Asia, began settling in Taiwan in the early 18th century. This Han Chinese ethnic group has its own language and customs, preserved despite numerous scatterings and migrations over the past 1,600 years. Particular deities in the Chinese folk pantheon are regarded as Hakka gods. And unlike Hoklo families, Hakka parents never bound the feet of their daughters.

Taiwan's three million Hakka people are concentrated in the northwest and in a few towns in the far south, because by the time they arrived on the island, the best farming land had already been taken by Hoklo settlers. Consequently, the Hakkas had to make do with marginal and foothill areas.

Hakka people are respected for educational success and hard work. Meinong, a exceptionally picturesque town in Kaohsiung, is said to have produced more PhD holders relative to its population than anywhere else in Taiwan. Lee Teng-hui (b1923), a Hakka who has a PhD from Cornell University, became Taiwan's first native-born president in 1988.

Mainland Chinese and their descendants

Between 10 percent and 15 percent of the ROC population is considered to be 'mainlanders'. This includes a great many people born in Taiwan, as in traditional Chinese thinking a person's ancestry comes from his or her father. Accordingly, many ROC citizens who have a Taiwanese mother and who've never visited the People's Republic of China are thought of as 'mainlanders'.

When the KMT retreated to Taiwan in 1949, 600,000 soldiers and up to a million civilians moved with them. This latter group was fantastically diverse. Among them were not only government officials, but also a good many scholars, Buddhist monks, Muslims, many of Shanghai's businessmen and even Christian missionaries originally from Western countries. Many of these refugees settled in Taipei, which is why the city offers a fabulous range of Chinese cuisines.

Military men were barred from marrying while in the army, so many took much younger Hoklo wives when they retired after the age of 40, even if they'd had a family on the Chinese mainland. It isn't unusual to meet thirtysomethings in Taiwan whose parents are very different in age, and who have sixtysomething half-brothers and half-sisters in the People's Republic of China.

Taiwan's most prominent mainlander is Ma Ying-jeou (b1950). Born in Hong Kong and raised in Taipei, he was elected Taiwan's president in 2008 and re-elected in 2012.

Taiwan's Languages

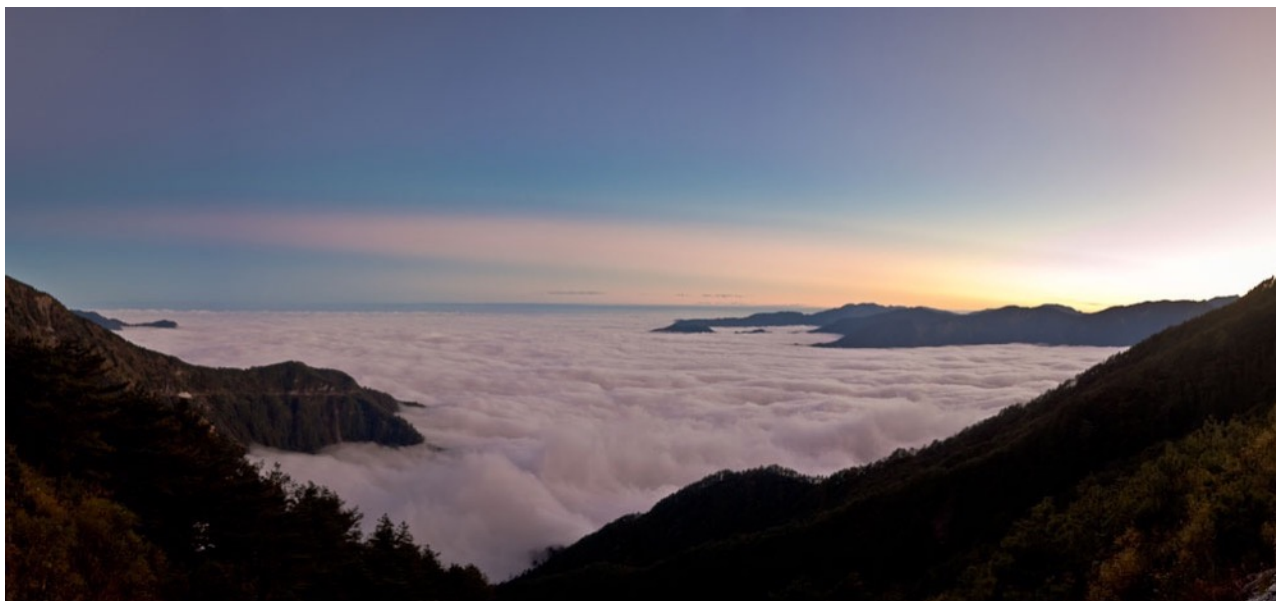
Most people in Taiwan speak more than one language, but often English isn't one of them. The official language is Mandarin Chinese, and it's more or less the same as the official language of the People's Republic of China. That said, each part of China has a regional accent, plus different expressions, so Mandarin speakers are usually able to distinguish mainlanders from Taiwanese by the way they talk.

With varying degrees of fluency, most of Taiwan's people speak what they call Taiwanese, but what language scientists call Holo, Hokkienese or Minnanhua. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, Taiwan's education system stressed Mandarin at the expense of Taiwanese; students who spoke Taiwanese in the classroom were punished. Realising that Mandarin proficiency is needed for any decent career, many parents decided to speak Mandarin rather than Taiwanese to their children. As a result, while almost everyone born in Taiwan 65 or more years ago speaks fluent Taiwanese, many of those born in last few decades don't speak the language well. Ability to speak Taiwanese is no longer a clear indicator whether a person is Hoklo or not. For similar reasons, few young people are proficient in Hakka, even if both parents are Hakka. That said, young people in the cities are far more likely to speak English than older people and country folk. Some elderly Taiwanese can speak Japanese because they attended school during the Japanese occupation.

Like other Chinese languages (such as Mandarin, Hakka and Cantonese), Taiwanese is written using Chinese characters. In Taiwan, traditional 'long form' characters are still used, unlike the simpler 'short form' characters taught in schools in the People's Republic of China. Long-form characters are more difficult to learn but, many feel, better preserve the beauty of China's ancient system of writing.

The aboriginal languages spoken by Taiwan's Austronesian minority are very different to Chinese. Sadly, several are on the verge of extinction.

Geography and Climate



For a relatively small island, Taiwan is incredibly mountainous. The reasons for this aren't hard to understand. The island is located on the eastern edge of the Eurasian tectonic plate, where it meets the Philippine Sea plate. The latter is continually moving westward, and sliding under the Eurasian plate, pushing it higher at the rate of approximately 5 mm per year. As a result, almost one-third of the island is 1,000 m or more above sea level.

You'll see mountains, among them the peaks in Yangmingshan National Park, as soon as you arrive in Taipei. A tenth of Taiwan is over 2,500 m, while a total of 258 peaks are more than 3,000 m high, the very highest being Mount Jade (no. 2 and no. 3 are, respectively, Snow Mountain and Xiuguluan Shan). Most of the high peaks are located along the Central Mountain Range, which runs 270 km from north to south. However, both Mount Jade and Alishan belong to separate ranges, while the mountains closest to the Pacific Ocean comprise the Coastal Mountain Range.

Four of Taiwan's eight national parks preserve high-altitude environments, so hikers are spoiled for options. In addition to hundreds of trails suitable for half-day or day-long hikes, there are epic paths which require six to eight days – plus proper camping equipment and provisions – to cover. These should not be attempted without an experienced guide.

Taiwan's Hot Springs

Taiwan's position on the 'Pacific Ring of Fire' brings it one very tangible benefit – an abundance of hot springs. At more than 120 locations around Taiwan, mineral-enriched waters warmed by the Earth's geothermal heat bubble to the surface.

For sheer variety, these soothing spas are astounding. In terms of temperature, mineral content or setting, no two are alike. In many the temperature exceeds 45 degrees Celsius, so visitors shouldn't fully immerse themselves right away, but rather acclimatise by scooping water and pouring it over themselves, then slowly lowering themselves in.

First-timers are often surprised to learn that after indulging in a hot spring, they shouldn't shower before dressing, but rather let their skin benefit from the trace quantities of sulphur, sodium carbonate and other minerals in the water.

Many springs are conveniently close to major cities. People based in Taipei are fortunate in having on their doorsteps the famous hot springs of Xinbeitou and Wulai. East Taiwan is riddled with springs; luxurious hotels have been built at some while others remain remote and entirely undeveloped, and can only be reached by 4x4 vehicle or on foot. Hikers find that, when their legs are aching, nothing beats a good soak.

When the Japanese took control of Taiwan in 1895, they brought with them a well-developed hot-springs culture. From the foreign tourist's perspective, Taiwan's hot springs have certain advantages over Japanese onsen. Whereas segregation by gender and nudity are the norm for springs in Japan, swimsuits are worn at most public hot-spring pools in Taiwan. Families can splash and soak together in these places, many of which are open-air and set against a scenic backdrop of mountains and forest.



Cliffs and Beaches



Taiwan and the country's minor islands together have almost 1,700 km of coastline, and the range of landscapes is tremendous. Much of the west coast is characterised by lagoons, mudflats and wetlands where migrating birds spend the winter, while the north coast is notably rocky. Between Hualien and Yilan, the land meets the sea in a range of breathtaking cliffs. Off the southern coast there are coral reefs full of life, and tidal platforms where it's easy to spot crabs, sea hares and other beguiling creatures.

Taiwan has scores of beaches, with several of the nicest ones being stretches of white sand in Penghu County and alluring coves in Kenting National Park. In Kinmen County and the Matsu Islands, you can find seaside spots where you'll have superb views and ocean breezes all to yourself.

Climate

Because of Taiwan's dramatic topography the country's climate varies considerably from one part of the island to another. In most places, typical daytime temperatures are 20 to 25 degrees Celsius (68 to 77 degrees Fahrenheit) and only slightly cooler at night.

In Taipei the mercury sometimes dips below 10 degrees Celsius (50 degrees Fahrenheit) during winter, but on summer afternoons it can reach 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit). Cities south of the Tropic of Cancer, which crosses Taiwan near Alishan, never get that cold; winters in this region are dry and sunny. In many ways, October to March is an ideal season to visit Taiwan. Temperatures in the outlying islands of Kinmen and Matsu are at least a five degrees lower than those in Taipei.

Rainfall varies hugely from place to place. The wettest spots are certain foothill areas near Taipei which in a typical year receive almost 6,000 mm of precipitation. That's a lot, but during typhoons parts of Taiwan have been hit with more than 2,000 mm of rain in less than 48 hours.

Wet Season, Dry Season

In 2012, Taipei got 2,858 mm of precipitation. It was a typical year in that June to August was the wettest period. In the south, the wet season is much more pronounced; three-quarters of Tainan's annual rainfall comes between late May and late August. Taiwan's minor islands are all quite dry – Kinmen, for instance, got just 829 mm of rain in 2012.

Each winter, snowfall adds to the beauty of Taiwan's highest mountains, but seldom in such quantities that skiing is possible. Typhoons are an occasional hazard. Most arrive in late summer, and even if they don't hit Taiwan head-on, they're likely to bring heavy rains which can disrupt transport and make travelling in the mountains inadvisable.

Nature and Ecology

Despite a human population that has grown tenfold in the past 200 years, and a massive expansion of industry and agriculture, Taiwan remains a realm of striking highlands and dense forests. Over 58% of Taiwan is covered by some type of woodland or bamboo. As a percentage of its total land area, Taiwan has twice as much forest as Norway and almost five times more than Great Britain.

For long periods in its past, Taiwan was physically connected to the Chinese mainland. During the most recent Ice Age, humans and animals migrated across the land bridge to what's now Taiwan, and this is one reason why the island boasts fabulous biodiversity. Fossil evidence shows that among the new arrivals were deer, rhinos, horses and hyenas. Between 10,000 and 12,000 years ago, the sea level began to rise and Taiwan again became an island.

Forests

The vast stands of camphor early settlers discovered and exploited are a thing of the past, replaced by tracts of Japanese cedars and other non-native species. Nonetheless, these forests play a vital ecological role. Not only do they nurture the majority of the island's bird species and almost all its larger wild creatures, they also prevent flooding by absorbing rainfall.



Logging is now restricted to small commercial plots, and these days the government's Forestry Bureau concentrates on managing its 18 national forest recreation areas (among them Alishan, Zhiben and Fuyuan) while supervising reforestation efforts. In the past decade, about six million new trees have been planted per year, not counting the many thousands added by local governments to city streets and parks.

Taiwan's Birds and Animals

For its land area, Taiwan has an incredible number of bird species. Including migrants and vagrants, more than 600 have been recorded. Endemic species number at least 25 (some experts say 29), and there also more than 50 endemic subspecies.

The largest of Taiwan's 53 Important Bird Areas (IBAs), Nengdan in Nantou County, covers almost 4% of the main island; Yushan and Shei-Pa national parks in their entirety have been declared IBAs, as has Guandu Nature Park in Taipei. Other IBAs of special interest to twitchers include Mount Bagua, Taijiang National Park and Orchid Island.

Larger creatures aren't difficult to spot in Taiwan's foothills and mountains.

The island's only native primate, the Formosan macaque, hangs out in easy-to-access parts of Yushan National Park, not far from the centre of Kaohsiung.

Deer of various kinds roam the mountains. The largest are sambars; sika deer can be sighted in certain parts of Kenting National Park, while Reeves's muntjacs (often called 'barking deer' because their yap is like a dog's) exist in substantial numbers in the wild. Once widely hunted, they're now farmed for their meat.

The country's only ursine species, the Formosan Black Bear, is far harder to find. The estimated 500 bears which remain in the wild live deep in the mountains, several days' hike from the lowlands. To see small yet intriguing creatures like flying squirrels and pangolins, you needn't venture so far from civilisation.



Butterflies and Insects

Butterflies are Taiwan's most eye-catching insects. Of the approximately 500 species, 56 are unique to the island. Yangmingshan near Taipei is an especially good place to spot lepidopterans. Island-wide, moth species vastly outnumber types of butterfly types.

Thanks to an abundance of wildflowers, large numbers of butterflies can be found year-round in the southern half of the island. Meinong and Maolin (both of which are in Greater Kaohsiung) are famous for valleys which, at certain times each year, are filled with these beautiful creatures. Yet even in the north in the cooler months, you've a good chance of spotting unusual species.

Taiwan's other insectoid natural wonders include an amazing range of beetles, dragonflies and grasshoppers. There are also well over 300 spider species, including several which have yet to be properly named and described.



Food and Drink



There are nations which eat to live, and nations which live to eat. Like the French, the Taiwanese are most certainly one of the latter. Major cities have thousands of restaurants; every budget and market demographic is catered for. Thanks to the influx of mainland Chinese after 1949, Chinese regional cuisines are well represented: spicy Sichuan (Szechuan) food is widely available, as are Cantonese and Shanghai-style delicacies.

Eating out is so convenient and inexpensive that few single people bother cooking. In families where both the mother and father work full-time, meals are usually takeout's or put together by a grandparent. Because of the influence of Buddhism, I-Kuan Tao and other sects, vegetarian cuisine is found everywhere.

Taiwanese people are passionate about local cuisine, but that doesn't mean they've no interest in what's served up in other countries. Japanese food has long had a place in the hearts and stomachs of Taiwanese. In Taipei, there's a smattering of halal restaurants, while Taichung has some good Indian eateries. Dig around, and you'll come across Turkish, German Spanish and other cuisines.

Taiwanese tea is justly famous, but in recent decades the island has developed a serious caffeine habit. Coffee shops can be found everywhere, and good coffee is grown in the south.

Staple Foods

Taiwanese cooking is a branch of Chinese cuisine, so meals tend to be based around white rice, while pork is the most commonly eaten meat. Chicken is common; beef is enjoyed, except by the small portion of the population who for traditional (rather than religious) reasons never consume it. Noodles made from wheat or rice flour are also popular. Thin soups are served with almost every meal. Taiwanese food is seldom very spicy.



Most of the rice eaten in Taiwan is grown on the island, with certain parts of Hualien and Taitung being renowned for the quality of their grains. Taiwan also grows an immense range of vegetables. Cabbage is a staple. Considered a rather dreary leafy green by many Westerners, in the hands of Taiwanese cooks it becomes a delicious stir-fry with garlic. Cauliflower, broccoli, asparagus, eggplants, carrots and potatoes are widely consumed. Taros and sweet potatoes are minor sources of carbohydrates. Bean sprouts are actually the sprouts of mung beans – the beans themselves are turned into semi-sweet desserts and drinks – and they're stir-fried or added to noodle soups. Brussel sprouts aren't common, but imported celery and lettuces grown indoors are widely available.

As you'd expect on an island, Taiwanese people eat a lot of seafood, especially tilapia, mackerel, tuna, squid and shark. About a quarter of the fish eaten – milkfish and eels in particular – are farmed rather than caught from the sea. In many seafood restaurants, diners can choose what they want to eat from large tanks

where live fish, lobsters and other sea creatures are kept. Ports are especially good places to enjoy Taiwan's seafood, yet you needn't go further than the nearest night market to savour an oyster omelette. These snack-sized delights are cooked on hot plates by adding leafy greens, starch and a sweet-and-sour sauce to eggs and oysters.

During winter, Taiwanese people like to gather around hot pots. Somewhat like fondues, these contain hot broth in which you simmer slices of meat, vegetables, mushrooms, mussels, chunks of tofu and other delectables until they're done just as you like them. Dozens of different hot pots are available, including super-spicy and vegetarian variants, milk-flavoured broths, and soups packed full of medicinal herbs.

Vegetarian Feasts

Vegetarians do very well in Taiwan. Because of religious traditions, many Taiwanese don't eat meat two days each lunar month, while a significant number are full-time vegetarians. In addition to not consuming animal flesh and offal, Taiwanese vegetarians typically also avoid onions, leeks and garlic, which they believe overstimulate the senses. There are few vegans in Taiwan.

Taiwanese vegetarian fare is delicious and can be enjoyed in dedicated restaurants in every neighbourhood. In addition to the usual white rice, these places often provide noodles and whole-grain rice as options. Many dishes are fried, but an even bigger surprise awaits those who don't eat meat because they simply dislike it: Many vegetarian restaurants offer 'fake meats' made from tofu and other non-animal proteins. Among them are pink hams, ribs and even juicy steaks.

Night Markets



Roadside food vendors have been a feature of Taiwanese towns since time immemorial. Often, they gathered in front of busy temples. However, it wasn't until after World War II that sprawling night markets, each with a hundred or more stalls selling hot, ready-to-eat food, appeared. Migration was a major factor. Many of the Chinese mainlanders who fled to Taiwan in the late 1940s were penniless and took up hawking as a way to survive. At the same time, industrialisation brought swarms of country folk to the cities. These blue-collar families typically lived in cramped tenements, so places where they could enjoy cheap entertainment and tasty snacks were hugely popular.

Two generations on, Taiwan is an affluent society – yet Taiwanese people haven't lost their taste for food-stall delicacies like stinky tofu. In case you're wondering, stinky tofu doesn't really smell any worse than cheese, and has a delicious savoury taste. In every night market, there are famous stalls which have been in business for decades. Customers sometimes have to queue to enjoy these must-try specialties, but even these seldom cost more than a few dollars. In fact, almost everything sold in Taiwan's night markets is very inexpensive, meaning they're not only fascinating for adventurous eaters, but also great places to go if you're hunting for souvenirs or little gifts. Taiwan's biggest evening bazaar is Fengjia Night Market in Taichung.

Taiwan's Premium Teas



Tea has been a cash crop in Taiwan for more than 300 years, and in the final quarter of the 19th century it was the island's first major export to the West. Tea fanatics in the USA and Great Britain snapped up 'Formosa oolong' as quickly as expatriate businessmen based in Danshui could package and ship it.

In recent years, Taiwan's tea industry has emphasized quality over quantity. Output is lower than it was in the 1970s but the reputation of Taiwanese tea has never been higher. It's now a premium product auctioned for high prices and relished by connoisseurs. If you buy a cup of 'bubble milk tea' (also known as 'pearl milk tea') the tea element of the concoction will likely have been imported from Vietnam or Sri Lanka.

Almost with exception, Taiwanese teas – be they black, green or oolongs – are made from the leaves and leaf buds of the *Camellia sinensis* var. *sinensis*, a subspecies of the tea plant native to south China. (By contrast, Indian teas are produced from *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*, also known as Indian or Assam tea). Green teas are produced from leaves which have undergone minimal oxidation; these infusions are increasingly popular in North America and Europe for health reasons. Black teas are fully oxidized, while oolongs are withered under the sun and allowed to oxidize in part. Oolong varieties include pouchong and Oriental Beauty. Packets of dried tea (and also tea bags of all kinds) are available throughout Taiwan and make excellent, lightweight souvenirs.

Tea is grown in many parts of the island, including the outskirts of Taipei and near Sun Moon Lake. If you drive up to Alishan, you'll pass through an important and scenically beautiful tea-growing district.

Taiwan's Coffee

Few people outside the island know it, but Taiwan produces excellent arabica coffee in addition to its superb teas. A British trade company introduced the first coffee seedlings in 1884, and during the Japanese colonial period output grew steadily. However, when World War II broke out, almost all of Taiwan's coffee plantations were cleared so food crops could be planted, and during the grim post-war period coffee-growing was neglected. In 1958, an assessment by the United States Department of Agriculture concluded that coffee grown in Taiwan's hills was every bit as good as Central American arabica.

Per capita coffee consumption has increased every year since the 1960s, but it wasn't until the 1990s that coffee was once grown in significant quantities in Taiwan, mostly 500 to 1000 m above sea level in the south. Even now, for every tonne of coffee grown in Taiwan, more than 30 are imported. Coffee-growing regions such as Tainan's Dongshan District and Yunlin's Gukeng have become popular with caffeine-loving tourists who soak up gorgeous rural scenery while sipping lattes.

Alcoholic Drinks in Taiwan

Taiwan produces a wide range of alcoholic beverages, including beers, wines made from grapes and other fruits, whisky, and some very potent liquors.

Until the 1990s, Taiwan's alcohol industry was controlled by a single, state-owned company, TTL. It still makes Taiwan Beer (you'll see the white-and-blue cans in shops throughout the island) plus Gold Medal Taiwan Beer, a more expensive variant that has won prizes in international competitions. Slightly sweeter than many Western beers because of the rice added to the fermentation process, it goes very well with seafood and spicy dishes.

The alcohol market is now open to all-comers; in addition to a greater choice of imported drinks – Scotch whisky is currently cheaper in Taiwan than in the UK – dozens of wineries and microbreweries have set up shop. One of these startups, King Car Kavalan Distillery, garnered a lot of attention beyond Taiwan when it won a 2010 blind-tasting contest against some well-known Scottish whiskies. In early 2015, Kavalan's Solist Vinho Barrique was named the best single malt whisky on Earth at the World Whiskies Awards.

Several of Taiwan's indigenous tribes have alcohol-making traditions, and in most cases the liquor they produce is based on millet. Usually cloudy and quite sweet, it's best enjoyed as an aperitif or a digestif.

Taiwan's single most famous liquor is called Kaoliang. This clear, drink is made from fermented sorghum (a type of grain), and some versions are 58% alcohol. Several brands are available, the most famous being produced in Kinmen and the Matsu Islands. One Matsu brand is named Tunnel 88, after the former military base where the liquor is aged for five or more years.

Rice wine, cheap but seldom drunk by itself, is used in a lot of Taiwanese stews, especially those consumed during the winter. During folk rituals, tiny cups of rice wine are offered to the gods.

Religion in Taiwan

Taiwan's religious environment is characterised by tremendous diversity and tolerance. There's some competition between sects, but almost no friction. Some observers have likened the mix of religions to threads which together create a beautiful cultural tapestry.



In Taiwan, some people practice 'pure' Buddhism and some follow 'pure' Taoism. Far more, however, follow one, or both, blended with folk beliefs. For anyone who grew up in the West or the Middle East, where monotheistic faiths require exclusive loyalty, the pick-and-mix approach of many Taiwanese to religion is initially bewildering but always intriguing.

The gods and goddesses revered by most Taiwanese are Chinese in origin, although a few are entirely local. Christians are a small minority, and Muslims an even smaller one. Despite Japan's huge impact on Taiwan in fields as varied as architecture and cuisine, very few Taiwanese follow Japanese religions.

Folk Religion

Some say there's no such thing as folk religion, rather a motley collection of beliefs and superstitions which adherents hope will bring them health, longevity and prosperity. Rather than uplift people's thoughts and refine their behaviour, a lot of folk rituals are designed to bring immediate personal benefit, such as protection from disease-spreading demons or success in school examinations.

The majority of Taiwan's temples are classed as folk shrines. In a typical house of worship you'll see several – possibly over a hundred – effigies of Taoist, Buddhist and folk deities. Some are no bigger than dolls; others are fearsome statutes twice the size of a man. Most are elaborately carved from wood, although some are clay or even solid gold. Incense is left to burn before these icons all day, every day; offerings of fruit, cookies, joss paper and tiny cups of rice wine are frequently made.

If you spend any time in a temple, you're sure to see someone *bua buay*, as one particular rite is called in the Taiwanese language. This can be translated into English as 'casting moon blocks' or 'throwing divination boards'. The boards or blocks are typically battered-looking crescent-shaped blocks of wood that have been painted red. These are used to ask deities questions: The worshipper frames the question in his or her mind, and then casts a pair of blocks three times. One block coming to rest flat-side up and the other flat-side down means the answer is yes; if both land rounded-side up, the god's response is negative; both landing rounded-side down means the deity feels the question is frivolous.



Folk beliefs continue to play a high-profile role in society, especially in more traditional regions such as Tainan and Pingtung.

Taoism (Daoism)

Taoism in Taiwan Unlike Buddhism, Taoism is a homegrown Chinese religion and philosophy. The founder, Laozi (meaning 'the old one'), is said to have lived at least 2,400 years ago, although some historians doubt he existed. Laozi is believed to have written the *Tao Te Ching*, the most important Taoist text.

It's a collection of 81 poems which provide advice on various topics, but because the wording is so ambiguous, passages can be interpreted in many different ways. Consistent themes include urging the reader to be kind, modest and frugal;



the term 'Tao' (also spelled Dao) is often translated as 'the way', but the meaning is somewhat closer to 'the unstoppable and inevitability of nature'.

Taoist priests wear black robes and distinctive headgear; during rites they chant, crack whips and blow horns. They can be seen in action during funeral ceremonies as well as temple parades. The Jade Emperor and Guan Gong are among the gods especially revered by Taoists.

Like practitioners of folk religion and those engaged in ancestor worship, Taoists burn considerable quantities of what English-speakers call 'joss paper', 'ghost money' or 'votive currency'. This fake paper money is usually yellow or silver. Many business owners order their workers to lug portable braziers outside and set out tables of offerings, including joss paper which is later burned, on the first and 15th day of each lunar month.

Buddhism

Buddhism appeared in China around 2,200 years ago. In the centuries that followed, hundreds of pious Chinese tried to reach India in order to study Buddhism and bring back scriptures. Very few succeeded; one who did is venerated in a pair of shrines at Sun Moon Lake.

The faith was carried to Taiwan around 400 years ago by the earliest waves of Han Chinese settlers. Appropriately, what's thought to be Taiwan's oldest Buddhist house of worship is in Lugang, one of the most ancient towns on the island.

In the past two decades, Buddhism has been Taiwan's fastest growing major religion, and continues to attract a significant number of young, well-educated people. Aspects of Buddhism – part-time vegetarianism and a reverence for Guanyin – have been embraced by followers of folk



religion. In recent years, many Buddhist groups have emphasised environmental protection, minimising or halting entirely the burning of joss paper.

Excellent places to learn about Taiwanese Buddhism include Foguangshan in Kaohsiung and Dharma Drum Mountain near Taipei. Both attract large numbers of non-Buddhist Taiwanese visitors, as does the headquarters of Tzu Chi in Hualien City.

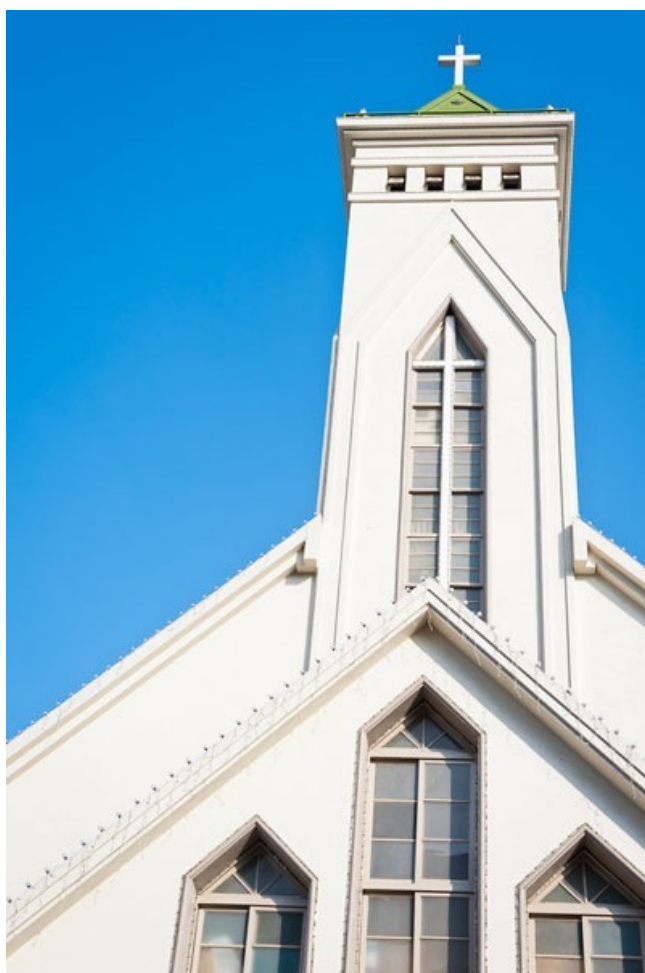
Christianity

Christians played a leading role in the 20th-century history of China and Taiwan. Both Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek became Christians in early adulthood, as did Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan's first native-born president.

However, even though proselytising efforts began soon after the Dutch arrived in 1624, no more than one in 12 Taiwanese is Protestant or Catholic. Among aborigines, however, the proportion of Christians is much higher, likely more than nine out of ten.

The Presbyterian Church is single most influential sect, having entered Taiwan in the 1860s via Qijin Island and Danshui.

Churches are prominent in both mountain villages and major cities. The majority of Protestant places of worship resemble churches in Western countries, while many Roman Catholic chapels and cathedrals imitate classical Chinese architecture. In addition to sects introduced from the West, such as the Wesleyans, Baptists and Mormons, Taiwan has a number of homegrown Christian sects.



Destinations

Taipei

Taiwan's capital is a city of perfect proportions – big enough to delight those who stay a week or more, yet so compact very little time is wasted getting from Wanhua's ancient temples to the hipster-youth enclave of Ximending, or to the glitzy malls in Xinyi District.



Visitors hoping to make the most of each day can spend mornings exploring the hills that surround the metropolis, afternoons taking in manmade attractions like Taipei 101 and the National Palace Museum, and evenings indulging in the city's fabulous cuisine. Taipei (which simply means 'north Taiwan') is a city of broad boulevards and sleek office and apartment buildings. Yet between these steel-and-glass towers, herbalists and holes-in-the-wall thrive; the 19th century is never more than a few steps from the 21st.

Only a small proportion of Taipei's buildings are older than the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, which was completed in 1980. However, Chinese have been settling here for over 300 years, and the original inhabitants of the Taipei Basin – the Austronesian Ketagalan people – were quickly overwhelmed.

Fascinating traces of old Taipei still exist down by the river, where Chinese merchants bartered with Ketagalan natives, exchanging imported cloth and cooking utensils for the latter's vegetables and charcoal. British and American tea traders came later, putting Taiwan's fabulous oolong beverage on the world tea map.

In 1895, Japan took control of Taiwan from the weakening Chinese empire, and set about industrialising the island. Few parts of Taiwan were changed more by the Japanese than Taipei, who made the city their capital. They pulled down its protective walls, widened its streets, and erected imposing public buildings designed to impress upon the natives that their new rulers were both wise and invincible. Several of these, such as National Taiwan Museum and what's now the Presidential Office, still play an important role. Colonial rule ended in 1945, yet Taiwanese born long after show an enduring love for sushi and Japanese fashions.

Just after World War II, a second influx boosted the city's population (currently 2.7 million) and added an additional layer to local culture. Following their defeat at the hands of Mao Zedong's communists, hundreds of thousands of Nationalists from every province of China fled to Taipei. Among them was Chiang Kai-shek, who headed the Nationalist government in-exile in Taipei from 1949 to his death in 1975.

Chiang and followers added the Grand Hotel, the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, the National Palace Museum and the National Revolutionary Martyrs Shrine to the cityscape. Many ordinary refugees took to selling food to make a living, which is why Taipei now has excellent Hunanese Shanghainese, and Szechuan eateries.

Chiang regarded Taipei as a provisional capital rather than a permanent home, convincing himself he'd one day defeat Mao and retake the mainland. But thanks to massive investments in everything from transport to public art there's nothing makeshift about modern Taipei.

National Palace Museum

For many, the mere fact that Taipei has the world-class National Palace Museum justifies time in the capital. This stupendous repository displays the highlights of a collection that was the personal property of each reigning emperor of China until 1925, when the last vestiges of the imperial system were abolished by the Nationalist Republic of China.



Built up over the better part of a thousand years and now numbering around 700,000 items, the collection ranges from bronzes to ceramics to ink paintings to jade treasures more than 5,000 years old. At any given time, a mere one percent of these valuables are on public display. Work to expand exhibition space threefold is underway.

It's something of a miracle this glorious museum exists at all. Originally established inside Beijing's Forbidden City, it was moved south in the 1930s when the Japanese began threatening north China. The cream of the collection was packed up again and moved several times during World War II and the Chinese

Civil War that broke out as soon as the Japanese had been defeated. Finally, the crates of rare books, wood-carvings and bronze funerary items were shipped to Taiwan in early 1949, where they were stored underground until the museum opened its doors to the public in 1965.

Many of the most impressive curios in the collection were gifts from senior officials hoping to curry favour with the emperor, or came as part of the dowries which arrived with new concubines. Others were tributes from vassal states such as the Kingdom of Korea and Tibet, while a few were presented by

Western diplomats during the 18th and 19th centuries. Not all the works created in China were undertaken by Chinese artists: A Hundred Steeds, for instance, is one of the finest accomplishments of Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian-born Jesuit who became a court painter in Beijing in 1715.

Few visitors can do justice to the museum in less than two hours, and real aficionados of Asian art may well spend the whole day here. Luckily for the latter, three restaurants inside the museum serve a range of meals, snacks and hot drinks. We like to pre-book guided morning tours of the Museum with the in-house staff for the best experience.

Food in Taipei

The range of cuisines visitors to Taipei can enjoy reflects the tides of local history, and thus is vast. In addition to restaurants which serve superb fresh and light Taiwanese food such as the Shin Yeh chain, there are gourmet eateries where the menu has been strongly influenced by mainland Chinese cooking styles.

Almost all of those in the latter category were established after World War II by refugees who followed Chiang Kai-shek to the city.

Dumpling-fan heaven Ding Tai Fung is one; Peng Yuan, which has built its reputation on sweet-and-sour deep-fried Hunan dishes, is another.



For many tourists, night markets are one of Taipei's main attractions. Shilin Night Market is the best known and busiest, but for those staying on the other side of the city, Raohe Night Market is every bit as good. Night markets and street vendors are excellent places to try traditional snacks such as hamburger-like guabao (Chinese steamed bread filled with pork belly and pickles) and choudoufu (stinky tofu).

The fifty years Japan ruled Taiwan had a lasting impact on kitchens and palates, and high-end sashimi is served in many places including Yun Sushi and Yuzu Japanese Kitchen. Located inside Taipei's main seafood market, Addiction Aquatic Development combines a standing-only sushi bar, an oyster bar and a wine bar. The food is exceptional.

Because of Buddhist influence, vegetarian food has always had a place on Taipei's dinner tables. These days, meat-free needn't mean self-denial, as a feast at Yu Shan Ge can prove. Because some of the Chinese Nationalists who arrived in Taiwan after 1949 were Muslim, the capital has a smattering of halal eating places, including Yunus Halal Restaurant.

Western businessmen have been coming to Taipei for decades, so it's no surprise the city has a complete range of North American and European cuisines, with everything from poutine to chimichangas to jagerschnitzel. In recent years, Indian and Middle Eastern restaurants have added even more diversity to the capital's dining scene.

Around Taipei

Like Shanghai, Danshui was once a 'treaty port', meaning that in the second half of the 19th century traders and residents from the British Empire, France, Russia and the United States enjoyed special rights and protections. The town, on the northern side of a scenic estuary, was then known to the outside world as Tamsui. In the 17th century, the Spanish built Fort San Domingo. That bastion was



taken over by the Dutch before becoming an imperial Chinese barracks; the British government later rented it and used it as their consulate until 1972. The fort is just one of several relics which history buffs find fascinating.

Jiufen and Jinguashi are sited just a few kilometers apart and enjoy stirring views of the northeast coast's bays and promontories. Both owe their existence to the minerals contained in the steep hills hereabouts. Jiufen grew rapidly during the 1920s and 1930s while gold was extracted. At Jinguashi, copper was mined as well as gold. When the mines closed down in the 1980s, most residents moved out, leaving behind a number of traditional houses along narrow, incredibly quaint streets. Jinguashi's Gold Ecological Park is an excellent place to learn about the area's geology and history. One of the darker episodes of the past occurred during World War II, when Allied prisoners-of-war were forced by the Japanese then occupying Taiwan to labour in the mines.

Far from the sea, and sprawling over a greater area than Taipei City, Wulai is a mountainous aboriginal district with a mere 6,100 human residents – but substantial animal and bird populations. For tourists whose plans include lounging in riverside hot springs birdwatching, hiking, or sampling the distinctive cuisine of Taiwan's Austronesian minority, Wulai is the place to go.

Covering the mountains northwest of Taipei, Yangmingshan National Park has indoor and outdoor hot springs plus several well-marked yet challenging hiking routes.

Taroko Gorge

If music is liquid architecture and architecture is frozen music, as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said, then Taroko Gorge is both architecture and music. A breathtaking combination of solid rock and rushing water, Taroko Gorge deserves its reputation as a world-class natural attraction.



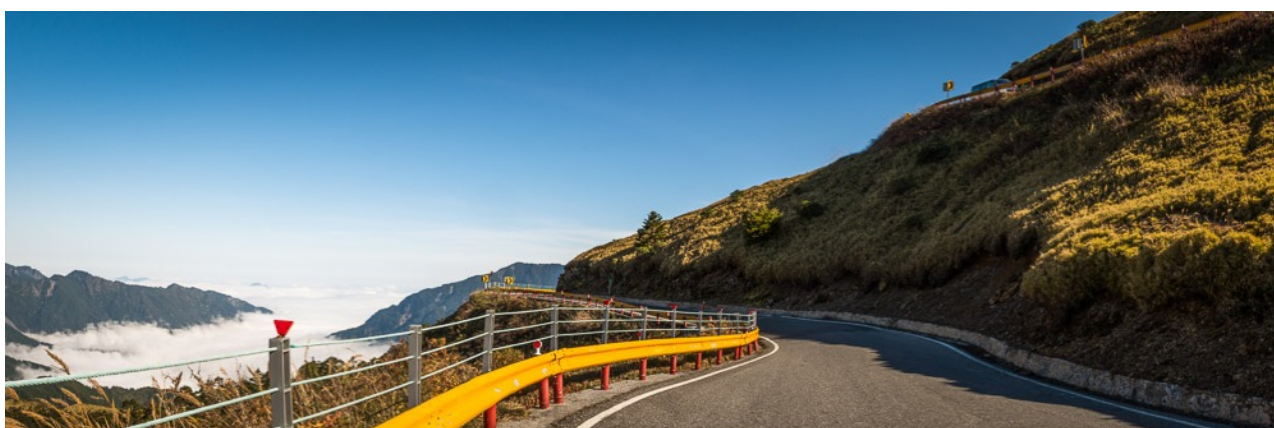
This not-to-be-missed geological marvel is located in the eastern part of Taiwan, a rugged island that punches far above its weight in terms of mountains and ecological diversity. Wandering through the 19 km-long gorge, one can't help but stare at the cliffs high above, then gaze down at the boulder-filled Liwu River.

Because Taroko Gorge is a treasure chest of marbles, schists and gneissic rocks, the colour scheme includes creamy whites, dark greys, light browns plus soft shades of silver and gold. And then there's the foliage which thrives in all but the most vertiginous spots, as well as the hemlock, spruce, cypress and pine forests that cover more than four fifths of Taroko National Park.

The only road through Taroko Gorge is the Central Cross-Island Highway. Completed in 1960 by demobilised soldiers who'd followed Chiang Kai-shek when he withdrew from the Chinese mainland more than a decade earlier, it's a

spectacular but challenging ribbon of tarmac. Drivers may feel nervous, but for passengers it's a thrilling succession of eye-popping sights. Glimpses of sheer rock faces and azure streams are followed by intoxicating, as-far-as-the-eyes-can-see mountain vistas.

The layers of rock which form the floor and sides of Taroko Gorge began to take shape tens of millions of years ago with the accumulation of sediment and lava beneath the Pacific Ocean. These deposits, often over 10,000 m deep, were hardened by metamorphism. Much more recently, a mere 6.5 million years ago, the Philippine Sea tectonic plate began to collide with and slide beneath the Eurasian plate, pushing up the edge of the latter and causing the tilted rock strata evident in many parts of Taiwan.



Around 2 million years later, the landmass we now call Taiwan emerged from the sea. Rivers quickly formed, and these waterways began chiselling down through the rock. Erosion continues at a steady pace, but because Taiwan's tectonic uplift rate is one of the world's highest (more than 5 mm per year until 5,000 years ago; an average of 2 mm per year since then), the riverbed at the bottom of the gorge is in fact rising by a tiny amount each year.

Taroko National Park stretches from sea level to the top of Taiwan's fifth-highest peak, Mount Nanhu (3,740 m / 12,270 ft), so there's tremendous climatic variety. This in turn nurtures fabulous biodiversity: More than 250 kinds of butterfly are active and visible. There are 34 mammal species, among them the Formosan Macaque (a kind of monkey found only in Taiwan) and the goat-like Formosan Serow. For birdwatchers, the most exciting of the park's 140-plus recorded avian

species are endemics such as the Blue magpie (*Urocissa caerulea*), the White-eared Sibia (*Heterophasia auricularis*) and Styan's Bulbul (*Pycnonotus taivanus*).

Even for those who wish to stay close to their vehicle, the Taroko area offers an abundance of impressive sights. Eternal Spring Shrine (Changchun Shrine) was built as a memorial to construction workers who lost their lives building the Central Cross-Island Highway. It's a colourful Chinese-style place of worship named after and built atop a water source that never dries up. It's possible to hike from here to a cave named in honour of Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, a bell tower and a Zen monastery.

Rightfully regarded as a highlight, Swallow Grotto is one of the narrowest, deepest and most extraordinary sections of the gorge. Grit and stones carried downstream when the Liwu River floods have pock-marked the cliff face here, leaving dozens of cavities in which birds nest – hence the name.

Sections of the highway have been safer and straighter, and one stretch of former road is now a walking trail which gives sightseers a chance to slowly appreciate the Tunnel of Nine Turns and views from it up and down the gorge. The route, which is as much overhang as actual tunnel, has far more than nine twists and turns – the 'nine' in the place name is a classical Chinese way of expressing 'many'.

Discovered by Japanese soldiers during the colonial government's 1914 campaign to subdue the indigenous people, Wenshan Hot Springs remains delightfully undeveloped. The only facilities are a changing room; access is from the highway is via stone steps and a footbridge.



The geothermally-heated water which seeps out from the rock face is scalding hot, while the adjacent river is often numbingly cold.

Gentle strolls, invigorating walks, and demanding hikes: Taroko has them all. For those who prefer pedalling to tramping, but are put off by the gradient, it's possible to start Tianxiang and spend the day freewheeling down through the gorge, all the way to the Pacific coast 22 km away.

A popular leg-stretcher is the Shakadang Trail (4.5 km), named after a tributary of the Liwu which drains from north to south. Much of the path is a broad concrete track which shadows the stream; the gradient is gentle. Most visitors spend two to three hours on the trail, but it's possible to go further afield if planned in advance.

Often described as Taroko Gorge's most challenging and rewarding hike, Zhuilu Old Road (10.3 km) is misnamed: It was never wide enough for cars, and in places it's so narrow fast hikers can't overtake slow walkers. This trail was cut into the hillside almost a century ago and is high above the current highway. Those brave enough to tackle it are rewarded with incredible views of the valley, but need to be in tip-top physical condition.

The family-friendly Lushui Trail (2 km) also predates the modern highway. It's hardly changed since the Japanese – who ruled Taiwan until the end of World War II – widened a hunters' track to 1.5 m across so military equipment could be moved by porters and wheelbarrows.

The little settlement of Tianxiang – location of the area's most luxurious hotel – is at an elevation of 480 m. Most of those who call Tianxiang home are Truku, members of one of Taiwan's 16 indigenous tribes. Like Taiwan's other Austronesian aboriginal groups, the Truku share linguistic and genetic kinship with the natives of Polynesia, Hawaii and New Zealand. The tribe's name is derived from that of the gorge, although the word 'taroko' – which means 'magnificent and beautiful' in the Truku language – initially referred not to the ravine, but to the stunning views of the Pacific Ocean which greeted those who emerged from the gorge's eastern end.

From Tianxiang, a very short but steep trail leads to a small plateau where there was once a Truku village called Tapido. The much longer excursion to Huoran Pavilion (1.9 km) involves considerable altitude gain if tackled from Tianxiang, but rewards those who take on the challenge with superb views from a high ridge. Starting less than 1 km inland of Tianxiang, the Baiyang Trail (2.1 km) features no fewer than seven short tunnels. These cut through the mountain, delivering walkers to one of Mother Nature's sweet spots – the Baiyang Waterfall and the gorgeous creek into which it cascades.

One of the great things about Taroko Gorge is there's no bad time of year to visit. Still, each season has particular advantages. During summer wildflowers and butterflies are exceptionally abundant. The Liwu and its tributaries are spectacularly vigorous, yet there's a greater chance landslides may damage hiking trails or even the main road. The gorge never gets as hot as Taiwan's cities, and there's no shortage of shade. November to April has the driest weather. Even during the coldest months of December, January and February, temperatures in the gorge are a comfortable 11 to 20 degrees Celsius (52 to 68 degrees Fahrenheit).

Several recommended destinations are within a day's drive of Taroko Gorge. The road that passes close to the main peak of Hehuanshan, (Taiwan's 34th highest mountain at 3,416 m / 11,207 ft) leads to Sun Moon Lake via Qingjing Farm. An alternative route takes in the high-altitude fruit-growing town of Lishan, within striking distance of Shei-Pa National Park. Taiwan's glorious east coast and East Rift Valley begin just south of the gorge, and await those with the time to explore every corner of Taiwan.

Sun Moon Lake

In the very heart of Taiwan, a sparkling body of water surrounded by verdant mountains draws sightseers from across the world. Sun Moon Lake, a favourite with Taiwanese honeymooners in the 1960s and 1970s, is now one of the island's top-five destinations. The lake's English name is a direct translation of the Chinese toponym, Riyuetan, which itself was inspired by the waters' shape. The larger eastern section, it's said, is round like the sun, while the southwestern part resembles a waning crescent moon.



The beauty of Sun Moon Lake is well known in China, and also in Japan, which ruled Taiwan from 1895 to 1945. Engineers working for the colonial government cut channels and tunnels to divert water that would otherwise have drained into the Taiwan Strait via the 186-km-long Zhuoshui River, Taiwan's longest waterway. By 1934, the lake had swelled from its original 4.5 km² to its current size of almost 8 km², while average depth had increased from 6 m to 27 m.

Many tourists alight from buses in Shuishe, a mini-town with several hotels. Of those who don't get on a hired bicycle, a good number begin their sightseeing with a stroll along the Hanbi Peninsula. The church where Chiang Kai-shek worshipped whenever he was in the area still stands but his personal retreat was

levelled several years ago. Moving clockwise around the lake, the next stop is Wenwu Temple. In addition to being perfectly located for splendid views over the water, it's unusual in being dedicated to both the scholar Confucius (China's most revered philosopher) and the soldier Guan Gong (a great general now worshipped as a god).

Located just north of the lake, Antique Assam Tea Farm preserves and explains traditional organic tea-growing and preparation methods. This is the only place in Taiwan where Assam tea is grown; elsewhere, oolongs predominate.

For many visitors, their favourite memories of this region feature the Sun Moon Lake Ropeway, an intensely scenic cable-car ride from the lakeshore, over the forest and into Formosan Aboriginal Culture Village. The ropeway is 1.87 km long and a one-way trip takes 10 minutes; the family-friendly village presents the music, dances, attire and traditional construction methods of Taiwan's indigenous people. It's also a theme park with some thrilling rides!

Just a short walk from the ropeway terminal and populated by a mix of Thao Austronesians and Taiwanese of Han Chinese descent, Ita Thao is the second-largest lakeside community and an excellent place to stop for lunch.

Sun Moon Lake Pagoda

It's also the 'capital' of the Thao tribe. One of the smallest of Taiwan's 16 surviving indigenous ethnic groups, the Thao call the lake Zintun, and believe Lalu Island – a tiny speck of land in the west of the lake – to be where their ancestors' spirits dwell. These days the Thao live thoroughly modern lifestyles, yet still cherish certain traditions. One is pestle music, an art form which evolved from the work



songs Thao ladies sing while pounding rice. Ensembles consist of up to a dozen percussionists who create different sounds by using pestles of varying lengths, thicknesses and woods.

Near the lake's southern shore, Xuanzang Temple and Xuanguang Temple hold relics associated with Xuanzang, a 7th-century Chinese monk revered by Buddhists throughout East Asia for making a perilous 16-year pilgrimage across the Himalaya to India, where he gathered and translated religious texts. Chiang Kai-shek loved Sun Moon Lake as much as anyone, and to commemorate his mother he commissioned the building of Cien Pagoda. The panoramic views over and beyond the lake make climbing the stairs to the upper floors well worth the effort. The structure's height, 46 m, was chosen so the top would be precisely 1,000 m above sea level.

The calm waters of Sun Moon Lake cry out to enjoyed from a leisure craft, and customised boat tours are both popular and relatively inexpensive. In addition to the short trails and boardwalks close to the water's edge, the hills which encircle Sun Moon Lake offer some strenuous hiking opportunities.

Tramping through forests is best done in the cooler months, but this region has a particular appeal in every season. In summer, visitors to the lake enjoy temperatures far milder than those in Taiwan's major cities, the mercury seldom topping 28 degrees Celsius (82 degrees Fahrenheit). Between November and February, daytime temperatures seldom sink below 10 degrees Celsius (50 degrees Fahrenheit), while many afternoons days see a delightfully comfortable 20 degrees Celsius (68 degrees Fahrenheit). Four to five hours of sunshine per day is typical year-round.

Alishan

Alishan's fresh, cool air and mountain scenery have been drawing tourists since Japan's occupation of Taiwan (1895-1945). However, this tiny settlement and its famous narrow-gauge railway link to the plains were established for a very different reason – to allow the exploitation of the area's spectacular forests. Many of Alishan's millennia-old red and yellow cypress trees were felled to provide lumber for construction, with some of the very best wood being used to rebuild Japan's most notable temples.



Tourists typically focus on the 1,400-hectare (3,460-acre / 5.4-square mile) Alishan National Forest Recreation Area, and for good reason: It's an excellent place for people who don't consider themselves outdoors-types, but who wish to revel in stunning views and sublime woodlands from a network of safe, clearly signposted trails. Alishan National Scenic Area is far larger, and encompasses tea-growing zones and indigenous villages as well as the forest recreation area. Alishan is a fantastically rewarding region, but a knowledgeable guide is needed to find the quietest and most pristine parts of this gorgeous part of the world.

Alishan is easy to access by road or railway, but no visit is complete without an on-foot immersion in the woodlands and bamboo groves, and a hike up to one of the ridges to enjoy panoramic vistas.

Because there's no industry and few people, Alishan National Scenic Area is an ecological treasure house. The village of Lijia and its immediate surroundings have 25 of Taiwan's 56 firefly species; they're best seen between April and December.

Taiwan's avians are already well known to birding enthusiasts throughout the world, and Alishan is home to an abundance of fascinating species, among them the Grey treepie (*Dendrocitta formosae*). The village of Guanghai is considered the very best place in Taiwan to see the Taiwan Partridge (*Arborophila crudigularis*), a hard-to-find endemic.

In addition to the stands of cypress which first attracted loggers, Alishan has large groves of pine, spruce, Taiwan Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga sinensis*) and

Taiwan Hemlock (*Tsuga chinensis* var. *formosana*), plus thriving specimens of *Ulmus uyematsui*, a type of elm unique to Alishan. These high-altitude woodlands nurture some shy but intriguing wild animals, among them the Red-bellied tree squirrel, the White-faced flying squirrel, the Formosan macaque, Reeves's muntjac, as well as various rodents and non-poisonous serpents.

Alishan is multicultural. Around Shizhuo most people are of Han Chinese descent. Nearby Fenghu is an enclave of Hakka families whose ancestors migrated from southern China to Taiwan in the 18th century, then relocated to Fenghu to work in the logging industry and railway depot. Off the main road there are communities of Tsou people, one of Taiwan's smaller indigenous ethnic groups.

Like Taiwan's other aboriginal groups, the Tsou are Austronesians who share linguistic and genetic kinship with Polynesians, Melanesians, Micronesians, Hawaiian natives and the Maoris of New Zealand. The Tsou language is utterly different to the Mandarin, Taiwanese and Hakka tongues spoken by the bulk of Taiwan's citizens.

Alishan's weather is as varied as its environment. Heavy cloud or fog for part of the day is extremely common – so common, in fact, that the 'Sea of Clouds' at daybreak is perhaps Alishan's most famous sight. During winter, temperatures may not get much above 5 degrees Celsius (41 degrees Fahrenheit). In summertime, daytime temperatures seldom go higher than 20 degrees Celsius (68 degrees Fahrenheit), but it can feel much warmer due to the strength of the midday sun. Hats and sunblock are a good idea.

Between February and April, sakura draw large numbers of Taiwanese and other Asian visitors to several parts of the Alishan area. Sakura is a Japanese word adopted by the Taiwanese which means 'flowering cherry tree'. During August, typhoons sometimes mean the area is cut off from the lowlands.

The Alishan area doesn't have the international dining options of Taiwan's big cities. Rather, local cuisine reflects the honest, hard-working and down-to-earth character of Alishan's people. After a day of sightseeing and hiking, nothing goes down better than super-fresh greens cultivated in the region's pristine environment, served with local specialities like succulent chicken fried in tea oil.

The Tsou ethnic group has its own way of cooking. Like other aboriginal tribes, traditionally they lived by snaring and trapping wild animals, and gathering wild vegetables quite unlike those grown in the lowlands. Hunting and foraging habits still influence what the Tsou eat, and what they serve in their eateries. Roasted mountain boar, flash-fried freshwater shrimp and unique salads make for a deliciously memorable feast!

Tea doesn't merely give many of Alishan's hillsides their distinctive appearances. It's also the area's most famous and lucrative crop, with some of the world's finest and most expensive oolong teas being grown here by third-generation farmers. Several keep their doors open, and welcome visitor's eager for an informal tasting. Coffee is also grown in this part of Taiwan.



Tainan

Tainan is to Taiwan what Kyoto is to Japan – essential for those curious about Taiwan's past, and alluring to all who adore characterful yet laid back places awash in tradition. Between the mid-17th century and late 19th century, Tainan was Taiwan's capital and largest settlement. The urban core now has close to a million inhabitants, and so many Buddhist and Taoist places of worship that locals like to say: 'Tainan has a small shrine every three steps, and a major temple every five steps'.



A few thousand Han Chinese were living alongside the region's indigenous Austronesians when the Dutch East India Company (VOC) established a trading colony here in 1624. Over the next 38 years, the VOC oversaw tremendous increases in rice and sugar production, commodities which the company exported to Japan and the Chinese mainland. To achieve this, the Dutch introduced water buffalo, shipped in farm tools and encouraged landless peasants in China's Fujian province to migrate across the Taiwan Strait. Those pioneers are the ancestors of many 21st-century Taiwan citizens.

The Dutch were evicted in 1662 by Koxinga, a supporter of the old Ming Dynasty who'd retreated to Taiwan after the collapse of his campaign against the new Qing Dynasty. Koxinga's lasting contribution to Taiwan was the introduction of classical Han Chinese civilisation, epitomised by Tainan Confucius Temple.

Modern Tainan rewards slow travellers. There are hundreds of lanes and back alleys where the past seems to live and breathe. Around every corner the curious will find something rewarding, be it a 19th-century merchant house turned into a restaurant, or a semi-Baroque abode constructed during Japan's 1895-1945 rule of Taiwan.

Tainan's most photogenic relics are clustered in two neighborhoods. The first is Anping, where the VOC and then Koxinga established their headquarters.



Remnants of the older of Tainan's two Dutch forts stand in the heart of old Anping, but visitors should also allot an hour for the adjacent streets. In places, the alleyways are so narrow that wandering tourists risk grazed elbows, but if they look closely they're likely to spot sword-lions – motifs placed above doorways to keep evil at bay.

The other concentration of antiquities can be found near what is now National Museum Of Taiwan Literature; it used to be the city hall. This part of Tainan is easy to reach and tour, even for those coming here on a day-trip from Kaohsiung. In addition to Tainan Confucius Temple and the adjacent martial arts dojo – an utterly Japanese building right next to a thoroughly Chinese landmark – there are more than a dozen important shrines, most of which were founded over 300 years ago.

But there's much more than incense, pious chanting and divination. As well as several good hotels, there's a 1932 department store which was recently reopened after decades of closure. Standing in a 200-year-old classical Chinese garden, one finds the Tainan Meeting Hall, a French-influenced structure built in 1911 at the behest of the Japanese colonial authorities. It's smooth lines and soft colours contrast abruptly but beautifully with the

fantastically ornate roofs and dazzling decoration seen in the Great Queen of Heaven Temple, the Altar of Heaven, and scores more houses of worship.

Food in Tainan

Among Taiwanese, Tainan is almost as famous for its snack foods as it is for traditional culture. Westerners find some of these delicacies rather odd, but the brave and the gluttonous will have a field day in the city's night markets. The two most popular evening bazaars are Huayuan Night Market and Dadong Night Market.



One tasty dish long associated with Tainan is danzaimian, also called danzai noodles or dandan noodles. The fisherman who popularised this dish back in the Qing Dynasty used shoulder poles to carry his noodles to the temple courtyards where he hawked them; danzai means 'carry on one's shoulders'. The noodles are served in small portions with minced pork and a single shrimp. Much-loved danzaimian specialist Chikan Peddler's Noodles has three branches in Tainan.

Being very near the ocean, Tainan folk eat a lot of seafood, especially clams and oysters. Chen's Oyster Rolls in Anping epitomises Tainan cuisine in the sense that it's utterly without pretension, shockingly inexpensive, and rambunctious during peak periods. The oyster omelette, fish-ball soups and other items are consistently excellent. Go around the corner to Chou's Shrimp Rolls for similar food featuring different shellfish.

Lugang

Two hundred years ago Lugang (often spelled 'Lukang') was Taiwan's second-largest settlement. Every year, thousands of junks unloaded cloth and crockery in its harbour, then loaded up with rice and sugar for export to the Chinese mainland. The town's merchants grew rich, endowed temples and founded schools.



After silting closed the port, Lugang found itself overtaken by newer towns such as Taichung. There's been little impetus for modernisation, so much of old Lugang has survived, to the delight of tourists.

Ding Mansion is typical of the homes in which the town's upper-class families lived in the late 19th century. Along with tasteful antique furniture, one of the clan's most precious assets is displayed – an inscribed board bearing just two Chinese characters. They signify that one of the Dings passed the highest-level civil-service examination in the Qing Empire (which ruled Taiwan between 1684 and 1895), an achievement which brought the family huge prestige.

Lugang Folk Arts Museum is housed in another aristocratic residence, but one very different in architectural terms. Built during World War I by the Koo family – very important in Taiwan's business circles even today – the museum exterior is

French Baroque. Inside, you'll find Koo heirlooms including traditional clothing and musical instruments.

Wandering through Lugang is always fun. The central part of the town has twisting alleyways overflowing with antiquity, plus workshops where prize-winning artisans paint lanterns, make delicate hand-held fans, and carve religious icons.

Lugang's houses of worship are every bit as engrossing as those in Tainan, and are so close to each other they can be visited in a half-day walking tour.

Longshan Temple is the most famous, and for very good reasons. Not to be confused with a shrine of the same name in Taipei's Wanhua, isn't simply the oldest Buddhist house of worship in Taiwan. It's widely considered one of the most sublime relics anywhere on the island. Sensitively restored after a major earthquake in 1999, this 99-door, five-entrance complex boasts a remarkable octagonal ceiling. Decorated so mischievous demons would think the temple is underwater (and thus safe from their fire-starting antics), it's a superb piece of art converging on a dragon's face. Amid the tourists you'll see plenty of genuine worshipers, most noticeably black-robed women busily praying to Guanyin.

Lugang's Tianhou Temple is as raucous as Longshan Temple is tranquil, and it may just be the oldest shrine on Taiwan's main island. The object of veneration is Mazu, and one effigy of the sea goddess is said to have arrived here in the 1680s. If you prefer quieter places of worship, you'll enjoy the Town God Temple. Local people occasionally ask the town god for help resolving cases of theft, as he has an impressive record when it comes to tracking down items stolen or lost.

Kenting

Kenting is Taiwan's Florida: Sandy beaches, abundant sunshine and a year-round holiday vibe. But just as the US state has the Everglades, Kenting National Park also offers world-class bird-watching, carefully protected coastal ecosystems and a gorgeous, unspoiled hinterland.



From Kaohsiung to Kenting, the most direct route isn't necessarily the one tourists will want to take. Those curious about Taiwan's agricultural interior or its indigenous tribes should allot the better part of a day to slow driving through the pineapple fields and rice paddies of the lowlands – perhaps stopping for a lunch at Foguangshan – all the way to Sandimen. From there, Road 185 is a splendidly bucolic approach to Taiwan's southernmost region.

A popular pit-stop on the way to Kenting, the little town of Hengchun is notable for having preserved most of the 19th-century city wall which protected it from bandits, rebels and head-hunters. Less than 10 minutes' drive away, there's a beguiling natural phenomenon. Chuhuo (literally, 'out comes the fire') is a spot where natural gas seeps through cracks in the mud and burns throughout the year. Come after dark for the best photos, but don't get too close!

For late-afternoon arrivals coming from Kaohsiung or points north, it makes sense to detour to Guanshan. This ridge isn't especially high, but it's perfectly positioned for watching the sun sink into the placid waters of the Taiwan Strait.

The main resort area has a string of beaches, each with its own character. For those coming from Kaohsiung, first up is Nanwan ('South Bay'), a 600 m-long stretch of sand where jet-skiing, banana-boating and other forms of excitement await those who find simply swimming and sunbathing a bit dull. Sleeping options near here include the Chateau Beach Resort. Sheltered by two headlands, Xiaowan ('Little Bay') is the beach closest to the centre of the resort.



The beach facing and named after Chuanfan Rock is much liked. The rock itself is a squarish column which American visitors say resembles the profile of the late former US president Richard Nixon. Continuing southeast, one comes to Shadao Beach, where there are no crowds because the national park takes its environmental-protection mission seriously. Lotus Lake KaohsiungThe foreshore is off-limits to the public as it's ecologically unique; the little on-site exhibition hall (free admission) explains why.

The usual warnings about tides, currents and other hazards apply in all of these places, but on the whole these locations are highly suitable for families who want to dig in the sand and dip in the water, as well as more boisterous personalities looking to let off steam.

That said, the ocean isn't gentle in every part of Kenting National Park. At Jialeshui in the east, the forces of erosion have created an extraordinary selection of wind- and wave-sculpted rocks. The nearby Nanrenshan Ecological Protection Area is utterly different, a sprawling reserve dedicated to low-altitude primeval forest and para-tropical rainforest. Lucky visitors may spot the rare (and unique to Taiwan) Coxing's white-bellied rat, while the green-fingered will revel amid the reserve's 1,000-plus plant species.

Kenting's sea, sand and sunshine are wonderful, but those who feel they're getting too much of a good thing may well be tempted by a pair of shaded retreats in the hills just behind the beach resort. There's something very soothing about the lush monsoon rainforest inside Kenting National Forest Recreation Area.

From the observation tower, the Pacific Ocean, Bashi Channel and Taiwan Strait are all visible. Shedding Nature Park is just as good, and there's no admission charge. A mix of grasslands, mixed forest and uplifted coral reefs (including two narrow gorges kids love to squeeze through), it's more wilderness than park. Macaques and deer sometimes put in an appearance.

Serious Eco tourists should consider timing their visit to coincide with October's raptor migration, and planning ahead carefully to obtain permits for the ecological protection areas.

East Taiwan

Often called Taiwan's Hawaii, Taiwan's east is every bit as welcoming and lushly tropical as the comparison implies. Just like the US island chain, the counties of Hualien and Taitung are home to a multi-ethnic population. Living among them are artists, dreamers, retirees and entrepreneurs who've exiled themselves from the big cities which characterise the western half of Taiwan. Many Taiwanese, as well as outsiders lucky enough to enjoy a comprehensive Taiwan tour, says it's their favourite part of the country.



Hualien and Taitung have one fifth of Taiwan's total land area, but a mere 555,000 people, less than 3% of the country's population. Agricultural and forestry dominate the landscape. Hualien City, the most important settlement, has an endearing 'not so small you can't get what you need, not so big there are traffic jams' vibe, not to mention a good range of hotels and restaurants. It's no wonder many tourists choose to base themselves here, and make day-long excursions to Taroko Gorge or points south.

Those flying into the city may well notice its most impressive landmark Before they land. The Hall of Still Thoughts is a dignified grey edifice quite unlike most Taiwanese temples. It's the spiritual center of Tzu Chi, a Buddhist charity said to be largest non-governmental organisation in the Chinese-speaking world. Tzu Chi's four million members are active in medical work, education and disaster relief in

Taiwan and overseas. The hall is open to the public and has multilingual displays about the group's goals and achievements. Visitors can wind down inside the vast and utterly tranquil chapel.

Taroko Gorge is a true must-see, but certainly not the only major attractions in the Hualien-Taitung region. The East Rift Valley and the Pacific coastline deserve two full days each.

The valley is a 152-km-long expanse of prime farmland between the Central Mountain Range (more than 100 peaks taller than 3,000 m / 9,843 ft) to the west and the Coastal Mountain Range (highest point 1,682 m / 5,518 ft) to the east. Taiwan's best rice is grown here, and organic farmers make the most of the pristine environment. The inland side of the valley is dotted with hot springs.

Some of these natural spas have been popular since the Japanese colonial era and still show considerable Japanese influence. One is Ruisui, where the yellowish spring water averages 48 degrees Celsius (118 degrees Fahrenheit) and is rich in iron. Another is Antong, where the water is even hotter.

A recent influx of outsiders drawn by East Taiwan's wonderful environment – not all of them Taiwanese – has added greatly to the diversity of the region's culinary scene. It's now a lot easier to find good Western and vegetarian food, with the artist/hipster magnet Dulan (25 km up the coast from Taitung City) emerging as a little town boasting good eats.

Lovers of seafood passing through in late autumn or early winter may want to stop in Chenggong, a fishing town famed for its black marlin. Many of the fish caught are eaten in Taipei or Japan, but some end up in local restaurants clustered near the harbour.

Given the east's demographics, it's no surprise aboriginal cuisines are much in evidence. A good bet for those eager to try this kind of food is Mibanai Indigenous Cuisine Restaurant in central Taitung. Other Austronesian restaurants can be found near Guangfu, and in smaller towns both on the coast and inland.

Serious hot-springs fans may want to add Zhiben, which is outside the East Rift Valley and just south of Taitung City, to their itinerary. The soothing waters here have been drawing tourists since the 1920s. An excellent way of working up a sweat before getting in the tub (there are both public pools where swimsuits are required, and private rooms) is to explore Zhiben National Forest Recreation Area.

This 111-hectare nature reserve has both semi-rainforest and mixed forest, plus a macaque population that's neither timid nor troublesome.

Other highlights along the inland route from Hualien to Taitung include the Amis aboriginal village of Dabalong. This is one of several places where the tribe's summertime Harvest Festival is celebrated with gusto, and it's home to a number of renowned woodcarvers.

Nearby Fuyuan National Forest Recreation Area is excellent for birding (throughout the year), butterflies (March until August) and fireflies (March-May and again October-November).

Taiwan's most popular whitewater-rafting course, Hualien County's Xiuguluan River, links the East Rift Valley with the Pacific. Each float lasts three to four hours, during which a professional guide helps each 10-person inflatable negotiate 24 thrilling kilometres of rapids, drops and eddies. Helmets and lifejackets are provided.

Highway 11 stays within sight of the Pacific all the way from Hualien to Taitung, more than 180 km to the south. The road is much loved by Taiwan's cycling fraternity, but richly rewards all who travel it, be they on four wheels or two.

Some of the settlements along the way are dominated by Amis clans. Others, such as Chenggong, are part-Han Chinese, part-indigenous. Chenggong is one of Taiwan's most important fisheries centres. There are beaches and coves where surfing and snorkelling are popular pastimes, but for many the coast's geological curiosities leave a deeper impression.

One of these, Sanxiantai (Terraces of the Three Immortals), is a monument to the power of nature. Wind and wave erosion turned what was originally a little peninsula into an island now linked to Taiwan's mainland by a photogenic if impractical eight-arch pedestrian bridge.

Not all coast-travellers go as far south as Taitung City. A good number stop at the modest fishing harbour further called Fugang, because it's the jumping-off point for excursions to the scuba paradise of Green Island and the remote, aboriginal-populated outpost of Orchid Island.

Mount Jade and Snow Mountain

It may lack a coastline, but Nantou County has more than its fair share of splendid landscapes. In addition to Sun Moon Lake, the county's borders cross the summits of both Mount Jade, and Xiuguluan Shan, Taiwan's third-highest peak. Taiwan's highest surfaced road – a spectacular stretch of Highway 14-Jia some 3,275 m above sea level – is in the county's north, and it provides spectacular access to Taroko Gorge.



Nantou is also a tea-growing region of importance. There are tea plantations in Lugu and Xitou, both of which can be accessed via the very scenic Road 151. Tea harvested from Lugu's Mount Dongding – where foggy conditions ensure exceptionally tender, flavourful leaves – sometimes sells for more than US\$1 per gramme.

Yushan (Mount Jade) National Park

Set up in 1985 to protect northeast Asia's highest peak, 3,952 m (12,966 feet) tall Mount Jade, and the strikingly rugged highlands that surround it, Yushan National Park covers 105,490 hectares, or about 3% of Taiwan's land area.

No technical climbing skills are required to hike to the country's highest point, but it goes without saying that the park offers a great deal more than a single mountain. There are enough high-altitude trails to keep trekking enthusiasts busy for weeks – including one multi-day route that goes right across the park from west to east; enough animals, birds and insects to galvanise eco-tourists; and so much gorgeous scenery visible from the few roads that enter the park that even those who stick close to their vehicles will find their breath taken away. The drive from Alishan to Tatajia is splendid, and if you continue northward on the New Central Cross-Island Highway toward Sun Moon Lake, you'll see plenty more stunning vistas.

Shei-Pa National Park

Covering 76,850 hectares, Shei-Pa National Park embraces two of Taiwan's most iconic peaks – Snow Mountain, (known variously as Xueshan, Sheishan or Mount Xue) and Dabajianshan (also Mount Dapachien). The former is Taiwan's second-highest peak at 3,886 m, while the latter (3,490 m) is famed for its distinctive barrel shape. The park has 49 other summits higher than 3,000 m, so hikers never lack for options.



The ascent of Snow Mountain is very beautiful indeed and many experienced hikers prefer it to the slightly higher Mount Jade. It can also be the final summit of a multi-day trekking route known as The Holy Ridge, so named because the scenery is sublime.

In terms of fauna, Shei-Pa's most unique asset is the Formosan Landlocked Salmon. It's not the only landlocked salmon species in the world, but it's the only type of salmon that lives anywhere near the tropics. It's regarded as especially precious because it's a holdover from the last Ice Age. Thousands of years ago, it habitually migrated to the ocean and back, but as the climate warmed, it retreated deep into the mountains.

The Surrounding Islands

Penghu Islands

Just 45 km west of Taiwan's main island, Penghu County's 90 islands have been inhabited by Han Chinese people for over 1,000 years. Because of water shortages and pirate raids, there were long periods when more people left this sometimes-windswept archipelago than settled here. Even now, when regular flights mean the islands are less than an hour from Taiwan's main cities, the population is only 102,000. Some outsiders still sometimes call the islands by a Portuguese name assigned in the 16th century: 'Pescadores', which means 'fishermen'.



High summer and the shoulder months of June and September are good times to visit Penghu, but even in the colder months there are often windows of decent weather ideal for watersports. Thanks to world-class conditions for windsurfing and kitesurfing, some promising young athletes have emerged in Penghu.

The islands get their distinctive geology – indeed, they owe their existence to – undersea volcanic eruptions millions of years ago. When red hot lava met the cool ocean, it solidified to create hexagonal basalt columns somewhat like Giant's

Causeway in Northern Ireland. These can be seen in several places, notably Tongpan Island, so named because it resembles the lid of a barrel. Between these rocky outcrops, there are several excellent beaches, such as the ones at Shili, where sand dunes and calm, blue water stretch for more than a kilometer, and Aimen. Jibei Islet has a remarkable tongue-shaped sandbar. If you visit that islet, which is a short ferry journey from the main islands, be sure to look for the fish-trapping tidal weirs that ring its shoreline.

The almost deserted village of Erkan has the archipelago's best collection of traditional residences. A few are dilapidated but many are still magnificent; several were built by villagers who'd made their fortunes selling herbal medicine in the towns on Taiwan's main island.

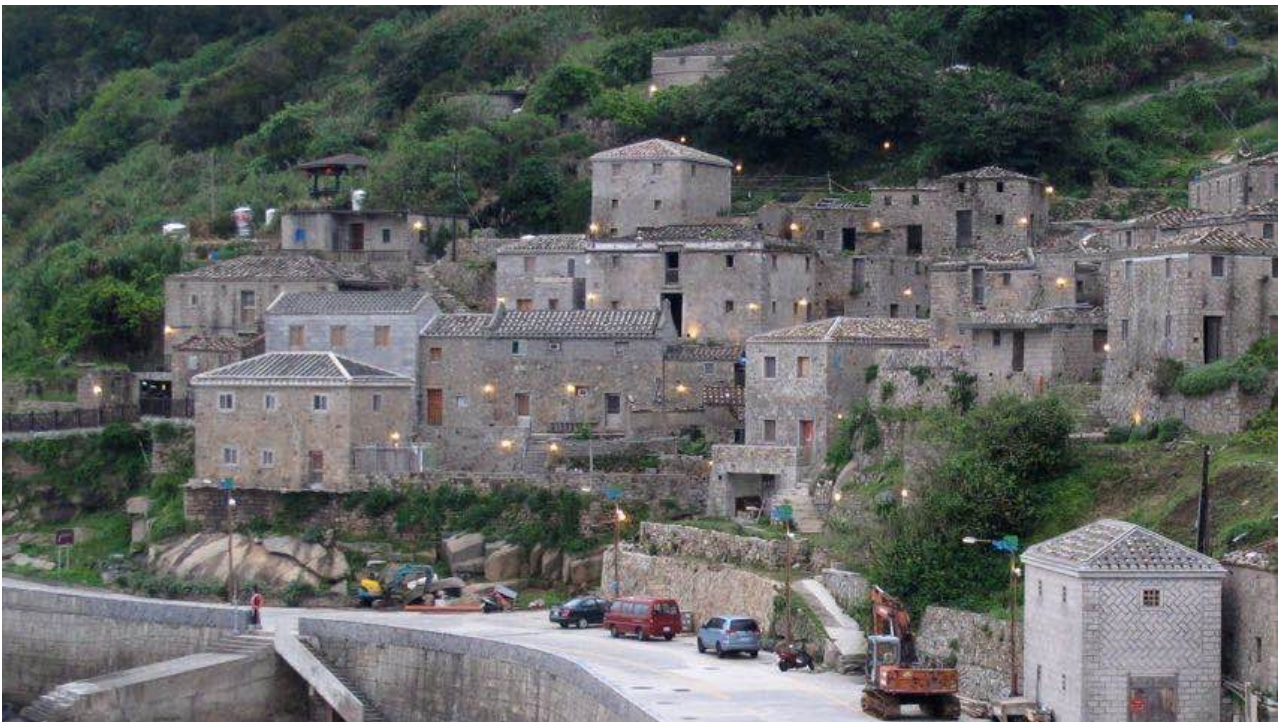
These days, Magong is home to more than half of Penghu's population. The county capital boasts Taiwan's oldest Mazu shrine, as well as two historic wells.

Tianhou Temple, founded in 1592, contains superb woodcarvings by artisans brought in especially from the Chinese mainland in the 1920s, as well as relics which date from the Dutch attempt to occupy Penghu at the beginning of the 17th century.

It's easy to see why Four-Eyed Well – near to but probably older than the temple – has that name. The four apertures are no bigger than portholes. Locals still draw water from this well; the goldfish which inhabit it are, they say, proof that the water is very clean. In the same neighbourhood, Ten Thousand Soldiers Well dates from 1683, when Qing Dynasty troops paused here during their invasion of Taiwan.

Kinmen Island

Consisting of two substantial islands and a few uninhabited rocks, Kinmen County (population: 112,000) is where Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalists stopped the Communist advance. Battles involving thousands of troops on either side, fighter jets and naval units took place in late 1949 and again in 1958. Communist artillery pounded the islands until the 1970s; shell casings and fragments were recycled into cleavers. When the Western media reported these clashes, they often used an alternative place name, Quemoy.



The military side of Kinmen's long history – Chinese people have been living here for over 2,000 years – is recorded not only in museums, but also in the bullet holes you'll notice in older buildings in Guningtou, Hujingtou and other villages. Until the 1990s, Kinmen's beaches were mined to prevent amphibious assaults. Even now, you'll see fields of sorghum (which is turned into a famous liquor) dotted with spiked poles to impale paratroopers. It's impossible to go far without stumbling across an old bunker. These remnants, along with top-notch birding areas, are now preserved by Kinmen National Park.

Peace now prevails. Regular ferries link Kinmen and the Communist mainland, and PRC tourists are among those discovering that Kinmen is an exceptionally endearing place. In large part, this is because more than 1,000 traditional buildings, built with wooden frames and tiled roofs, remain intact. Some are open to the public, such as the 16 near-identical homes that date from around World War I and which now form Kinmen Folk Culture Village. Others have been turned into delightful homestays.

Wind Gods

Traditional buildings and battlefields aren't Kinmen County's only distinctive physical features. Many visitors are smitten by the wind gods who never move, and the archipelago's birds, some of which migrate vast distances.

The wind gods are a unique aspect of local folk religion. For centuries, the main island has suffered from strong winds which eroded the soil, blew dust into homes and hampered farming. Seeking divine help, many villages placed statues of wind gods – depicted with lion-like features – facing northeast. There are almost 70 of these icons, and they vary in size from tinier than an infant to far bigger than a man; most are sexless but some are blatantly male. Offerings of incense and food are left in front of these gods, and several are dressed in red capes.

Birding Hotspots

One of the best places for winter birding is Cihu, an artificial reservoir created to ease Kinmen's water-supply problems. Almost 200 species have been recorded here, with cormorants being especially common. Birds often seen on Kinmen but never or seldom spotted on Taiwan's main island include the Lesser pied kingfisher, the White-throated kingfisher, and the Chinese pond heron.

One of Taiwan's smaller conservation zones, Kinmen National Park covers three parcels of land, one of which showcases the island group's tallest mountain, the 252m-high Taiwushan. Many tourists explore the national park by bicycle. There's little traffic, the weather is bike-friendly, and pedal power is a fun way to explore the narrow alleyways of villages like Shuitou and Qionglin.

Matsu Island

The Matsu Islands are almost as close to the Chinese mainland as Kinmen County, but being around 200 km further north the climate is significantly cooler. The 9,000-odd people who live here speak a language quite different to the Holo (Taiwanese) spoken in Taiwan, Kinmen and Penghu. Like Kinmen, several flights each day link Matsu to both Taipei and Taichung.



The drawdown of army and naval bases here has hurt local businesses such as restaurants and karaoke parlours, and transport links with Taiwan aren't very convenient. However, the easing of Taiwan-China tensions has allowed a tourist industry to emerge, and the 19 islands that make up this archipelago have an abundance of attractions. Villages such as Qinbi have lost almost all of their younger residents but retain dozens of graceful granite-and-marble fishermen's cottages. Those into militaria will enjoy places like Andong Tunnel, an underground dock cut into a cliffside so the garrison could be resupplied even during heavy bombardments. Romantic personalities, however, will more likely enjoy the lighthouses set atop remote clifftops.

For birders, Matsu means terns, and one tern species in particular: The Chinese crested tern. This extremely rare avian, first identified in 1863 but spotted on only a handful of occasions in the decades that followed, was long assumed extinct. Its rediscovery in 2000 caused great excitement in the bird world, and seats on boats which go out to the Matsu Islands Tern Refuge are much in demand.

Green Island

Some 33 km from the coast of Taitung County and just 17 km² in area (and that's when the tide is low), Green Island is an isolated Pacific frontier which has transformed itself from a grim place of imprisonment to an ecologically and historically fascinating getaway.

Between 1951 and 1990, opponents of Chiang Kai-shek and his Chinese Nationalist regime were imprisoned here. That jail has now been converted into a tourist attraction – albeit a sombre one – but another prison, for the worst kind of ordinary criminal, remains in operation on the island. Relics of Chiang's dictatorship are preserved within the Human Rights Memorial Park.

Other, more uplifting, attractions include Guanyin Cave. This small cave is a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists who leave offerings before a rock outcropping that resembles the goddess of mercy. The island's almost uninhabited east coast is impressively rugged, and it's here you'll find Zhaori Hot Springs, one of the world's very few saline geothermal springs, and the only hot springs in Taiwan right beside the sea. During peak season, the springs are open 24 hours. Come at dusk and soak while watching stars come out, or just before dawn so you can enjoy sunrise over the Pacific.

Green Island is also excellent for snorkelling and scuba diving because ocean currents push fish close to the island and then block their escape. Those who don't want to get in the ocean should spend time exploring the rocky platforms that emerge as the tide goes out, because the receding waters reveal a wealth of corals, crabs and other forms of marine life.

Orchid Island

The best things in life aren't easy, and getting to Orchid Island falls into this category. Boats and flights to this 46 km² volcanic island are often cancelled because of bad weather. However, all who reach this remote spot – which is 60 km south of Green Island and the same distance east of Kenting National Park – describe it as a highlight of their time in Taiwan. It's undeveloped, unspoiled, and utterly different to other parts of the country.



The 4,000-odd Tao people who live here are Taiwan's only aboriginal island-dwellers – to them, Orchid Island is Pongso no Tao – and they continue to build canoes and hunt flying fish in the traditional way. Some still live in semi-underground dwellings (much better in a typhoon than a modern concrete box) and older tribesmen often go about in no more than a loincloth. Lives are of course dominated by the ocean. There are some lovely yet underused beaches – such as the one at Dongqing Bay – but for many, Orchid Island's real treasures are its fauna and flora. Much of the island is forested, and there are patches of original jungle. In these places, flying foxes (actually a species of large bat) and a type of owl found nowhere else on Earth make their homes.

Private Tours of Taiwan

As you can see, we know our adopted home very well and have a great appreciation for its beauty and culture.

We specialize in tailoring tours for international travellers. Life of Taiwan offers a uniquely professional service that results in a better travel experience for our clients.

All of our tours are curated to your specific requirements. Each is carefully planned by our itinerary builders, so you have the best possible time while travelling.

Each of our tours has a commercially licensed driver and professional guide. Both Taiwanese and international guides are ready to meet your needs and reveal Taiwan's scenic and cultural treasures.

Please read some of our client's reviews of our service. We hope we'll have the opportunity to guide you on your journey through this culturally rich, strikingly beautiful, and eternally welcoming Asian island.

Client Reviews

"Steve Crook was our guide this autumn in Taiwan and took us around Taipei, Tainan, on the High Speed Train, on the Fenshiqu railway, to tea plantations, on forest walks, around temples, to a bird sanctuary, to day and night markets, museums galore and to many local restaurants and all with the accompaniment of staggeringly well informed commentary; and what he didn't know already he asked locals to help with.

Much of what we saw we would have missed without his company and we would have found many of the restaurants difficult or impossible without his guidance. We had a wonderful time with a flexible easy going Steve. I hope we manage to get back to Taiwan. If we do we'll talk to Life of Taiwan."

Haward Soper - England

"After having the best part of 2015 slip past, I felt it necessary to finally write to you and thank Life of Taiwan for the amazing vacation that Ashley and I enjoyed earlier this year. We are both very busy individuals and to take a vacation is something we treasure, so when we contacted you to assist us with the planning of our trip, we had to have full confidence in your ability to meet our needs for a great escape.

It is without question that you exceeded our expectations. As this was my first visit to Taiwan, I wanted to see a bit of everything without the hassles of jumping on and off busses, trains, tour groups, etc. I wanted to see the natural highlights of the country as well as the famous busy street markets and city life of the major cities.

When we first met our tour guide, Stephen, we weren't quite sure what to expect but he made us comfortable from the start. He escorted us to a private BMW complete with a driver (I apologize that his name slips my memory at this moment). The team of guide and driver that you set us up with were perfect for us. We quickly became friends as we enjoyed scenic roads, hikes, and foods in Taroko Gorge, Jade Mountain, Tea fields and the major cities.

I won't go through all the details of the tour you set up for us, but we loved the flexibility that we were offered and the convenience of the private car to make changes and detours as we requested along the way.

Truly a unique experience like no other. And to have it end with a personal gift from your wife to mine followed by a fabulous dinner with you and Stephen was a great gesture that went a long way to show us that you truly care about your clients. I will continue to rave about your services and group to my friends and family ... hopefully they will contact you if they ever want to visit Taiwan, in the meantime, I will look forward to our next visit when you can organize the motorcycle trip I would really love to do. Sincere and best regards to you, Stephen and all at Life of Taiwan. Happy holidays!!!"

Jason & Ashley Bosa - Canada

"Taiwan is a beautiful country that is well worth visiting. We travelled from Shanghai and it was the best decision to spend our precious holidays in Taiwan. The trip was perfectly organised, the schedule was well paced and our expectations were vastly exceeded. During the tour we enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere our guide created. The atmosphere was very pleasant. Thank you Life of Taiwan team. We hope to return."

Robert Fuhrmann – Germany

"We did one of the first ever tea tours and it was a blast. Went to Ali Shan, San Li Xi, Sun Moon Lake, Dong Ding Mountain and drank fine oolong tea from morning til night. Guide was very knowledgeable on teas, processing methods, harvests and brewing techniques. We stayed in wood cabins in tea gardens surrounded by bird song and tea plants. It was a magical trip and the mountains of Taiwan are very special."

Stephen Carroll – Australia

"We travelled with our young child. The Life of Taiwan team were very patient and considerate with our daughter and made arrangements from the beginning to the end so that she would enjoy the trip. This thoughtful and caring approach made the whole trip a very special time for our family. Taiwan is amazing. You have to visit Taroko Gorge and drive over the mountains to Sun Moon Lake. It is the drive of a lifetime. I whole heartedly recommend using Life of Taiwan."

Alexandra Korndoerfer – Germany

"I knew that this trip was going to be a life changer, perspective changer- what I didn't know is that I would be so deeply touched by this experience and by the new friends I have made. Even though it is unknown when I'll have the opportunity to visit Taiwan again, I will always surround myself by reminders of my short, albeit wonderful, time there- even something as simple as enjoying Aiyu Jelly in my bubble tea. I would never have been able to have such an intense and in depth experience without the Life of Taiwan team. Mark and Muchin were just amazing and the planning and attention to detail was second to none. I can wholeheartedly recommend Life of Taiwan. First class from start to finish."

Maretta Delacruz - USA

"Our family did the natural wonders tour and spent 3-4 hours hiking every day. Coming from Shanghai it was just what we needed. Visited Yeh Liu, Taroko, Sun Moon Lake, Ali Shan and Tainan. We were genuinely sad when the tour ended. Taiwan has great hiking and some amazing scenery. The people are very warm and kind."

Thomas and Miri Mayer – Germany

"Family tour was great. Our kids had a lot of fun. We cycled around Sun Moon Lake and hiked in Taroko Gorge. Food was excellent. Guide was fun and really took time to make sure all of our needs were taken care of. Taiwan is well worth a visit."

Excellent tour! With airline tickets to Taiwan pre-purchased for my wife and 4 children, our original tour plans with another company fell through two weeks prior to our arrival. I frantically searched for another tour company and Life of Taiwan tours responded to my request very quickly. We laid out our desires to see the whole island over an 11 day period with a stop on Green Island for diving. They worked diligently to plan and book the tour providing frequent updates on the progress. Our family size and timeline made our request difficult, but they came through and delivered a great itinerary."

The tour itself was outstanding and provided our family great memories that will last a lifetime. We chose to tour the beautiful East coast and Taroko gorge first, making our way down to the southern tip of the island. Unfortunately, when we arrived at the airport to fly to Green Island, weather became an issue. All flights and ferries were cancelled to the island due to rough seas and low lying clouds. It became fairly evident that transportation to the island was not going to be available anytime soon. Our guide worked with us to come up with an alternate itinerary, booked new hotels and we were on way with minimal delay. With four children in tow, expediting this process through the tour company greatly reduced our stress level and allowed us to enjoy our time on the island."

Taiwan is beautiful and sells itself. Life of Taiwan tours provided a great experience with knowledgeable guides and customer service second to none. Would highly recommend this company to anyone looking for a tour service in Taiwan."

Jeff Hemlick - USA

"Many thanks to the Life of Taiwan team. When my wife and I started planning our trip to Taiwan we had difficulty organizing a tour due to the language barriers. That all changed when I contacted Life of Taiwan. They were very patient and generous with their time. I had already made some bookings in hotels and don't like to have food included as I like to explore local foods. They accepted that and provided guiding services only for the days we had booked in Taipei and Tainan.

When it came to the island touring we let Life of Taiwan handle all of the bookings. The hotels they selected were first class. We were allowed to order food as and when we wanted and the guide was excellent. He drove very safely and skillfully over the mountain roads and was very attentive to our needs. The guide was very professional in every aspect of his work and I highly recommend him.

If you are going to Taiwan, which you should, then use Life of Taiwan for sure."

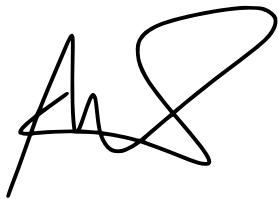
Morris Raker – USA

Contact Us

We would love to hear from you. If you need further information or would like to hear more about our services, please don't hesitate to contact us. We really hope you found this information useful!

We look forward to hearing from you!

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'MS' or 'Mark Sinclair', with a large loop at the end.

Mark Sinclair

Founder, Life of Taiwan

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