

Destination Taiwan

Ilha Formosa – Beautiful Island.

This is what a group of Portuguese sailors, said to have been the first Westerners to lay eyes on the island, uttered upon seeing Taiwan for the first time. We imagine they must have been pretty enamoured. While not every Westerner has the same love-at-first-sight reaction to Taiwan, our Portuguese seafaring friends were just the first of many. With lush jungles, pulsating cities, great beaches, excellent hiking and biking, not to mention some of the world's best hot springs, Taiwan cuts a figure as one of the most diverse destinations in Asia.

True, Taiwan hasn't yet made it to the top of everybody's 'to visit' list, but we think this is partially a result of people not quite knowing what Taiwan has to offer. But within the borders of this small, sweet-potato-shaped island barely the size of many American states lies a world of contrasts and a melange of cultural influences you're not likely to find anywhere else on the planet.

In the first decade of the 21st century, Taiwan is increasingly drawing travellers of all stripes: from spiritual seekers looking to experience the island's religious heritage to gourmards in search of the perfect night-market meal to computer geeks scanning the horizon for the latest high-tech gadgets. Taiwan offers visitors a hypermodern skin, an ancient Chinese skeleton and an aboriginal soul. And more than that, Taiwan has some of the world's warmest people, affable to a fault and so filled with *rénqíng wèi* (which, roughly translated, means 'personal affection') that few who come to Taiwan a stranger leave that way.

Much has changed in the centuries since the Portuguese first saw Taiwan. Still, we think if the same group of sailors came back in the present day, they'd call it *Ilha Formosa* all over again.

Getting Started

Travelling to Taiwan takes relatively little advanced preparation, as there are no serious challenges compared with other Asian destinations. The big cities are easy to get around, roads are signed in English, and transport is comfortable and affordable by western standards. In addition, there are now visitor centres inside most major train stations, airports (and now high-speed rail stations), with English- and Japanese-speaking staff to help with bus transfers, hotels and the like. There's even a helpful 24-hour tourist hotline (☎ 0800 011 765) you can call anytime you need help.

For the budget traveller, more and more hostels and campsites are opening, the former often by well-travelled, English-speaking Taiwanese. The proliferation of B&Bs and swanky hot spring resorts finally gives those on a higher budget options beyond sterile midrange hotels or generic 5-stars.

Adventure travellers will be happy to discover that the old permit system for climbing high mountains has been relaxed, maps are easy to find, and there are now many sources of good clear information about outdoor activities.

WHEN TO GO

People often remark that Taiwan has no seasons, but in reality you must take the time of year into account when travelling. In general, autumn (September to November) is best, as conditions tend to be warm and dry, air pollution is at a minimum, and prices lower. Visiting in spring (March to May) is a crapshoot: it can be clear and dry, or wet and grey, or even blighted by a sandstorm from China. Sometimes you get all three conditions in one day.

Summer (June to August) is a great time to visit the east coast, especially for outdoor activities, but be aware of typhoons, which can hit the island from June to October. Summer is not a good time for travel to the outer islands as they are crowded with tourists and flights and hotels are difficult to secure. Try October to November when rates have dropped but the weather is still great. The cities are always hot and sticky in summer.

Beach lovers can swim comfortably anywhere from May to October. But if you want to swim in winter, head south, not southeast.

Avoid travelling during the Chinese New Year holiday as the entire country pretty much shuts down. Some good holidays not to avoid, however, include Lantern Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, and the Matsu Pilgrimage (p336).

In general, July and August, Saturday night, and Chinese New Year are considered high season and accommodation prices are often double the off-season rates. Outside touristy areas, however, there is little change in price from month to month (only perhaps weekday and weekend).

COSTS & MONEY

A bed in a dorm room will cost from NT300 to NT400 on average, while a room in a hotel your mother might find acceptable starts at NT1200. Campsites average NT200 per person if you have your own tent. Consider B&Bs if your budget is NT2000 to NT4000 a night as they are much better value than most midrange hotels. Top-end hotels are overpriced in general (even the tourism board thinks so), especially when full rates are charged. The corollary is they are often good value in the off-season.

The typical lunch or dinner might cost NT80 to NT250. A bowl of noodles or dumplings costs NT40 to NT50 but is not usually enough to be considered a meal. Realistically, backpackers should budget NT200 to

See Climate Charts (p333) for more information.

HOW MUCH?

Basic fare on Taipei's MRT (underground railway): NT20

Taxi ride: NT70 for the first 1.5km

Adult admission to National Palace Museum: NT100

Train fare, Taipei to Hualien (for Taroko Gorge): NT343

Motor scooter rental: NT200–600 per day, average NT400



TOP 10

TOP 10 SUPERLATIVES

The best of Taiwan in a variety of categories:

- 1 Keelung Miaokou (Street Food; p154) Let our Taipei-city friends scoff; here is the best street fare in Taiwan!
- 2 Lantern Festival (Traditional Festivals; p149) With modern high-tech displays and traditional lantern releases, this festival has mass appeal.
- 3 Erkan Old Residences, Penghu (Traditional Villages; p314) A living museum of culture in a beautiful setting.
- 4 South Cross-Island Hwy (Drives; p260) This route has it all: mountain views, wild hot springs, aboriginal villages, ancient cypress forests, and some great hikes.
- 5 Caoling Historical Trail (Day Hikes; p160) A six-hour walk along stunning coastal bluffs.
- 6 Chipei Beach, Penghu: (Beaches; p306) In an archipelago known for beaches, this ranks among the finest.
- 7 Spring Scream, Kenting (Music Festivals; p285) Still Taiwan's best venue for independent music.
- 8 Cochin Ceramic Museum, Chiayi (Small Museums; p233) The figurines from a master 19th-century ceramicist express fluid natural movements with amazing life-likeness.
- 9 Core Pacific City, Taipei (Buildings; p101) An alien golf-ball? Even if you don't shop here, we promise you won't soon forget Taipei's strangest mall.
- 10 Old British Consulate at Takou, Kaohsiung (Cafes; p268) Watch ships sail into the harbour from this great old vantage point.

TOP 10 TEMPLES

Taiwan's temples are often both beautiful historical relics and lively centres of folk worship.

- 1 Longshan Temple, Lukang (p217) The largest and best-preserved Qing dynasty temple in Taiwan, ready at last after years of repairs.
- 2 Longshan Temple, Taipei (p97) An important place of worship and a great spot for photographers looking for that quintessential temple atmosphere.
- 3 Matsu Temple, Matsu (p251) One of the most sacred temples in Taiwan, once thought to hold the bones of Matsu.
- 4 Tzushr Temple, Sansia (p152) A masterpiece. Restoration of this temple has been progressing steadily for over 50 years.
- 5 Shitoushan (p175) Not one temple but a whole mountainside of them.
- 6 Chung Tai Chan Temple, Puli (p226) A modern temple filled with gorgeous works of art. English-speaking nuns can show you around.
- 7 Zhinan Gong, Maokong, Taipei (p138) Float up to this 19th-century temple on the new gondola and take in the views.
- 8 Confucius Temple, Tainan (p251) The first and best of the sage's temples in Taiwan. Expect calm and dignified beauty.
- 9 Nankunshen Temple, Tainan County (p258) Exorcisms and other expressions of extreme religious faith are often on display.
- 10 Dongyue Temple, Tainan (p252) The masterful wall paintings depict the agonies of Hell in disturbing detail.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT

- Tissues – many public toilets don't have paper towels or hand driers. Antiseptic baby wipes are good too.
- Business cards – people here like to exchange them.
- At least one nice outfit – even if you're only here to teach kids English.
- Quick-drying clothing – for outdoor activities; cotton never dries.
- Photocopies of diplomas, certificates, etc – if you plan on seeking employment.
- Good rain gear – the weather changes very frequently!
- Tampons – if you're travelling outside Taipei.
- Underwear – especially for women; you won't like what's here.
- Makeup – especially if you're dark skinned as local makeup is designed to make Chinese look whiter.
- Shoes and clothing – if you're above or below average size.
- A towel – if you're staying at cheaper hotels and don't like to dry with tea towels.
- Warm clothing – if you'll be here for winter.
- Vitamins – expensive here.
- Earplugs – don't ask us why; literally, our hearing's shot.
- A smile – showing anger will do more harm than good.

NT300 a day for food and water; those on a higher budget, NT500 to NT1000. Breakfast tends to be cheap, NT40 for an egg sandwich and a soy milk drink, and many hotels, including budget ones, include it free.

For the budget traveller, then, basic expenses could run from NT400 to NT600 a day. For the greatest savings, hit resort areas midweek and areas that have dorms or campgrounds on the weekends. Adventure travellers, such as cyclists and hikers will spend little except on food and water (and some transport), as you can usually camp in the mountains or on the beaches for free. Midrange travellers should budget for at least NT2000 per day (based on double occupancy as hotels charge by room, not person). For those opting for resorts and western style meals, NT3000 to NT5000 a day (again, based on double occupancy) is a good start.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Formosan Odyssey by John Ross (2002) is a quirky personal account of one writer's journey across Taiwan just after the 21 September 1999 (921) earthquake. Dead-on descriptions of small-town life in Taiwan.

Keeping Up With the War God by Steven Crook (2000) is a series of short articles on life in Taiwan – from politics to folk religion – by a shrewd observer.

Vignettes of Taiwan by Joshua Brown (2006) An anthology of short stories, travel essays, photographs, random meditations and political meanderings about life in present-day Taiwan.

From Far Formosa by George Mackay (1896) is a chronicle of the famous Presbyterian minister's life in Taiwan around the turn of the 19th century. You can still find copies in some Taipei bookstores.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Please refer to regional chapters for websites of local interest.

Forumosa (www.forumosa.com) Expat community website that collectively has the answers to all your questions: from visa and citizenship issues, to where to find whole wheat pasta. This is where we hang out online.

SOUVENIRS

Paper umbrella: NT600 and up

Chinese-style coat: NT1000 and up

Good traditional teapot: NT500 and up

Hand made Kinmen knife: NT800 and up

Reproduction Chinese scroll: NT1000 and up

Information For Foreigners (<http://iff.immigration.gov.tw/enfront>) Lists everything from getting a visa to what days the garbage trucks accept recycling materials.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Don't forget to visit the Thorn Tree site for updates from fellow Lonely Planet readers and fans.

The View From Taiwan (<http://michaelturton.blogspot.com>) Good local political coverage.

Welcome to Taiwan (www.tboc.gov.tw) Official website of the Tourism Board.

Zhongwen.com (www.zhongwen.com) A nifty intro to the Chinese language and a good links section to books on Taiwan.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE EAST COAST LOOP

Two Weeks / Hualien to Taitung and Back
From Hualien, it's a quick hop to **Taroko National Park** (p188), site of Taroko Gorge, a rugged marble canyon that's been Taiwan's premier natural attraction since the '30s. After a few days exploring this treasure, head down the coast on **Hwy 11** (p192) to Taitung. This stretch of road takes you past some of the most scenic stretches of coastline in the country. Spend three or four days en route, stopping at sandy beaches, ocean-side campsites, fishing harbours, and aboriginal villages.

South of Taitung, take a stroll through **Chihpen Forest Recreation Area** (p205) with its monkey-filled banyan forests. Then head back north but this time go up the rift valley on **Hwy 9** (p196). You're between two mountain ranges here, in the rice belt of Taiwan, and the contrast with the coastline is dramatic. Check out the organic farming scene at **Loshan** (p201), walk at least part of the historic **Walami Trail** (p200), raft the Hsi-ukulan River at **Rueisui** (p198), relax in the many hot springs, and feast on some very exotic aboriginal food in **Mataian** (p197) before returning to Hualien.



The contrast between the coastline and the countryside will amaze, and the endless outdoor activities will exhaust you on this 400km, two-week loop on the east coast.

DOWN THE WEST COAST

One Month / Taipei to Kenting

Almost every trip to Taiwan will start in the capital, Taipei. Don't miss the **National Palace Museum** (p90) with the world's foremost collection of Chinese art, and **Longshan Temple** (p97) a centre of Taiwanese folk worship. If you have time, ride the new gondola to Maokong for an afternoon of fine oolong tea, followed by an evening visit to **Shilin Night Market** (p99).

History soaked **Danshui** (p126) makes for a pleasant day trip as does the **Juming Museum** (p156), which features Taiwan's best modern sculptures. Heading south, fans of traditional arts and crafts will enjoy a smorgasbord in **Yingge** (p151), a town devoted to ceramics; at Hsinchu's relic-rich **Guqifeng** (p173); in the woodcarving shops in **Sanyi** (p178), and around **Lukang** (p216), home to master lantern, fan and tin craftsmen.

Further south in **Chiayi** (p233), visit the small collection of **Cochin pottery** while you wait for the train to **Alishan** (p232). The narrow-gauge alpine railway, called the **Alishan Forest Train** (one of three left in the world; p241), takes you from 0m to 2200m in just a few hours. For a great side trip, stop halfway at **Fenchihu** (p235) and hike through bamboo forests to the pretty tea-growing village of **Rueili** (p236). In spring, countless fireflies light up the night.

After returning to Chiayi, continue south to the old capital of **Tainan** (p248) for a few days of temple- and relic-hopping, and sampling of traditional foods. During the winter, take a detour east to see the purple butterflies at **Maolin** (p277).

Returning to the coast, head south to **Kaohsiung** (p265). Lunch in this bustling harbour city at the old **British Consulate at Takou** (p268) before continuing to **Kenting National Park** (p282) to wind down your journey on the beach.

A month-long, 600km route that lets you visit the best museums, the most relic-rich small towns, and a splendid mountain retreat (without working up too much of a sweat). Along the way sample tasty local foods, relax in teahouses, and shop for traditional crafts.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

ISLAND HOPPING

Three Weeks / Matsu to Lanyu

Start with **Matsu** (p289) to get a taste of maritime Fujian culture you can't find in Taiwan proper. Give yourself at least four days, unless you're only exploring Nangan and Beigan Islands. In any event, definitely spend a night in the traditional houses of Beigan.

From Matsu, fly to **Kinmen** (p296) via Taipei and spend two days exploring the ancient towns and military presence on the main island. Birdwatchers will want to include an extra day for walking around Little Kinmen; the saltwater marshes here are home to a unique mixture of waterbirds.

If the weather's fine, you'll want to spend at least five days getting in some beach-time (or windsurfing) on **Penghu** (p306) via Taipei; and don't miss the opportunity to explore the archipelago's myriad temples.

When moving on from Penghu, we recommend flying to **Kaohsiung**. If the seas aren't too rough, try the Penghu-Kaohsiung boat. From Kaohsiung, take a two-hour train ride across southern Taiwan's flat banana and betel nut growing country to Taiwan's easternmost city, **Taitung**. From here, you can either boat it (if you have the stomach) or fly to both eastern outposts, **Green Island** (p320) and **Lanyu** (p316). Don't miss the seawater hot springs on **Green Island**. Both islands are worth three days each.

The autumn months offer the most pleasant weather to visit the islands, not to mention a respite from the crowds that can make getting to Penghu and Green Island difficult. But autumn can also bring typhoons, a definite consideration for anyone travelling the islands.



Three weeks of short air-hops and ferries will take you around Taiwan's island outposts for glimpses into her military, maritime and aboriginal heritage. Ancient villages, beautiful beaches, amazing temples, and one of the world's only seawater hot springs await.

A CROSS-ISLAND TOUR

Two Weeks / Taichung to Jiaoshi

Leave Taichung (p209) with a full stomach as there's little to satisfy you until you reach the Chung Tai Chan Temple in Puli (p226) – and this amazing centre of Buddhist art and research will only help with the spiritual pangs.

After Puli the highway starts to rise into the Central Mountains and it's just one gorgeous landscape after the other begging for a photo from here on in. For a side trip, head down to Aowanda Forest Recreation Area (p230) and spend the night in little Beatrix Potter-approved cabins among cherry and plum trees. Keep an eye out for the birds; this is a top-twitching venue.

Returning to Hwy 14, continue to the end to the start of the Nenggao Cross-Island Historic Trail (p230). You don't need to do the whole thing (which takes you all the way down to the east coast) but think about hiking in and spending the night in a cabin.

Retrace your route, and head north up Hwy 14甲. Prepare for endless windy roads and numerous wash outs. Also prepare for a stunning landscape of receding blue mountain ranges.

After Wuling Pass (3275m), the highest point on the road, stop in Hehuanshan Forest Recreation Area (p231) to photograph (and maybe stroll) the treeless emerald hills. Then head up Hwy 8 to Hwy 7. Follow this north to Wuling Forest Recreation Area (p169) for thick forests, high waterfalls, and cool mountain streams, some of which are home to the endangered Formosan landlocked salmon.

Past Wuling Forest Recreation Area, the road winds down past quaint aboriginal villages with their trademark church and steeple, past countless streams just asking to be traced, until it reaches the Lanyang River plains. Continue to Jiaoshi (p163) and treat yourself to a hot-spring bath.

You'll need your own vehicle for this 300km route but it's quintessential Taiwan: from the temples to the landscapes – high-altitude farms, maple forests, rolling alpine meadows, grassy plains – to the washed out roads. And of course it ends with a hot spring.



TAILORED TRIPS

HOT SPRINGS

For star resorts head to Yangmingshan (p133), Jinshan (p156) or Beitou (p131). Paolai's (p261) spas are perched on mountainsides. We love the traditional brick design at the resort in Nanzhuang (p176). In scenic Sun Moon Lake (p222) and Carp Lake (p229) hotels have drilled for water. In Jinluan (p206), facilities overlook the ocean. In Dongpu (p245) people hot spring after climbing Yushan. For wild springs hike to Sileng (p169) and Fan Fan (p169) on the North Cross-Island Hwy. Pretty Bayen Hot Spring (p156) is on the back of Yangmingshan. Wulai's springs (p141) bubble by the river. Don't miss sublime Lisong (p264) and eerie Mokenan (p265).

Jinfeng (p206) offers simple tiled pools beside a campground. A similar setting exists at the Taitung Hongye Hot Springs (p201). At Nanao (p165), villagers have built primitive pools by a rushing river. The park's board did the same at Maolin (p278). Jiaoshi (p163), on the northeast coast, has slightly salty spring water. Suao (p164) possesses a rare cold spring. Green Island (p321) boasts one of only three saltwater springs worldwide. Iron-rich springs are found at Ruesui (p198) and nearby Hungyeh (p199). Sichongsi (p287) gives bathers an alternative to the beaches. The silky waters at Taian (p176) leave the skin glowing. At Antung (p200), spring water is used to make coffee.



A HIKING GUIDE TO TAIWAN

For day hikes around Taipei, head to Yangmingshan (p132), Maokong (p137), and Pingxi (p144). Huangdi Dian (p150), Wuliao Jian (p152) and Bijia Shan (p150) are exciting ridge walks not far from the capital. Wulai's trails (p143) were once original hunting routes: hike all the way to the east coast, or south and connect with more trails in Manyueyuan (p152). The aboriginal trails in Taroko National Park (p188) run through valleys, and alongside blue-green rivers to waterfalls.

Scenic coastal routes include the Caoling Historic Trail (p160), the Bitou Cape Trail (p159), the path from Jialeshui to Lake Nanren in Kenting National Park (p282), and the 10km circuit around Little Kinmen Island (p305). For a hike through bamboo forests, head to Fenchihu (p235). To see some of the best-preserved subtropical forests in Asia hike the Walami Trail (p200). Experience the tropical forests along the Qing dynasty Jin-Shui Yin Old Trail (p280). For 3000m+ mountains, try Snow Mountain (p170), Hehuanshan (p231), and Yushan (p243).

For cross-island thrills, hike the South Cross-Island Hwy (p260). The two- to three-day Nenggao Cross-Island Historic Trail (p230) crosses the island midway, while several week-long trails cross Yushan National Park (p243). Lanyu (p318) and Green Island (p321) don't have long hikes, but views are spectacular. For strolling through pretty forests try Alishan (p242), Chihpen (p205), Fuyuan (p198), Shuangliou (p287), Mingchih (p168), Aowanda (p230) and Neidong (p144) forest recreation areas. For more on hiking, see also p329 and p330.



Snapshot

There's no question about it. From Keelung to Kenting, the winds of change are blowing, and Taiwan in 2007 stands at a crossroads. Ideas once unthinkable are now openly debated; changing the titular China of various state-owned entities to Taiwan; rewriting the constitution of the Republic of China itself to reflect a growing sense of Taiwanese identity; perhaps most revolutionary of all, removing many (some voices cry for all) traces of the once-sacrosanct former dictator Chiang Kai-shek – smiling statues, commemorative plaques, even the name Chiang itself – from military bases, city squares and just about all public spaces.

But Taiwan is no stranger to transformation (if anything, the island has long thrived on it): from pirates' nest to fortress for the Ming dynasty's last futile stand; from Qing dynasty backwater to coveted Japanese possession; from former colony of a defeated empire to enforced 'loyal subjects' of an authoritarian regime; from one-party state to full-fledged democracy.

Economically, Taiwan has proven itself nothing if not eminently flexible. In a few short decades this one-time maker of textiles and cheap consumer goods transformed itself into the world's leading high-tech producer, fueling the digital boom of the late 20th century, becoming in the process one of Asia's most durable and dynamic economies. But even this is subject to change. Across the straits, the economic power of once-impoverished and technologically backwards China is growing exponentially (in no small part thanks to Taiwanese investment), and many in Taiwan feel that the days of regarding China as the unsophisticated, muscular cousin wearing a cheap suit are over. Cross-Strait relations are a major issue in Taiwan, but it's far more complex than the question of independence versus unification.

However, the more important question is one of identity, of what it means to be Taiwanese. While many in Taiwan feel a strong connection to Chinese culture and history, not all feel the same pull. Many Taiwanese feel no more kinship with China than, say, a third-generation Italian-American might feel towards Italy. Sure, they like Peking Duck and might have vague plans to visit the Great Wall one summer, but they aren't really interested in tying their entire identity to the nation that their ancestors left generations ago. Many Taiwanese, young and old, are instead increasingly defining their identities by the shared memories of Taiwan. It's a rich history indeed, one of colonisation and oppression, rags to riches, and the island's long journey from dictatorship to democracy.

While Taiwan's relationship with China is a major issue, perhaps even the defining one, it isn't the only issue being discussed. Not by a long shot. So what are Taiwanese office workers chatting about around the water cooler (or water boilers) in most offices? Politics, not surprisingly, is a big topic, with a variety of high-level scandals involving figures from all parties being very much in the news. Of course the economy looms large in the collective unconscious. As more and more manufacturing moves from labour-expensive Taiwan to labour-cheap China, Taiwan is increasingly manoeuvring itself to redefine its niche in the global economy.

Ecology and the environment are big issues as well. Whereas the Taiwanese were once flagrantly callous about pollution, the last 10 years have seen a veritable renaissance of environmental awareness. As decades of environmental neglect are reversed, many hope that Taiwan's international image (already changed from 'Asia's bargain-basement factory' to 'global high-tech powerhouse') might, through promotion of its

unparalleled natural beauty, make yet another transformation: 'Switzerland of Asia' anybody?

Still, the question of Taiwan's future vis-à-vis China looms large. While political leaders from one side creep slowly towards codifying the island's de facto independence, those from the other camp have been making highly publicised pilgrimages to China in order to create a framework for eventual unification. In the middle stand those who'd prefer to keep the status quo, neither admitting nor denying either Taiwan's independence from or inclusion within the greater Chinese nation. Many say that 2008 will be a decisive year, and that once China's Olympic hosting duties are over, the nation will turn towards settling the question once and for all.

So is Taiwan at a crossroads, or a precipice? Only time will tell.

FAST FACTS

- Population of Taiwan (July 2006): 23,036,100
- Mobile phones in use: 22.1 million
- Percentage of population under 14: 19.4%
- Estimated percentage of population (including infants) without mobile phones: < 5%
- Highest Point: Yu Shan (Jade Mountain) 3952 m
- Percentage of homes connected to the internet: 75%
- Percentage of Taiwanese who shop online: 45%
- Percentage of male population who chew betel nut: 25%
- Number of street vendors in Taiwan (2003): 291,064
- Number of betel-nut vendors in Taiwan (2003): 17,604

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