In the south, people’s ties to rural folk culture are strongest. Local gods are more fervently worshipped, traditions more respected, and a clannish regard for kith and kin more obvious. And in a land of hospitable people, southerners shine as the most hospitable of all.

Outside of Taipei, the only cities really worth visiting are in the south: ie Tainan and Kaohsiung. Tainan has a temple heritage second to none, and a great array of local foods to sample. Kaohsiung is a harbour city on a mad drive to make up for decades of lost development time. Ten years ago we could hardly stand to drive past it. But these days you can feel the buzz (much like Taipei a decade ago) and couple of days here soaking it in would be well spent.

For some of the best mountain scenery in the country head to the South Cross-Island Hwy. This route literally crosses the island, and can be used as a walking path, with side trips up to 3000m-plus mountains and down to beautiful natural hot springs in the river valleys.

In fact, the south pretty much has it wrapped up for the nature-lover. There are two butterfly valleys – one of which (in Maolin) has recently been put on equal footing with the Monarch Butterfly Valley in Mexico – and a winter resting ground for the rare black-faced spoonbill. The southern landscape also varies from coastal mud flats, to grassy headlands, to majestic cypress forests.

Weatherwise, the south is hot and sticky in summer and warm and dry in winter. If you want to swim in January, head south.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Hike ancient forests and soak in natural hot springs along the **South Cross-Island Hwy** (p260)
- Bike through lush fields, eat traditional foods and shop at **Meinong** (p274)
- Explore Taiwan’s temple heritage in the old capital of **Tainan** (p248)
- Swim or surf year-round in **Kenting National Park** (p282)
- Visit the winter resting grounds of the purple butterfly in **Maolin** (p277)
- Cross the southern tip of Taiwan on the **Jin-Shui Ying Old Trail** (p280), a steamy jungle route once used by the Qing dynasty military
- Get rained on with fireworks at **Yenshui** (p259)
- Scooter and snorkel around Taiwan’s only coral island, **Little Liuchiu Island** (p281)
- Watch a ceremonial boat burn to the ground in **Donggang** (p280)
National Parks & Forest Recreation Areas

There are three national parks in the south. Beautiful, remote Maolin is a stronghold for aboriginal culture but also holds an important winter resting ground for the purple butterfly. The South Cross-Island Hwy runs through the southern end of Yushan National Park and there’s some excellent hiking to be done there. Kenting National Park is a beach playground, though there are also some interesting protected areas few people venture into. Siangyang Forest Recreation Area is an excellent bird-watching venue. Shuangliou Forest Recreation Area has a gorgeous waterfall, while much of Tengchih Forest Recreation Area boasts intact virgin forest. Shanping Forest Recreation Area offers peaceful trails, abundant plant life, and excellent bird-watching. There’s something for everyone in this part of Taiwan.

Getting There & Around

It’s easy to get to and around the major urban centres by public transportation. The High-Speed Rail (HSR) is convenient for travel to Kaohsiung but not Tainan (the station is 40 minutes walk from downtown). Scooters and cars can be hired in the cities and are recommended for travel into the countryside where public transportation is poor, such as in Meinong, Maolin and along the South Cross-Island Hwy.