

Welcome to Taiwan

With its all-round adventure landscape, heritage-rich capital, diverse folk traditions and feted night market scene, Taiwan offers a continent-sized travel list for one green island.

The Beautiful Isle

Famed for centuries as Ilha Formosa (Beautiful Isle), this is a land with more faces than the 11-headed Guanyin. Towering sea cliffs, marble-walled gorges and tropical forests are just the start of your journey, which could take you as far as Yushan, Taiwan's 3952m alpine roof.

In Taiwan you can criss-cross mountains on colonial-era hiking trails or cycle a lone highway with the blue Pacific on one side and green volcanic arcs on the other. And if you simply want a classic landscape to enjoy, you'll find them around every corner.

Have You Eaten?

The words are used as a greeting here, and the answer is always 'yes', as there's just too much nibbling to do. Taiwan offers the gamut of Chinese cuisines, as well as the best Japanese outside Tokyo, and a full-house of local specialities from Hakka stir-fries and Taipei beef noodles to aboriginal-style barbecued wild boar. Night markets around the island serve endless feasts of snacks including stinky tofu, steamed dumplings, oyster omelettes, shrimp rolls and shaved ice. And when you're thirsty you can look forward to fresh local juices, outstanding Taiwan teas and, in a surprising twist, Asia's best gourmet coffee.

Asian Values on Their Terms

Defying those who said it wasn't in their DNA, the Taiwanese have created Asia's most vibrant democracy, and liberal society, with a raucous free press, gender equality and respect for human rights and increasingly animal rights as well. The ancestors are still worshipped, and mum and dad still get their dues, but woe befall the politician who thinks it's the people who must pander, and not him. If you want to catch a glimpse of the people's passion for protest, check out Taipei Main Station on most weekends, or just follow the local news.

The Tao of Today

Taiwan is heir to the entire Chinese tradition of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and that amorphous collection of deities and demons worshipped as folk faith. But over the centuries the people have blended their way to a unique and tolerant religious culture that's often as ritual-heavy as Catholicism and as wild as Santería.

Taiwanese temples (all 15,000) combine worship hall, festival venue and art house under one roof. Watch a plague boat burn at Donglong Temple, go on a pilgrimage with the Empress of Heaven, study a rooftop three-dimensional mosaic, and learn why a flag and ball have come to represent prayer.

Taiwan's Top 15

Hiking the High Mountains

1 Don't forget your boots because two-thirds of Taiwan's terrain is mountainous – and what mountains they are. Hundreds soar above 3000m, and well-established hiking routes run everywhere. These are the real deal (no shops, no restaurants) and on remote trails you might find yourself alone for several days. Everyone wants to tackle Yushan (p205), the highest peak in Northeast Asia, but the second highest, Snow Mountain (p156), is a more scenic climb and leads to O'Holy Ridge (p157), a five-day walk on an exposed ridgeline that never drops below 3000m. Below: Hiking on O'Holy Ridge

Taroko Gorge

2 Taiwan's top tourist draw is a walk-in Chinese painting. Rising above the froth of the blue-green Liwu River, the marble walls (yes, marble!) of Taroko Gorge (p179) swirl with the colours of a master's palette. Add grey mist, lush vegetation and waterfalls seemingly tumbling down from heaven, and you truly have a classic landscape. Walk along the Swallow Grotto (p181) to see the gorge at its most sublime or brave the Jhuliu Old Trail (p181), a vertigo-inducing path 500m above the canyon floor.

