

The Gateway Taiwan - Waiting for Discovery

With inflowing mass tourism, and FITs starting in July 2011, from mainland China, Taiwan has become a sought-after tourism destination. Today a number of islands make up the Republic of China's rump territory, which although sovereign is still claimed by China.



Besides the main island, once called Formosa (the "Beautiful") by the early Portuguese seafarers, some volcanic isles emerge off the east coast: Lu dao (Green Island) and Lan yu (Orchard Island), the latter one inhabited by the Austronesian Tao tribe who still hunt flying fish in their tiny colorful boats.

The others lie off the continental coast in visible distance to China's Fujian province (the drowned granite mountains of Kinmen and Matsu), and a unique archipelago bridges the Formosa Strait: Penghu (Pescadores: the "Fishermen islands").

Penghu - the undeclared world heritage of a shattered, drowned basalt plateau - recalls a million year long erosion. Tongpan yu ("kettle-dish isle") juts out with impressive volcanic pillars, with cliffs like pencil-sticks turning away arrivals. Qimei ("Seven Belles") is also thrilling - freshly congealed lava flows are seemingly straight away contracting into hexagonal columns. Sea waves have left a miniature map of Taiwan at one corner, while another shore site beguiles with a fish trap. Due to its twin heart shape this stone weir has become a queer landmark attracting throngs of romanticists.

Sharply contrasting are some rare blazing beaches, composed of coral, shell and radiolarian sands on Jibei, where bathers and snorkelers find a tropical paradise. But Penghu has more: abundant seafood from pristine waters (anchovies, abalone shellfish, squids, crabs ...), caught from seawaters or harvested in floating farms. It is great to spend vacation here. The warm waters of Kuroshio current and their cold counter stream of Oyashio from the north have brought off a rich marine

fauna, discovered by those early emigrants from Fujian who in 1604 built the first Matsu temple in thanks to their protectress Mazu.



Penghu's repulsing rock castles are the oldest time window of Taiwan. It was here that some 150 million years ago the Eurasian continent began to break up, allowing magma to creep through the earth crust's cracks and to form undersea pancake plateaus. Only later has the Central Mountain chains emerged from their heavy deepwater sediment charge that today form the main island's backbone.

Densely industrialized and populated (with over 23 million people on 36.000 km²), Taiwan has become a global player, but also retains an abidingly bucolic appearance. Nothing could subdue the sensitive nature, neither strong trade winds and summer monsoons, humidity and heat, typhoons, flooding and earthquakes, nor the overall exploitation by man, instead silent sensations are hidden all around.

For example the world's single museum of full-fledged Chinese culture (the old Palace Museum) or the 101 skyscraper in the capital city Taipei. Or the 17th century heritage sites of Dutch traders in Tainan. Or the green-blue belts of the Ocean City Kaohsiung. Once the key site of heavy industry and pollution, old Takao (Kaohsiung) attracts now with forested coral hills and open waterfronts along the country's largest seaport. Nearby on Gaoping River, Tang palace-style halls remind of the bygone Golden Age of Buddhism at Foguang Shan ("Buddha Light Mountain") monastery, a remarkable international Mahayana center combining Eight Schools of Chinese Buddhism.

On the adjacent forelands extend the fields of Meinong, home of southern Taiwan's Hakka community. Their backdrop is the towering Central Mountain Range, which has overall 165 peaks of over 3000m above sea level (Mount Jade: 3952m), steep valleys, spectacular hiking trails, and far-flung settlements inhabited by mountain people such as the Baiwan tribe at Maolin or Shandimen.

The island's southern tip is preserved in Kenting National Park (one out of eight NPs) surprising with tropical flora, beaches and a bustling resort. Its cramped tourism is now competing with Sun-Moon Lake, the classic uplands highlight in the very center, or with Taroko gorge, the awe inspiring marble ravine to the northeast. As spectacular the diversified sceneries are, as exciting are the ethnics, their cultures, languages and religions, evidencing an enviable harmony. Some 12,000 years ago the earliest dwellers had arrived, followed by those Austronesians who had spread all over the endless Indo-Pacific oceans. Taiwan had become their northernmost destination, contested only thousands of years later, when in 17th century Han-Chinese immigrants arrived.



More Chinese settlers followed after 1875, as well as after World War II (the “external provincials” or waishengren) when Japan’s 50-year long rule had ended. The social amalgamation now shows a mixture of 2% “aborigines”, 14% Hakka (Kejia) and 70% ho-lo-lan (the “HuangHe - LuoHe” people) whose last homeland once was southern Fujian.

Next to the diverse vernaculars come the gaudy temples with their hard to discern deities and protectors that contrast with the more prosaic multi-denominational churches mainly spread across the mountainous regions. Han cultures, intermingled in noisy festivals, are also experienced in drama performing street theatres, or demonstrated by the countless pilgrim streams that satisfy minds and economies alike.

How many Mazu birthdays are celebrated throughout the year, and how lavish is the pomp for “King of Yue” who is sent to the sea in gorgeous boats flaring off in untamed seawaters? Along with the ancient Austronesian cultures the classic Han Chinese heritage has miraculously survived, embedded in an enchanting nature with lush vegetation (banyan trees, the dateless false cypresses and hinoki trees ...), abundant wildlife (muntjacs, Formosan Sika deer, black bears, pangolins, Macaque monkeys ...) and exotic sceneries. Taiwan is truly a gateway of discovery.

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Date: 2011-06-27

Article link:

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