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Luminaries are Among Us

When Jacky, a passionate entrepreneur in his thirties, talks about his innovative upcycled charcoal and his sustainable carpentry training camp, his eyes light up with enthusiasm. The same level of intensity and excitement is evident when you encounter Michael, the 70-something chairman of Taiwan's leading inkjet producer and owner of many patented inventions. You can spot a sparkle in his eyes when he shares his latest breakthrough in clean-air solutions.

These remarkable individuals possess qualities and characteristics that are truly exceptional, making them easily recognizable as luminaries. You must have encountered such individuals before and experienced their unique presence firsthand. And you can rest assured – they are not a dying breed; luminaries are among us.

During my time as AmCham Taiwan President, I have had the privilege of working with many illuminating leaders like yourself. It is your unwavering commitment and inspiring guidance that have motivated me to seek new heights and encouraged me to add distinction to my own and others' work.

Through our recently launched initiative, the AmCham ESG Co-Learning Program, you had the foresight to set new milestones for the Chamber. Together, we've successfully held our first mentorship session, constructively opening a free flow of ideas between large and small companies. In the coming months, we plan to host a series of ESG best practice sharing sessions during mayoral visits in Hsinchu, Taichung, and Taipei with the goal of engaging local governments.

We are building something new and meaningful. Brick by brick, we are amplifying members' ESG achievements and establishing synergy between the Taiwan government and local businesses. Project by project, we are becoming the international platform that puts Taiwan's ESG efforts on the map. We are constructing a future where sustainability, social responsibility, and good governance are at the forefront.

In the realm of industry and issue advocacy, you bring to life a two-pronged approach to government engagement by advocating for overarching high-level issues across membership while also addressing industry-specific concerns. You stand to support many fundamental and critical points, such as calling for swift implementation of agreements under the U.S.-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade, asking for solid enforcement of good regulatory governance, and advocating for the signing of a U.S.-Taiwan double taxation avoidance agreement.

You pave the way in networking by hosting the first Cancer Summit, creating a platform for multilevel in-depth dialogue between the U.S., UK, and Taiwan governments and private sectors, fostering opportunities for future scientific exchanges and partnerships. Through every new path we embark on, you lead by example and showcase how public-private partnerships can unite communities and drive progress for all.

Our in-house luminaries are the ones who take action to support ideas and manage administrative details at large events such as our Hsieh Nien Fan banquet and intimate gatherings like committee meetings. You are my partners in ensuring every choreographed detail unfolds as planned, place cards are appropriately set, meals are served warm, water glasses are full, and guests leave with genuine smiles. You are my thoughtful colleagues who expeditiously record members' happy and memorable moments and commemorate the lessons learned and inspirations to be shared with others.

You are my teammates who help shape and strengthen our communication with internal and external stakeholders. You are the ones who, before the *White Paper* was sent to print, sat silently side by side and in great concentration to double and triple-check the spelling and the meaning of every reference and word used, safeguarding the integrity and principles that AmCham has proudly upheld for the past 27 years in issuing this most well-read advocacy document.

Above all, I owe my gratitude to the AmCham team of experts in admin and human capital, membership, marketing and events, publications and communications, and government and public affairs as you teach me the meaning of *teammate* and the significance of *people first*. When a young intern or contractor joins our daily work, you make every effort to mentor, train, and care for these young minds. You generously offer knowledge, skills, and career advice that will no doubt stay with them for a lifetime.

Thank you, all luminaries. Thank you for giving me this unforgettable, most rewarding opportunity to work with you and serve you. You are not only an indispensable part of the AmCham family and the future of Taiwan but also an important part of my world. Thank you!

Amy Chang
President,
American Chamber of Commerce in Taiwan

Splash into Summer at Shangri-La Taipei

Nestled among the trees on Dunhua South Road, Shangri-La Far Eastern, Taipei is a hotel destination worth considering the next time you're looking for a place to stay in Taipei City.

"The beauty of the hotel is that it's located only 10 minutes from Taipei 101 and the Xinyi District shopping and business area," says Marco Vazzoler, Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts area manager for Taiwan and general manager of Shangri-La Far Eastern, Taipei. "Our rooms have an excellent view of 101 and the area, and since we're located in a more residential part of the city, all of the everyday conveniences are very close."

The hotel's interior is luxuriously decorated, its comfortable rooms providing stylish elegance with Chinese elements. Aside from being a great place to call a second home for your next Taipei trip, Shangri-La also boasts an impressive variety of culinary choices, with five restaurants and three lounges to choose from allowing you to select the venue that best suits your taste. With everything from Italian to Chinese, Shanghainese, Cantonese, and even Japanese cuisine and an all-day buffet, you're sure to find the apple of your eye at one of the restaurants at Shangri-La Far Eastern.

This summer until September 3, the hotel is offering a special Summer Water World family room package. This package includes a family club floor dedicated to fun facilities and activities such as race car simulators, Nintendo Switch games, cooking and handicraft classes, and a playroom. For those who would like to explore the city, there is another special package with MRT and Maokong Gondola passes, dining credit for use at restaurants, and more.

Those who wish to cool off can choose between two pools – a summer pool on the seventh floor and an outdoor pool located on the roof with breathtaking views of Taipei City – to create unique memories while enjoying their summer stay. Guests can also attend the Summer Pool Party on Saturdays and Sundays from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Whether guests come for a wedding or corporate event, or choose to take advantage of the hotel's gym, massage services, saunas, and steam rooms, Shangri-La Far Eastern, Taipei strives to leave guests with memories from their stay.

"We're looking to provide our guests with an experience," says Vazzoler. "When they are in their room, when they go out to eat, we want to create an experience and make our guests feel that they are being taken care of. Of course, you need to sleep well and eat well, but we like to take that the extra mile by creating memorable experiences."

In addition to the Summer Water World event, Shangri-La's restaurants are welcoming the season with special events,

including its "four-hands" Cantonese cuisine collaboration between the head chefs of the Shang Palace, located at the Shangri-La Far Eastern, Taipei, and the Moon Pavilion, situated on the 48th floor of Mega 50, Banqiao's first international five-star dining complex. This gastronomic event will see the two chefs spending two weeks at each location, offering a curated menu of Cantonese delicacies.

In September of this year, the hotel will also welcome a visiting chef from one Michelin star Shang Palace of Shangri-La Singapore. In November, its Marco Polo restaurant, located on the hotel's 38th floor, will be led by a two-starred Michelin guest chef serving a special Italian menu.

"We are very proud of our restaurants, and we consider Shangri-La Far Eastern, Taipei as a culinary hub for first-time and returning guests to enjoy an unforgettable meal, and we continue to innovate with culinary events to cater the most sophisticated appetite," Vazzoler says.

Despite the difficulties experienced by the hotel industry during the pandemic, Vazzoler and his team managed to cope with the adversity and find new offerings for customers. Now, the team is ready to continue providing guests with unique and luxurious travel and dining experiences.

"Indeed, during the pandemic period, we learned to become flexible, dynamic, and to reinvent ourselves," says Vazzoler. "After the lifting of travel restrictions, we saw the quick spark in demand as people yearned to resume travel and spend time with family and friends while having fun and relaxing. Therefore, at Shangri-La, we are providing a variety of options that appeal to different types of travelers."

TEA, TIGERS, AND TEMPLES IN LUKANG

Lukang, which once served as an important trading port for Taiwan, now sees tourists flocking to enjoy traditional fare and historic sites.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DINAH GARDNER

Its name may mean deer harbor (鹿港), but today Lukang (sometimes rendered Lugang) is more a city of birds. In the shifting hours when day becomes night and night becomes day, the winding, brick-paved streets of this historical town surprisingly fill with birdsong.

Facing China halfway down Taiwan's west coast in Changhua County, Lukang was one of the island's most important ports in the 17th and 18th centuries. Its ships were laden with rice, sugar, cloth, and timber. Prosperous merchants built themselves mansions here, while a growing number of migrants from across the Strait fueled the demand for ever grander temples. Lukang was a dynamic center of culture and craftsmanship until the 19th century when the harbor silted up, railroads opened new transport options, and the capital was moved from Tainan in the south to Taipei up north.

These days it is tourists – not traders – who flock to Lukang. They come to admire the old twisting streets and heritage buildings, renovated and converted into teashops and souvenir stores. And they come to marvel at two of the most stunning temples in Taiwan – Lukang Tianhou Temple (天后宮, also known as Mazu Temple) and Lungshan Temple (龍山寺). In terms of visitor experiences, Lukang is a bit of a crossover between New Taipei's old hill mining town Jiufen and Taipei's traditional shophouse district along Dihua Street.

Most people come for a day trip, but Lukang is considerably more enjoyable if you can squeeze in an overnight stay. Not only will you be able to experience the joys of the dawn-and-dusk birdsong, but outside of the 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. tourist rush, you can amble the old streets in peace, visit a glass temple that lights up only at night, and save the souvenir shopping for the following morning.

An early morning train from Taipei with a bus connection (No. 6396) from the Taichung HSR station should get you into Lukang before 10 a.m. Arriving at Lukang's Fuxing Road bus depot, you can take a five-minute walk to the Lukang Township Northern Visitor Center, which has useful English-language maps. Another five-minute walk from here will take you to Tianhou Temple – an excellent place to start your visit.

Lukang is no metropolis, but its streets seemingly curve without rhyme or reason (there's even a lane called Nine-Turns Lane, or 九曲巷), making navigation a somewhat tricky task. It helps to know that all the main sights are anchored around Zhongshan Road, which runs north to south. Bisecting Zhongshan is Minquan Road, which heads west to east. Roughly, you can explore north of Minquan in the morning and south in the afternoon.

Lukang Tianhou Temple is one of the liveliest temples you will see in Taiwan. Dedicated to worship of Mazu (媽祖), goddess of the sea, this impressive complex probably dates back to sometime in the 17th century. The interior hosts a plethora of deities, several serene Mazu statues, bulging-eyed generals, chubby flying fairies, and Yue Lao (月老), the god of love and marriage, for those who need a little help with affairs of the heart.

But the temple's forecourt, strung with red lanterns, is where all the action is. That morning we arrived at a cacophony of celebration. Amid crashing cymbals and beating drums, explosions of firecrackers punctuated the din without warning. Moments later, techno

was blasting out of a sound system on wheels propelled by Heineken-drinking volunteers decked out in green T-shirted uniforms. Behind them was a sedan chair borne by similarly-clothed devotees that bounced and flared flaming gas Mad Max style.

A row of cannons, emblazoned with tiger motifs, let out bursts of gunpowder blasts. Milling among the crowds were young men in silky costumes with extravagantly painted faces, feathered headdresses, and scepters – I spotted one tiger and a bird. To me, it was thunderously festive, but apparently, this was just another day at the busy temple.

Outside the main gate is a cluster of restaurants and snack stalls serving Lukang's famous oyster omelets, deep-fried shrimp, sesame buns, and taro cakes – fist-sized buns of minced meat (vegetarian versions are available). Here you can also buy another Lukang specialty – the ox-tongue biscuit (牛舌餅, *niushebing*). Despite its name, it's not made from ox tongue. Rather, it is a long flaky pastry with a moist, doughy center and flavored with taro, strawberry, five spices, or sesame.

The streets west will lead you into the historic quarter comprised of Putou Street (which morphs into Yaolin Street as it approaches Minquan Road), Houche Lane, and a few impossibly narrow alleyways. Take your time exploring, enjoying the many beautiful doorways with painted wood and stone details. Look up to spot hanging orchids in alien colors and timelessly elegant swallowtail roofs.

Afternoon delights

There is plenty to buy in Lukang. You can bag some fresh handmade noodles dried in courtyards in the sunshine and stretchy like elastic bands. There are embroidered red silk baby shoes so small that a pair fits snugly into the palm of one hand. Traditional toy shops dominate, hawking spinning tops, painted yo-yos, and animals on sticks.

You'll also find retro pinball parlors, where the prizes are sausages, and photo studios where you can slip on a *cheongsam* (or *qipao*) and pose in front of a trellis of fake flowers and a giant plastic flamingo. The 150-year-old Cheng Yu Chen Bakery (鄭玉珍餅舖, No. 23 Putou Street) sells gift boxes of pastries, including its famous phoenix-eye cakes (鳳眼糕, *fengyangao*) – tiny almond-shaped treats that taste a bit like sugary dust.

If it's a hot day and the crowds are getting to you, pop into one of the many flour tea shops on this stretch. Flour tea or *miancha* (麵茶) is a sweetened cereal-like drink served iced, hot, or as a dessert. Forgo takeout and slip inside to have your drink. The establishment at No. 6 Putou Street resembles an old 1920s Shanghai saloon with elaborately painted screens, wooden benches, and an old apothecary-like counter. I opted for a refreshing iced *miancha* (NT$50), which had puffed grain bobbing on the top and a pleasant wheaty paste on the bottom.

As you near the end of Yaolin Street, just before reaching Minquan Road, you will notice people lining up to photograph themselves next to a half well that juts out of the side of a wall. Tourist literature explains that the well's owner constructed it this way to allow "the poor" outside his mansion to have access to the water.

Before you cross Minquan Road, if you're in the market for hand-crafted lanterns, nip up Zhongshan Road to the Wu Tun-Hou Lantern Shop (吳敦厚燈舖) at No. 310. This shop even has its own Wikipedia page. Giant yellow lanterns adorned with red calligraphy and stretched across wicker frames go for around NT$10,000. Now staffed by the affable son of founder Master Wu, Wu Tun-Hou is adorned with posters showing its most famous customers, including Lady Gaga and President Tsai Ing-wen.

The old lanes continue south of Minquan Road. The maze is messier here, but also mellower, with less commerce and less foot traffic, although you'll see fleets of bicycle taxis trundling past. There are some surprises – twisting old

Breast Touching Lane is also known as Gentleman Lane, as a true gentleman would wait for a lady to pass first.

Husheng Temple, also known as the Glass Mazu Temple, is made of 70,000 pieces of glass.

trees, hand pumps that still spout water, hidden cafés, and renovated mansions.

Nine-Turns Lane is Lukang's famous meandering alleyway. Notice the curved walls and a small, stone bridge-like structure called Shih Yih Hall (十宜樓), a watering hole for Lukang's poets and writers in times past. Farther south is Breast Touching Lane (摸乳巷), a long and narrow alley that gets its name from the inevitable brushing of bodies when passing someone coming the other way. We waited until the coast was clear before venturing inside!

A short walk southwest takes you to Lukang's second great temple – Lungshan. Initially constructed in the 18th century, Lungshan Temple is a peaceful haven with spreading trees, moon gates, and multiple courtyards. Sadly, the front of the temple complex was being repaired when we visited, which meant the caisson ceiling, an exquisite octagonal wooden structure, was out of bounds.

Wander the halls of Lungshan and admire the wooden and stone carvings featuring writhing dragons, leaping tigers, and dancing fish. Note the several entrances and exits from the walled compound and the numerous shaded spots to rest and watch the faithful.

Swing back around and head up Zhongshan Road until you reach the Ding Family Mansion (丁家古厝) at No. 132. This hauntingly lovely Fujian-style courtyard house, with smoky blue painted doors, was the home of wealthy Muslim traders. Toward the front stands an ancestral shrine, a gallery, and one@Lukang, a dessert parlor serving ice cream and sorbet. The back quarters house office spaces, a library with papercuts on the walls, and a storeroom piled high with discarded furniture.

After leaving through the back entrance of the Ding house, you may experience a sense of déjà vu if you've traveled here from Taipei. The Lukang Folk Arts Museum building next door, built around the time of World War I, was designed by Matsunosuke Moriyama, the same Japanese architect responsible for Taipei's Presidential Office Building. The two structures share the same baroque style.

The museum is housed in what was the ancestral home of the Koo family that became prominent in Taiwanese business circles (their many companies include Taiwan Cement and CTBC Bank) and politics (in the 1990s, Koo Chen-fu was Taiwan's lead negotiator with China). The myriad items in the museum collection, including wedding carriages, impossibly tiny shoes for bound feet, four-poster beds covered with pink silk, tasseled tobacco pouches, and a magic mirror used for exorcisms, were all Koo family possessions. The artifacts are accompanied by decent English explanations, and the corridors and courtyards are well worth exploring. Note that photography is not allowed inside the building.

On the corner of Zhongshan and Minzu Roads sits Lukang's most famous bakery, Yu Zhen Zhai (玉珍齋), where tourists descend to buy gift boxes of pastries. If you're in the mood for a coffee, continue a few minutes up Zhongshan Road to Skinny Café (瘦子咖啡) at No. 163, a renovated shophouse intact with period dark wooden furniture and a small open courtyard.

Before dusk falls, head to the industrial park to see the Taiwan Husheng Temple (玻璃媽祖廟, also known as the Glass Mazu Temple), about eight kilometers west of Lukang's urban center. It's easiest if you have your own transport, but if you don't, take the infrequent 6936 bus that leaves from the bus station on Fuxing Road and goes directly to the temple. During the day this elaborate structure, made from 70,000 pieces of glass, is a little underwhelming, but as night falls, the neon lights create an entrancing glow.

Come evening, Lukang is finally emptied of its tourist hordes. Strolling through the old streets at this time is truly a magical experience. A cat slinks into the shadows, a door creaks on its hinges, and the soft smell of incense tingles the nostrils. Above, strings of lanterns glow orange, and the sound of birds sweetens the air.

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A WALK THROUGH HISTORY ALONG THE CAOLING TRAIL

The Caoling Historic Trail, which offers some of Taiwan's most spectacular views of the Pacific Ocean, provides hikers with a rare glimpse into Yilan County's early Chinese colonization.

BY JANE RICKARDS

The Caoling Historic Trail (草嶺古道) is over two centuries old. The path, which today is 10 kilometers long and crosses the border between New Taipei City and Yilan, started as a messenger path for Taiwan's indigenous peoples. Later, Chinese immigrants and officials developed a complex network of routes connecting Tamsui and Yilan throughout the 19th century.

In recent years, officials and volunteers have retraced these old networks to rediscover Taiwan's early cultural roots. They've turned the rediscovered paths into a series of hiking trails completed in 2018. The central government has dubbed these trails the Danlan Old Trail (淡蘭古道), with *dan* (淡) representing Tamsui (淡水, *danshui*) and *lan* (蘭) standing for Yilan (宜蘭). The Caoling Historic Trail is part of this system. Compared with some other paths, it has more remaining relics from the Qing era.

Huang Da-feng, chief of the Tourism Planning Division of New Taipei City Government's Tourism and Travel Department, explains that three main routes from Tamsui to Yilan were developed in the 19th century. Tea traders often used the southernmost trail, while the middle trail tended to be taken by settlers from mainland China. The northern paths, including the Caoling Historic Trail, were near the coast and commonly traversed by Qing officials and soldiers. Qing colonists began work on the trail, which involved carving through mountains to reach Yilan, in 1807.

Once up and running and sanctioned by the Qing court, the Caoling Historic Trail became Taiwan's most frequented mountain path, according to the Ministry of Culture. Huang says officials and soldiers needed to be near the sea to guard against ravaging pirates, while the trail was also crucial in quelling multiple rebellions. In 1812, the Qing dynasty set up Kavalan Prefecture, which was situated in modern-day Yilan. The trail was used for deliveries of mail and official documents between Tamsui and Kavalan.

Tommy Lee, a volunteer with the Northeast and Yilan Coast National Scenic Area Administration (NYCNSAA), notes that traders also used the trail to get to Yilan, for example to exchange needles for deerskins with indigenous people. Bandits would sometimes lurk in the forest as well, hoping to ambush wealthy travelers, says Lin Yu-shih, an officer with the administration. "It used to be very dangerous," she notes.

On a sultry day in June, I began the hike at the trail's northern entry point in Yuanwangkeng Water Park (遠望坑親水公園) near Fulong Beach in New Taipei City. The park offers verdant terraced fields, wooden pavilions for shelter, and a lotus pond surrounded by mountains. It was my second time hiking this trail, which takes a moderately fit person about three to four hours to walk.

While Caoling Historic Trail is uphill, it's not steep, and the average person would find it a relatively easy hike. But there are no roads or stores along the way, so you need to stock up on water and food. Lighting fires, cooking, and camping are prohibited along the way. There's also no lighting along the path, so be sure to finish the hike before it

gets dark. Storms and mist roll in from the sea, and the weather can be highly unpredictable, so you would be wise to bring rain gear.

I set forth into the forest along a narrow concrete path next to a bubbling brook. As I left Yuanwangkeng Water Park behind, chirps from cicadas and other insects gradually grew louder. I noticed a profusion of butterflies flitting from leaf to leaf on the trees – a black and white paper kite butterfly, a great orange tip, and a black and turquoise common bluebottle. Along the trail, I also spotted several birds, including a Taiwan blue magpie in the trees and a green, red, and blue Taiwan barbet. Lee says you can often also glimpse other birds, such as crested serpent eagles, grey treepies, and Eurasian kingfishers, along the way. An exhibition at the Dali Visitors' Center at the trail's southern end describes how pangolins and muntjacs (a kind of small deer) can be found in the trail's surroundings.

A few signs are scattered along the trail warning of attacks from Tigerhead bees, otherwise known as Asian giant hornets, the world's largest. Their sting has been compared to a hot nail driven into the flesh. Signs in English and Chinese warn travelers not to throw away wrappers from sweet snacks, as they attract hornets, and that perfume and cologne should be avoided. Travelers are also urged to keep their eyes and ears open for – and keep their distance from – hornet nests.

Commander Liu Mingdeng is said to have inscribed the four characters 雄鎮蠻煙 (boldly quell the wild mists) on this large rock formation.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Boldly quell the mist

The first sign of the early Qing presence I encountered wasn't marked on the map. It was a small, red-tiled shrine on the side of the path with the characters 百姓公 (*baixinggong*), which can be translated loosely as "common people's temple."

Annie Tai, an officer with the NYCNSAA, explains that these kinds of shrines, commemorating mainland migrants who came to Taiwan alone and died without their families with them, are scattered across Taiwan. Tai says this particular shrine refers to victims of a conflict between two groups of early Han immigrants, one from Zhangzhou and one from Quanzhou, both in Fujian Province. Their rivalry reached a peak in 1850 and only subsided after 1860. "The temple is to let them rest in peace," Tai says.

The path turned away from the brook, and I followed stone stairs upwards into more woods. I wore ordinary sneakers – no special hiking boots were needed, but the damp stones were slippery, and I had to tread carefully. Trees with lush tree ferns sprouting from their boughs hung over the pathway.

I then reached the Qing-era Xiongzhenmanyan Monument (雄鎮蠻煙碑), the largest stone inscription in Taiwan listed as a Grade 3 historic site, meaning it's considered to be of some merit but is not yet qualified as a monument, despite its name.

GETTING THERE AND AWAY:

Via car: There are two small parking lots near the Yuanwangkeng Water Park at the trail's northern entry point. There are also parking lots at the southern end of the trail at the Dali Visitors' Center.

Via public transport: To get to the trail's northern entry point, you must first take a train to Fulong. Taxis usually wait outside the station, and I found that taking a taxi to the park was the quickest option. The ride cost about NT$200. For those who wish to take a bus from Fulong Station to Yuanwangkeng, the F831, 791, and F823 buses on weekdays and an extra tourist bus on weekends stop at scenic spots.

To get to the trail's southern entry point, take a train to Dali.

In 1867, a Hunan-born Taiwan regional commander called Liu Mingdeng was inspecting the trail. He was traveling to Yilan along the winding path when he encountered stinging rain and thick mist. This experience made him conscious of the hardships faced by the Han Chinese in developing this part of Taiwan. Liu inscribed four characters (雄鎮蠻煙) with the meaning "Boldly quell the wild mists," on a huge stone lying on the mountain's flank to encourage travelers encountering hardships on the journey and frighten mountain demons. Farther up is a picnic area with a wooden pavilion and restrooms.

Eventually, the forest flanking both sides of the trail gradually turned into cliffs covered in silver grass. Looking ahead, another wooden pavilion could be seen in the distance. The trail's highest point was in sight, but before I reached it, I arrived at the Tiger Inscription, a single character inscribed onto a rock. I stopped to admire the graceful calligraphy.

When Liu arrived at this point on the trail, he was surrounded by such strong wind and fog that he could not determine the right direction. As the story goes, Liu impulsively picked up a piece of silver grass and drew 虎 (*hu*) for "tiger," inspired by a line from the *I Ching* (易經), or *Book of Changes*, that says, "Clouds obey the dragon. Winds obey the tiger." Liu believed depicting a tiger might suppress the wind and make it safe for people to travel through the area. The character was inscribed on stone and is also listed as a Grade 3 historic site.

Tiger Inscription.

PHOTO: KYLE SAGE-COX

The trail offers spectacular views that make the walk worthwhile.

PHOTO: JANE RICKARDS

At Caoling's highest point, hikers are rewarded with the trail's most stunning views: sweeping panoramas of the vast Pacific Ocean surrounding Guishan Island (龜山島), also known as Turtle Island, along with woody cliffs that drop dramatically to the shore.

There's also an Earth God Shrine (土地公廟), built in 1925, with bunches of flowers freshly placed on either side. In front of it stands a boundary tablet that marks the dividing line between New Taipei and Yilan counties. The shrine is said by locals to protect passing travelers.

Every November, the surrounding silver grass blossoms with white wispy featherlike flowers. The NYCNSAA has held an annual Silver Grass Season Festival every November since 2002 to raise awareness about the Caoling Historic Trail while offering activities such as guided tours.

I stayed on the path as it left the silver grass cliffs and descended downward into more forest. Eventually, I reached a site labeled "Remains of an old inn" (客棧遺址), where a popular tavern for travelers to rest once stood. At first glance, not much can be seen aside from a modern stone wall, but if you look carefully at the undergrowth, you can see some of it covers old stones. A ginger tea stand is set up for visitors during the annual festival.

Finally, I passed a coffee shop and continued on the forest trail, which eventually flattened out. The trail's end is marked by the stately Dali Tiengong Temple (大里天公廟). Facing the Pacific Ocean, this temple is devoted to the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝), also known as Yudi. The Jade Emperor is the supreme deity in Chinese folk religion.

At the Dali Visitors' Center at this endpoint in Dali Village, Lee and Tai showed me an exhibit devoted to silver grass that's been closed since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. It introduces the growth of silver grass in the area and how it can be used in everyday life, even describing its potential for use as a biofuel. A replica of the Tiger Inscription stands in front of the center's gates for visitors to make rubbings as souvenirs.

The charmingly quaint Dali Railway Station (大里火車站) is almost an attraction itself. The small station and railway lines are about 10 meters from the sea. Some prefer to take the train to this station and hike along the trail from its southern entry point, as you can swim at Fulong Beach afterward. However, walking southward along the trail towards Yilan, as I did, is much more scenic.

UNLEASH YOUR INNER ADVENTURER IN TAIWAN'S OUTDOORS

Freediving, paragliding, canyoning, and rock climbing are exhilarating and easily accessible ways to discover more of Taiwan.

BY NEIL ARMSTRONG

Taiwan offers plentiful natural beauty. You can drink in the green just about anywhere here, whether by hiking up a mountain or glancing up at one from the city streets. But if you're feeling a bit more adventurous, many exhilarating ways are available to get into Taiwan's environment while improving your fitness and mental acuity.

Whether you want to fly, climb, take in waterfalls, or jump into the ocean this summer, there are plenty of activities that can get your pulse racing or slow things down. So get off the couch, put your phone down, get outside, and immerse yourself in this island's gob-smacking natural wonders.

Rock climbing

Scaling a cliff, desperately seeking toe holds, and hoping you're excused from the laws of gravity might seem daunting at first. But with the right safety equipment and expert help, it can be a fun game of mental and physical chess, stresses Kelly Khiew of The Bivy Taiwan Rock Climbing Guides, a popular climbers' center in New Taipei City.

"Climbing requires both physical and mental fitness and strength, self-awareness, climbing techniques, flexibility, and coordination," she says. "It's a blend of dancing, gymnastics, and problem-solving in sometimes high-stress situations."

Using the sea-hugging cliffs of Long Dong (龍洞岩場, or Dragon Cave) on Taiwan's northeast coast, Khiew coaches climbing techniques and guides various routes. The Long Dong cliffs feature cracks in which climbers can place their gear to prevent falls. As one of the few locations in the region to offer this style of ascent, Long Dong is a popular climbing destination.

"Long Dong offers a unique climbing experience that is wild, adventurous, and athletic," says Khiew. "It is made up of Sziling sandstone, one of the most ancient and hardest rocks in northern Taiwan, making it an ideal rock-climbing spot. Spring (March through May) and fall through early winter (September through mid-December) are considered

the best times to climb in this area.

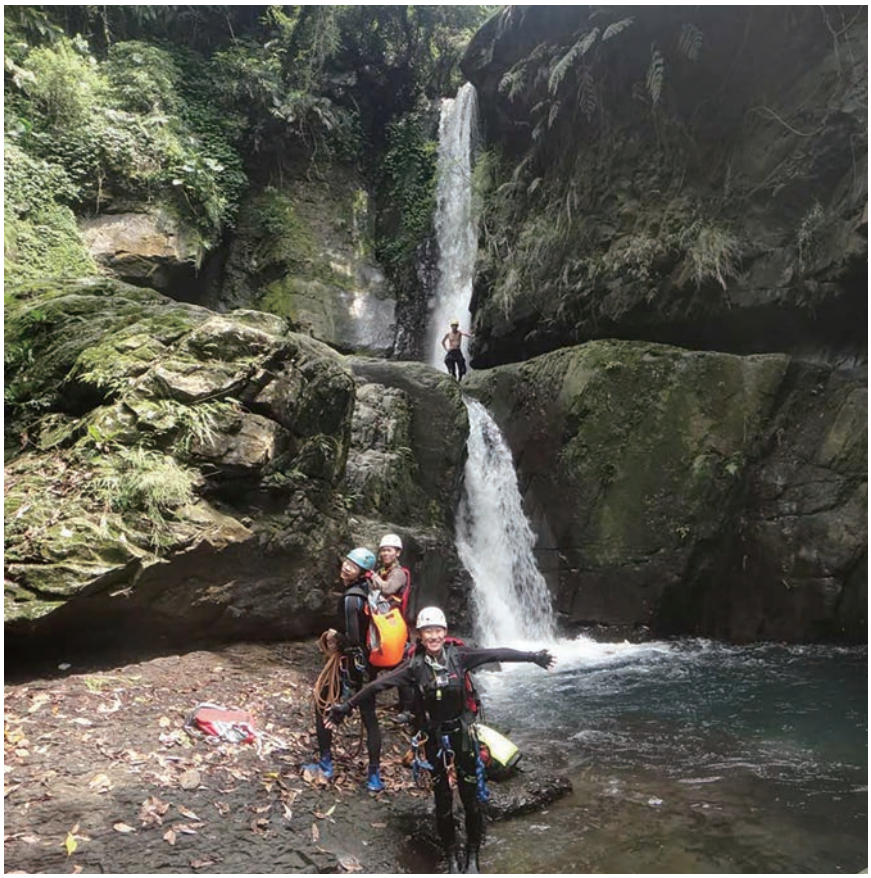
Long Dong offers numerous routes for both beginners and experts. Beginners are advised to start low and slow, gain altitude, and attempt trickier routes as their confidence builds. Part of rock climbing's allure is that it's achievable. There are many ways to ascend a rock face, and with time and training, your skills will improve. The feeling of getting to the top of a route, grasping the solid rock, breathing in the fresh sea air, and drinking in the view, is a prize worth striving for.

Website: www.taiwanrockclimbing.com/

Paragliding

Paragliding will see you floating through the sky, relaxing in a comfy cloth chair suspended by a thousand slender strings under a billowing parachute or paragliding wing while watching the world below from a blissful distance.

At least that's what I told myself while strapped into a harness, perched on a cliff, looking at a lush green valley below. A long way down, I could see the landing area. "At least the grass looks soft," I thought. I looked over at my relentlessly grinning instructor. He gave the signal to go, and we started running toward the cliff edge. We were locked into a harness together. It's not like I could back-pedal. Believe me, I tried. Still, after leaping and finding I wasn't plunging to my death, a mixture of excitement, calm (let's call it adrenalZen), and the sheer thrill of living in the moment swept over me.



Chasing thermals to gain altitude, you can soar, swoop, and bring out your inner eagle. Paragliding has a low learning curve and the equipment is light. Taiwan has roughly a half-dozen locations suitable for paragliding. Near Taipei, these include the coastal towns of Yilan and Wanli. In eastern Taiwan, Taitung's Hualien and Luye offer coastal and mountain areas suitable for paragliding. Puli is an excellent choice in central Taiwan, and Pingtung's Saijia Township is also a viable option farther south. The coastal areas are perfect during summertime, offering stellar views and smooth sailing. In winter, when the coastal winds are stronger, inland spots are better options.

Those are the recommendations from instructor Chris Yeh of Fly Taiwan Paragliding. He was one of the first to paraglide in Taiwan, qualifying for his license more than 25 years ago when he was based in the U.S. with the United States Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association.

Yeh also offers tandem lessons near Jiqi Beach (磯崎海水浴場) south of Hualien, where the launching point is 450 meters above sea level and coastal views greet you from below. You'll end your flight by landing on the beach. It's hard to find a better place in Taiwan for a touchdown.

While clipped in and standing at the mountainside, you might question what you got yourself into. But as you run and jump, the wing inflates, and you find yourself hanging in the air. You're now airborne in a silent world, enjoying views few get to experience with an enormous smile on your face.

Website: www.flytaiwanpara.com/

Canyoning and river tracing

Wading across streams, clambering over rocks and boulders, and checking out waterfalls along with lush nooks and river-carved crannies is what canyoning is all about. As one of the most mountainous destinations in Asia, com-

plete with towering peaks, tropical forests, and plunging valleys, Taiwan offers a fantastic landscape for wild waterways.

Many of Taiwan's canyons are easily accessible, and canyons can be found in every county. Beginners can – with accompanying guides – jump into pools, slide down natural water slides, and rappel beside waterfalls.

There are several options for canyoning in northern Taiwan, including Yi-Hsing Creek (義興溪) in Taoyuan – known for its three abseiling pitches (routes that can be climbed using just one rope), a waterfall, and a swimmable waterhole. In northern Yilan County, there's Shipan Trail (石磐步道), which hosts a waterfall as high as 20 meters with six pitches. A little farther south, also in Yilan, the crystal-clear Lu-Pi Creek (鹿皮溪) boasts a rockslide, numerous rock pools to swim in, and plenty of easy climbs. The most accessible canyoning route finishes at the spectacular 50-meter Jinyue Waterfall (金岳瀑布). With a six-meter jump into deep water, it's particularly popular in summer.

Due to their topography, Hualien and Taroko Gorge offer some of Taiwan's most stunning locations to explore these raw, water-carved river canyons.

One of the most accessible spots is Emerald Valley (翡翠谷), which can be reached via a Japanese-era pedestrian tunnel and a riverside path that takes you straight to an artificial waterfall. If you head farther up the track to a natural waterfall by jumping from rock to rock, you can find a refreshing pool to swim in. You can also enjoy views of Hualien's mountain ranges along the way. Be aware that Emerald Valley can be busy on weekends, so arrive early.

Hiking in the summer heat isn't everyone's idea of fun, but it's an adventure worth embarking on when the benefits include being immersed in nature and swimming in cool, forest-lined pools. Canyoning allows you to de-stress and leave urban life behind for a little while.

Be aware that regardless of the location you choose or the route you take, river tracing can be as challenging as it is wet. Always go with experienced guides who know the area well and are attuned to any potential dangers, be it surging waters or slippery rocks. If required, you'll also be supplied with safety equipment like a helmet, life jacket, wetsuit, or river trekking shoes.

Websites:
For northern Taiwan:
www.shawatw.com/en/
For Hualien area:
www.hualien-adventures.com

Freediving

It's as simple as taking a breath, being able to swim, and believing in yourself. If you've got these abilities, you're ready for freediving – the art of diving on a single breath. The silent, underwater world is there for you to experience, going as deep as you feel comfortable.

On the physical side, freediving is a gateway to a healthier lifestyle. Your joints experience less pressure when underwater, and as it's an activity with no impact, unlike running, freediving lets you increase your endurance and vitality with fewer injuries. It also helps strengthen your lungs through exercises that improve oxygen capacity. As you gently push your body's physical boundaries, you'll also test your mental strength.

Unlike almost every sport on the planet, where the goal is to get your heart racing and increase adrenaline levels, the goal of freediving is the complete opposite. A relaxed body performs better.

There are numerous breathing techniques that help prepare the body for going on an underwater dive. Many are related to yoga and feature a combination of belly, diaphragm, rib, and chest expansions and contractions. The most important thing is always to do these exercises with someone beside you, and taking courses with professionals is essential to learn the correct and safe way to breathe, stay calm, and lower your heart rate.

For freediving, you ideally want a dive site that's clear, calm, and easily accessible. Thankfully, Taiwan has an abundance of these. Kenting and the surrounding Hengchun peninsula are recommended in the south. Green, Orchid, and the Penghu Islands also have good locations, although winds are an issue come winter. Taichung's 21-meter deep purpose-built pool DiveCube is another option.

The crown jewel of freediving in Taiwan is Xiaoliuqiu, off the coast of Pingtung. Comprised of coral, the island offers various dives and depths a short swim from shore, and it's warm year-round – or at least warm-ish. During the winter, a standard 3mm wetsuit is enough to keep most people toasty. Xiaoliuqiu's geographic location also naturally protects it from winter winds. For these reasons, freediving instructor Raymond Ko of Freedive Nomad Taiwan has made this island his base.

While scuba diving, which requires mastery of equipment, is more common in Taiwan, freediving requires mastery of your mind and body. If you want to progress, you likely need to change your lifestyle. Ko believes adding meditation, stretching, fitness training, breath work, and even diet changes are ways to improve your life and diving ability. "They say scuba diving is for those who want to see outwards, and freediving is to see inward," he says.

Together with Adam Stern, one of freediving's best-known educators, Ko is also the organizer of Taiwan's first Deep Week, to be held on Xiaoliuqiu November 18-25. It's the first time an event of this caliber has been held in Taiwan. The week-long freediving festival is open to all.

Website:
www.freedivenomadtaiwan.com

SIX QUIET CORNERS FOR YOUR NEXT CITY ESCAPE

A weekend getaway to a serene location could be what you need to recharge and recenter. Here are six quiet corners waiting for you around Taiwan.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY NEIL ARMSTRONG

Serenity and escapism are blissful, and finding a tranquil spot that allows you to relax and rejuvenate is rewarding. But those who seek relaxation don't need an entire lifestyle shift or hike to the top of a lonely mountain and live there – it'd be chilly and the bathroom facilities are terrible. Below are some spots in Taiwan where a bit of calmness and contentment can be cultivated.

Jiqi Beach (磯崎海水浴場) – Hualien

If you're seeking a quiet stretch of sand with tropical mountains on one side and the deep blue Pacific on the other, Jiqi Beach is where you want to be. Forty minutes south of Hualien, you'll find plenty of peace and have a patch of nature to yourself.

While beaches close to the big cities are bursting with cafes and bustling with people, Jiqi is a haven for rest. If the only soundtrack you need is waves surging on the sand, peaceful tranquility awaits you here. And at the beach's southern end, there's a hill with a well-maintained track that offers pleasant views of the area.

Chaojih Hot Springs (朝日溫泉) – Green Island

This natural ocean-side hot spring is a world marvel. The only other two comparable sites can be found in Japan and Italy. Naturally hot water bubbles into the rock pools near the ocean, which allows seawater to mix with the warm water, offering pools of different temperatures according to the tide. There are quite a few pools scattered around the area. Sipping sea air while relaxing in a warm rock pool is sensory bliss. You can get your dose of vitamins D and "Sea" in one easy sitting.

Kayoufeng Falls (卡悠峰瀑布) – Pingtung

The combination of vast ranges of mountains, rainfall, and gravity at this scenic location means that water heads down crevices and crannies at a rapid rate. More often than not, thanks to Taiwan's topography, you'll find a waterfall or two between the mountains and the ocean. As a result of that phenomenon, there are plenty of falls to choose from in Pingtung County.

One of the quieter spots is the Kayoufeng Falls, not far from Shihzih Township and smack in the middle of mango country. There's a paved walking trail from a nearby parking lot and easy access to the base of the falls.

Sea of Clouds (雲海) – Nantou

Pretty much at any elevated spot along Route 14, on the mountainous border between Nantou and Hualien counties, you'll find a sea of clouds – or *yunhai* (雲海). The Ren'ai and Qingjing Farm region is a popular area to stay and view a uniform cloud layer from above, resembling an ocean surface. You can also find a serene viewing spot by walking or driving a bit farther up.

Your best chance of seeing the clouds is early to mid-morning. It's the simple science of cooler air being trapped or compressed by a layer of warmer air. As the day warms, the clouds dissipate –

Taroko Gorge, although popular among tourists, still offers numerous secluded spots to escape the crowds.

but hopefully only after you've had the chance to witness this natural magic.

Taroko Gorge (太魯閣) – Hualien

In terms of size, grandeur, and a multitude of peaceful locations, it's difficult to beat Taroko Gorge and its associated national park. Taroko is incredibly popular, and can thus get crowded, but you don't have to go far off the beaten track to escape the hordes. Numerous walking tracks, differing in degrees of difficulty and length, give you plenty of opportunities to escape the throngs.

Whether you want to stroll over a few scenic suspension bridges or sit down by a quiet bend in the river, you'll find many options in and around this breathtaking gorge.

Hengchun Peninsula (恆春半島) – Pingtung

Known locally as the Breezy Peninsula, Hengchun is always pleasantly a couple of degrees cooler than the rest of the country in summer, and warmer throughout winter. Located at the southern tip of Taiwan, this scenic spot hosts numerous dive sites, clear-water swimming spots, and palm-dotted beaches. On this picturesque peninsula, it's fun to take in a sunrise or sunset by moving from one side to the other.

Although Hengchun Peninsula is a tourist haven, hosting a hugely popular night market in the tourist town of Kenting, there are plenty of places to relax outside its immediate area. A thirty-minute drive can see you in the rural township of Manzhou. This town is a slice of serenity, surrounded by rice paddies and within sight of the tail end of the Central Mountain Range, where long, narrow plains alternate with hills and plateaus, and where the Pacific Ocean, the Bashi Channel, and the Taiwan Strait can all be seen in the distance.

A couple of languid waterfalls, timid cousins to their relatives in the high mountains, pour lazily into rock-lined creeks in the Manzhou area. Picturesque grasslands abound, and walking, cycling, and horse riding are easily accessible activities here.

Hengchun-Manzhou

PRESERVING TAIWANESE CINEMATIC HERITAGE

TOPICS editors sat down with Lan Tsu-wei, president of the Taiwan Film & Audiovisual Institute (TFAI), to talk about the development of Taiwanese cinema, its relationship to the world and society, and TFAI's role in preserving films of the past.

BY BRIAN CRAGUN

What is the Taiwan Film & Audiovisual Institute and how has it developed over the years?

TFAI is a foundation that preserves Taiwanese and mainland Chinese films. Founded as the Film Library of the Motion Picture Development Foundation in 1978, TFAI was the first film library founded in Taiwan. At first, there was only a library, screening room, reading room, and a few video viewing rooms at TFAI. But since 2008, we have been digitally restoring films. As of 2022, we have finished 661 advanced digital scans and 95 digitally restored titles – 76 with partners and 19 in-house. Today, we house about 20,000 film titles and 400,000 artifacts in our 10 vaults.

We arrange around 10 restoration projects each year to restore and re-release more films. This dedication to preservation is crucial in maintaining Taiwan's film history, which is deeply rooted in the country's culture.

What was it like being the first film library in Taiwan in the late 70s?

Initially, the library's mission focused on exploring film aesthetics by introducing foreign classics to the public. This mission was quickly realized as the Film Library became very popular with young people as it was one of the only places where it was possible to enjoy foreign films. Also, as times were changing and Taiwan was becoming more and more international, Taiwanese people enjoyed going to the movies to learn more about other places, cultures, and people.

Why and how did the Film Library start preserving films?

When we started the Film Library, we didn't really know how to do film preservation. So, learning from books, we started by preserving older Hollywood films. Then, as the market began opening up and society became more democratic in the 1980s, more and more foreign films from the European market started coming to Taiwan.

In the beginning, the government only supported the preservation of Mandarin films. Then, around 1990, the Film Library began preserving all types of films.

In 1989, under director Ray Jing, the Film Archive began compiling old Taiwanese Hokkien (Taiwanese-language) films and other artifacts of the Taiwanese film industry. This effort to preserve Taiwanese culture – especially through Taiwanese-language films – was inspired by the worrying fact that many Taiwanese-language films were beginning to disappear. Of the total 1,200 Taiwanese-language films, sadly, most have been lost to time.

What do you feel Taiwanese cinema means to the people of Taiwan?

Movie-watching has always been very deep-rooted in Taiwanese culture, and going to the movies has always been a favorite pastime activity here. Through movies, we have been able to explore our Taiwanese identity and learn about the world's cultures.

Another thing about Taiwanese people is that, aside from enjoying movies, we also enjoy music and singing – which you know if you've ever been to KTV or karaoke with friends. So in the early days of Taiwan cinema, the music and movie industries worked together to complement each other and attract more people to the movies.

In the 1970s, successful films would release three to five songs in advance to attract the audience to the theaters. By the time a film was released, the audience would already know the lyrics, so they'd go to the theater to watch the movie and sing the songs together.

Because of the Taiwanese love for movie soundtracks and singing, in later years movie concerts for Taiwanese

films were also organized in Kaohsiung and Taipei together with the One Song Orchestra, an orchestra comprised of talented young musicians with classical music backgrounds dedicated to performing music that fuses the Taiwanese and classical genres of music.

What do you consider to be the representative parts of Taiwanese cinema?

There are a few elements and genres that I think are quite representative of Taiwanese cinema. Early Taiwanese films were almost wholly made in the Taiwanese language until the government's promotion of Mandarin in mass media led to the decline in Taiwanese-language films being made. During this time, 武俠 (*wuxia*, martial arts) films and melodramas were the most popular genres. Martial arts films were popular at the time because it was a format familiar to the people of Taiwan due to newspapers and other publications also publishing these types of stories around that period.

Once the 1980s began, "New Taiwanese Cinema" films started to appear in theaters. These movies differ from the previous era's romantic and martial arts films. Instead, they portray realistic, sympathetic versions of everyday Taiwanese life and tell the stories of urban and rural life in Taiwan.

One such example of New Taiwanese Cinema would be a film we recently worked on remastering for re-release, Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness*. In the film, you see a realistic portrayal of life in Taiwan during the White Terror period. These films explored the Taiwanese identity while also chronicling the evolution of Taiwan and Taiwanese society in modern times.

Finally, as you know, Taiwan is a very forward-thinking society when it comes to the LGBTQIA+ community. This has been crystalized in Taiwanese cinema with LGBTQIA+-themed movies and productions appearing in theaters very early. Inclusivity and diversity are other things that are quite unique to Taiwanese society and Taiwanese cinema.

***A City of Sadness* starred Tony Leung, one of many Hong Kong actors who have starred in Taiwanese films. What was the relationship between the Taiwan and Hong Kong film industries during the 1980s and '90s?**

During the early 1980s, films from Hong Kong started to take center stage in the Taiwanese market – leading to box office competition for Taiwanese films. Realizing that the two industries could work together on productions would lead to a close relationship between the film industries of Taiwan and Hong Kong that flourished throughout the '80s and '90s. Many popular Mandarin-language movies from the time were made as collaborations between the Taiwan and Hong Kong film industries.

The two industries would collaborate on films, each bringing something unique to the table. Taiwanese film distributors would fund the films, while Hong Kong film companies would focus on recruiting star-studded casts to draw moviegoers to the theaters to see their new movies.

Why do you think Taiwanese films seem to have a bit of a darker, sadder tone in general?

Watching many New Taiwanese Cinema films, one may think Taiwan is quite a dark place. However, these films aim to allow viewers from Taiwan and around the world to gain a deeper understanding of the country's history while allowing directors to create works of art that speak to a shared national identity and history. Moreover, seeing these stories brought to the silver screen could be seen as a form of catharsis since parts of Taiwan's modern history had previously been taboo to discuss in public forums – let alone in the medium of cinema.

Looking ahead, what do you see in the future of the Taiwan film industry?

Foreign productions have noticed Taiwan's beauty and suitability as a filming location. Having attracted several big names in the Hollywood film industry before the pandemic, including Martin Scorsese's *Silence* and *Lucy*, starring Scarlet Johansson, and with film productions around the world beginning to return to normalcy, Taiwan is in an excellent position to serve as the home base or a filming location for other big studio productions.

Taiwan's unique geography and convenient transport make it easy to film in a variety of locations. For example, you can be on the top of a high mountain in the morning and standing on a beach at the seaside at lunchtime.

Additionally, Taiwanese directors and production companies continue striving to create meaningful artworks. The nurturing of the next generation of filmmakers in Taiwan is one area that continues to require attention and support from both the film industry and the education system. Further government support can also create opportunities for more Taiwanese stories to be shared with the world. The Taiwanese film industry continues to produce films – both for theater and for online streaming services – that appeal to viewers in Taiwan and around the world, and I'm sure that the future for Taiwan's film industry is bright and exciting. I can't wait to see what comes next.

EMBODYING STORIES THROUGH INK

From his transformation as a disillusioned graphic designer to a passionate tattooist, Sean Wei's focus lies in leaving a legacy on the skin of those who entrust their bodies to him, crafting pieces that personify their stories, memories, and emotions.

BY JULIA BERGSTRÖM

As you walk into Sean Wei's tattoo studio – which is also his home – you immediately get an impression of his personality. The apartment, located close to Yongan Market in New Taipei's Zhonghe District, is filled with all sorts of art – from Wei's own work to calligraphy, paintings, pop culture memorabilia, and replicas of famous art pieces.

The ceiling is covered in white sheets that bulge to resemble clouds, and the room is crammed with plants and other greenery. The fluorescent lights commonly found in Taiwanese apartments are nowhere to be found here. Instead, Wei's place is lit up with fairy lights and light bulbs that shift colors in a soothing rhythm.

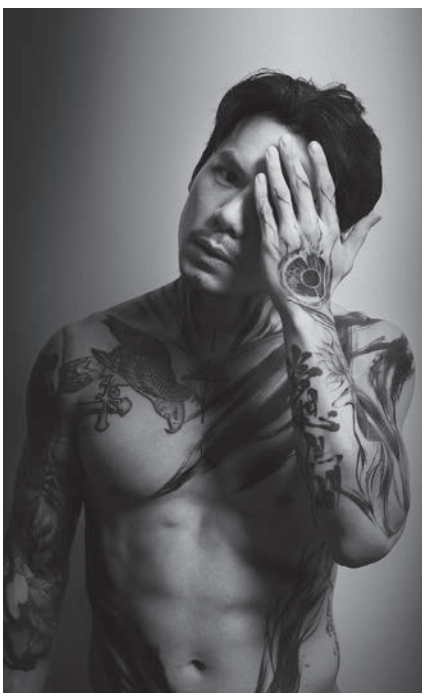
The large carpet in front of his sofa hides a sizeable yoga mat, which Wei uses every day. His black leather tattoo chair stands on a Persian carpet farther in. The place is calming, beautifully eccentric, and a reflection of Wei's way of life, which is mostly made up of hard training, work, and meditation.

What he describes as "a lifetime ago," the Taipei native owned an advertisement company in Taiwan when he relocated to Shanghai short-term to work on graphic design and commercial illustration projects. His clients included Tiger Beer and Coca-Cola, and he was doing well – until he lost his spark.

"After a while, I felt almost like a robot," he says. "I wanted to continue doing art, but in a way that inspires me. So I closed my company, moved back to Taiwan, and spent the next 10 months training myself in tattooing." The first tattoo Wei inked was on his own body. He's since tattooed his entire left arm and both thighs himself.

Although far from being the most followed Taiwanese tattooist (some have a few hundred thousand followers), Wei's social media influence is still substantial, with around 20,000 fans on Instagram (www.instagram.com/seanweitattoo). He says he is simply "lucky" to have managed to build a social media presence. He approaches marketing as a fun endeavor, a way to share his passion and create engaging stories. Wei finds it important to strike a balance between commercial aspects and staying true to the art.

"Capturing people's attention doesn't



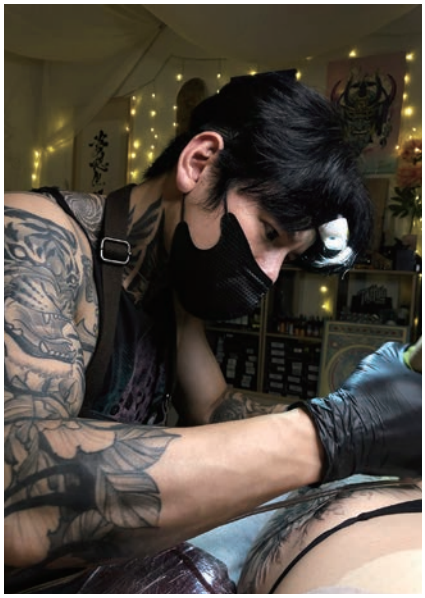
require a large number of followers or superficial marketing tactics," he says. "Instead, I use Instagram to share my story, my art, and provide a glimpse into the life of an artist, which a lot of people find intriguing. I believe that when I focus on my craft and share my work, people will take notice and appreciate it."

But at the end of the day, the number of followers is irrelevant to Wei. "I can't tattoo 20,000 people, anyway," he says. "I've already managed to get a steady income stream, so my focus is on quality, not quantity. I don't obsess over follower count or rely on popular influencers for value. I have seen talented tattoo artists with fewer than 1,000 followers who are highly respected in their field and booked solid for years in advance."

Still, Wei has leveraged his background in advertisement and marketing to capture his persona online by telling the story of a dedicated tattoo artist following his own school of Zen (禪, *chan*). Zen – a school of Mahayana Buddhism originating in China – strongly emphasizes self-control, meditation practice, and the ensuing insight into the nature of the mind and the nature of things. It avoids conceit or egotism and highlights the individual expression of this insight in daily life, particularly for the benefit of others.

"When I became a tattooist, I tried to let go of my commercial mindset and reflect on my own artistic style," says Wei. "I wanted to promote Taiwanese culture, our essence, through my art. But what is 'Taiwanese,' and what is Taiwan style? We have so many influences from Japan, the United States, Korea, and China. Where do they end and we begin?" He describes Taiwan as "a cultural remix" and says his own style is "a bit Eastern, a bit Western, using abstraction to fuse the different elements."

Wei posits that compared with Japan or Korea, people in Taiwan – particularly those of the younger generation – are progressive, and he doesn't feel judged walking around the streets of Taipei with his inked neck and arms exposed. "People usually compliment my tattoos, if they comment on them at all." However, he wishes that Taiwanese artists would share their work more confidently.



"Sometimes, Taiwanese people can be shy," he says. "We have great skills, great artists here, but we don't share it enough with the world. We should share the beautiful things we create here with the world, along with our lives and dreams."

Honoring the canvas

Wei's tattoo designs often include animals, flora and fauna, smoke, and abstract patterns. Their mystical appearance fits with the Zen school of exploring the nature of the mind and the nature of things. He only tattoos black-and-white art, and won't touch readily available templates.

Sometimes, Wei will create a piece and sell it to the right customer as-is. But most of the time, his tattoos are the result of a highly collaborative process that involves hours of face-to-face conversation.

"As a client, you invite me to tattoo your body, but you also become a canvas for my artwork," he says. "I have to enjoy and love what I'm creating – otherwise the job becomes a contract project. I don't work that way – it should be a collaborative process, a legacy I leave on your skin. Give me your story, your idea, your memory, or emotions, and I'll create a performance that embodies it."

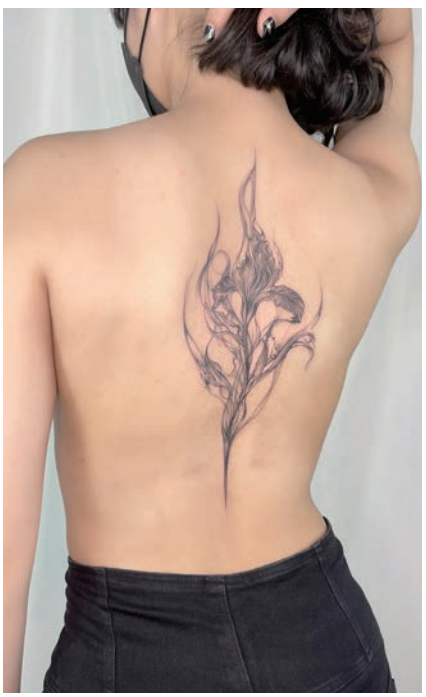
Those who are exceptionally particular about what they want should not seek Wei's services. As a serious professional, he expects a degree of trust from clients. "You tell me what you want, and I'll give you what you need," he says with a smile.

Although his decision to become a tattooist was born from passion, Wei's choice to embrace the artistry of tattooing manifests itself in the meticulous dedication he pours into his job. "When you're an artist whose canvas is other people's bodies, you need to make sure your mind is sharp and your body is in ideal condition," he says. Wei wakes up early most mornings to exercise, follows a healthy diet, and has given up alcohol and cigarettes to ensure his hands are always steady.

Apart from ensuring he can do the best possible job for his clients, Wei's healthy lifestyle fills two more purposes. Firstly, he views his own body as his most important canvas, and he keeps it lean to "honor the art" that adorns it. The second factor is to fit his "Zen lifestyle," with the ultimate goal of finding some sort of peace of mind.

Wei says he wants to die happily, knowing he did everything he set out to do and that he lived a good life. His meticulously active and hardworking lifestyle is part of this quest. I ask him if he's found inner peace yet. He ponders for a moment before he replies:

"Some days, yes, but it's a lifelong journey. All we can do is keep trying, do our best, and be kind to ourselves and others."



Micron: Nurturing Excellence and Innovation for the Computing Revolution

With a solid commitment to rapid innovation, Micron Technology consistently delivers cutting-edge technologies that power various industries, ranging from data centers to consumer electronics and automotive sectors. As a renowned global leader in the development and manufacture of memory and storage solutions, the company's dedication to rapid innovation extends beyond its headquarters in the United States. Taiwan in particular has played an indispensable role in contributing to Micron's success.

"When every second counts, having an extremely knowledgeable and highly dedicated team is paramount," says Corporate Vice President of Front-End Manufacturing and Head of Micron Taiwan Donghui Lu. "The Taiwan team is phenomenal. Their execution is top-level. Having a team like this is one of our biggest advantages."

Lu recalls an instance shortly after his arrival in Taiwan, when an earthquake affected Micron's plant in Taichung. After hearing the news, Lu hurriedly drove from Taipei to Taichung to oversee the recovery of the fab after the earthquake late in the evening. When he arrived in Taichung around midnight, he discovered that the team in Taichung had already made great progress in returning the factory to its usual capacity.

Having worked in the semiconductor industry since the 1990s, Lu notes the importance of continuing to learn and recognize the contributions of all team members.

"Wealth and IQ are never substitutes for hard work. It's important to stay focused on the details of your work and what you are learning about because there are many distractions around. You also need to remain grateful to the people around you who have enabled and continue to enable you to grow and succeed – there's no such thing as a lone wolf in this industry."

Donghui Lu, Corporate Vice President of Front-End Manufacturing and Head of Micron Taiwan

Micron prides itself on bringing together experts across a range of disciplines, including for the establishment of its Centers of Excellence (CoE) – entities that foster leadership, best practices, research, support, or training for a focus area. Micron has opened several CoEs, including for NAND, Technology Innovation, High-Volume DRAM, and Long-Lifecycle Products, which are located in Singapore, Idaho, Taiwan, and Virginia, respectively.

"It takes a village to develop a technology," Lu says. "People from a multitude of disciplines working together in concert is necessary in this knowledge-based industry. He notes that when operating in different markets, it's important to be aware of differences in the overall structure and ecosystem of how business is done. "The company culture at Micron is still highly American, but some aspects of the culture and mindset in Taiwan are uniquely Taiwanese. For example, in Taiwan there is a trend toward top-down decision-making and

dissemination of ideas and opinions. We do what we can to help our team members at all levels find their voices and have their opinions heard."

In this spirit of diversifying pathways for personal career development, Micron has implemented a Technical Leadership Program to help promote individual professional development into leadership positions in charge of specific technical areas. The program's objective is to give employees the chance to advance within the organization and take on leadership roles outside the purview of conventional management positions.

"We want to promote employees, make them visible, recognize their efforts, and empower them to continue to learn and advance in their field," Lu says. "It's important to highlight the value and

necessity for leaders with technical expertise to emphasize that leaders in these positions are equally as important as those in traditional management positions."

Micron's products range from DRAM and NAND flash memory to solid-state drives. The company's continuous focus on research and development has allowed it to maintain a competitive edge in the ever-evolving semiconductor industry. Micron is currently developing the new generations of its DDR5 memory – which will bring faster and more efficient computing power enabling our devices to do more for us. Lu predicts that, as we continue to develop increasingly complex AI systems, more advanced memory will be key in the upcoming revolution in computing.

"We all see how ridiculously powerful AI can be, and that's only the basic applications of AI we are using right now," he says. "When it starts getting applied to industry practices, that's when you will see profound changes in human society, and Micron will be there as a partner in continued development and advancement."

美光：為運算革命培育卓越與創新力

美光科技本著快速創新的堅定承諾，始終如一地提供尖端技術，從資料中心到消費電子和汽車產業，為各種產業提供動力。身為記憶體與儲存解決方案開發和製造領域的全球知名領導企業，美光科技在美國總部以外也致力於快速創新。其中尤以台灣對美光的成功扮演著不可或缺的角色。

美光前段製造企業副總裁暨台灣美光董事長盧東暉表示：「分秒必爭的環境中，具備深度產業知識且絕對專注的團隊是首要之重。台灣團隊非常出色，具備頂尖的執行能力。擁有這樣的團隊是我們最大的優勢之一。」

盧東暉回憶起他抵達台灣不久後經歷的一個案例，當時地震頻仍影響了美光台中廠的運作。盧東暉聞訊，深夜急忙從台北驅車趕往台中，確保晶圓廠震後產線能迅速回復正常運作。午夜時分抵達台中時，他發現台中的團隊已積極恢復工廠正常產能，進度良好。

盧東暉自 1990 年代即投身半導體產業，他指出持續學習的重要性，並強調團隊合作的重要性。

「財富和智商永遠無法取代努力。專注於工作的細節和學習的事物，非常重要，因為周遭充滿著干擾因素。也要對身邊的人心懷感激，他們會持續幫助你成長和成功——這個產業中，沒有所謂的孤狼。」

美光以匯集各領域的專家為榮，並藉此優勢打造卓越製造中心(CoE)，也就是用於培養領導力、最佳實踐、研究、支援或重點領域培訓的機構。美光已經成立多個 CoE，領域包括 NAND、技術研發、 DRAM 先進製程和長生命週期產品，分別位於新加坡、美國愛達荷州、台灣桃園台中和美國維吉尼亞州。

盧東暉表示：「開發一項技術需要大量人力。在這個以知識為基礎的產業中，必須要有橫跨眾多領域的人才齊心協力。」他指出，在經營不同市場時，一定要瞭解業務整體結構以及生態系有何差異。「美光企業文化的美國化程度高，但台灣也存在專屬獨特文化和思維。例如，台灣企業文化的一向是由上而下的方式進行決策以及傳遞想法和意見。我們盡可能幫助各級團隊成員發聲，讓他們的意見得到傾聽。」

秉持多元化個人職涯發展途徑的精神，美光實施技術領導力計劃 (Technical Leadership Program)，協助將個人專業發展提升至負責特定技術領域的領導職位。該計劃的目標是讓員工有機會在組織內升遷，在傳統管理職的範圍之外擔任專注於技術職的領導角色。

盧東暉表示：「我們鼓勵員工，提升他們的能見度，肯定他們的努力，並幫助他們持續學習並在各自領域持續進步。一大重點是要凸顯具備技術專長的領導者的價值和必要性，強調這類的領導者與傳統管理職的領導者同等重要。」

美光的產品範圍涵蓋 DRAM 和 NAND 快閃記憶體，以及固態硬碟。公司持續著重於研發，因而得以在日新月異的半導體產業中保持競爭優勢。美光目前正在開發新一代 DDR5 記憶體，將帶來更快、更高效率的運算能力，讓我們的裝置能完成更多任務。盧東暉預測，隨著未來持續開發更加複雜的 AI 系統，更加先進的記憶體會在將來的人工智慧應用革命中成為關鍵因素。

盧東暉表示：「我們都看到了 AI 有多麼強大，而我們現在使用的只是 AI 的基本應用。當 AI 開始應用於產業實務，大家就會看到人類社會發生深刻的變化，而美光將以夥伴的角色，持續推動發展和進步。」

CLIMBING TO A HUNDRED

Daniel Rios is one of the few foreign nationals to have completed the *baiyue* – a list of mountains in Taiwan that many hikers dream of summitting.

STORY BY DINAH GARDNER

PHOTOS BY DANIEL RIOS

A sea of clouds – or *yunhai* (雲海) – is the striking phenomenon of a uniform cloud layer viewed from above, resembling a contoured ocean surface. It's photographers' gold. In Taiwan, Beidawu Mountain in Pingtung County is one of the best places to snap an especially gorgeous *yunhai*.

I'm looking at a photo of just this sensation, taken by American teacher and part-time mountain guide Daniel Rios on the top slopes of Beidawu in 2018, just as dawn was breaking. It shows a rolling blanket of violet-hued clouds burnt orange by the rays of a rising sun. In the foreground are the moody silhouettes of Chinese hemlock trees.

"You can see this kind of thing on top of almost every mountain in Taiwan," says Rios, 37, who has seen his fair share of *yunhai* by now. He is one of only a handful of foreign nationals who have completed the *baiyue* (百岳), or 100 peaks, a list of mountains in Taiwan – including Beidawu – that are mostly over 3,000 meters and deemed worthy of climbing because of the scenery, the distinctiveness of the route to the top, and geographic diversity.

Most serious hikers in Taiwan aspire to complete this feat, some spending decades to do so. But Rios took less than four years to climb all 100 summits. Between 2016 and 2020, anytime a long weekend holiday loomed, he would apply for a day or two of extra leave from his job as a cram school teacher and set off on a trip – sometimes bagging several peaks in one journey as many are adjacent peaks along the same mountain range. The *baiyue* wasn't just a challenge for him; it was a way to escape into another world.

"The views are great, of course, and there's kind of a sense of freedom up there," he says. "You stop thinking about your bills, your bosses, and stuff like that. It gives you a sense of achievement when you get to the top."

Sitting at the boundary of two colliding tectonic plates – the Eurasian and Philippine Sea plates – Taiwan is primarily made up of mountains, and mostly high mountains at that. The tallest peak in East Asia can be found here: Jade Mountain (Yushan) at 3,952 meters. Taiwan is believed to have a total of around 285 peaks over 3,000 meters tall. A comparison with another moun-

tainous island country in the region, Japan, which has just 21, shows how impressive that number is.

Hundreds of years ago, indigenous peoples and later Chinese settlers forged footpaths across Taiwan's mountains for trading and transport purposes. During the Japanese colonial period (1895-1945), Japanese mountaineers hacked out even more routes. In the past decade or so, hiking and mountain climbing have become hugely popular pastimes in Taiwan, prompting the development of tourism infrastructure and a proliferation of blogs, guiding services, and Instagram accounts.

Back in 2015, Rios, a business school graduate, was growing tired of the high cost of living in the U.S. He started considering different places to live in Asia and ultimately picked Taiwan. The island was affordable compared with Japan, and it didn't have the censorship problems of China. The fact that it had accessible and explorable ranges was just icing on the cake. Back in the U.S., Rios liked to hike and camp "a bit," but coming to Taiwan ignited his love of hiking.

Rios recounts how he joined a tour group in his first year here to climb Jade Mountain. He was immediately hooked.

"I got addicted to it right away," he says. Not long after he decided he would attempt to complete the *baiyue*. "It seemed like a good goal to have, and I didn't have any other hobbies. It was a good way to stay in shape and gave me something to work towards that not many people had done."

For the next three and a half years, Rios set about teaching himself everything he needed to know about hiking in Taiwan – from trails and bus routes to how to apply for and secure permits (all but 20 of the peaks require permits) to having the right gear, and then climbing each one. It was intense. He summited 30 in 2017 and 40 in 2018. Most of the peaks he tackled alone or with friends, only opting to go with tour groups for four of the 29 trips it took in total.

When Rios first arrived in Taiwan, he would eat in 7-Elevens because, unable to speak Chinese, he was "too nervous" to go to restaurants. And while he hasn't had time to study the language, his "hiking Chinese" has gotten pretty good, and he rattles off a list of names of routes and peaks with ease.

Snow Mountain North Peak

Sunset at Mt. Guangtou

Rios is a nerd when it comes to planning. He shows me spreadsheet after spreadsheet on his phone. They list Taiwan's mountain summits (some of which he has not yet completed), including names, elevations, routes, national parks, GPS coordinates, and rankings in the 100 peaks list. The spreadsheets also include upcoming hikes, which have been color-coded blue for pleasure, red for profit as a guide, and brown for unconfirmed. Rios has also written numerous pages of itineraries of all the different routes he has taken, day by day, even hour by hour.

"I don't really watch TV," he says with a laugh. "When I'm at home, I'm usually researching a route I want to do in the future, applying for permits, or researching gear."

I ask him to tell me more about the kinds of things he has seen mountain climbing in Taiwan, apart from the famed *yunhai*. He describes waking up in the early morning, unzipping his tent to find 50 sambar deer surrounding his camp along the Nenggao-Andongjun Trail between Nantou and Hualien counties. Along trails, he has spotted the skulls of wild boar, monkeys, muntjac (barking deer), and other deer species with their antlers intact. Other routes wind past airplane wreckage and spilled weaponry from World War II.

Rios is hoping to transition to full-time mountain guiding this year. He currently contributes to Taiwan Outdoors, a portal for hiking, diving, surfing, and other exploits in nature. He also works as a guide for Parkbus Taiwan, a company geared at foreign nationals in Taiwan who wish to travel to hard-to-get-to locations in nature. I ask him what advice he has for anyone thinking of following in his footsteps. His response is rapid fire. "Hire me!" But if you want to do it independently, he suggests five rules worth following:

1. **Get and stay fit.** "Don't assume you can do it. You'll be hiking about eight to 10 hours every day."

2. **Invest in good gear.** "Don't just go to Decathlon," he warns. Buy quality boots, rain jackets, and sleeping gear. Rios' leather hiking boots cost US$400 (around NT$12,000). But some things, he concedes, you can "cheap out" on. His Taiwanese rain boots (favored by older local hikers) cost just NT$300, and they are excellent for routes where you know you'll get wet – such as river tracing or during rainstorms. He pads them with thick insoles to make them comfortable. Hiking shirts, too, can be cheap. Rios also advises hikers to bring trekking poles. "They will really help your knees and your balance."

3. **Learn how to read offline maps.** Tools like Gaia GPS or AllTrails will work on your phone without a cell signal. Learn how to use them so you will never get lost. "It could save your life."

4. **Do your homework.** Before any big trip, scour blogs of hikers who have already done the route so you know which parts are dangerous and where water sources, cliff sections, and any escape routes are located.

5. **Learn how to pack.** Put gear you won't use until the evening, like sleeping gear, on the bottom. Stash heavier items like cooking gear in the middle and place stuff you will need in a hurry, like snacks and rain jackets, at the top where they're easier to reach.

While generally safe, mountaineering carries some risks. Inclement weather, falling rocks, altitude sickness, and attempting routes above the hiker's skill level contribute to injuries and sometimes death. Unfortunately, fatalities occur almost every year. Rios himself has

Cloud Sea from Mt. Beidawu

powered through a twisted ankle, dodged a falling rock "about the size of a baseball," grabbed onto a rock "when [his] rope snapped," and traversed narrow ridges where "you will die if you fall." His one pet peeve is leeches, which are common along jungled routes.

On one of his early trips, back in 2017, Rios embarked with a guide and one local climber on an eight-day hike to Mabolasi Traverse, one of the *baiyue*'s "four obstacles," a name for the four most challenging hikes in the list. (The *baiyue* is peppered with colorful names for peak subsets such as the "five greats," the "harsh ten," the "four beauties," and my favorite, the "one ogre.") It was just hours into the climb when disaster struck.

"I heard this rustling and a sound like a falling rock," says Rios. He and his guide turned around to look, and "our eyes became as big as dinner plates; we knew instantly what had happened... that sound I heard was [the other member of their group] tumbling down the mountain." When they peered over the cliff edge, they spotted the man 20 or 30 meters down – his fall miraculously broken by a tree. "He flew down so hard his shoes fell off."

The duo gingerly inched down to rescue and carry the fallen hiker back to the trailhead. Later, they found out that he'd escaped with a concussion and a few broken ribs. "That was the most stressful day of my life," he says. "I thought for sure that guy was going to die."

For those who like the idea of a challenge but may not have the time, the skillset, or the head for heights for the baiyue, there is also the *xiao baiyue* (小白岳, or "100 small peaks"), a list of scenic mountain trails that are more accessible day-hikes and generally easier to tackle. They range in height from the substantial, like the 2,663-meter Datashan in the Alishan Mountain Range, to the diminutive, like the 20-meter Shetou Hill in Penghu.

Having finished the *baiyue*, Rios has now set his sights on a new hiking challenge: the remaining 150-plus peaks over 3,000 meters in Taiwan. Rios plans to do them all by the end of next year.

"No foreigner has done them yet," he says with a gleam in his eyes.

DANIEL RIOS' TOP FIVE ACCESSIBLE HIKES FROM THE 100 PEAKS LIST

1. Yushan
Where: Nantou County
Duration: Two days
Permit: Yes
Public transport: Yes, but only a few buses a day
Why go: Tallest in Taiwan (and in East Asia)
Appears on the NT$1,000 note
Good facilities, including cabins
One of the three big things to do in Taiwan (the other two are swimming across Sun Moon Lake and cycling around the main island)

2. Jiaming Lake
Where: Taitung County
Duration: Three days
Permit: Yes
Public transport: No
Why go: Gorgeous alpine lake
Snag two peaks of the baiyue in one trip
No technically difficult sections
"Nice food" in the cabins

3. Xueshan
Where: Taichung City
Duration: Three days
Permit: Yes
Public transport: Yes
Why go: Second-highest mountain in Taiwan
Almost guaranteed to see wildlife such as the serow (a cross between a goat and a deer), muntjacs, and pheasants

4. Mount Dabajian
Where: Hsinchu County
Duration: Three days
Permit: Yes
Public transport: Yes
Why go: On the NT$500 note
Unusual barrel shape
Best cabin food in Taiwan
Bag four peaks in the *baiyue* in one trip

5. Mount Nanhu
Where: Taichung City
Duration: Four to five days
Permit: Yes
Public transport: Yes (same bus as Snow Mountain)
Why go: Beautiful sunsets
Rocky peak looks like a castle
Tons of wildlife

TAIWAN'S STAND-UP SCENE: A LAUGHING MATTER

Twenty years ago, live stand-up comedy was a rarity in Taiwan. Now, thanks to the efforts of a committed core of performers, things have taken off – though not necessarily in a direction everyone had anticipated.

BY JAMES BARON

When I met Brian Tseng more than five years ago at a comedy event in Taipei, he was a rather shy, slightly nervous 27-year-old trying to cut his teeth as a stand-up comedian. Slight and unassuming, he nonetheless had a boyish cheekiness and a twinkle in his eye that bespoke resolution. Not long back from Europe, where he had completed a master's in neuroscience, he was working as a scriptwriter and producer for Taiwan Bar, an online animation channel focusing on Taiwanese history and culture.

There was a restlessness about him, as he admitted that his work was "not going in the direction I had anticipated." Tseng had first tried his hand at stand-up in Mandarin during his undergraduate years at Taipei's first comedy club – then known as Comedy Club Taipei.

"I tried out at their open mic night five or six times, and I was horrible," he said. "My friends and even my girlfriend told me, 'Just stop. You don't have what it takes to be a comedian.'" Military service and postgrad studies in London and Paris ensued before his return to Taiwan and a decision to give things a go in English.

Trying out again at Republic of Comedy, a now-defunct comedy circuit, Tseng started to find his feet. "I've no idea what happened, but when I wrote in English, maybe because it's not my first language, I could really see what the problem was and could write more succinct sentences," Tseng said. "That's something I never really did in Chinese."

He then went back to Mandarin and soon found himself growing in confidence in both languages. Online footage of his sets had gained traction, with one Mandarin video gaining hundreds of thousands of views. Even so, the speed with which Tseng blew up was astonishing. Just a few months after our initial meeting, Tseng had launched *The Night Night Show*, an online, partially crowdfunded political satire program. As host, Tseng interviewed and bantered with guests such as President Tsai Ing-wen and opposition Kuomintang politician Han Kuo-yu.

Despite several controversies –

including the revelation that STR Network, the production company that Tseng had cofounded, had received substantial sums for the appearances of both politicians – his popularity continued to soar. In May, he sold out the 13,000-seat Taipei Arena, a feat that would have been unimaginable for a stand-up comedian just a few years earlier. For many, it was a massive shot in the arm for live comedy in Taiwan.

"We needed some rising stars to build up the industry and culture," says Sosio Chang, who ran Comedy Club Taipei, a mainly Mandarin-language venue, which has now evolved into Comedy Plus, a 200-seat venue in Zhongshan District."

"Brian was the first major one, and it has helped build a small industry. Stand-up has now more or less become a part of everyday life in Taiwan and gets news coverage – though often for offending people!" says Chang, who other performers refer to as "the godfather of comedy in Taiwan."

Sam Yarborough, who cofounded the performance center Two Three Comedy Club (23喜劇) with Tseng, agrees that his partner's success was pivotal for the scene's development. Having previously run their events from the 30-seat basement of the 23 Public bar in Taipei's Da'an District, Yarborough could now think bigger.

"When Brian agreed to come on board, he was already hosting *The Night Night Show*," says Yarborough. "His popularity was exploding, allowing us to set our sight on a much larger venue with the appropriate space to build what we envisioned as a comedy club."

Yarborough – who performs as Sam Yarbs – is excited about how far the scene has come over the past few years. "If you're a Chinese-language stand-up comic, and you want to perform six nights a week, it's now possible," he says. "There are that many open mic events. Even outside of the clubs, there are bars and cafes popping up with stand-up nights."

Chang agrees though he stresses that producers, directors, and organizers cannot rest on their laurels. "The scene is basically now strong, but it still needs lots of effort to keep going," he says. Performances at Comedy Plus are not limited to "Western-style" stand-up and include sketches, improvisation, and more traditional forms such as *xiangsheng* (相聲, crosstalk) and its Japanese counterpart *manzai* (漫才), both of which feature a pair of performers who indulge in puns and mutual misunderstandings. The larger selection inevitably makes for a wider audience base.

Division and disillusionment

Elsewhere, some performers have become slightly disillusioned with developments. Arthur Chou, who previously performed in Mandarin and English, has taken a step back over the past couple of years.

"I thought the scene was on the verge of a breakthrough, but I was wrong," says Chou, a television screenwriter and director. "The culture went somewhere else. Young comedians didn't go to the clubs because they like jokes. They went to get famous."

Chou suggests the coincidence of the social media era with a stand-up scene that hadn't fully coalesced played a role. While stand-up in Western countries had been established over a period of decades before social media arrived, he says the Taiwanese scene emerged "in the middle, or even, I would argue, at the height" of the social media age.

"Kids that didn't grow up with any classic stand-up got exposed to comedy through TikTok and YouTube shorts," says Chou. "It's less about being funny than algorithms. Many go on stage thinking it's a live version of a YouTuber narration video."

Another issue frequently raised as a potential barrier to the success of Western-style stand-up in Taiwan is cultural differences in humor and joke-telling. For some, these discussions have become something of a cliché.

"Every single time I do a podcast or interview, I get asked: 'What's the Taiwanese sense of humor like? How is Taiwanese humor different from other people's humor?'" says Yarborough. "I believe it's such a mistake to treat Taiwanese comedy as a kind of monolithic, different style of humor."

Instead, Yarborough believes generational differences play a much bigger role. "Among Taiwanese, some people love dark, edgy, and offensive-type humor. Others find that completely distasteful and prefer crosstalk shows, which are really based on wordplay."

Chang supports this view, arguing that the divide between comedy in Taiwan and the West is minimal. "The material, the approach, and how you deliver the jokes might be a little different, but the essence is the same – it's all about freedom and daring to make fun of things," he says. "Most importantly, it just has to be good. You need to have the pacing and to manifest your confidence and convince the audience, and that's the same everywhere."

Tseng is not so sure and points to an over-reliance on physical, slapstick humor. He admits to finding some

Two Three Comedy Club in Taipei.

Sam Yarborough (left) and Brian Tseng (right), comedians and cofounders of Two Three Comedy, see potential for growth in Taiwan's comedy scene.

humor in Taiwan "immature." He also notes that aspects of language make certain types of jokes tricky in Mandarin.

"Chinese doesn't usually stick [relative] clauses at the end of the sentence, so that takes away the flexibility to twist the meaning of a sentence mid-way through," he says.

For Chou, the difference comes down to one thing: space. Western humor, he says, leaves gaps that audiences have learned to fill in. "It's all about directing the audience towards a certain logic, then subverting expectations and using perspective to draw surprises, as opposed to funny things per se," he says. "For comedy to work, the audience needs to participate. But in Taiwan, it's trickier because the audience expects to laugh without thinking." This difference in expectations explains why sketches, impersonations, and slapstick remain popular. "These are the most primal and direct forms."

Tseng agrees. "Good comedy misdirects people, so you shock them with something else," he notes. "If you can't build up that expectation, you can't shock them."

One unique perspective comes from Ed Hill, a Taiwanese-Canadian comedian with almost 15 years of professional stand-up experience. Hill, who moved to Canada at age 10, believes the "bicultural lens" through which he approaches his art allows him to flit between Mandarin and English comedy in a way that is not so accessible to others.

"Language, like it or not, is not exclusive from culture," he says. "You need to be able to phrase your language in ways that encompass the culture. I have the advantage of knowing how both sides work so I can bridge it. The way I construct my language in English and Mandarin is the same."

Hill also pushes back against the claim that Taiwanese are not big on irony – a commonly held belief among foreign nationals in Taiwan. "I'm ironic or sarcastic to my family here in Taiwan," he says. "Again, I think it's about how you phrase it and the construction of language."

Tseng believes that because Taiwanese are less sarcastic in everyday speech, they don't always appreciate this type of humor. "People often take things literally," he says. "If they don't know you're not serious, it's hard for them to loosen up." For this reason, sarcasm during performances can sometimes offend, especially when directed at the audience.

Chou says that ironic joshing is generally reserved for close-knit groups where there is less room for misunderstanding. "It's not as accepted because people often take things too seriously," he says. "In order to avoid sounding impolite, people usually keep it between friends."

While Taiwan's comedy scene remains male-dominated, female comics have steadily made their mark. Janice Wu had been performing in Mandarin for almost five years before debuting in English earlier this year. While gender has not proved a barrier for her, she believes some people have the misconception that women get more opportunities because there is less competition for them.

"I think we have to work harder to prove we deserve it," she says. "Besides [that], I think some people don't know the boundaries when they talk to us. Sometimes they see a woman telling dirty jokes and assume they can talk to us like that." The inability of some male audience members to separate public persona from private personality can sometimes make things "a bit uncomfortable," she says. "But it doesn't happen a lot."

Like most people involved in Taiwan's comedy scene, Wu thinks the future is bright. However, she echoes Chou and others who fear burgeoning attendance is premised on superficial considerations. "Most people come to a show for a particular person," she says. "So, it's still a long way to make stand-up comedy mainstream entertainment in Taiwan."

Acknowledging that these things take time, Yarborough nonetheless believes the foundations are in place.

"Where it goes from here will be very interesting to see," he says. "I'm on the optimistic side, where I don't think it will grow exponentially, but what you'll hopefully see is that we've created space, so people with five years' experience are emerging the way a stand-up comic should – performing almost every night. This will give a new generation of stand-up stars a model to follow."

NATIONAL KAOHSIUNG CENTER FOR THE ARTS

VENUES THAT BRING IN THE CROWDS

Besides Taiwan's traditional cultural center of Taipei in the north, Kaohsiung is now rapidly developing as a vibrant secondary market with the help of its wide range of performance venues.

BY DON SHAPIRO AND BRIAN CRAGUN

When famed British rock group Coldplay presents two concerts in Kaohsiung this November, it will further embellish the reputation of the southern port city as a center for pop music performances and a complement to Taipei's offerings for classical music and jazz.

Over the past year, Kaohsiung has pumped up the volume of musical performances and festivals, drawing A-list artists from both Taiwan and around the world. These have included concerts headlined by Taiwanese pop music icons A-Mei and Mayday, as well as the K-pop girl band sensation Blackpink. Attracting a total of 90,000 adoring fans over two nights last March, the Blackpink concerts reportedly set a new attendance record for Taiwan – surpassing the 80,000 set during a previous Coldplay tour in 2017.

Kaohsiung is also getting on the map for leading classical music and jazz performers. The New York Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by its music director Jaap van Zweden and featuring violinist Hilary Hahn, came through town at the beginning of this month, and renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma is due to arrive in December. On the jazz scene, virtuoso trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and his combo held sway last March.

Although not as well-known internationally as Taipei or as convenient to access by air, Kaohsiung has the advantage of a range of excellent facilities for musical performances – everything from smaller live house venues to the 40,000-seat National Stadium, the largest in Taiwan, where Blackpink set its record.

Some of these facilities are also architectural gems. Completed in 2009 in time to host the World Games, the National Stadium was the first in the world to be powered by solar energy. The design by Japanese architect Toyo Ito features a striking semi-spiral shape intended to resemble a dragon.

Another facility, the Kaohsiung Music Center, was designed by Spanish architectural firm MADE IN and opened in October 2021 as part of a massive project to redevelop the Kaohsiung waterfront. A collaboration of the Ministry of Culture and the Kaohsiung City Government, the center's mandate is to "nurture domestic pop music talent." The center is located in Kaohsiung's Yancheng District, which was the most international part of the city in the 1960s due to the presence of American military personnel and was home to numerous jazz and other live

Above: National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts
Left: National Kaohsiung Stadium

PHOTOS: NATIONAL KAOHSIUNG CENTER FOR THE ARTS & TOURISM BUREAU OF KAOHSIUNG CITY GOVERNMENT

music venues.

Also acclaimed for its architecture as well as acoustics is the National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts, more commonly known as Weiwuying after the military training base that once occupied the site. The complex, which opened in 2018, is considered the world's largest performance arts center under one roof. It consists of a concert hall (equipped with Asia's largest pipe organ), playhouse, opera house, and recital hall, in addition to an amphitheater for open-air performances.

The innovative design by Dutch architectural firm Mecanoo required the use of construction technologies borrowed from the shipbuilding industry. It also makes use of the surrounding banyan trees for both an aesthetic and cooling effect, creating a plaza that has become a popular leisure location. Inside, the concert hall features a "vineyard-style" design in which seating surrounds the stage in tiers for optimal sight lines.

"Because we have such a variety of venues, we can accommodate all kinds of performances," says Emily Yeh, Weiwuying's head of artistic planning. Besides programming based on monthly themes, the Center presents special events geared around long holiday weekends. The Center estimates that at least 30% of the total audience comes from outside the Kaohsiung area – either other parts of Taiwan or overseas.

"Taipei has been cultivating audiences for over 30 years, but we are just beginning to cultivate our local audience," says Yeh. That effort includes learning activities of various kinds, including workshops for youth.

Kaohsiung's emergence on the cultural scene has also been aided by strong support from the city government. "In the past, Kaohsiung was known chiefly for its heavy industry," says Raymond Wong, the deputy general director of Weiwuying. "Of course, it still has its industry, but in recent years the city government has been keen to change that image by developing the cultural infrastructure. The ambition is to make Kaohsiung a kind of events city, and I can see quite a lot of opportunities here."

For several major events, the city government has sought to show appreciation to concertgoers through a "(K) Town After Party" program in which ticket stubs can be used to enjoy discounts at major department stores and other partnering shops, as well as free meals at scores of restaurants. During the weekend of the Blackpink concerts, local night markets reported record business and hotels were near full capacity, underscoring the economic benefits associated with performing arts events.

The current cultural evolution is building on the foundation of music festivals that had already been a staple in Kaohsiung. The annual Megaport Music Festival held in April is Taiwan's largest music festival. The inaugural festival in 2006 included performances from 20 artists on three stages. This year's event, the first since the Covid pandemic, saw over 100 indie, rock, pop, hip-hop, punk, alternative, and other artists gracing 10 stages extending from the port-side plaza to the Great Harbor Bridge.

In addition, the first Migrants in Kaohsiung Festival held at the Kaohsiung Music Center last December highlighted Southeast Asian music and food to celebrate Taiwan's diversity.

Looking north

As both Weiwuying and Taipei's National Theater and Concert Hall (NTCH) belong to the Ministry of Culture's National Center for the Performing Arts, Kaohsiung is also benefiting from the connections and reputation that Taiwan has built up in the international cultural community over the decades. For Taiwan, the addition of a second venue in the south makes it an even more desirable location to include on a performance tour schedule.

The New York Philharmonic's recent concerts are an example of this symbiosis. After the orchestra performed for two nights in Taipei, it proceeded to Kaohsiung's Weiwuying for a final performance before moving on to Hong Kong.

"Having more players in the market is something we embrace very positively," says Lin Ting-chun, NTCH's director of programming and international development. "Before, when there was only one professional venue of its kind in Taiwan, we had to do everything. Now having more venues makes the entire cultural market more desirable for those on tour."

Both Lin and Weiwuying's Yeh also cite Taiwan's advantages as a tourist destination as a plus in attracting international performers. "Taiwan has the best street food, beautiful scenery, and kind people," says Yeh. "The foreign artists always tell us they want to come back."

At the same time, there are differences in the nature of the markets in the north and south. Given its longer history as an artistic center, the audience in Taipei tends to be quite sophisticated, even compared with other big cities in the region.

"One indicator is that post-performance talks in the lobby at NTCH can

easily attract more than 200 people, and they ask very intelligent questions and are artistically curious," says Lin. "They want to know about the creative process and the context of the work, and they are able to share ideas about what they have seen. That is really rare in the world, and the artists often tell us how exciting that is for them."

Some types of events that are extremely popular in Taipei – for example, a visiting modern dance troupe can do three or four sell-out performances – would not be as appealing to Kaohsiung audiences. And recently, reflecting the culturally liberal environment in Taipei, NTCH has geared an increasing amount of programming to such contemporary themes as social justice, climate change, and LGBTQIA+ rights. For instance, one recent program focused on the dangers posed by misinformation, while another stressed the importance of sustainability by using no more than 150 watts of lighting throughout the performance.

In contrast to the modern architecture in Kaohsiung, the traditional Chinese palace style of the twin National Theater and National Concert Hall buildings are distinctive, elegant additions to the urban landscape. Although the complex is 36 years old, Lin stresses that age is a relatively insignificant factor for a performance venue. She notes that New York's Carnegie Hall, though built in 1891, is still one of the world's preeminent concert halls.

At the same time, NTCH has stayed fresh through rigorous maintenance and continuous improvements, Lin says. The pandemic period slowdown, for example, was used to install 4K camera systems and a 5G enterprise network.

Looking ahead, the NTCH calendar for the coming months brings some outstanding musicians to Taipei. The 2023 Summer Jazz festival will feature the popular Kenny Barron Trio as well as jazz vocalist Kurt Elling accompanied by guitarist Charlie Hunter. Classical music aficionados can look forward to the arrival of Finnish conductor Klaus Mäkelä leading the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra in works featuring violinist Janine Jansen. A phenomenon at 27 years of age, Mäkelä is the current "wunderkind" of the classical music world.

Despite Taiwan's successes in the cultural arena, many in the domestic industry say that this market has fallen short of its potential. Events promoter Steven Lin, founder of Wonderful Entertainment Asia, notes that Taiwan is often absent from the itinerary for mega pop music events. A prime example is Taylor Swift's upcoming world tour, which will take her to only Japan and Singapore in this region. Both the Tokyo Dome and the Singapore National Stadium are covered arenas, whereas the only comparable facility in Taiwan – the National Stadium in Kaohsiung – is open-air, leaving events vulnerable to bad weather conditions.

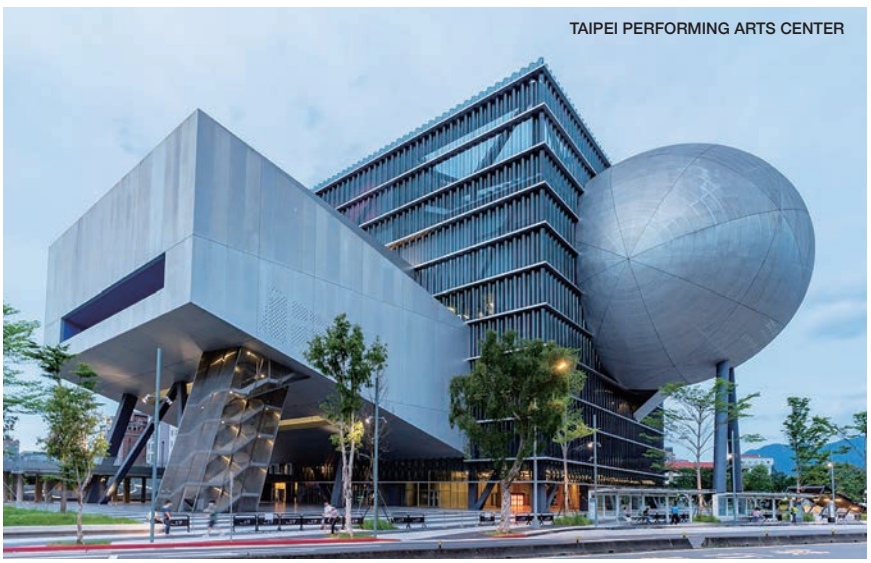
In rating Taiwan's competitiveness, Steven Lin also cites the higher levels of corporate and government support in some other Asian locations. "Doing a music event can be very high risk," he notes. "If there's a typhoon or the headliner falls sick, the concert has to be canceled. Having strong brand backing and government support makes it easier for operators like us to go into a country."

He says the government support could be either monetary, such as waiving or lowering venue fees, or increased assistance with visas, application procedures, customs, and traffic or crowd controls. He also urges more efforts to tie music and other cultural events together with tourism promotion.

"As a result of K-pop and Korean cinema, the authorities here are starting to become more aware of the importance of cultural products to a country's economy and international image," he says. "So I think things will improve, though for now we're still quite behind."

Potentially, the availability of new performance venues may help the situation. The recent opening of the Taipei Performing Arts Center in Shilin – it's the building that looks like a pregnant wall – brings several more small and mid-sized theaters to the market. And after many years of on-again, off-again construction, the multipurpose 40,000-seat Taipei Dome, known colloquially as the "Taipei Big Egg," should soon (fingers crossed) finally be ready to contribute to both the local sporting and cultural scenes.


NATIONAL CONCERT HALL


TAIPEI PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

HAPPY CAMPING

While they haven't always been popular vacation options, camping and the more luxurious alternative glamping are seeing a boost in Taiwan.

BY BRIAN CRAGUN

PHOTO: LEISHA DABASI

As the sun rises on a brand-new day over the mountains of Hsinchu County's Jianshi Township, two groups are waking up under widely differing circumstances at the Leisha Dabasi Campground. One group is on a more traditional camping trip. They arrived the previous night and promptly set up their tent at their campsite before getting dinner ready. The other group is on a luxury camping retreat, staying in futuristic domes with air conditioning and comfortable beds just down the terraced hill.

Luxury camping, or glamping, can be described as camping without the hassle. Glampers can enjoy amenities like beds, electricity, air conditioning, indoor plumbing – and sometimes other resort-style features and comforts. Rather than bringing and setting up your own tents and equipment or sleeping in your vehicle, lodging is already prepared when you arrive – be it a tent, a yurt, a dome, or even a cabin.

Originally, Leisha Dabasi Campground had only traditional campsites, but last year saw the addition of glampsites. "With glamping, it's about comfort," says owner Leisha Dabasi. "It's about getting out in nature, but it's also about the speed and convenience of not having to set things up. You just have to go."

Around the world, luxury and traditional camping are enjoying their time in the spotlight, with an unmistakable infusion of new lifeblood compared to pre- and mid-pandemic eras. According to Kampgrounds of America's 2023 North American Camping & Outdoor Hospitality Report, camping activity in the U.S. has grown significantly over the past decade and now accounts for nearly one-third of the North American leisure travel market. Campers in the United States spent US$52 billion in 2022, with 6.4 million households going camping for the first time.

Similarly, in the European Union, camping was the only type of travel accommodation to experience growth in 2022, with nights spent in campsites surpassing figures from 2019 by 6%. According to Japanese newspaper *The Asahi Shimbun*, the Japanese domestic camper population is estimated to have reached 8.6 million in 2019 – though

that figure dropped to 6.1 million as campsites suspended operations due to the pandemic before rising again to 7.5 million in 2021. First-time campers accounted for 16.8% of the total in 2018, a number that increased to 25.9% in 2020 and 24.4% in 2021. In South Korea, a survey showed that 43.5% of campers interviewed said they camped for the first time after the pandemic.

Camping has taken a long time to reach mainstream popularity in Taiwan. One association that has worked to help usher in this new age of popularity is the Camping Association of the Republic of China (CAROC). The non-profit organization was founded in 1975 by citizens who enjoyed sharing their love for camping with others by promoting the activity in Taiwan. In the organization's early days, efforts included a series of summer camp experiences for Taiwanese youth.

"Many parents who didn't have the time to go camping with their families would happily send their children to camp by themselves," says Lin Chin-chang, honorary president of CAROC. "There were so many young people participating in our summer camps, but whenever we would hold events directed at families, there wasn't so great of a turnout."

Lin remarks that while most children loved attending CAROC's summer camps, many would have less time and inclination to venture out into the wilderness with their friends and family as they grew up.

PHOTO: LEISHA DABASI

Glamping offers the luxury and comfort of upscale accommodations while providing a close connection to nature.

PHOTOS: LEISHA DABASI

"Two main groups make up adult campers in Taiwan," Lin says. "The first group is people who, as children, experienced the joy of being out in nature with friends through scouting and fell in love with camping. The other main group is people who love getting in touch with nature and preserving the environment."

CAROC has sought to promote camping as a pastime for more types of people. To make camping more accessible, it established the Huazhong Campground located in the riverside park near Huazhong Bridge, which connects Taipei's Wanhua District to New Taipei's Zhonghe District.

Progress in attracting more campers, especially families, to campsites was sometimes slow. However, Lin and his association were pleasantly surprised in 2014 by an explosion in attendance at the 17th Asia-Pacific Rally, held in Taiwan. The Asia-Pacific Rally is an annual camping event organized by the Asia-Pacific Commission of international camping promotion organization Fédération Internationale de Camping, Caravanning et Autocaravaning (FICC).

"At that time, we'd been trying to promote 'family camping' for over 50 years, and it had not always been easy," says Lin. "Then, in 2014 at the 17th Asia-Pacific Rally, suddenly we had 300 camping outfits totaling over 1,200 people – and most of them were 'family camping' outfits." The association's efforts seemed to have finally succeeded in helping promote family camping in Taiwan.

Lin's anecdote is supported by search engine trends in searches for "camping" in Taiwan. There has been a four-fold increase in searches on Google for camping-related information since 2014. Chuang Jien-ho, chairperson of CAROC and one of Taiwan's top distributors of motor homes, predicts that – with an increasing number of travel agencies offering glamping options – glamping will continue to grow in popularity rapidly. Mirroring international trends, camping in Taiwan has also seen post-pandemic growth at a remarkable rate. According to industry research firm Mirai Business Research Institute, camping experienced an increase of 27.2% year-on-year in 2022, up from 4.7% between 2019 and 2021.

Brothers Rays and Keelong Hsu were intrigued by the prevalence of glamping on their social media feeds, prompting them to give it a try.

PHOTO: KEELONG AND RAYS HSU

Stoking the campfire

So why the sudden uptick in the popularity of camping in Taiwan? The main factor appears to be people's desire to escape the concrete jungle in favor of fresh air, green hills, and a sense of freedom.

Campgrounds owner Dabasi appreciates that urge. His campground is situated on land that once belonged to Dabasi's grandparents, members of the Yunwu Tribe of the indigenous Atayal group. As a child, Dabasi would hike for hours to get to his grandparents' house. He recalls the connection with and respect for the land he felt on those visits and credits his love for nature to these childhood outings.

"Years later, I returned with my mother and we discovered there is now a road," he says. "We took our tents and stayed on the property. After that, I'd take any chance I could to get up there, and that's when I started planning how to design the campgrounds while keeping in mind the natural layout of the area."

Another recurring theme is the effects

of the pandemic on the types of places that make for appealing vacation spots.

"When the pandemic started, people began to look for new domestic vacation options," says Dabasi. "Being outside and farther away from other guests made camping an attractive option to many. Since our campgrounds are terraced, there's a feeling of having more space to yourselves." He adds that since Leisha Dabasi Campground opened around seven years ago, public interest has grown steadily.

Social media has also played its part, with a multitude of internet personalities and influencers sharing their own experiences. With backdrops of beautiful scenery and the visible feeling of camaraderie and being with friends in unique locales associated with camping, it's no surprise that this type of content appeals to users from all walks of life.

Brothers Rays and Keelong Hsu – creators, performers, and members of the YouTube ensemble This Group of People (這群人) – have recently dabbled in the hobby by trying out glamping as well as "free camping" or "wild camping," where groups or individuals venture into the wilderness and seek out suitable sites for camping themselves. Rays Hsu recalls childhood trips to the mountains and the seaside with their family.

"Our family would go into the wilderness and bring our own equipment and supplies, find a place we liked, and sleep in the family car," he says. He fondly remembers these trips and feels they led to his love for the outdoors and escaping into nature.

Keelong Hsu says his interest in camping started abroad 14 years ago on a camping trip in Thailand. At that time, he didn't think many viable options for camping existed in Taiwan, so he planned the trip to give camping a try. "Living in the city, it's nice to be able to go on camping trips and experience a simpler way of life without all of the information and distractions barraging you from every direction," he says.

As glamping grew in popularity in Taiwan, Keelong Hsu was drawn in by the prevalence of social media posts on his feed. When friends invited him to join their glamping trips, he was excited to try camping in a different way than he'd experienced before.

"Glamping isn't the same as traditional camping," he says. "It's a bit safer and less imposing because you don't have to worry about forgetting gear or supplies or setting things up yourself. 'Wild camping' or 'free camping' is unique because you get to create your own environment, and there's a sense of accomplishment from putting together a camp that makes you feel comfortable."

Rays Hsu adds that, "Seeing everyone work together toward a common goal and how people work together in a group is also really fun for me. You learn a lot about people by observing them in that kind of situation."

While the brothers acknowledge social media influencers' role in popularizing camping and glamping in Taiwan, Rays Hsu believes there is more at work behind the scenes. "I feel like influencers can't take all the credit for how popular glamping has become in Taiwan over the last few years."

"I think influencers became interested in glamping because it was already becoming popular around Taiwan, and influencers started trying it themselves. At that point, they began sharing posts, stories, and videos, and that got the ball rolling faster."

To some degree, social media's unique ability to rapidly popularize people, hobbies, and trends played a part in accelerating the upsurge in the popularity of both luxury and traditional camping here in Taiwan. Regardless of which influence has caused the new camping revolution, this hobby seems appealing to a growing number of people hoping to get out of the house.

The Huazhong Campground, on the banks of the Xindian River in Taipei, offers urbanites a taste of camping right on their doorstep.

PHOTO: CAROC

RESTARTING THE ESPORTS GAME

Although it once punched above its weight in esports, Taiwan is now falling behind countries like South Korea and Singapore. How can Taiwan leverage its strengths to put itself back on the map?

BY HENRY LAN

I started playing *League of Legends (LoL)* 10 years ago while attending middle school in Australia. It was already a popular game, but I had no idea how much the professional scene would explode between then and now. *LoL* is now the number-one PC game globally, drawing in up to eight million concurrent players per day across 145 countries.

And it's not just *LoL* that's gained popularity. According to esports analytics company Newzoo, the global esports market grew from generating US$130 million in 2012 to over US$1.7 billion in 2022 and is projected to grow at a compound annual rate of 13.4%.

Arguments with my mom about time allocation between gaming and academics ensued throughout my schooling, but even she began referring to *LoL* by name rather than simply as "the video game" after hearing about it from the news and her friends.

Conversations like ours took place worldwide, and in few places were they more frequent than in Taiwan following the victory of the Taipei Assassins (TPA) in the 2012 *LoL* World Championships. This annual tournament is one of the world's biggest, with just under 100 million viewers in 2019. TPA's victory is considered to have catalyzed widespread recognition of esports as a legitimate industry and a viable career path.

Kevin Pai, CEO of Taiwan Esports League (TESL), says the nature of competitive gaming has evolved during the past few years. "At the beginning, organizing competitions and esports was a strategy that game developers used to hook new players and grow their player base," he notes. "But over time, esports became a business opportunity of its own."

Pai notes that the concept of esports is still in its infancy compared to traditional sports and contains some structural problems yet to be addressed. One example is the phenomenon of game developers exercising a monopoly over competition hosting rights for their game titles, rather than implementing integrated competitions like the Olympics for traditional sports.

Despite these structural differences, both esports and traditional sports are a test of dedication, teamwork, and

comradery. Leading Asian team Talon Esports Cofounder and CEO Sean Zhang says his early childhood interest in traditional sports is what led him to enter the esports industry.

Talon Esports has sought to capitalize on these commonalities by partnering with French football club Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), currently home to superstars Kylian Mbappé, Lionel Messi, and Neymar Júnior. Zhang notes that the formation of PSG Talon is a mutually beneficial arrangement.

"Many traditional sports teams are seeking diversification strategies due to the increasing average age of their traditional fanbase," he says. "The Premier League dominates here in Asia, so building a new football fanbase as a French team is difficult here. Looking at new ways to connect with young fans, such as esports, is a great way to help bridge the gap to new audiences and create a new angle, so the next best thing was for them to look at esports."

Paper Rex exits the stage at VALORANT Masters Tokyo Lower Finals on June 24, 2023.

PHOTO: COLIN YOUNG-WOLFF

Shifts in Taiwan

Since TPA's rise to fame, Taiwan's gaming industry has continued to flourish in hardware and mobile gaming development, but progress in professional esports has stalled. Many high-profile Taiwanese players have departed to play in other regions. The most prominent one is Hu Shuo-chieh (competing as SwordArT), who was acquired by U.S.-based Team SoloMid in 2020 with a record-breaking US$6 million contract.

"What usually happens is that there are better opportunities for Taiwanese players in mainland China," says Harley Örvall, cofounder and chief gaming officer of Paper Rex, an esports team startup. Although Paper Rex is based in Singapore, Örvall resides in Taipei after falling in love with Taiwan on earlier visits to study Mandarin.

"Taiwan is a great place, but the market in China is so much bigger, which means that sponsors pay more money, and teams can in turn pay higher salaries to players," he says. "And it's easy for Taiwanese players to move there because they speak the language." Örvall says he thinks the situation won't change until Taiwanese organizations are willing to pay as much as teams in China.

Esports team PSG Talon.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF PSG TALON

Zhang says this problem can be overcome through more concerted efforts to activate brands and unlock commercial opportunities. He notes that in the past, Taiwanese teams haven't done enough to build international brands.

"Taiwanese teams, in general, have not been the best at connecting to international fan bases as well as teams from other regions," says Zhang. He adds that focusing only on the domestic market doesn't provide enough commercial scale. "Video games are an international product. Why are large teams from China, Korea, and the U.S., like G2, T1, and Cloud9, so popular? Because they produce content that caters to international audiences, and they invest in building partnerships."

Taiwan's neighboring markets enjoy

TESL hosts the League of Legends School Championship (LSC), an inter-school competition organized in partnership with high schools and universities, supported by the Ministry of Education and* LoL *developer Riot Games.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TESL

backing from big-name corporations. Such backing ranges from direct team sponsorships, such as Samsung and SK Telecom in Korea and JD.com in China, to event and competition sponsors like Mercedes-Benz and Nike. International commercialization is at the center of Talon Esports' strategy.

"It's as simple as committing more to creating content and understanding the value of the content," says Zhang. "If Taiwan wants to be competitive with China, we need to offer comparable salaries. In order to do that, we need to do a better job of educating our partners to improve and believe in the content."

Factors for success

There is no reason Taiwan can't become an esports powerhouse. The country's advantageous geographic position, robust internet infrastructure, and strong grassroots ecosystem form a trifecta of advantages that can propel it to become a world leader in the industry.

Talon's Zhang also points to the strengths of Taiwan's internet connection speed and talent pipeline. "Taiwan is way ahead of Hong Kong regarding the mindset of parents and schools," he says. "I think the foundation is there. Everything is ready to go. The internet is great."

Ecosystem builders like the Taiwan Esports League (TESL) reinforce this mindset. TESL hosts the League of Legends School Championship (LSC), an inter-school competition organized in partnership with high schools and universities and supported by the Ministry of Education as well as *LoL* developer Riot Games.

TESL CEO Kevin Pai stresses that a vibrant grassroots community underpins the industry's growth. "I see esports in two layers," he says. "There's the professional esports side and the grassroots esports side. Using *LoL* as an example, there are only a handful of professional tournaments in Taiwan yearly but 4,000-5,000 competitions at the grassroots level."

These high school and university-level tournaments form the talent pipeline for professional competitions. Pai notes that the average age of esports players is extremely young – players usually peak around the age of 23, and teams nurture talent from ages 15 or 16. TESL now aims to provide comprehensive training and development opportunities by partnering with technology developers to run pilot programs at schools.

Paul Chen, Blizzard's head of strategy and business development for APAC, says the ability to bring in talent for events will be a determining factor for Taiwan's success in esports.

PHOTO: BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

"Our goal is to not only host grassroots competitions but provide widespread training for the community to have the capacity to host their own local competitions by possessing capabilities like shout-casting and media," says Pai.

Despite the strength of Taiwan's grassroots community, Pai and Zhang agree that there is a notable gap separating it from the upper echelons of professional leagues. While universities and schools provide a solid foundation, establishing formal second-tier "academy-style" leagues could bridge this divide. But these leagues, which would offer aspiring players a more straightforward path toward professional esports, have long struggled to materialize.

At the center of this is the willingness to invest in the Taiwan market from developers like Activision Blizzard, a leading game developer known for titles such as *World of Warcraft*, *Call of Duty*, and *Candy Crush* under its three banners of Activision, Blizzard, and King. Paul Chen, Blizzard Entertainment's head of strategy and business development for APAC, says game developers are conflicted about the Taiwan market.

"Both Activision and Blizzard have been in Taiwan since 1998," he notes. "Half of Taiwan's population plays games, and there is a large base of very devoted and engaged players across all our game titles. We've always identified Taiwan as a potential hub to host the biggest events and serve as a bridge for our developing markets in Southeast Asia."

But Activision Blizzard's investments in Taiwan have not always borne fruit. When Chen joined the company in 2017, Blizzard chose Taipei to build the world's first Blizzard Arena, a fluid multi-purpose esports arena fully equipped with broadcasting rooms and player stages. Today, the Blizzard Arena is defunct and in the process of being torn down. While Chen acknowledges the effects of the pandemic, he also believes government support is essential to support the industry.

"Number one is the ability to bring talent into the country for events," he says. "Particularly for players from less visa-friendly countries, we need special help to bring them in for events. We often don't know the player lists until a month or two before the event, so it's too late for us [to apply for visas]."

South Korea's introduction of the E-6 visa has opened doors for professional esports athletes worldwide to reside in the country. This special cultural and arts visa covers music, art, literature, and entertainment talent. Governments in Southeast Asia are also considering similar schemes, while esports players continue to obtain visas for entry or residency in Taiwan.

The second form of support is for events and is financially linked. Chen notes that while the Singaporean government provides companies with substantial concessions to run global competitions that drive tourism to the country, Blizzard has never received such support in Taiwan.

There have been some positive developments, however. One of these was President Tsai Ing-wen's push in 2017 to classify esports as a sport, which led to professional esports players being included in the list of athletes that are granted military service exemption. Chen recognizes the progress and urges the Taiwan government to act proactively to capture opportunities in the esports sector.

"When we invest in kickstarting the industry, we would really like to work with partners at our side," he says.

BURSTING WITH BIODIVERSITY: TAIWAN'S WETLANDS

Home to a vast assortment of Taiwan's flora and fauna, numerous wetland conservation areas around the island are waiting to be discovered.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY STEVEN CROOK

Wetlands cover no more than 1.6% of Taiwan's land area, and many are located in unappealing coastal districts. Yet they make a massive contribution to the island's spectacular biodiversity and provide a range of ecotourism opportunities.

Conserving and rehabilitating natural wetlands isn't only crucial to protect some of Taiwan's most remarkable bird, crustacean, insect, and plant species – it's also required by Article 18 of the Basic Environment Act, which sets out the government's duty "at all levels" to "actively protect wildlife, ensure biodiversity, protect forests, estuaries, and wetland environments."

The Wetland Conservation Act and the Coastal Zone Management Act reiterate the central government's responsibility to preserve these areas. Each year the Urban and Rural Development Branch of the Ministry of Interior's (MOI) Construction and Planning Agency also approves a budget for conservation, education, monitoring, and other wetland activities. Few environmentalists, however, express satisfaction with official efforts to save Taiwan's wetlands from climate change, overdevelopment, and pollution.

Taxpayers without interest in nature have good reasons to support local wetlands. Such ecosystems act as natural filters that remove contaminants from wastewater. By storing carbon in the soil, they keep carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. Calculating the economic value of any ecosystem is complex, yet it seems that compared to manmade infrastructure, swamps, and marshes provide human communities with incredibly cost-effective protection against storm surges and heat waves.

Sightseers can contribute to wetland conservation by being responsible visitors – this includes sticking to marked paths, keeping pets under control, as well as avoiding littering, disturbing wild creatures, and carrying away natural objects of beauty or interest.

Wetlands in the North

Despite development pressure, several wetlands still exist in the northern third of Taiwan – more, in fact, than the

MOI's Ramsar Citizen map would have you believe. ("Ramsar" refers to the Convention on Wetlands that was signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, though Taiwan was not a signing member.)

Tianliaoyang Wetland (田寮洋濕地), just inland from Fulong Beach in New Taipei City, doesn't get a mention even though it offers exceptional birdwatching opportunities. According to eBird, an online global database of bird observations, 354 avian species have been seen here – more than at any other birdwatching hotspot in Taiwan.

The Ramsar Citizen map treats 11 distinct sites as parts of the Tamsui River wetland. Among birdwatchers, the best known is the 57-hectare Guandu Nature Park, within walking distance of Guandu Station on Taipei Metro's Red Line. No fewer than 229 bird species have been recorded here. But despite careful management by the Taipei Wild Bird Society, the park's ecosystem faces various threats, including invasive species such as tilapia, red-eared slider terrapins, and stray dogs.

Guandu Nature Park (關渡自然公園) is the only place featured in this article where there's an admission charge (NT$60; elementary and junior high students pay NT$30; children under six and visitors with disabilities get in for free), and access is limited to certain times (9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday to Sunday).

Since the construction of the Port of Taipei in the mid-1990s, silt accumulating against the port's north jetty has resulted in the appearance of a new wetland. The dunes here have become a breeding ground for oriental plovers and other birds, while the intertidal zone is a feeding ground for gulls and terns.

The Ramsar Citizen website frankly acknowledges the problems faced by each location it profiles. Humans bringing vehicles into the Port of Taipei wetland cause ecological disruption, and the expected impact of the under-construction Danjiang Bridge, which will be 920 meters long, is unclear. The health of this and other wetland sites around the Tamsui Estuary is also imperiled by residents who dump waste soil and trash or trespass to catch crabs or shrimp.

The West Coast

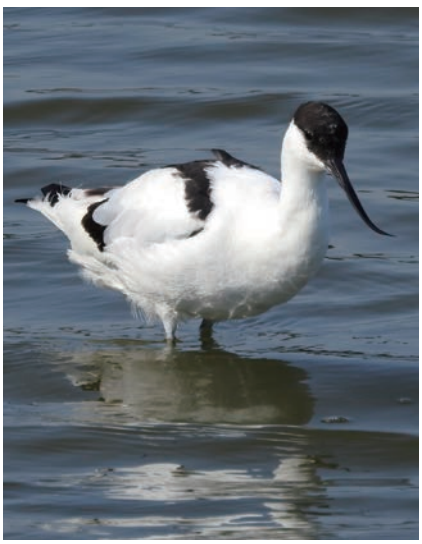
Like the wetland beside Taipei Port's northern jetty, Gaomei Wetland (高美濕地) in Taichung didn't exist until human activity changed the shape of the coastline. From the mid-1970s onward, a levee in Qingshui District captured silt dislodged from around the mouth of the nearby Dajia River, creating extensive tidal mudflats.

Since 2004, around 700 hectares of dry land and seashore here have been classified as part of the Gaomei Wetlands Wildlife Sanctuary (高美野生動物保護區). Despite this status, there's no limit to the number of people that can visit the wetlands. If you come during the weekend when dusk is approaching – Gaomei is famous for its sunsets – you might have to share the 500-meter-long boardwalk with well over a hundred people. On weekdays, you have a much better chance of seeing the crustaceans and waterbirds that populate the intertidal zone.

The ocean-facing parts of Changhua, Yunlin, Chiayi, Tainan, and Kaohsiung are characterized by gray flats inhabited by crabs and mudskippers, swampy windbreak forests, lagoons, oyster farms, and abandoned salt pans. In recent millennia, an abundance of sediment washing down from the mountains every typhoon season has pushed the coastline westward. However, rising sea levels may yet retake some of the ground that's been gained.

The region's wetlands are key resting spots on the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, a corridor through which vast numbers of birds migrate between their summer breeding grounds in the far north and warmer regions where they spend the remainder of the year. Among notable wintertime visitors are Kentish plovers, Lesser and Greater sand-plovers, Pied avocets, and Black-faced spoonbills. The latter species, which is present between late September and early spring, has both driven and benefited from efforts to protect local wetlands.

The spoonbill has long been synonymous with Tainan's Qigu District, where



Above: The elegant Pied avocet can be seen throughout Taiwan, but is most numerous in the wetlands of the southwest.
Left: Like several other marshlands in Taiwan, Hukou Wetlands owes its size in part to human mismanagement of land and water resources.

Zengwen Estuary Wetland (曾文溪口重要濕地) and Sicao Important Wetland (四草重要濕地) are located. The Taijiang National Park's Black-faced Spoonbill Conservation Area (黑面琵鷺保育區) can be found just north of the mouth of the Zengwen River. As of publication of this article, the area's ecological exhibition hall is closed for repairs, but if you continue a few hundred meters to the west, you'll come across birdwatching blinds from which you can gaze out across the water.

Part of the global black-faced spoonbill population (recently estimated at 6,600, up from fewer than 1,000 in the 1990s) spends the colder months in Chiayi County. The county's Budai Salt Pans (布袋鹽田), Haomeiliao Nature Reserve (好美寮自然保護區), and Aogu Wetland Forest Park (鰲鼓濕地森林園區) each offer sightseers a distinct experience.

The salt-pan terrain is flat and completely exposed, so bring a hat. Like other artificial forests so close to the sea, Haomeiliao's woodlands look sickly and are littered with fishing-industry waste. But the adjacent tidelands, as any patient visitor will discover, are alive with fiddler crabs.

Aogu is managed by the Forestry Bureau, a government agency usually associated with sites deep in the mountains. This 1,465-hectare park has a history unlike conventional nature reserves because it's the outcome of a misguided attempt more than 60 years ago to convert marshlands into productive fields for the state-run Taiwan Sugar Corp.

While seawater contamination meant Aogu's land was never suitable for growing crops, subsidence created brackish ponds and sheltered lagoons ideal for waterbirds. For first-time visitors, the Seaview Pavilion (觀海樓) near the peninsula's northwest corner is an excellent place to start. Volunteers staff the information center here and share news on recent bird sightings.

Like the Zengwen and Sicao wetlands, Aogu and Budai are recognized by BirdLife International – a UK-headquartered global partnership of non-governmental organizations – as Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas.

At Linyuan Ocean Wetland Park (林園海洋溼地公園), in the southeasternmost part of Kaohsiung, the main attraction isn't birds but marine creatures. This six-hectare site hosts two brackish lagoons, hundreds of mangroves, and a population of light brown Cassiopea andromeda jellyfish that peaks in the cool season.

Left: Rhizophora stylosa, also known as the stilt-root mangrove.
Right: Flourishing mangroves in Sicao Important Wetland, Tainan.

Jellyfish of a similar size tend to cluster together. In shallower spots, most of them are no bigger than a passionfruit. Elsewhere, you might find a school of jellyfish in which each is bigger than a rice bowl. The jellyfish spend most of their time upside-down because they live in symbiosis with single-celled algae called dinoflagellates. Like plants, these microorganisms are photosynthetic, providing each jellyfish with up to 90% of its daytime energy needs. In return, the dinoflagellates obtain nutrition, carbon dioxide, and a protected position close to the water's surface where they can receive more sunlight.

If turned over – for instance, by a visitor who hasn't read the notices asking humans not to disturb the jellyfish – it shakes off its languor, gradually rights itself, and settles back down within a minute or two. Gazing at these marine creatures as they laze in sun-dappled water is every bit as soothing as watching spoonbills feed on a tidal flat.

Inland bogs

A little over 30 km from Taipei's Xinyi District as the crow flies, but at least an hour and a half by car, Shuanglianpi (雙連埤) in the hills of Yilan County has been a conservation triumph.

The 17-hectare Shuanglianpi Wildlife Refuge (雙連埤野生動物保護區), named for a sublime lake 470 meters above sea level in Yuanshan Township, is cared for by the Taiwan-based environmental NGO Society of Wilderness, with financial help from the Wistron Foundation, the charitable arm of electronics manufacturer Wistron Corp.

On sunny days, the lake's reed beds are abuzz with dragonflies (58 species) and other aquatic insects (32 species). Throughout the refuge, 206 species of terrestrial insects have been spotted, plus a variety of ferns and other intriguing plants. It's usually possible to park near the water's edge and walk all the way around – the total distance is about 2 km.

Compared to Shuanglianpi, Matai'an Wetland Ecological Park (馬太鞍濕地公園) in the East Rift Valley is far more tourist-oriented. The place name is a Mandarin Chinese transliteration of an indigenous toponym, *Fataan*, which refers to a type of bean (sometimes called the pigeon pea) that sustained local Amis households during a long period of warfare with another Amis clan in what is now Hualien County's Guangfu Township.

For many tour groups that spend time in Matai'an, the highlight is a lunch or dinner full of indigenous flavors. At least three restaurants near the wetland serve Amis-style cuisine. Compared to some of Taiwan's other Austronesian cooking traditions, salads, and vegetables are much in evidence. If you order a freshwater fish dish, your server may explain that it was caught nearby using the *palakaw* method, which makes it easy to trap shrimp and eels as well as fish.

THE DIVINE TREES OF CILAN

Nestled in the mountains of Yilan's Datong County, Cilan Divine Tree Garden is one of Taiwan's 18 potential World Heritage Sites.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY STEVEN CROOK

We were still some distance from Cilan Divine Tree Garden (棲蘭神木園區) when I realized that the area's strict entry requirements protect more than the ecology of this remote conservation zone.

Visits must be booked at least a week in advance, and all sightseers have to arrive on one of the operator's minibuses. I immediately understood why, as no car owners in their right mind would want to subject their vehicle to the 11 kilometers of potholed logging road that separate the garden from more civilized motoring conditions.

The previous afternoon, when we saw some of the minibuses bring tourists back to Mingchih Resort (明池山莊), my wife commented on the 12-seaters' mud-spattered sides. But as our little convoy negotiated a series of tight switchbacks that took us higher into the mountains, it became apparent why keeping the minibuses clean isn't possible.

Once past the gate that controls access to Forestry Road 100 (100線林道), the road surface quickly deteriorates. We splashed through puddles and slurry, passing landslide damage in several places. I was thrilled to leave the driving to someone who comes this way several times per week, and equally thankful that I never get car sick.

If you're coming from Taoyuan or Mingchih, the turnoff is just beyond the 74.6-km mark on Provincial Highway 7 – the Taoyuan-Yilan route, also known as the Northern Cross-Country Highway (北橫公路).

Forestry Road 100 starts at an altitude of around 1,100 meters, then climbs to the Cilan Divine Tree Service Station (棲蘭神木服務站) at approximately 1,620 meters above sea level. Between these two locations, the forest isn't particularly attractive. It's mainly commercial cedar plantations that lack the thickness and rich green undergrowth characteristic of healthy natural woodland. There is an upside, however. Occasional gaps make it possible to enjoy brief yet impressive views of the upper reaches of the Lanyang River (蘭陽溪), northeast Taiwan's principal drainage.

The foreground can be just as engaging. On the drive back to Mingchih, as most of my fellow passengers dozed, I saw a Formosan serow within

a few meters of the logging road. This endemic protected species, which some English-language sources mistakenly call a "mountain goat," doesn't like human company. The animal stared in our direction momentarily, then dashed deep into the forest. I consider myself lucky to have encountered two serows in the last four years.

Setting out from the station to explore the garden alone isn't allowed. This being a wilderness – the word "garden" in the name notwithstanding – straying from the path could be disastrous. Visitors are asked to choose either the 2.3-km or 1.2-km route and stick close to the guide assigned to their group. We wanted to see as much as possible, so we opted for the longer route, which takes the better part of two hours.

Our guide said we'd brought favorable weather, by which he meant it hadn't rained so far that day. Cilan's temperate coniferous forests get twice as much precipitation as Taipei, and misty conditions are the norm. The trail can be slippery in places, and there are lots of steps, so hiking footwear is a must. That said, the trees that make Cilan unique are reachable by any reasonably fit person.

Cilan Divine Tree Garden is home to two evergreen species, the Taiwan red cypress and the Taiwan hinoki (or yellow) cypress, as well as a protected thistle (Cirsium albescens) found on the left bottom corner of NT$1,000 bills. The Ministry of Culture (MOC) website states that 62 of Cilan's cypress trees are over 400 years old, while other sources say the area has nearly 100 specimens at least 1,000 years old. This uniqueness prompted the MOC to list this place as one of Taiwan's 18 potential World Heritage Sites in 2002.

Counting the rings on fallen trees helps scientists estimate the age of Cilan's giant cypresses.

Confucius Sacred Tree

In 1959, the government handed over control of 45,000 hectares of land around Cilan to the Vocational Assistance Commission for Retired Servicemen, now the Veterans Affairs Council (VAC). Ex-soldiers who'd come to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek established a network of logging roads and set about making commercial use of the area's forest resources. By 1985, over 7,000 hectares had been cleared of native trees. Some accessible giant cypresses were spared the saw, however, because their shape meant they couldn't easily be cut into sellable planks.

Following the 1991 ban on all logging in natural forests, the VAC's Forest Conservation and Management Administration (FCMA) commissioned a survey of surviving ancient trees and began giving them names inspired by their ages.

Before he began introducing individual trees, our guide explained how experts can estimate the age of a living tree, without cutting it down, by measuring the tree's circumference and comparing it to nearby fallen trees of the same species. Examining those deceased neighbors makes it possible to calculate the average ring width and determine normal bark thickness.

For me, the most memorable of the 51 named trees was No. 6, the Confucius Sacred Tree (孔子神木). This 41-meter-tall red cypress is thought to have sprouted from this hillside within a few

years of the birth of China's greatest sage 2,574 years ago. In addition to being the oldest of the named trees, it sports a twisted branch that reaches down to the ground that has been dubbed "Confucius's walking cane."

The garden's tallest red cypress is the Bao Zheng Sacred Tree (包拯神木, No. 26). Boasting a height of 51 meters, it was named for a Song Dynasty official who lived from 999 to 1062 CE. Bao was posthumously deified because of his reputation for incorruptibility and justice.

If you've been to Taroko Gorge, you likely passed through a small inland settlement called Tianxiang (天祥). That town, and tree No. 9 in Cilan, both honor Wen Tian-xiang (文天祥, 1236-1283 CE), a Southern Song literati celebrated for choosing to die rather than submit to Kublai Khan after the latter defeated the Song and established the Yuan dynasty.

Ferns thrive in Cilan's cool, wet environment.

Living memorials

Many of the trees here bear the names of historical figures from Chinese history. No. 5 bears the name of Sima Qian (司馬遷), often described as the father of Chinese historiography. Sima was born around 145 BCE. His tree is the stoutest in the garden, having a girth of 4.14 meters. No. 12 is a 38.4-meter-tall living memorial to Zhuge Liang (諸葛亮, 181-234 CE), revered as a Chinese military-political hero since the Three Kingdoms period.

No. 29 commemorates Emperor Guangwu (光武帝), who restored the Han dynasty in 25 CE. Strangely, the information panel devotes more text to one of the emperor's contemporaries, Jesus of Nazareth, than to him. No. 46 celebrates Wang Yang-ming (王陽明, 1472–1529 CE), the Ming dynasty general and intellectual whose name is also attached to Yangmingshan National Park near Taipei.

Countless rotting trunks litter the hillside because, in 1999, the FCMA ceased gathering deadwood following the "Fallen Trees Incident." Some officials were accused of forging documents so they could fell living cypresses and pass off the valuable wood as having come from dead trees. The prosecutions were unsuccessful, and the controversy added impetus to efforts to establish a national park that would include Cilan (see the accompanying sidebar).

The Cilan area is said to have over 1,000 different plant species. In addition to various ferns and mosses, Chinese-language bloggers report seeing such intriguing plants in Cilan as the red berry Arisaema, sometimes called the Himalayan cobra lily, the Taiwan Pleione, a miniature terrestrial orchid that flowers in February or March, and the Taiwan rhododendron, an endemic species that produces red and white flowers in April and May.

I was starting to wonder if the tree-naming committee had been told to glorify China's heritage and downplay Taiwan's much shorter written history when

we finally reached a cypress connected to someone of local prominence.

The Zheng Cheng-gong Sacred Tree (鄭成功神木, No. 32) is a 29-meter-tall hinoki cypress that sprouted in 1624 CE, the year in which Zheng Cheng-gong (鄭成功) was born. In 1661-62, forces led by Zheng – a Ming dynasty loyalist known to some as Koxinga – besieged the Dutch trading base in Tainan, expelled the Europeans, and established a Sinocentric regime.

None of the other historical figures assigned a tree at Cilan had the remotest connection to Taiwan. But at least there's some acknowledgment of the local Atayal indigenous people in the name of the private-sector entity that manages the garden on behalf of the VAC.

Lealea Makauy Ecological Park (力麗馬告生態公園) – named after *makauy*, the Atayal name for a type of peppercorn (sometimes written *maqaw*) that often appears in indigenous cuisine – is also in charge of the Mingchih Resort and adjacent Mingchih National Forest Recreation Area (明池國家森林遊樂區) at 1,170 meters above sea level and the Cilan Resort (棲蘭山莊) at a lower elevation.

Rooms at both resorts can be booked through the usual online platforms, but if you want to visit the divine trees, it's best to contact Lealea Makauy Ecological Park. Regarding signs and information boards, there's not much English around Cilan Divine Tree Garden, but park staff can arrange an English-speaking guide at no extra cost if given plenty of notice.

Admission to the garden costs NT$770 per person, including pickup from and return to Cilan Resort or Mingchih Resort. Overnight guests at either resort pay NT$670. Add NT$180 for a bento at the service station.

There's no need to book in advance if visiting Mingchih National Forest Recreation Area (open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. daily). Two hours is enough to see the small lake that gives the area its name (which means "bright/clear pond") and the surrounding woodland. Admission is NT$150 on weekends and holidays and NT$120 on weekdays. There are also the usual discounts for students, children, senior citizens, and those with disabilities.

THE NATIONAL PARK THAT NEVER MATERIALIZED

Taiwan's once extensive cypress forests were heavily logged during the 1895-1945 period of Japanese rule and after World War II. By the end of the 20th century, fewer than 26,000 hectares remained, of which over half were in the uplands of Yilan County.

Fearing that Cilan's cypresses might suffer piecemeal degradation if left unprotected, an alliance of NGOs first petitioned the Control Yuan to investigate the FCMA's controversial removal of trees it had listed as dead. The coalition then campaigned to create a national park incorporating Cilan and its neighboring mid-elevation wilderness areas.

The idea was soon taken up by the central government, which settled on the name Magao National Park (馬告國家公園) and proposed boundaries that would have made the protected area about half the size of Yushan National Park.

Had it come into being, the new national park would have covered large parts of Yilan County's Datong Township, Jianshi Township in Hsinchu County, Taoyuan's Fuxing District, and New Taipei's Wulai District. All four are designated as indigenous areas (原住民族地區), meaning they enjoy an additional degree of autonomy. The central government had promised from the outset that residents would play a key role in running the national park, yet opposition from certain Atayal communities – especially Nanshan (南山) and Siji (四季) in Datong – proved intractable.

According to a 2006 report posted on the Ministry of the Interior's website, the hostility the authorities encountered stemmed from tribal ideas about "lifestyle rights, land rights, the right to independent development, as well as distrust of the proposed co-management mechanism, coupled with the awareness of multiple previous conflicts between other national parks and indigenous people."

The budget for Magao National Park was frozen in 2003, and the plan has never been revived in the two decades since. It isn't the only failed national park project in Taiwan's recent history. Proposed national parks covering Orchid Island, Green Island, and Nengdan (能丹, part of the Central Mountain Range) were also scrapped as a result of local protests.

Plenty to Chew on at the Taiwan Culinary Exhibition

Whether you are a fastidious gourmet, a shameless glutton, or somewhere in between those extremes, if you enjoy food, your taste buds are sure to rejoice at the Taiwan Culinary Exhibition (TCE).

A celebration of Taiwan's multifaceted food scene, from fine dining to the simplest of street snacks, the 2023 edition of the TCE will comprise four areas: Gourmet Tastes, Culinary Exploration, Government Pavilion, and Exotic Foods. The exhibition will run from August 4 to 7 at Hall 1, Taipei World Trade Center. The venue is a stone's throw from the Taipei 101–World Trade Center Station on the Red Line of the capital's rapid transit system.

The exhibition's official website is www.tcetva.tw (Chinese only). At the time of writing, ticket prices for the 2023 event had not yet been confirmed, but they are unlikely to differ much from last year's NT$200 per person.

Taiwanese food in the 21st century is a glorious reflection of the way in which the country's multiple ethnic groups have come together, learned from each other, and created a modern and dynamic society. At the same time, the distinctive foodways of the island's Hakka, indigenous, and Southeast Asian minorities are cherished and celebrated like never before, giving international visitors a mouthwatering array of eating options.

Sponsored by Taiwan's Tourism Bureau and coordinated by the Taiwan Visitors Association, TCE 2023 is a key part of an ongoing branding campaign to showcase the diversity of Taiwanese cuisine and boost its international profile. With input from several central and local government units, the TCE's organizers have selected a wide range of participants, among them prize-winning chefs who can present dishes that encapsulate the sheer joyfulness of Taiwanese food.

Last year's TCE included more than 60 cooking demonstrations, nearly 90 expert lectures, and close to 100 sessions at which members of the public could try to make well-known dishes. For Taiwan residents, the opportunity to snag discount coupons is a significant attraction.

Further proof that Taiwanese food enjoys a growing international profile has come from Michelin, publisher of the world's best-known restaurant guides. The first edition of Michelin's Taipei guide appeared in 2018. Taichung was added in 2020. Two years after that, coverage was extended to the southern cities of Tainan and Kaohsiung.

It is not necessary to refer to a physical copy of the gourmet's red bible when planning a personal food tour based on Michelin's recommendations, because there is so much information in both

English and Chinese on the company's website (https://guide.michelin.com).

In addition to a brief profile of every featured eatery (which includes useful details such as whether credit cards are accepted, and whether the eating area is air-conditioned), the website has mini-guides such as "Recommended Eats Along the Kaohsiung Metro Line," "The Best Vegetarian-friendly Restaurants in Taipei and Taichung," "On the Michelin Bicycle Trail in Taipei & Taichung." and "The Best Sushi Restaurants in Taipei."

When Taiwan joined the World Trade Organization in 2002 and opened up its markets, several types of farming became uneconomic. In response, the authorities began helping individual farmers and local farmers' associations branch out into agritourism.

Instead of merely growing crops for sale, dozens of farms up and down the island now welcome visitors eager to learn where their food comes from. Those willing to roll up their sleeves and participate in the production process can pick fruit and turn it into jam, or make tofu from scratch.

Some agribusinesses have introduced crops or animals that few Taiwanese have previously seen. Qingjing Farm has long been famous for its flocks of sheep and sheep-shearing demonstrations. In addition to growing pepper vines, Shishan Pepper Farm in Kaohsiung's rural interior serves deliciously aromatic dishes featuring meat from its own chickens and vegetables grown on-site. A-Shin Choco Farm in Pingtung County welcomes tourists to see its hundreds of cocoa trees and take part in chocolate-related DIY activities.

One especially popular destination is Ceroh in Hualien County. An outpost of the Amis indigenous people, Ceroh enjoys exceptional community solidarity thanks to labor-sharing traditions known in the tribe's Austronesian language as *mipaliw*. Ceroh is known for three crops: rice, arrowroot (which they call *alida*), and bamboo shoots (*kingtol* in Amis). Local farmers have joined scholars and students in an effort to bring back heirloom foods.

Arrowroot rhizomes grown by Ceroh's farmers are powdered and used as a cornstarch substitute, or to make drinks or a jelly-type dessert. Tourists interested in food-related DIY experiences can sign up for an activity, for an outdoor feast, or to join tribespeople as they fish with nets in the nearby Xiuguluan River.

In another part of Hualien County, the Amis residents of Tafalong invite outsiders to their Red Glutinous Rice Field Picnic Table. Because this type of rice has never been grown in large quantities, it is usually reserved for special occasions and honored guests, and served alongside foraged wild vegetables, smoked chicken, and pickled pork, or in the form of mochi.

The Tourism Bureau has recently created a number of "tourism unions" around Taiwan, to leverage the strengths and distinctive appeal of each region by enhancing cooperation between local governments, experts, and entrepreneurs. Ceroh and Tafalong – alongside bike paths and scenic spots – are among the attractions promoted by the Hualien Tourism Union.

East Rift Valley National Scenic Area will be holding the East Rift Valley Festival on August 26 and 27 at the Luoshan Visitor Center in Fuli Township, Hualien County. The festival themes include indigenous cuisine, aesthetics, music, and traditional crafts, introducing visitors to diverse aspects of the East Rift Valley. Each area of the festival offers unique experiences, showcasing the diverse aspects of life and culture in the region.

For all kinds of travel information about Taiwan, visit the Tourism Bureau's website (www.taiwan.net.tw), or call the 24-hour tourist information hotline 0800-011-765 (toll-free within Taiwan).

Silks Hotel Group Savors Elevating Sustainable Development with Taiwan's Revitalized Salt Industry

Get ready to add some extra flavor to your hotel experience! As transformation and innovation challenges are faced by traditional industries, the 200-year-old sun-dried salt industry stands resilient. Regent Taipei and Silks Place Tainan, sister hotels of Silks Hotel Group, have aligned their vision with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Together, the hotels have partnered with salt fields in Taiwan to champion sustainable development and help reintroduce the fading magnificence of the once-flourishing centuries-old salt industry.

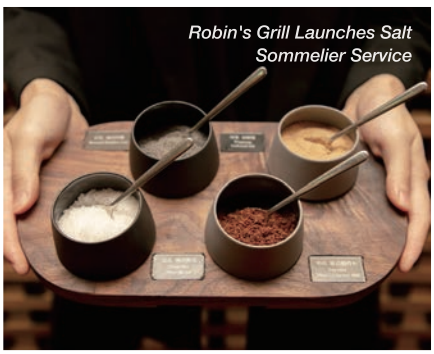
Regent Taipei partnered with Zhounan Salt Field, one of the last two remaining sun-dried salt fields on Taiwan's southwest coast, to showcase its commitment to sustainable development and promote locally sourced ingredients. Originally established in 1824, the salt field thrived until the decline of natural sun-dried salt in 2001. However, thanks to the efforts of the Chiayi County Budai Cultural Association, the farm was revitalized in 2008, and the historic salt fields received a breath of new life. Through cultural and tourism education, people are now forging friendly and sustainable connections with the fields.

For this collaboration, Zhounan Salt Field has handpicked seven locally sourced Taiwanese salt products to be featured at Robin's Grill, located on the second floor of Regent Taipei. The steakhouse is offering a "Salt Sommelier" service to guide guests in ensuring each bite is perfectly accentuated by a carefully selected local salt. This unique collaboration also incorporates the different salts into unique salads and desserts, delivering an unrivalled "farm-to-table" experience that leaves a lasting impression on every palate.

Additionally, Regent Taipei introduced a rejuvenating spa treatment at its award-winning Wellspring Spa that incorporates everything salt from an exfoliating bamboo salt scrub to a mugwort salt bath and four salt-inspired post-treatment snacks, providing a holistic and revitalizing "farm-to-skin" experience.

Silks Place Tainan, following the sustainable development philosophy of the Silks Hotel Group, has signed the "Salt Field Adoption Program" with Taiwan Patron Cultural & Creative Co. which operates the Jingzijiao Wapan Salt Fields in Beimen, Tainan. Silks Place Tainan introduced the harvested sea salt into the hotel's restaurant menu and provides mugwort bath salts to guests who wish to

Silks Place Tainan ROBIN'S Japanese Style Teppanyaki Harvested Sea Salt is Used to Make Salt-Baked Boston Lobster



Robin's Grill Launches Salt Sommelier Service

relieve travel fatigue.

The Jingzaijiao Wapan Salt Fields proudly stand as Taiwan's largest and oldest salt drying field, with a sun-drying tradition spanning 360 years, all the way back to the Qing Dynasty. Through their meticulous "three exposures and nine sun-drying" process, they produce the highly esteemed "Taiwan fine salt," known for its purity and rarity.

Silks Place Tainan actively engages in co-creation with the local community by adopting around 100 square meters of crystallization ponds, yielding approximately 500 kilograms of salt annually. This partnership enables the hotel to promote Taiwan's local ingredients and integration of "food education" into its restaurants' ethos, advocating sustainable dining practices. With a focus on culinary innovation, Silks Place's culinary team crafts flavored salts using natural two-layer salt infused with ingredients like garlic, red onion, and tomato basil. These unique salts not only replace imported seasonings but also contribute to Taiwan's promotion of local produce.

Silks Place Tainan has launched a specially curated "Salt" family room package, immersing guests in the world of salt farming. Guests can visit the historic Jingzijiao Wapan Salt Fields as experienced salt workers guide them through the traditional salt production process. Donning conical hats, guests will experience the joy of hands-on salt harvesting, connecting with centuries-old traditions. After the harvesting, salt halide, a natural coagulant crafted from concentrated seawater and a blend of minerals, is combined with high-quality soy milk to create a fragrant salt halide tofu pudding to enjoy.

The family room package includes a three-day, two-night "farm-to-learn" stay at Silks Place Tainan's Family Suite complete with breakfast. One child under the age of 11 can also enjoy a complimentary full experience. Those who book through the official website can enjoy a 30% discount on High-Speed Rail tickets.

Through these initiatives, Silks Hotel Group shares Taiwan's finest local ingredients, embracing sustainable the farm-to-table, farm-to-skin, and farm-to-learn ideas.

Silks Hotel Group upholds social responsibility in its everyday practices to integrate new aspects of sustainability into everyday experiences. Within the hospitality industry, every facet revolves around individuals and society – the dedicated workers who tirelessly craft exceptional experiences for our esteemed guests and the local businesses we collaborate with to celebrate and preserve Taiwan's vibrant culture, arts, and cuisine. This interconnectedness forms the very fabric of Silks Group's hotels, and we hope to further minimize their environmental footprint and promote sustainability through our services and community initiatives.

Regent Taipei introduces bespoke Rejuvenating Salt Spa Treatment at its award-winning Wellspring Spa.

Silks Hotel Group

Founded in 1990, Silks Hotel Group (formerly FIH Regent Group), is one of the top Asia-based hotel management companies as well as the largest and most profitable hotel group listed on the Taiwan Stock Exchange. The group currently owns and operates the renowned international luxury hotel Regent Taipei, shopping mall Regent Galleria, the authorization and management of Regent brand hotels and luxury residences in Taiwan, and three diverse hotel brands: cultural luxury lifestyle hotel brand Silks Place, hot spring resort Wellspring by Silks, and stylish boutique hotel chain Just Sleep. In addition to hotels, Silks Hotel Group has also expanded its footprint in the Food and Beverage industry, operating Silks Palace in the Taiwan National Palace Museum, and other renowned attractions. The brand's DNA focuses on fusing Eastern and Western cultures as well as providing extraordinary accommodation, dining, and service.

Currently, the hotels under management and operation of the group include locations in Taipei, Yilan, Hualien, Tainan, Kaoshiung, Osaka, and more.

For more information, please visit www.silkshotelgroup.com.

All prices are subject to an additional 10% service charge

Regent Taipei booking website
https://www.regenttaiwan.com/overview/news-events /
phone number: 02 2523 8000

Silks Place Tainan booking website
https://member.silkshotelgroup.com/SPTN/
phone number: 06 390 3000

Meet Steven Pan of the Regent Hotels Group

Steven Pan, chairman of the Regent Hotels Group and the Silks Hotel Group, is a veteran in the hotel industry, managing the Regent Taipei and other luxury hotels since 1992. Pan also serves on AmCham Taiwan's board and is focusing his expertise in management and sustainability on leading AmCham's new ESG Steering Group to help more companies improve their environmental impact.

TOPICS *Senior Editor Julia Bergström met with Pan at the Ghost Island Media recording studio in mid-June to discuss his move from Wall Street to hospitality, Pan's yin-yang approach to management, and the future of tourism in a post-pandemic world. An abridged version of their conversation follows. To listen to the extended podcast version, visit* **topics.amcham.com.tw/listen**.

You started your career on Wall Street before shifting to hospitality. What made you decide to take over the Regent Hotels Group?

Many consider me a "1.5 generation" entrepreneur with a somewhat unconventional journey, not exactly fitting the first or second-generation molds.

The Regent Taipei project, initially started by my father, involved selling a majority of shares to his partner, Mr. Chen of Tuntex. At the time, I worked on Wall Street for a now-merged bank called First Boston. While working on an investment banking assignment, Mr. Chen asked me to join him at the Regent in Taipei in 1991, just a year after the hotel opened.

I had reservations about my lack of knowledge of the hotel industry. Mr. Chen explained that my role would involve expanding the hotel company, developing new hotels, and eventually taking the company public. Overall, it was a tough decision involving a significant salary reduction, but I saw the potential in this opportunity and decided to embrace it.

In 1998, I successfully took the company public, and in 2000, I orchestrated a buy-out of the majority shares from Tuntex. Unfortunately, in 2001, the September 11 attacks occurred, followed by the SARS outbreak in 2003. This led to significant struggles for the hotel industry, with our share price plummeting. Then, as China and Taiwan established closer ties, our share price began to recover, and we managed to weather the storm and achieve a successful recovery.

Later, during the global financial crisis, I saw an opportunity amid the chaos and seized it by acquiring the Regent brand, which propelled our international expansion efforts. In 2018, after eight years, I formed a joint venture with InterContinental Hotel Group to rebrand the original Regent Hong Kong (which was then called InterContinental Hong Kong) back to its former glory. This strategic decision aimed to establish a flagship property and leverage InterContinental's expertise to expand the Regent brand globally. As a result, we currently have 10 projects worldwide.

What excites you about the hotel industry? What gets you up in the morning?

The hotel industry encompasses various elements that align with my interests. I often describe a hotel as a Rubik's Cube, a complex puzzle that requires careful consideration and problem-solving.

Regent Taipei, for example, distinguishes itself from other hotels by being a mixed-use hotel project, incorporating a significant shopping component and independent restaurants. During the pandemic, we reimagined the hotel to overcome travel restrictions. Drawing inspiration from our ownership of Regent Seven Seas Cruises, we transformed our hotel into a cruise-like experience – providing entertainment, activities, and learning experiences besides the restaurants and accommodations. During the initial months of the pandemic, we embarked on a three-month co-learning process – this involved training and collaborating with various stakeholders, including entertainers and laid-off tour guides.

The concept of co-learning has become an integral part of our sustainability efforts, alongside co-creation and co-sustaining. It's about learning from one another, collaborating to create innovative solutions, and thriving as a community.

What's your pitch to potential new entrants into the industry?

I never had a conventional pitch for individuals interested in joining the hotel business or starting a new hotel. Instead, my advice to them is to think hard about it. The hotel industry is not for everyone – it requires long hours and a genuine passion for the work. However, it offers one of the best first jobs anyone can have.

Working in hotels exposes you to a diverse range of people from different nationalities and walks of life and sets individuals up for success by cultivating strong relationships and empathy. Dealing with challenging and enjoyable situations

daily and interacting with all kinds of individuals throughout the day is a unique aspect of working in the hotel industry.

We primarily look for people who genuinely care for others. Empathy is a key quality we value – fortunately, it's a characteristic found in a significant portion of the Taiwanese population.

What predictions do you have about Taiwan's tourism sector now that the pandemic is largely behind us? Are you optimistic about the future?

In this first year of reopening, we have experienced significant positive trends in our hotel business, particularly at Regent Taipei. Our business guests have already surpassed pre-pandemic levels by 150%. We have also witnessed a rise in visits from diplomats and political delegations from various assemblies. Taiwan has garnered attention, piquing curiosity and fostering increased business engagements.

Although high-end tourism – particularly from Japan – has not fully returned, we are observing encouraging developments. Our Just Sleep brand hotels in Taipei are performing exceptionally well. Surprisingly, domestic tourism has also seen positive trends. Despite Taiwanese travelers exploring destinations worldwide, our Silks Hotels have maintained their positions as the number one hotel in their respective markets, even during the pandemic. However, middle-tier hotels face challenges and are experiencing a significant downturn. I anticipate major corrections within the domestic travel sector as more Taiwanese go abroad, but I think the international sector will continue to thrive.

How would you describe your approach to management?

The essence of our brand revolves around the concept of yin and yang or the harmony of opposites. This is reflected in our management style, which can be described as "hands-on yet strategic." We are hands-on in specific areas, such as branding and new projects, while empowering hotel operations. In fact, there are times when I don't even visit the hotels for weeks or months.

During prosperous times like the current boom (almost 20% ahead of pre-pandemic levels), we adopt a motto of "competitive yet collaborative." We encourage internal competition within our profit-centered system, where each restaurant operates as a separate business unit. This approach fosters a healthy balance of competitiveness and collaboration.

In terms of our brand essence, we embrace being "global yet local." For instance, at Regent Taipei, we have introduced a new product that exemplifies this concept – champagne tea. Tea is deeply rooted in Taiwanese tradition and Asian culture, but we have elevated it by brewing it similarly to how champagne is crafted. This innovation is an example of taking something local and making it internationally relevant.

You're leading AmCham's new ESG Steering Group. Can you tell us what that is for people who may not be familiar with ESG concepts? What's your vision for this initiative?

For us, sustainability is not just a project or initiative – it is a way of life. It permeates our corporate culture and guides our actions. We view sustainability as a lifelong learning process, continuously seeking opportunities to improve and cultivate sustainable practices. Even during the pandemic, we implemented measures such as contact tracing for food ingredients and preparation, ensuring transparency and accountability. These efforts are part of our commitment to embedding ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) principles into our daily operations.

Within AmCham, as an NGO our focus on sustainability aligns with the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 17, which focuses on partnerships. We believe in fostering public-private partnerships, working closely with our members, government entities, and local communities. Through co-learning, we share best practices, exchange knowledge, and collaborate on projects that benefit Taiwan. We aim to support local entrepreneurs and help them thrive by providing mentorship, expertise, and guidance on scaling their businesses and positively impacting their communities. This approach allows us to give back in a meaningful and sustainable way while also contributing to the overall goals of ESG and sustainability.

Your Just Sleep hotel brand opened its first location abroad – in Osaka – last year. What have you learned about the Japanese market and how it differs from the Taiwan market?

Launching a hotel in Japan involves consensus-building and relationship-building in every aspect of the business. Although the process took longer than in Taiwan, it resulted in a more sustainable foundation for the hotel.

Despite the initial challenges, our hotel in Japan has shown promising signs. It achieved profitability within the first month of operation. Typically, hotels take several years to turn a profit, but the success of our Just Sleep brand has been evident not only in Japan but also in Taiwan. The popularity of Just Sleep among Taiwanese guests has translated into interest from international travelers, particularly from Hong Kong, Singapore, and Korea.

Initially, our Japanese operations catered to international guests, but we have been steadily establishing our presence in the domestic market. As our systems and partnerships, including online travel agencies, have been set up, we have witnessed an increase in Japanese guests.

What do you do in your spare time to relax and recharge?

I have a wide range of interests and hobbies. Every year, I challenge myself to learn something new. In the past, I have picked up piano and saxophone, tried Muay Thai, and currently, I've been enjoying swimming. Last year, I ventured into book publishing, which turned out to be a significant project.

The book focuses on the experiences of Regent Taipei and Silks Hotel Group during the pandemic – sharing our transformation journey and lessons learned, ensuring others wouldn't have to face the same challenges without guidance in the future. The process ended up spanning multiple years because the pandemic just wouldn't end, but it's now been published in Mandarin.

Listen to this interview

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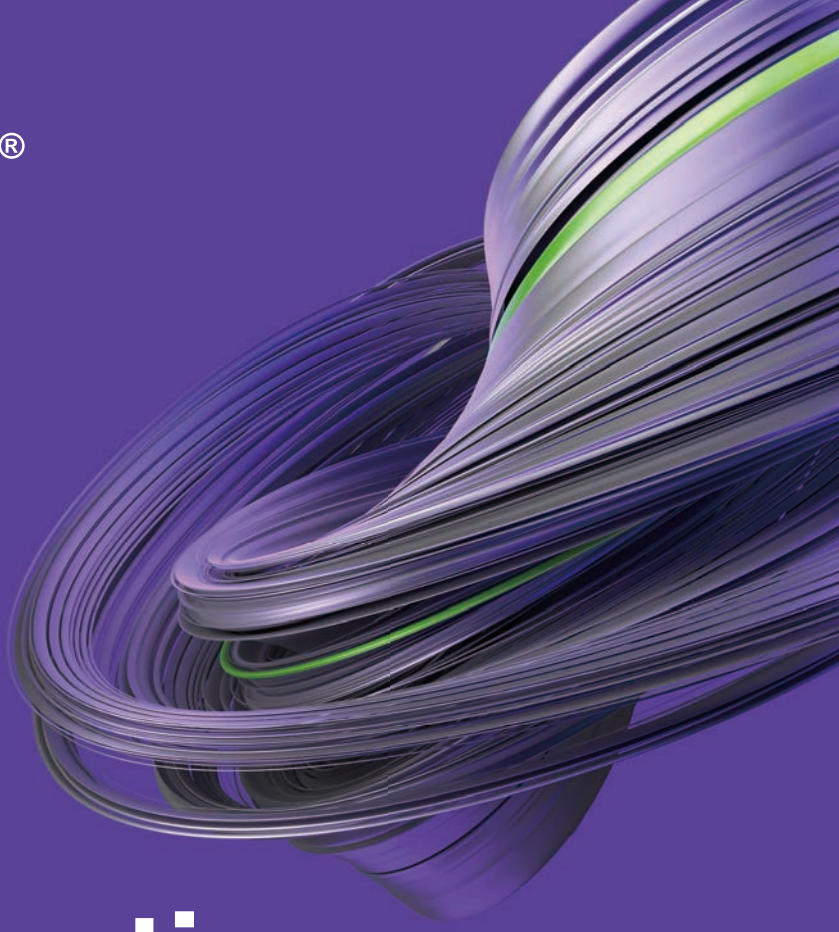

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