



Taipei 101, modeled after a stalk of bamboo, has 101 floors and is the world's tallest occupied building.

## Taiwan Treasures

*The island amazes with ancient Chinese artifacts, Buddhist temples and innovative architecture*

By April Thompson

**Yi Jih Shih, my tour guide** to the Fo Guang Shan Monastery in Kaohsiung, is as giddy as a schoolgirl about to catch a glimpse of her favorite superstar. “You are so lucky; you don’t know how lucky you are,” the Buddhist nun whispers, breaking into a wide grin. ■ We are approaching the Buddha’s Tooth Relic Shrine, a sanctuary that requires advance reservations and contains what is believed to be one of only a few of

the Buddha’s teeth still in existence.

Shih and I have been walking around the massive Buddhist monastery in southwestern Taiwan for a few hours, and she remains enthusiastic to show me its gardens, shrines and gold Buddha statues.

As we enter the silent sanctuary, a woody scent of incense wafts through the air. I follow Shih’s lead, squinting through the thick glass and blinds to see a stupa protecting the tiny, sacred, nearly 2,500-year-old tooth.

Over the course of my tour with this monastic charmer, I learn to expect the unexpected. She gives me lessons in calligraphy and Buddhist scripture. Then she shows me the monastery’s modern media centers, which publish a daily newspaper and produce enlightening programs for the monastery’s TV station, Beautiful Life Television. We meditate in silence in the Great Hall before stopping to sip what just might be the best latte I’ve ever had. I smile when I hear how members of Taiwan’s taekwondo team stopped here for a retreat on their way to the Olympics in Beijing last year, and played basketball with the monks to loosen up.

I love a place with surprises, and Taiwan continues to impress me. Its people are humble enough to say “thank you” after doing a favor for someone, yet bold enough to construct the world’s tallest building, Taipei 101.

While Taiwan might be better known as a hub for high-tech manufacturing, it is also lushly landscaped. Rugged mountains cover 65 percent of the island, with nearly 150 peaks soaring above 10,000 feet. In some cases the peaks are so close to the coast they practically rise right from the ocean. Rivers have carved dramatic gorges into some of these mountains, most notably Taroko Gorge, a national park in northeast Taiwan with stunning marble walls. Along the north coast, red sandstone formations and jade-green algal reefs offer painterly landscapes.

While many consider Taiwan to be an

independent state, the People's Republic of China, 100 sea miles to the west, considers it a province. To further confuse matters, the country answers to two names: Taiwan, which the world knows it by, and the Republic of China, or ROC, the country's official and preferred name. Except, it seems, when locals call it Taiwan. While about 85 percent of Taiwanese are of Chinese heritage, and most speak Mandarin, they claim an identity distinct from mainland China.

Taiwan's close ties to the mainland are apparent, however, in the National Palace Museum, nestled in a verdant hillside in the northern capital city of Taipei. The museum displays about 600,000 pieces representing approximately 8,000 years of Chinese art history. Many of the authentic Chinese treasures were brought to Taiwan when Chinese Nationalists fled from the mainland Communists in 1949.

"Jade was used to communicate with the gods; these objects are still speaking their messages to you today," a museum tour guide whispers dramatically. The museum's crown jewel is the 7-inch-long *Jadeite Cabbage with Insects*—one of the most beautiful and famous pieces in art history, complete with a tiny grasshopper carved into its leaves. There are many



Participants stand during a repentance ceremony at Fo Guang Shan Monastery in Kaohsiung.

KEVIN O'HARA / AGE FOTOSTOCK

other treasures to explore here, as well. Two of my favorites are an inch-long stone boat resembling an olive pit with a 300-character poem carved on its back, and an ornate "puzzle" ball with 17 concentric layers skillfully carved from a single piece of ivory.

After getting the long view of history at the Palace Museum, I head to Taipei 101 for a long view of the city. My ears pop as I ride the world's fastest elevator from the fifth floor to the observation deck on the 89th floor in 37 seconds. It's especially gorgeous at sunset when lights begin to blink on across the cityscape, a lovely mix of angular skyscrapers and rolling hills.

Taiwanese architectural firm C.Y. Lee & Partners Architects/Planners designed this tower and modeled it on the natural world: Taipei 101, which was completed in 2004, was built to look and act like bamboo, rendering it flexible enough to withstand earthquakes and typhoons. Several buildings under construction in other countries will vie for the title of tallest

building once they are completed; however, Taipei 101 is the tallest building currently in use.

I can't resist buying a stuffed "damper baby" from the building gift shop. Taipei 101's cuddly alien-looking mascots

## LODGING

### THE GRAND HOTEL

This landmark hotel on a hill overlooking Taipei was established in 1952 at Chiang Kai-shek's request. The former president wanted a five-star hotel worthy of visiting dignitaries. Each of the hotel's eight main floors is styled after a different Chinese dynasty. The main building has an enormous classical-style Chinese roof and the Presidential Suite has one of Kai-shek's desks and his wife's dressing table. Rooms start at \$171. 02-2886-8888; [www.grand-hotel.org](http://www.grand-hotel.org).

### THE HOWARD PLAZA HOTEL TAIPEI

Located in the heart of Taipei's business district, the Howard Plaza boasts nine restaurants with everything from traditional-Taiwanese to French cuisine, dozens of boutiques and a grand atrium featuring a player piano on a "lily pad" in the middle of a fountain. The service and attention to detail here are impeccable—down to the well-polished Chinese rosewood furniture. Rooms start at \$221. 02-2700-2323; <http://taipei.howard-hotels.com>.

### LES SUITES CHING-CHENG HOTEL

This trendy boutique hotel is blissfully tucked away in a quiet corner of Taipei's city center. The rooms are modern in design and accoutrements, with multimedia systems. Visit the cigar shop or wine lounge to indulge after a long day of sightseeing, or for a more family-friendly treat, visit the nonsmoking lounge for complimentary tea and cookies. Rooms start at \$163. 02-8712-7688; [www.hotel-suitesching-cheng.com](http://www.hotel-suitesching-cheng.com).

are the creative offspring of the building's gigantic "damper," a massive steel ball suspended from wires that counterbalances the sway of the building in rough weather. I pick up Smart Silver, "a quick and curious kid who is bright and a big fan of high-tech stuff."

Famished from wandering the many floors of Taipei's two main attractions, I





The National Palace Museum in Taipei has an impressive collection of Chinese art.



JOSE FUSTE RAGA / AGE FOTOSTOCK

am ready to explore some Taiwanese cuisine. As someone who prefers to graze during the day rather than sit down for three square meals, I delight in Taipei's night markets. The savory scents of oyster omelets, fried chicken and steamed dumplings meet the sweet smell of an ice cream-stuffed crepe topped with roasted peanuts, and I try it all.

The crowded markets are also great for people-watching, as Taiwanese of all ages come here to stroll, snack, shop or play games of chance, such as the popular Mahjongg Bingo. The markets are also fun places to hunt for colorful and kitschy T-shirts bearing offbeat slogans, such as "Happy Marbles," that are popular with local youths.

The next day, I slow my sightseeing pace in order to relax in some hot water. Located on the Pacific Rim's "ring of fire," Taiwan is blessed with a wealth of natural hot springs, and one of the legacies of Japan's 50-year rule of Taiwan—from 1895 to 1945—is bathhouses. Within 20 minutes of Taipei's Main Station, I'm in Beitou, a quiet mountaintop suburb and a favorite spot for springs both hot and cold.

Beitou boasts a range of options for

enjoying the springs, from simple bathhouses to five-star spas. I choose Shann Garden, which boasts Chinese-style gardens, lovely trees and dark wood deck. I could easily linger all afternoon in Shann Garden's milky open-air pool, soaking up the view of the green valley below, as the water temperature is just right and the lightly sulfur-scented breeze refreshing. However, Shann Garden's celebrity kitchen is cooking up other plans for me.

While the restaurant offers a daily Mongolian barbecue buffet, I had put in an advance order for the chef's special nine-course feast inspired by Xueliang's favorite foods. Each course is a culinary sculpture so artfully presented I am torn between wanting to admire it and taste it. The Hong Kong-style abalone with the iridescent shell is a Buddhist lesson in impermanence: It took two days to cook, and two minutes for me to devour. My favorite dish is a simple appetizer—the divine buttery crunch of sautéed lotus root.

To complete my Taiwanese spa experience, I head back into town for a reflexology massage. This ancient healing art uses pressure points on the feet, hands and ears corresponding with various parts of the

## DINING

### DIN TAI FUNG

This world-famous dumpling house, now celebrating its 37th anniversary, serves up comfort food Taiwanese style: dumplings, noodles and steamed buns. While Din Tai Fung originated here as an offshoot of a cooking-oil shop, it has since spread to locations in nine countries. 02-2321-8928; [www.dintai fung.com.tw/en/index.asp](http://www.dintai fung.com.tw/en/index.asp).

### FiFi CONTEMPORARY CHINESE CUISINE

FiFi Contemporary Chinese Cuisine, founded by local fashionista Isabelle Wen, is one of Taipei's see-and-be-seen restaurants. Wen co-created the menu with her mother, drawing on favorite Shanghai childhood dishes. FiFi doesn't shy from the spice, with dishes such as poached chicken in chili-pepper sauce and a chili pepper stuffed with minced pork. 02-2721-1970; [www.isabelle-wen.com/wenfi](http://www.isabelle-wen.com/wenfi).

### SILKS PALACE AT THE NATIONAL PALACE MUSEUM

Opened next door to the National Palace Museum last June, this restaurant is a work of art inside and out. Its webbed-glass facade is modeled after the pattern often seen on Song dynasty ceramics, and the restaurant serves an edible replica of the famous *Jadeite Cabbage with Insects* displayed in the museum (dried shrimp stand in for the grasshoppers). The chefs have designed a lavish prix-fixe menu to include such delicacies as An Pin's mixed preserved fruits, marinated pig trotter with bamboo shoots, Tainan-style shrimp meatballs and thick fish soup. 02-2882-9393; [www.silkspalace.com.tw/english/index.htm](http://www.silkspalace.com.tw/english/index.htm).

body. It's a thin line between pain and pleasure, and reflexology treads it well.

My reflexologist—an older gentleman with forearms like Popeye's—starts out easy, wrapping my feet in a warm, wet towel and giving me hot water to drink. Before long, I am feeling nerve endings I didn't know were there, as he digs his



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knuckles into my soles, presumably improving the function of my pituitary gland or whatever organ he discovers is weak.

I leave the clinic energized and ready for a night on the town. I soon discover how Taiwanese youths spend their Friday nights: singing to karaoke and dancing the night away to hip-hop.

The next morning I leave Taipei to explore the island further, enjoying the ease of the country’s high-speed trains to beam from one end of the island to the other. I skirt the coastline, sharing a boat with Taiwanese tourists who squeal each time dolphin ballerinas leap in the air. I experience part of the monthlong Ghost Festival, featuring lanterns on the water; sacrifices of whole hogs, fake money and junk food; and a boisterous, neon parade of groups competing for the best float—all with the benevolent aim of helping ghosts of the deceased find their way out of the netherworld and into heaven.

During my stay it becomes clear that Taiwan has much to offer in the way of art, architecture, cuisine and natural beauty. For me, though, the personal connections are what make the deepest impressions.

While I was still at my hotel in Taipei, I received a pleasant surprise from Shih, my guide from the Buddhist monastery. The ever-thoughtful nun had sent the elegant black-and-silver chopsticks I’d admired over our lunch together, as a parting gift. It’s a small token from a big heart that I will remember fondly as one of Taiwan’s many happy surprises. ▲

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