



Taiwan - a caravan to the beautiful isle

DETAILED DOSSIER

15 day itinerary *Taipei – North East Coast – Taroko Gorge – Highway 11 – Chihpen – Kenting – Tainan – Forest Railway – Alishan – Sun Moon Lake*

Travel dates **Sunday 25 Oct 09 – Sunday 08 Nov 09**
Sunday 08 Nov 09 – Sunday 22 Nov 09
Sunday 28 Feb 10 – Sunday 14 Mar 10

INTRODUCTION

When seafarers from far off Portugal set the first western eyes upon this tear-shaped Island in the South China Seas they declared it to be Ilha Formosa, the Beautiful Isle. They did so with good reason for, as those travellers fortunate enough to visit soon discover, this is one of the most naturally beautiful and still unspoilt places in Asia. It is also one of the most interesting, for here, protected from the utter destruction wrought on the mainland by Mao's Cultural Revolution, the true spirit and fascinating culture of ancient China remains very much alive. Those disappointed by their visits to 'New China' will find that in Taiwan their dream of a magical, mystical Orient can still be realised. Here the essence of Chinese civilization remains, not just in Taiwan's vibrant temples or exquisite treasures, but most notably in the hearts of its people who, in a claim not casually made, rank as some of the most welcoming, affable people in all the world.

Taiwan is also a nature lover's paradise. Amidst the towering mountains and ancient Forests that make up much of the island are found some of the finest botanical gardens in all Asia with an endless array of strange, exotic flowers. In fact, wherever you go on the island, whether it be on the Pacific coast or deep into the aboriginal interior, there are lovely short walks all rewarded by stunning scenery and remarkable flora. Carefully researched in June 2008 by Chief Caravaneer Phil Colley, The Oriental Caravan's journey around Taiwan will seek out and explore the rich diversity of what is perhaps Asia's best kept travel secret. Our unique itinerary will unfold at a relaxed pace with, wherever possible, gentle walks providing the medium for exploration. As we travel around the island we aim to take in its finest gardens, temples and forest walks, its most splendid spa hotels and beaches, and visit everything from the amazing marble cliffs of Taroko Gorge to the 101st floor of 'Taipei 101' the world's tallest inhabited building. Following the recent rapid thaw in its relations with China, Taiwan is opening to Chinese tourism and soon this charming, sleepy backwater will undergo rapid change. Now is very much the time to visit. You will not be disappointed.



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ITINERARY



Day 1 Taipei Time for early arrivals to explore. In the evening a group rendezvous and a first taste of Taiwan's world famous cuisine around our centrally located hotel in Taipei. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 2 Taipei Taiwan's capital has transformed itself in recent years into becoming one of Asia's most vibrant and exciting destinations. It remains nonetheless refreshingly unwesternised and any visit here by those interested in Asian culture is simply a joy. As well as being the island's political and business centre Taipei is home to some of Taiwan's most interesting historical attractions - not to mention some of the tastiest Chinese food in the world! Today we have a full day to explore. Among other things we will visit the Chiang Kai Shek Memorial Hall and begin gleaning an insight into Taiwan's complex but fascinating history - one which reflects in miniature much of the twentieth century turmoil played out on the greater Asian stage. Though once almost deified by personality cult the role of the Generalissimo Chiang in that history has recently been significantly reassessed and few that come to his memorial hall today do so as pilgrims. The spiritual side to Taipei is however rich indeed and the city affords a great opportunity to see working Chinese Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian temples alive and in a state of health no longer found in mainland China. Longshan Temple, dedicated to the bodhisattva of compassion Guanyin, is one of the city's liveliest places of worship with the fragrant incense, yawning gongs and hypnotic chanting of the devotees all seeming to combine to insulate the temple from the hectic pace of the city around. Another deity found here, and in fact all over Taiwan, is Matsu, goddess of the sea, whose protection was sought by those making the perilous voyage from the mainland in days gone by. Xingtian and Baoan temples as well as being beautiful structures are both excellent places to witness folk Taoism in practice and we will visit one or other during the day. Later in the afternoon, for a genuine overview of the city, those with a head for heights have the option of travelling on the fastest elevator in the world (over 1km per minute!) to ascend what was until recently the world's tallest building for incredible views over the city and beyond. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 3 Taipei In 1949 as Mao Zedong's peasant army came within days of seizing the city, the Chinese government in Nanjing packed the cream of five thousand years of Chinese art into crates and shipped it temporarily, as it was thought then, to the safety of Taiwan. This priceless collection, unparalleled in the world, was accumulated by successive Chinese emperors and hidden away in Beijing's Forbidden City for over a thousand years before the fall of the last Emperor Puyi turned his former home into a museum. For nationalists in Taiwan its ownership is a mandate for who has the right to rule China – for the communists in Beijing it is considered to be looted treasure. Such is the size of the collection that only a fraction of it is ever on display, the rest being stored in massive bomb-proof vaults in the mountain behind the museum. The oldest exhibit, a jade carving of a bird, goes back to 3500BC; the most exquisite is more difficult to assign but one contender must be the incredible *Jadeite Cabbage with Insects*. Today we spend the whole morning at the National Palace Museum. The afternoon has been left free. Some may wish to spend more time at the museum while for others the opportunities offered by Taipei's shops or botanical gardens might be too good to miss. One experience well worth seeking out in Taipei is a visit to one of the city's bustling night markets. Its most famous, Snake Alley, took its name from the practice of giving snakes the chance to help a certain kind of man attain virility by having their blood drained and drunk whilst still warm. Though the practice is, officially, now banned the area still exudes a certain dynamic capable of at least stiffening the resolve of any wavering vegetarian! *Overnight – hotel*

Day 4 Taroko Gorge A leisurely start this morning as we bid farewell to Taipei and set off on our journey south. We begin however by heading slightly north to the historic port of Keelung where we join the road for our scenic drive down Taiwan's stunningly pretty north east coast. Among the many wind eroded rock formations found along this stretch one is considered to be uncannily akin to the countenance of the Queen of England! After crossing the Lanyang Delta our road hugs the steep cliffs that cascade dramatically from Taiwan's east coast into the Pacific. Upon reaching the mouth of the Tailukuo River we turn inland where the scenery changes utterly as we find ourselves passing between the towering marble walls that make up Taroko Gorge, one of the true natural wonders of the world. Our accommodation is situated on a high meadow in a delightful natural setting which was once an aboriginal village and which now aims to preserve aboriginal culture – including the provision of some delicious Atayul cuisine! A great way to end the day is to sip a late afternoon drink on the porch of one of our private log cabins and watch the sun softly setting upon the surrounding hills. *Overnight – deluxe log cabin*

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Days 5 and 6 Taroko Gorge We have two full days in which to explore this delightful area deliberately allowing enough time to venture deeper into the park and see some of the more off the beaten track sights. Taroko, its name meaning beautiful in local language, was once the preserve of the aboriginal Atayal people and the many easy walking trails that today exist in the gorge and its side valleys were originally used by them for hunting purposes. The gushing turquoise rivers and lofty peaks, especially when shrouded in mist, would give the landscape pride of place in any Chinese ink painting. Our vehicle will be available at all times but nonetheless during our stay we will make good use of the many opportunities provided by these trails for short walks enabling us to steal a closer look at the abundance of exotic flora and fauna that is to be found here. The road is an engineering wonder in itself and its existence a monument to the courage and tenacity of the men who built it, painstakingly hewing it, often only using hand tools, from the sheer marble cliffs. Although it was the Japanese who first penetrated the area the real impetus for the road's construction was fear of Chinese invasion and over 450 of Chiang Kai Shek's loyal veterans died in the process – we will visit Eternal Spring Shrine which commemorates their sacrifice. Among other things we aim to explore variously the Shakadanag and Baiyang trails and the Tunnel of Nine Turns, all short, flat walks but which afford incredible views. For those who wish on our second day in the gorge there is the option of a longer walk of a half day or so to Bamboo Village, a Truku settlement of bamboo houses, also home to one of the area's finest swimming spots. For those who prefer less walking there will be other options available and some might wish to just spend more time relaxing at our accommodation in Buluowan. *Overnight – deluxe log cabin*

Day 7 Chihpen Today we leave the gorge behind and begin our journey south by passing through the marble factories of Hualian where huge blocks of the recrystallised limestone await reshaping by man. With the vast Pacific on our left hand side we travel down Highway 11 and pass some truly dramatic coastal scenery on the way. As we head for Chihpen we will break our journey along the way and visit one or two of the interesting sites that the route provides. At Baxiandong there is evidence of Neolithic settlement dating back 30000 years though today all of the once usefully residential caves have been sequestered by temple builders. Further on, at Sanxiatai (Three Immortals Platform), a series of arched footbridges undulates visitors from the shore to a trio of legend-heavy and strangely formed islets. Closer to Taidong we will pause to witness 'Water Running Up', a phenomenon capable of making the beliefs of even the staunchest upholder of gravitational law come crashing down to earth. At some point during the day we will also cross the Tropic of Cancer, beyond which the Taiwanese consider the wearing of shorts to be de rigueur. Chihpen is the most famous of the many hot spring resorts founded by the Japanese. Some of the area has been a little enthusiastically developed but our hotel, with its fine swimming pool, outdoor hot spa and even a temple in its grounds, has the best facilities around and is close to the enchanting Chihpen Forest Recreation Area, one of the main reasons for our being here. *Overnight – spa hotel*

Day 8 Kenting We can spend the morning exploring the nearby Forest park. Its cool shaded walks are home to ancient *banyans* and acrobatic Taiwanese macaques and provide a great opportunity to see tropical flora and fauna at close quarters. There is also the option of spending the morning making use of the hotel facilities. Around lunchtime we will set off on our journey down the East Coast. At Shouchia we will leave Highway 11, the main road, and cross into the Kenting National Park driving through sleepy, little visited areas occupied and farmed by the Paiwan aboriginal tribe. Our route today takes us past some fine beaches and towering sand dunes and we will no doubt see members of Taiwan's nascent surfing fraternity. At Eluanbi we reach Taiwan's equivalent of Land's End, its southernmost point. Here we will pause to visit the Eluanbi lighthouse, built by English engineer John Ropinald and fortified against aboriginal attack. Nearby boardwalks will also enable us to get close up to the sea edge and provide a sea urchin's eye view of the coral beds below. Further on we come to the lively resort town of Kenting, playground of the poor and unknown. Our hotel, though easy walking distance, is quietly out of town and boasts its own private beach, very much the best in the area, and which our rooms overlook. The town itself consists of one drag with many small restaurants, shops and bars and is a great place for people watching and observing the Taiwanese at play. *Overnight – hotel*

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Day 9 Kenting Unless we have visited on the previous afternoon, this morning we will stroll through the nearby magnificent Kenting Forest Recreation Area with its limestone caves and lush botanical gardens. Easy walking paths make it possible to venture deep into the forest and, as well as the incredibly exotic flora and fauna, witness countless banyan trees as they drape themselves over the massive and ancient coral outcrops. The rest of the day is free to relax on the beach or by the hotel pool or make use of the many water sports facilities available in the area. *Overnight – beachside hotel*

Day 10 Tainan Our journey north takes us along Taiwan's South China seashore and by late morning we should have arrived in historic Tainan, the island's capital for over two hundred years. Tainan is often compared to Japan's Kyoto and whilst the comparison is faint there is some justification with the city being home to the finest and greatest number of temples on the island. Here is where the Dutch first set up Fort Zeelandia in 1624 only to be evicted by the Ming general Koxinga who became the liberator and popular father of modern Taiwan. This afternoon we will visit the more interesting of its temples and sights including the old Dutch fort of Chikhan Towers, the Confucian temple, the temple to the Official God of War as well as the Koxinga shrine and museum. Tainan is also famous for its cuisine and tonight there is a wide choice of fine restaurants to choose from. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 11 Alishan This morning we have more time to explore Tainan and in particular its area known as Anping, home to the first Dutch fortress. The sea that once surrounded the fort has long since receded but there are many interesting buildings still to be seen. Of particular note is the Anping Tree House which sits in the ever tightening grip of the banyan trees that have overgrown it. Next door, and evidence of British ties with the island, is the Tait and Co Merchant House which houses an illuminating museum of Taiwanese history. Later in the morning we will continue on to Chiayi where the little train that will hoist us into the hills awaits. The Alishan Forest railway provides one of the most spectacular narrow-gauge train journeys in the world as, in just over three and half hours, it travels through three vegetative zones rising from the fields of pineapple and breadfruit below to the Alpine paradise above. The railway, with its many bridges, tunnels and switchbacks is one of many impressive additions to Taiwan's infrastructure from the time of the Japanese and is easily one of the country's top attractions in its own right. Our hotel, which affords excellent views, is of the colonial style and was also built by the Japanese at the turn of the last century. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 12 Alishan For early risers, and by no means compulsory, there is the chance to watch the famous Alishan sunrise as the early morning sun, in theory, rises above a 'sea of clouds' – a special 'sunrise train' is available to take people to the best viewing spot. The rest of the day is left free to wander through the magic of Alishan forest. Though Japanese loggers did their best (hence the mountain railway), there are still many amazing old cypresses to be seen and a variety of trails from which to see them to choose from. Most of them are quite short and all of them well maintained but for those who want to stretch their legs there is the possibility to ascend Tashan Mountain. For those wanting a gentler stroll the easy Travel Trail takes in some lovely, and often quite unusual forest sights, as well as passing the remains of the massive Alishan Sacred tree. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 13 Sun Moon Lake This morning a picturesque mountain drive brings us close to Jade Mountain (Yushan) which at 3952 meters is the tallest peak in Northeast Asia. Resisting all temptation to climb it we instead continue north until finally we arrive at the shores of Sun Moon Lake erstwhile summer retreat of Chiang Kai Shek and ancestral home of the Thao people. There are plenty of walks and opportunities for cycling around the lake but for some the chance to relax at the Lalu, our lovely hotel, will suffice. Taking up the grounds of President Chiang's former residence this hotel with its stunning views and stylish decor is considered to be one of the best spa hotels in the world. It certainly has the biggest 'infinity pool' in Taiwan - a great place from which to watch the sunset. *Overnight – spa hotel*

Day 14 Taipei After a leisurely morning either making the most of our hotels' excellent facilities or perhaps taking a cruise to visit some of Sun Moon Lake's more interesting sights, in the afternoon, we return to Taipei. For those who wish there is the option of completing this last leg of our journey by travelling on Taiwan's version of the 'bullet train' from Taichung. After time for some last minute shopping we will come together in the evening for a farewell meal. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 15 Caravan concludes...

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Tour price (excluding international flights) – £1,790 per person on a twin share basis

Group size & Leader The group will comprise between 6 and 14 members, and be escorted throughout by an experienced Mandarin-speaking tour leader from the UK, assisted throughout by a local English-speaking guide from Taiwan. We will also have our own professional driver and local guides where appropriate.

Transport We have our own comfortable, private coach throughout. Elsewhere we make use of the delightful Alishan Forest Railway and have a private boat for our Sun Moon Lake boat cruise. Although we travel from place to place by coach much of the sightseeing is done by foot, and it should be noted that use of the train system necessarily entails a certain amount of walking.

Accommodation All our hotels have been chosen carefully and are of a high standard throughout with 5 star establishments, where the quality of experience warrants it, often being the choice - for example at Sun Moon Lake we stay at the incredible Lalu hotel, considered to be one of the finest spa hotels in the world. In Taipei we stay at the Gala Hotel; in Taroko Gorge we stay in the delightful log cabins of Buluowan; in Chihpen at the Royal Chihpen Hotel; in Kenting at the Chateau Beach Resort; in Tainan at the Taipung Suites. All facilities are en suite. We will return to the same hotel in Taipei at the end of the tour. The tour is sold on a twin share basis. Single supplements are available at a cost of £595. Depending on group size we reserve the right to impose a compulsory single supplement if no one of the same sex is available to share. Due to flight arrival times some participants might like to arrive the day before the tour begins. Extra nights at the hotel in Taipei are available at a cost of £89 per night for a twin and £83 per night for a single. Staff from The Oriental Caravan will be available in Taipei to assist any early arrivals.

Airport Transfers Taipei's Taoyuan airport is an organised and safe airport to arrive to. Transfers to our hotel from the airport are straightforward; the airport shuttle bus costs around £4; a metered taxi costs around £22. If you would prefer to be met by a driver we can arrange this at a cost of £34; to be met by a driver and guide would cost £75.

Flights There are several options for flying to Taiwan. One of the most direct and still reasonably priced, especially through its website (www.evaair.com), is with EvaAir. Trailfinders (020) 79383939 is another good place to gauge fares. For further information please contact The Oriental Caravan.

Food Breakfasts are included throughout. A 'farewell' meal is also included in Taipei. Thanks to having inhabitants who came from all over China, Taiwan has cooking styles to match and the island is famous for the quality of its cuisine. For this reason and to provide greater convenience, choice and flexibility, food is not included in the price. For all meals the tour leader and/or guide will be on hand to help with ordering meals and, if necessary, to suggest restaurants. Although it is possible to eat more cheaply, and certainly possible to eat more expensively, most people should find that around £10-20 a day is more than enough.

Weather Summers (May to September) in Taiwan can be hot and humid with the island's rainy season running from May to August. The best times to visit are Spring (March-April), especially good for flowers, and Autumn (October-December) when, particularly in Autumn, rainfall is at a minimum.

Insurance It is a condition of travelling with The Oriental Caravan that each group member be insured against medical and personal accident risks (including the cost of emergency repatriation) and have adequate baggage cover. In addition, it is strongly recommended that at the time of booking all participants take out cancellation insurance so that should they need to cancel prior to departure and do so within the terms of their policy their costs at least in part will be recoverable from their insurer. (For your convenience, The Oriental Caravan is able to provide details of a suitable insurance policy, on request).

Health Formalities There are currently no statutory vaccination requirements for visiting Taiwan except for Yellow Fever if arriving from an infected country. Please consult your GP for updated information.

Passports & Visas All nationalities require a passport valid for at least 6 months beyond the date of departure from Taiwan. For most, including British passport-holders, no visa is required as long as the stay is for less than 30 days.

Luggage Requirements Detailed information on what to pack, and other practicalities, is included in the PDI (Pre-departure Information) that will be sent to group members nearer to the date of departure.

This dossier, and the itinerary it describes, have been carefully compiled and are provided in good faith. As with any such journey to a remote destination unusual and unexpected conditions can occur at any time, and this kind of holiday can be subject to unforeseen changes; to fully enjoy this kind of travel it is, on occasion, necessary for participants to be prepared to adopt a certain amount of flexibility.

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