



Strong Growth Potential for Adventure Travel

Taiwan is a great place for cycling tours, paragliding, birding, scuba diving, and treks into the mountains to visit remote Aboriginal villages.

BY TIMOTHY FERRY

A chance English teaching gig and a thirst for adventure brought Cam McLean to Taiwan more than a decade ago. While looking for opportunities after working in construction management, the rangy New Zealander was searching for a way to bring together his passion for outdoor sports and his need for a new career, when he happened upon

a video of some daredevil mountain bikers on Hsinchu County's rugged Stone Deer Trail. Inspired, he rode that same trail with some friends, all veteran bikers. The group was so impressed with Taiwan's backcountry – fast, winding trails, sheer drops, grueling ups and downs – that one of his friends remarked: “There's a business opportunity here.”

Ten years later, McLean is the owner of InMotionAsia (www.inmotionasia.com), one of Taiwan's top cycling tour companies, offering 5-star cycling tours catering to a well-heeled clientele of multinational executives, mostly expats living in Asia. McLean notes that while his customer base is fairly small, clients are willing to pay more for the experience of a lifetime cycling Taiwan's acclaimed mountain roads. As he observes: “If someone is going to pay money to go overseas for a cycling tour, they're pretty serious about cycling.”

McLean has done well in a growing niche market – “adventure travel” – which encompasses everything from kayaking and scuba diving to mountain climbing and paragliding. The Seattle-based Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) says adventure travel is one of the fastest growing tourist sectors in the world; ATTA's *Adventure Tourism Market Report 2013* notes that the sector's revenue increased from US\$89 billion in 2009 to US\$263 billion in

2012, an average annual growth rate of 65%. The report surveyed travelers from Europe and the Americas, an estimated 69% of the total travel market (ATTA says it will include Asian travelers in the next market report), and found that 42% cited an adventure activity as the main focus of their travels.

Centrally located in East Asia, Taiwan is in many ways a Goldilocks region for travel. According to Malcom Vargas, an American paragliding instructor and long-term Taiwan resident, Taiwan represents a middle ground between expensive, overdeveloped Japan and less-developed Southeast Asian nations. “Taiwan strikes a happy medium without being mediocre,” he writes. Taiwan’s Search and Rescue teams are experienced and responsive, he assures, while Medi-evac and medical services are also first class. Equipment for adventure sports is readily available and competitively priced, and instruction is offered year-round for air, land, and water sports. He adds that transportation, banking, and telecom services, as well as other amenities, are ubiquitous. “You really have to struggle to get lost in Taiwan,” he writes.

South African Eddie Viljoen, founder of adventure travel firm Green Island Adventures, emphasizes that local Taiwanese are “very friendly and eager to help guests,” and that, “everyone can speak a little English.” Taiwan is also “very, very safe,” an important consideration for female travelers, who make up the bulk of his customers. “It’s also very gay friendly,” Viljoen adds.

Tot Foster, founder of Taiwan-based Bamboo Trails (www.bambootrails.com) summed it up in an email: “Big yet accessible mountains (with good quality roads), beautiful mountain streams, remote beaches, decent waves, and hot springs galore, all contained in an island less than 300 miles long and 100 miles wide!” She notes: “Intact aboriginal culture and friendly people add to the experience.”

Gifted with tall, jagged mountain ranges, lush rainforests, sound infrastructure, and traditional Chinese and Aboriginal culture, Taiwan would seem like a choice destination for this growing slice of the tourism pie.

So why isn’t Taiwan a more popular destination in the adventure travel sector? One reason is that while adventure travel at this point is most in demand among travelers from Europe and the Americas, Taiwan’s name recognition in these markets is poor. Most Westerners don’t know Taiwan from Thailand, and if they do, are generally under the impression that Taiwan is an industrial wasteland.

“Most people’s first thoughts on Taiwan are of industry and troubled relations with China, so selling the idea that there are huge and beautiful wilderness areas can be tough,” admits Foster. “Ten years ago I had to see it for myself before I believed it.”

In 2013, only around a quarter of the 414,060 visitors from the United States came to Taiwan as tourists; the ratio among the 223,062 visitors from Europe was similar. South America is another important source of adventure tourists, but arrivals from Latin America to Taiwan are in the mere thousands every year. Any market in Taiwan catering to Westerners seems bound to be a niche activity, especially when compared with the masses of Asian – particularly Chinese – tourists flooding into Taiwan.

Rather than courting well-heeled Westerners, Taiwan has made a big play for the other recent big story in global tourism: the Chinese tourist. China is now the single biggest source of tourists and tourist dollars in the world; according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, China’s 100 million tourists spent a

total of US\$129 billion in 2013, a 26% increase over the previous year.

With close proximity and a shared culture, language, and history, it’s no surprise that Taiwan decided to develop the China market. Once rules were loosened in July 2008, the number of Chinese visitors surged, from just under one million to over 2.87 million in 2013. The vast majority of them – 2.26 million – identified as tourists.

Taiwan’s Tourism Bureau has not stopped with just the China market. Since 2008, it has initiated a number of programs to increase the overall number of visitors to Taiwan. Traveler arrivals have nearly doubled since then, from 4.4 million in 2008 to over eight million in 2014, with 72% of these arrivals identified as tourists.

But many in the tourism industry feel that Taiwan is overly focused on big-bus, budget tours aimed at getting hordes of Chinese travelers into a few hotspots, while ignoring the huge potential Taiwan has for developing the more diffuse, low-impact adventure travel segment.

“Travel agencies generally work on a high-volume, low-margin business model,” observes American and long-time Taiwan resident Cheryl Robbins, founder of Tribe Asia, a travel agency and online retailer specializing in Taiwanese aboriginal tours and handicrafts (www.tribe-asia.com). “But right now what we need is a low-volume, high-profit model.”

Such a model is exactly what several



Malcolm Vargas, paragliding pilot and instructor, demonstrates some techniques of paragliding.

PHOTO: PULI FLIGHT SCHOOL

EXTREME TOURISM

expat-owned firms are already doing. Recognizing the difficulty of selling Taiwan directly to Western markets, they are instead courting expats already in Asia. As Robbins notes, Western expats in Asia have “seen the touristy places – they want a unique experience that they can go home and brag about.” Taiwan can offer those unique experiences. Below are some of the adventure travel activities that are readily available at Taiwan’s seaside, mountains, forests, and rivers.

Paragliding

When a foreigner in Taiwan mentions paragliding, the name Malcolm Vargas invariably comes up. Vargas (email: heart_of_taiwan@yahoo.com) has been in Taiwan for more than two decades and is something of a paragliding evangelist, having written the world’s first comprehensive Chinese-language paragliding training manual. He also offers training lessons, and is the only instructor in Taiwan certified by the U.S. Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association (USHPA). Paragliding is similar to parachuting, but instead of jumping out of an aircraft, paragliders simply run off the top of mountains or cliffs, allowing wind currents to lift them in the air for what are often lengthy and far-roaming flights. Crazy as it might sound, paragliding is gaining in popularity in Taiwan, due in no small measure to the efforts of Vargas and other enthusiasts. Vargas says

that he hopes “to open a new paragliding site every year in Taiwan,” with operators trained to offer safe, professional “tandem” sessions, in which a rider is harnessed to a paragliding pilot for the flight.

The tall peaks of Puli Township in central Taiwan’s Nantou County, 17 kilometers from Sun Moon Lake where Vargas is based, have become something of a paragliding center for Taiwan. Vargas works with another expat-owned adventure travel firm, Step Out in Taiwan (www.paraglidetaiwan.4t.com), to provide rides and lessons for would-be paragliders. Step Out in Taiwan is joined in Puli by Outdoors Taiwan (www.outdoorstaiwan.com), another expat-owned paragliding venture featuring pilots Karlis Juanpetrovics from Latvia and Tim Stahl from the United States. Green Island Adventures, more often associated with scuba diving, likewise offers paragliding in Puli. Closer to Taipei, Feitsui Wan is another popular location for paragliding. Prices for paragliding flights generally fall between NT\$2,000 and NT\$3,000 for 20-30 minutes in Puli, with no training necessary if doing a tandem flight. Vargas also offers lessons for NT\$20,000 for 4-5 weekends or 7-8 consecutive days.

Scuba diving

According to Nigel Anderson, certified scuba instructor and owner of the ScuBar (www.scubar.com.tw) in Fulong District,

New Taipei City, high levels of maritime biodiversity make Taiwan one of the world’s top dive destinations. Anderson notes that overfishing over the decades has reduced wildlife populations, but the establishment of maritime national parks such as Kenting’s protected zone and the banning of fishing near Green Island have allowed fish populations to recover, to the great benefit of the environment and scuba divers. *Sport Diver* magazine agrees, having placed Green Island’s “Big Mushroom” coral formation at the top of its “Iconic Dives” in the Asia Pacific list in 2013. Southern Taiwan offers the best diving in Taiwan, with Orchid Island, Green Island, and Kenting topping the list. Scuba divers in Taiwan can see several unique species such as the flying gunard, the highly venomous sea krait snakes, and exceptional coral formations.

Green Island Adventures (www.greenislandadventures.com), well established in the south of Taiwan on Green Island, offers diving package tours from between NT\$2,000-NT\$2,500 per person. The firm says that if divers have logged 50 “advance dives,” Green Island will even lead them to dive with hammerhead sharks.

While scuba diving is well established in the south, particularly Kenting, Canadian Nigel Anderson is trying to establish a diving scene in the north, at the popular beach town of Fulong. Based at his new ScuBar, a scuba-diving themed bar-restaurant, he offers tours and dive training at nearby dive sites. For absolute beginners, Anderson even offers trial instruction in the Songshan Sports Center’s five-meter-deep pool for as little as NT\$900 per lesson.

Aboriginal culture

Cheryl Robbins of tour organizer Tribe-Asia works with a local travel agency to develop itineraries for foreigners looking to travel to indigenous areas in Taiwan, which is both fascinating for the tourists and economically beneficial to the tribes. Taiwan’s Aboriginals are considered the ancestors of all Austronesian cultures, and as such are of considerable interest to tourists from Oceanic nations such as New Zealand. Also, unlike the



PHOTO: KATIA CHEN



PHOTO: CHERYL ROBBINS



PHOTO: RICHARD FOSTER

United States where access to American Indian reservations is often extremely difficult to obtain, Taiwan's Aborigines welcome visitors. "In Taiwan, (Aboriginal villages) are completely accessible and completely hospitable," Robbins says. "The people are very generous."

A resident of Taiwan for over 20 years, Robbins has earned certification as a qualified tour guide, one of only a handful of foreigners to do so. Most of the villages she recommends are remote, isolated from the mainstream economy. Tourism generates business opportunities that allow local residents to remain in their villages instead of seeking jobs in the cities, thus helping to maintain the cohesiveness of their societies. Still, recognizing the need to respect the ways of the Aboriginal tribes, she keeps her tours small scale. "If it grows too much, it will be like Thailand, where people don't want to let you into their lives," she says. Instead, she caters to high-end tourists who "buy the handicrafts, stay in the local *minzu* [bed-and-breakfast], hire local guides, and are respectful of the culture and environment."

Birding

Birdwatching (also known as birding) might conjure images of elderly people leisurely strolling around parklands with binoculars, but according to Richard Foster, this image couldn't be further from reality. He says that the birders he guides around Taiwan are dedicated – even driven – to ticking off as many bird species as possible in their field guides, and are willing to endure nearly any deprivation to do so. He refers to the movie *A Perfect Year*, starring Jack Black, Steve Martin,

and Owen Wilson as competitive birders, to describe the single-mindedness of birders to see as many species as possible. Foster must endure hardship right alongside them, suffering cold and rain in the uplands and extreme heat and humidity in lowland forests, working 18-20 hour days driving, hiking, and mountain climbing to lead these birding devotees to their quarry.

Having been involved in bird guiding for several years, and with excellent command of Chinese, he leads both Asian and Western birding tours and notes some interesting differences between the groups. Asians, as per stereotype, always want a photo, but Western birders simply look, tick the box on their guide, and move on. "They seem to attach very little emotional significance to it," he observes. "It's a bit strange."

Originally from Northern Ireland, Foster has been in Taiwan for over 20 years and has created a significant presence in the birding world. Birding has become more popular around the world, and the competitive element means that serious birders have to come to Taiwan, as the island hosts a number of endemic species (meaning they are found only in Taiwan) such as the Formosan Whistling-Thrush, Swinhoe's Pheasant, Taiwan Partridge, and Formosan Magpie. Foster manages the blog *Birding Taiwan* (www.birdingtaiwan.blogspot.tw) and is also the owner and manager of *Taiwan Ecotours*, based in Tainan (TaiwanEcotours@gmail.com). Foster's website says that he guides ecotours throughout mostly southern Taiwan as well as Penghu, Kinmen, Matsu, and Kenting. Most tours are 10-days long and cost around US\$2,000, including meals, accommodations, entrance fees, and transport. He stresses

that there are no additional "surprise" costs. Most tours have 2-6 participants and get to see around 200 species. Foster also offers 1-day tours on the outskirts of Taipei for US\$200.

These are only a handful of the possibilities offered in Taiwan for adventure travel. Bicycling is very popular, including extended tours in Taiwan's mountain roads, as the success of McLean's *InMotionAsia* reflects. Mountain trekking is also becoming increasingly popular, and several companies offer extended treks into Taiwan's Central Mountain range. For example, *Bamboo Tours* offers 18- and 14-day tours of Taiwan for small groups of four to five people.

With Taiwan's high quality of life, political stability, and clean air, the island looks like an increasingly winning vacation destination, especially in contrast to many congested and heavily polluted East Asian cities. For example, at the Challenge Taiwan triathlon, one of the premier sporting events in Asia, held in eastern Taiwan's Taitung County, China-based expat competitors expressed admiration and envy for their Taiwan-based counterparts on the quality of Taiwan's training environment. Between the traffic and the pollution, several noted, China will likely kill the avid triathlete, and most were forced to do all of their training indoors.

While the indicators look good for growth, whether the local industry invests the resources to transform Taiwan into a world-class destination for adventure travel remains to be seen, but insiders are optimistic. McLean's sentiment is echoed by other expat industry players when he says, "I believe that Taiwan has huge potential in this kind of tourism." ❧