



# Biking the beautiful isle

Called 'Ilha Formosa' by the Portuguese, Taiwan is a cycling heaven with good roads, heaps of hills and a readily accessed biking infrastructure

Story by Lee Rodgers





TAIWAN IS ONE OF ASIA'S BIGGEST SURPRISE PACKAGES, with even well-travelled visitors guilty of judging it by its bustling capital alone. This is a mistake as two-thirds of the island is wildly mountainous, hundreds of peaks running down to its southern tip and all the way over to the rocky, windswept, and in many places, near-deserted, east coast.

Home of much of the world's bicycle production, Taiwan also has some of the best cycling that Asia has to offer. Great roads, massive hill climbs and a cyclist-friendly environment combine to make it the ideal destination for a cycling trip, whether you bring a folding, touring, road or mountain bike – or even if you bring no bike at all but rent one once you arrive.

#### ROUND - THE - ISLAND

The prevailing wisdom for this classic adventure is that it's best to head down the west coast on the way out and to head up the eastern side on the way back. That's because the wind in Taiwan blows most often from north to south, so as the western side is much less scenic than the east, most people prefer to take advantage of a tailwind to sail south a little faster on the outward journey.

First though you have to escape Taipei. As this would test the patience of even the most urban of



cyclists, many take advantage of the bike carriages that feature on some inter-city trains.

If you choose to leave Taipei by bike, then the simplest way is to head up Route 64 to the coast, then come down the 61 to Hsinchu, a route of some 130 kilometres.

Hsinchu is relatively unremarkable but it does feature a fantastic place for easy hikes: the 18 Peaks Mountain Park, an arc-shaped park cultivated during the Japanese colonial era. The trails here undulate over several small hills, flanked by a huge variety of flowers that, when in bloom, create the most remarkable mix of scents and colors.

From there the next obvious stop is the city of Taichung, though it's best to move to an inland road here as the roads on the coastal plain can become congested. Route 3 for instance is the old highway and is relatively uncrowded, with a rolling profile as it passes through forested valleys. In all, the ride from Hsinchu is just over 100 kilometres and should take the average rider around five hours.

Taichung offers the visitor a mix of the traditional and the modern, with its old centre down by the train station and its newer malls and shopping area based around the Sogo department store. A must-do for many people coming here is a trip to the Feng Jia Night

## WHEELS ON RAILS

For a full rundown on bike carriages, readers of Chinese can go to [http://163.29.3.98/twrail\\_bicycle/bicycle/index.aspx](http://163.29.3.98/twrail_bicycle/bicycle/index.aspx). For a comprehensive explanation of this site in English, read the excellent blog by long-term Taiwan resident Andrew Kerslake at <http://taiwanincycles.blogspot.tw/2011/01/taiwan-railway-administration-bicycle.html>.

Market, one of the most famous in Taiwan (a country where night markets are a major draw), where you can enjoy late night shopping and a variety of Taiwanese delicacies, such as chicken's feet and stinky tofu – aptly named but nonetheless delicious!

Leaving Taichung on the third day out from the capital, you finally hit sustained stretches of countryside, with a turn-off to the interior beyond Nantou offering the chance to access some of the most beautiful landscape that Taiwan has to offer, taking you up Route 139 then onto the 131.

Brave souls can also head directly from Taichung up the locally infamous 136, an eight-kilometre climb that averages about 9%. From there you can head along the 14 and higher on the 131 to Sun Moon Lake, which is well worth a stopover in itself. Sightseers can hop between the various lakeside attractions by boat, or cycle around the lake in around an hour and a half. Even in

#### HEAVENLY HIGHWAYS

Whether you are at the southern tip near Kenting (previous spread), winding through Taroko Gorge (left), or skirting the Shih Men Reservoir just outside Taipei (below), Taiwan's well maintained infrastructure is a tarmac treat for roadies.



PHOTOS: STEVE THOMAS



the summer months this is a relatively cool ride, as the road is shaded by a canopy of leaves overhead. The undulating, serpentine ride is a favorite of many well-seasoned Taiwanese cyclists. There's also a love-themed shrine at Longfeng Temple, and an Aboriginal village nearby, called Idashao.

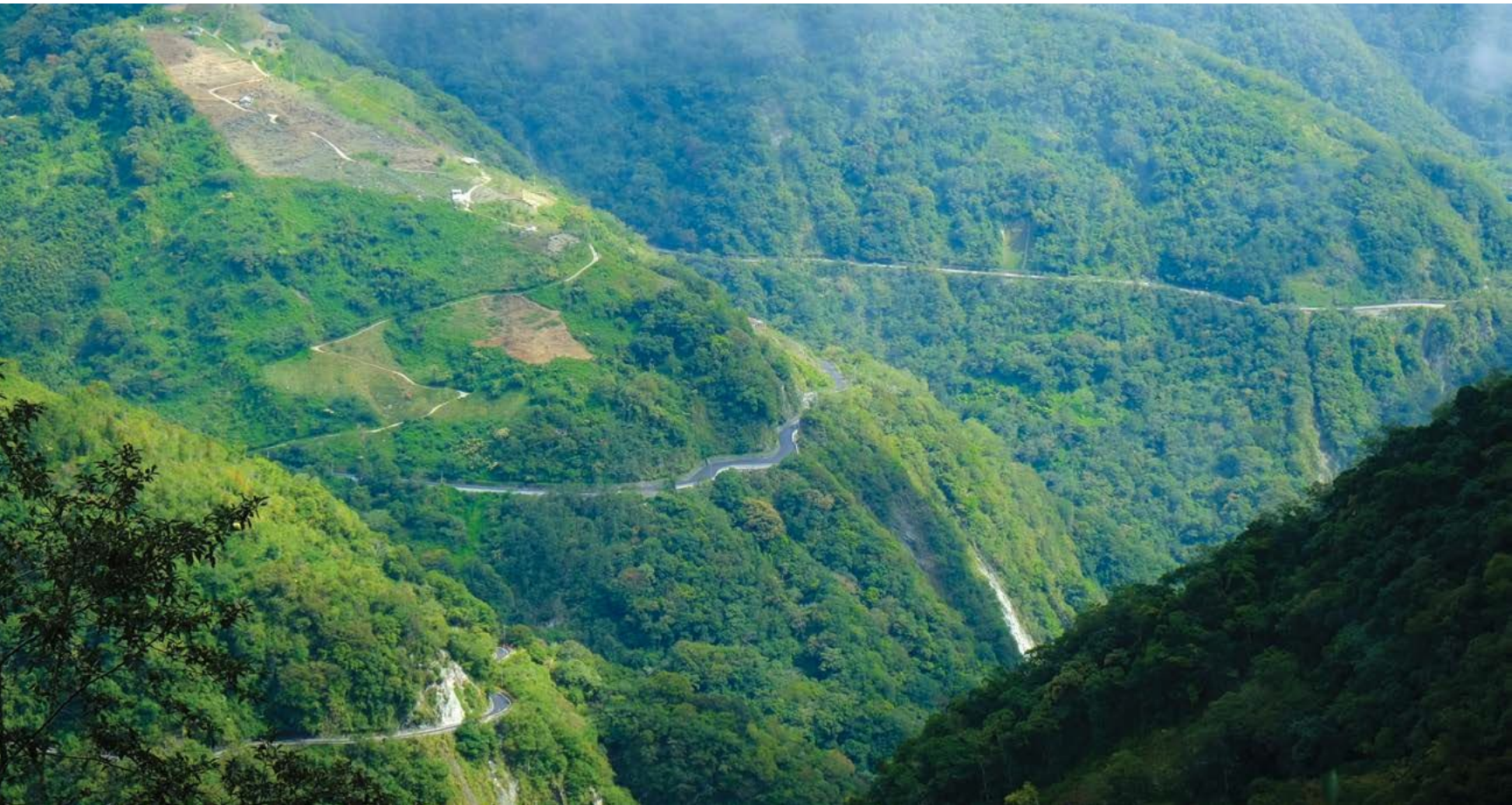
From there, Route 21 up to Alishan is one of Taiwan's legendary bike routes, but be warned – this is one serious mountain! Reaching the summit here will take the rider to just over 2,500 metres, where the scenery is more alpine than tropical, so decent warm clothing is required. The mountain offers a rare chance to get above the treeline, and the views are exceptional.

There's plenty of good, moderate hiking in the area, and the mountain is a favorite spot for people to see in the sunrise so avoid holidays if you can to beat the worst of the congestion. At over 50 kilometres in length, the descent down towards Chiayi City is one for the thrill-seekers out there, especially if your timing is good and the road is clear.

All told, this is a long day in the saddle at over 200 kilometres. Not for the faint-hearted, it will take even the very fit roughly seven to eight hours.

From Chiayi City it's best advised to get back onto Route 3 towards Kaohsiung, Taiwan's second city. On the way down you'll come across the Zeng-Wen reservoir in the Siraya National Scenic Area, beside which sits Chiayi Farm, 70 kilometres from the city. The farm sits among verdant hills,

« **Those final eight excruciating kilometres are a real test as the climbs pitch up before your wheel like gigantic, asphalt waves. You can take solace though in the extraordinary view . . . »**



offering a serene getaway for the weary cyclist. Hours can be spent cruising the lake by boat or taking advantage of the activities the farm offers. There's accommodation too in the form of European-style cottages if you fancy a shortened day for a change.

If you elect to push on for Kaohsiung, you'll discover a modern city with wide walkways, the usual bustling night markets and a buzzing bar scene. From there the next stage of the ride takes you to the beach resort area of Kenting and the end of the outward leg of the round-island journey. Again, it's recommended here to head inland before heading south to catch the best views, though either way the urban landscape soon gives way to beautiful, quiet stretches of coastline and, closer to Kenting, to inviting beaches.

The town itself sits in Kenting National Park, the north of which offers some beautiful mountain roads ripe for exploration, while the coast has fringing reefs that attract snorkellers and divers. Kitesurfing is also increasingly popular.

The town makes a great little place for a day or two's stopover, affording the cyclist a chance to refuel and enjoy the surf-town atmosphere of the place. A full range of accommodation is available, from truly luxurious hotels that feature private beaches to more rustic guesthouses and B&Bs. There's scooters and motorcycles for rent here, allowing you to explore while saving the legs, and if your timing is good, you can also enjoy the laid-back and very popular Spring Scream music festival, held annually in early April.

Day 6 of the itinerary heads to the southernmost tip of the island before finally turning north to begin up the east coast towards Taitung: a total of

150 kilometres of riding. To your left as you ride lie the most remote parts of the entire country. Here you encounter a windswept coast of sometimes breathtaking beauty, heading through bay after perfect bay on the only road in the area.

The east coast of Taiwan is far less developed than the west and offers a tranquility that makes for truly memorable riding. The breeze blows cooler on the east coast too, making the Taitung area a surprisingly comfortable place even in the summer months. The town has in many ways missed out on the economic boom that took over the rest of the island, affording it a rustic charm that many travellers fall in love with, with several vibrant Aboriginal communities making their traditions and presence felt much more than elsewhere.

Out of Taitung next day, you can stick with the coastal route or swing inland to the the East Rift Valley, reached by heading up Route 9. The valley runs parallel to the coast for dozens of kilometres and is dotted with farmland, tea plantations and hot springs – more chances for respite for tired muscles!

From there, two routes are possible up to the next destination on day 7, Hualien City, about 170 kilometres away to the north. Following the East Rift Valley up the 9 to the 16 beyond Guangfu will take you inland through

**WORLD-CLASS CLIMB**  
Ride the serpentine curves of Taroko Gorge (above) all the way to the final push up to Wuling (views up and back down the road shown opposite) for some of the very finest hill climbing to be had anywhere in Asia.





PHOTO: STEVE THOMAS

**AN IRON WILL**

It takes some commitment to make it all the way up the last ridge to Wuling (above), far above the twists and turns of riverside Taroko.

the hills, along the reverse of the route of the annual Huadong Road Race. This is a good choice if the headwinds are blowing along the coast.

Alternatively, Route 11 alongside the ocean has some fantastic views and some equally fantastic roads to

slide easily along. Azure blue waters meet windswept beaches on the right, while on the left is gently sloping, verdant farm and grassland that suddenly pitches up to magnificent cliffs. If you're really lucky you may even see whales and dolphins breaching in the ocean as you pedal by!

Hualien is a city of 110,000 inhabitants but you'd never know it, as it has a similar sleepy, relaxed feel to Taitung. The area has amazing scenery, with the coastal flats giving way quickly to majestic, vegetated cliffs that mark the northern end of the immense mountain range you have been pedalling past



for the last few days. There are long, quiet stretches of sand to enjoy too and a strong Aboriginal community that holds several festivals throughout the year that you are welcome to join.

There's a cyclist's dream of a bike path that runs right by the sea here, affording calm, traffic-free riding, though for a real adventure you can try out river tracing in the area. Deep-cut valleys coupled with Taiwan's relatively wet climate make Hualien and its environs perfect for trekking up the streams, clambering from pool to pool.

The next portion of the ride is the one that most people enjoy the least – another coastal stretch along Route 9 known, macabrely, as 'The Highway of Death!' It is rideable but it is worth considering taking the train from Hualien up to Yilan, from where the riding is far more pleasant again. It's hairy enough to do this road in a car as trucks (there's more industry again north of Hualien), buses and cars barrel along the winding, twisting single-lane road that hugs cliffsides and teeters above the ocean. The tunnels are an especially dangerous place for the cyclist.

There is an alternative to this route, heading up due west from a point just north of Hualien through Taroko Gorge, to what feels like the top of the world at Dayuling (also known as Hehuan Shan). The road crests at 3,275 metres though, going up for 105 kilometres, with a final eight kilometers pitched at no less than 17.8% in average incline, making this the hardest challenge the island has to offer the cyclist.

Route 8 up through Taroko Gorge is an astonishing ride, taking your breath away in more ways than one as you carve through the giant cliffs, winding by a deep river gorge and passing temples and shrines perched atop the peaks. Those final eight excruciating kilometres are a real test as the climbs pitch up before your wheel like gigantic, asphalt waves. You can take solace though in the extraordinary view: bare and beautiful mountains all around, most of them now sitting below you. Whether you ride the whole way up, or just through the gorge, this detour off the round-island route is a must-see for any cyclist.

For those who can make it to the top, an alternative to the Death Highway is to make a right turn just before the summit onto Route 7 and

following this all the way to Yilan Town. This though is a monster ride and would take at least eight hours even in favourable conditions.

From Yilan, you can either finish your trip with a straight dash to Taipei on Route 9, or by snaking up further along the coast, taking in yet more beautiful beaches and coastline. Heading inland here on just about any route – though especially along the 102 or the 106 – will take you up some amazing climbs and into the lush valleys of northern Taiwan. While they lack the grandeur of the major mountain chains, these chains of knobbly peaks lie remarkably close to Taipei and very quickly you find yourself in the outlying suburbs of the capital again.

**ROUND TAIPEI**

Taipei can be a fun city to ride in and a relatively safe one too. There's little of the anger directed at cyclists that you find in places like Singapore for instance, and the ubiquity of scooters seems to have trained car drivers to be more aware and considerate of two-wheeled vehicles than in many other places.

Taipei may be a sprawling capital city but there are literally thousands of little lanes that subdivide the grid of major thoroughfares and allow for a great day's adventure. Saddle up and head out to sample the plethora of boutique stores, restaurants, food stalls and coffee shops that line these more manageable side-streets.

If that isn't your cup of tea, you can always head down to the river to take advantage of the more than 100 kilometres of bike path that wind by the water. There are no cars, scooters nor other motorised pests allowed there, making for a great and very safe day's riding. Head out to Gongguan on the MRT, where you'll find Gongguan Riverside Park, which is well-signposted

« **The ubiquity of scooters seems to have trained car drivers to be more aware and considerate of two-wheeled vehicles than in many other places.** »

in English. Down by the river you can rent bikes from as little as NT15 an hour, with the better bikes (including tandems) costing about NT350 for the day. There are rental kiosks at Guandu, Muzha, Dajia, Jingfu, Dadaocheng, Huajiang, Erchong and Bali along the river, open all year.

Heading out of the city, the only way is up. Within 30 minutes from Taipei Main Station, you leave the city behind and can start to enjoy wonderful open roads. A favourite is out to Route 2, following it up the western coast to the tip of the island, then cutting back inland, staying with Route 2 back to Taipei. With over 2,000 metres of climbing, this is quite a tough ride but well worth the effort, allowing the adventurous cyclist a real escape from the city's hustle and bustle.

Put all of these rides together and you have enough to make Taipei an ideal hub for day-riding if you prefer not to strike out into the wider countryside.

**THUNDERING IN**  
Just beyond the Taipei city limits, a biker lets it all hang out on a rocky descent as the clouds overhead suggest the onset of another summer storm.



PHOTO: LEE TRUMPORE





## MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAILS

Being essentially one giant mountain range thrust up long ago from the ocean, you might reasonably expect Taiwan to be a haven for mountain biking and yet the truth of the matter is that long, epic trails are hard to come by on the island.

In most places the mountainsides are simply too steep to allow for riding, and this, coupled with the dense jungle that has discouraged locals from beating paths over the hills since time immemorial, means that rideable trails are few and far between.

That being said, with a little local knowledge, you can find some great off-road riding, most of it close to Taipei where there is the greatest concentration of riders looking for escape routes on which to let off steam.

One of the most famous routes is the Maokong Trail situated close to Mucha in Northern Taipei. This mixes on- and off-road riding through bamboo and tea plantations that offer great vistas out over the urban sprawl of Taipei. Innumerable trails run through the area, making it a great place for a day's cruising and even some hard riding. It's best visited on weekdays though: Maokong can become crowded on weekends.

Another well-known spot to get down and dirty near Taipei is known as Battleship Rock (Juenjian Yan), situated in Beitou, north of the city. The environs hide a mish-mash of trails, of varying degrees of difficulty. A few are easy while others feature highly technical descents that demand full concentration from experienced riders. This area offers stellar views of the nearby Guandu Nature Park.

Finally, Neng Gao West Line is a beautiful singletrack in Wushe, Central Taiwan that takes you up to 3,000m over 12 kilometres from the foot of the trail, from where most people turn homeward to bomb back down the perfect, winding route at breakneck speed back to where they set out from. It is sometimes possible though to continue as far as Hualien City, though often the trail beyond the most commonly ridden section is washed out. **AA**

### ROOT-INE BUSINESS

Dialling Taiwan's often-forested downhill calls for good skills over roots and mossy rocks.

### PRACTICALITIES

#### When to go

Taiwan has a tropical climate, with the whole of the island experiencing hot and humid weather from June through to the end of August, when temperatures are often over 30°C. Cycling at any time other than the early morning in these months is a wet, sticky affair. It rarely rains aside from during typhoons (mostly between July and October) which bring heavy rain and high winds but usually last only a day or two.

Northern Taiwan experiences a rainy season from January to March when temperatures get as low as 10°C, with central Taiwan and the south usually 2-5°C warmer.

In spring, from March to May, and autumn, from September to December, the island typically enjoys cooler, perfect for cycling temperatures with the average about 20-24°C.

#### What to take

Bike parts and spares are widely available, with shops in most towns and cities. There are also bike rental options, a particularly flexible one being offered by major manufacturer, Giant Bicycles ([www.bike2taiwan.net/en](http://www.bike2taiwan.net/en), [giant.d21080@msa.hinet.net](mailto:giant.d21080@msa.hinet.net)). You can rent a touring bike at any one of their 15 outlets and drop the bike off at any other. The cost is NT1,000

(US\$33) for the first three days and NT200 (US\$6.50) for each extra day.

Another option in Taipei is Alan's Mountain Bike Store ([alanbike@ms58.hinet.net](mailto:alanbike@ms58.hinet.net)), where mountain bikes can be hired on a daily or weekly basis.

A GPS system would be handy for the more adventurous, along with a tent and sleeping bag perhaps. A phrasebook or phone app is useful for non-Chinese speakers: note that Taiwan uses traditional, as opposed to simplified characters.

### Contacts

If going it alone is not for you, there are several bike tour companies:

Giant Cycle Tours, [www.bike2taiwan.net/en/message/page\\_1.html](http://www.bike2taiwan.net/en/message/page_1.html)

Grasshoppers Taiwan: <http://grasshopperadventures.com>

In Motion Asia: [www.inmotionasia.com](http://www.inmotionasia.com)

### Other contacts:

Formosa Fat Tire Association: [www.formosanfattire.com](http://www.formosanfattire.com)

Hualien River Tracing Tours: [www.hualienoutdoors.org](http://www.hualienoutdoors.org)

Taiwan Cyclist Federation: [service@cyclist.org.tw](mailto:service@cyclist.org.tw)