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When it comes to adventure tourism destinations in Asia, Taiwan is one of the most underrated, although it hard to understand why. It has some of the most captivating scenery anywhere on the planet, towering mountains (including Northeast Asia's tallest), a smorgasbord of national parks, a selection of alluring offshore islands, and thanks to its volcanic past, numerous hot spring resorts.

Cycling Aboriginal Trails

TEXT BY InMotion Asia

Taiwan is also home to sensational cuisine, a fascinating cultural mix and one of the most complex histories for such a short-recorded period, by Asian standards. It started with the arrival of the Dutch in 1624, and through a tradition of rebellion and resistance, has also seen occupations by the Spanish, Mainland Chinese, Japanese and briefly the French.

With such a tumultuous past, Taiwan is a historians delight and throughout the island you can find an array of interesting snapshots from the past which when combined with the grand array of adventure activities on offer adds just that little bit more to an already world-class outdoor adventure experience.

One of the best areas to find this fascinating adventure and historical and cultural mix is Central Taiwan, which starts from the major bike manufacturing city of Taichung on the western belt, through the rolling mountains to the majestic Sun Moon Lake, and from there rapidly upwards into the massive moun-

tain ranges that run down the central spine of Taiwan before plunging steeply down to the tranquil east coast.

CULTURAL CENTRAL

It's in these imposing mountains that hidden secrets and stories from the past lay. Stories of tribal wars, bravery, coups and assassinations, and ultimately a story of huge sacrifice and suffering.

Nowhere is this more abundant than an area called the NengGao West Line, the scene of an epic battle between the local aboriginal tribes and the then occupying Japanese forces. It is also home to one of the best high altitude single-track mountain biking trails in the world.

The journey starts from Puli, the geographical centre of Taiwan and the epicentre for the devastating 921 earthquake that killed more than 2,400 people early in the morning of September 21, 1999. The area has long since been rebuilt and vehicles can cruise effortles-

sly across the 100m-high elevated expressway, an engineering masterpiece that connects Puli to the outside world, and provides a birds-eye view of the lush mountainous coverage and betel-nut plantations far below.

Heading up the steep switchbacks east of Puli lies the Central Cross Island Highway, one of only 3 roads to connect western and eastern Taiwan due to the difficult and steep mountainous terrain, which in total covers 69% of Taiwan and includes a staggering 258 peaks over 3,000m.

The Central Cross Island is another engineering marvel and home to some of the most spectacular high alpine scenery anywhere in the world as it winds through the clouds with rocky mountains and sheer drop-offs at every bend, tropical valleys, snow-capped peaks, alpine forests and rocky ravines, steamy hot springs and roaring rivers, mountain lakes and the shimmering sea in the distance.



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TAIWAN'S LEGENDARY NENGGAO WEST LINE



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The Wushe Incident

The soothing hot springs of Lushan, an aboriginal village about a third of the way up the Central Link and just past the aboriginal village of Wushe, is strategically located at the foot of the Wanda Reservoir on a plateau overlooking the valleys below. It is here in Wushe that the infamous Wushe Incident took place, the biggest and last rebellion against Japanese colonial forces in Taiwan which ultimately resulted in the massacre of the Atayal aborigine group in 1930.

During the Japanese occupation of Taiwan, policemen were stationed in every Atayal village in the area, and a school system was established, making Japanese compulsory to all aboriginal children. Such policies angered tribal leaders, and in October 1930, a misunderstanding at a wedding provided the spark for an Atayal uprising led by Chief Mona Rudao.

The local school, which was holding a sports day, was attacked with the Atayal warriors slaughtering some 132 Japanese men, women and children. The Japanese reaction was swift: an army of 2,700 was sent, along with trackers from rival Atayal clans to hunt down the rebels, a campaign which took fifty days and involved aerial bombing and poison gas that left around 644 Atayal dead. Chief Mona Rudao, along with almost 300 other warriors, opted to hang himself rather than surrender.

In the aftermath, most of the local villagers were wiped out, with the Japanese offering bounties to other Atayal warriors to mop up resistance that led to further massacres of those surrendered.

Rudao's body was taken to Taipei and only given a formal burial in 1981. A special 20-dollar coin was minted in his honour in 2001.

GUIDED NENGGAO BIKING TRIPS

Guided trips along the NengGao West line can be made with In Motion Asia, Taiwan's leading outdoor adventure company who provide fully-supported logistics covering mountain permit application, support vehicles and transfers, guides, accommodation, and a long-standing mountain biking experience.

Check www.inmotionasia.com for more.



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BIKING THE NENGGAO WEST LINE

Having enjoyed the soothing hot springs of Lushan and some of the tastiest fresh mountain cuisine on the island, rise early to head a short distance to the NengGao trailhead when the early morning sun rises majestically above the towering mountain vistas. This is arguably one of the top 10 mountain biking trails in the world.

The NengGao West Line was initially opened by the Baleiao group of the Sedeke Branch of the Atayal Tribe who, by accident, found during a hunting expedition that the sector was habitable. After settling down in the area, they continued creating trails deep into the mountains and established a trade link to Hualien on the east coast and the local Ami Tribe.

In 1917, the Japanese expanded the original aboriginal trails and built what is known as the NengGao Cross Mountain Trail, a shortcut linking both sides of Taiwan and a means to keep the local tribes under control. It became

one the broadest and most well-constructed of all the police trails built by the Japanese in Taiwan, and was expanded yet again in 1950 by TaiPower engineers as they built a network of 127 tall electricity pylons in the region.

Today, it is nature's answer to mountain biking heaven and a legendary out-and-back ride that offers up endless perfect high altitude single-track, jaw dropping views, and diverse flora and fauna.

The trail commences at an elevation of just over 2,000m and involves a steady 3-hour climb through a handful of climatic zones to the top hut 13km away at an awe-inspiring elevation of 3,080m.

There are stunning views from the grassy rest area and along an epic stretch of the ridgeline to the NengGao Monument (the turnaround point). With 360° panoramic views, the downhill is a 90-min plus descent

along the flowing single-track that sweeps down the mountain through pristine forest sections, past tranquil waterfalls, over a series of suspension bridges and, if you're lucky, you may see a local hunter returning from a day in the mountains.

The cultural remains along the trail include old Japanese police huts, charcoal kiln remains, the huts at Yunhai and Tianche, and the impressive NengGao Monument among others. The Taiwan forestry bureau has done a great job of erecting informative displays throughout the trail providing a fascinating cultural and historical mix to Taiwan's premier single-track trail.