

Taiwan

Expect the Unexpected

Is it the Alps, or perhaps somewhere in the Pyrenees? No, this is Taiwan—an unexpected mountain biking paradise.

Virtually everyone knows Taiwan—especially if you are into cycling. Regardless of the brand, there's a pretty good chance that your bike was manufactured in Taiwan. Most high end bikes originate from factories in and around the major industrial regions of Taichung and Taipei. In fact, during 2009 bicycle production brought more export dollars into Taiwan than the manufacture of laptop computers.

So, bikes are big business in Taiwan but few foreigners would contemplate riding there. Most envisage a crowded and chaotic place full of dirty factories, pollution and manic moped riders. While that side certainly exists, it really is limited to the heavily populated areas and there's a whole other side to this small nation.

Taiwan is an island located around 180km off the south-eastern coast of China. It's approximately 400km long and 150km across at the widest point. With around 23 million residents, Taiwan is a densely populated place—that's more than our entire population crammed into an area half the size of Tasmania! However, most of these people are restricted to the coastal fringes of the island, leaving relatively large tracts of the interior uninhabited.

Why so empty? Well, Taiwan is also a very mountainous nation. Its highest peak stands at 3,952 metres—that's higher than Mt Cook (New Zealand) and Mt Fuji (Japan). There's a further five peaks over 3,500 metres and Taiwan is ranked as the fourth most mountainous island in the world.

So there are big mountains and a sparsely populated interior, but are there any trails? Once again the answer is yes... During the Japanese rule of the early 1900s, much of the indigenous population was forced to seek refuge in the mountains. There was a policy of assimilation with many bloody incidents as the Japanese sought to eradicate the native Taiwanese people. In this time, the invaders built many well formed tracks and roads into the mountains—in fact the Japanese were responsible for much of the infrastructure that has allowed Taiwan to develop so rapidly. Nowadays the Taiwanese people are gaining a better appreciation of the natural beauty that lies on their doorstep, and many of these tracks are utilised by hikers.

It's pretty clear that the Taiwanese are not shy of change. They seem to have embraced western culture, commercialism and have industrialised their nation at a rapid rate. They are also a very welcoming and friendly people. As a result, mountain bikers and walkers seem to share a good relationship on the trails. Meeting a group of walkers on a trail usually means stop-

Riding through the landslip on the Neng-Gao trail.

ping for a chat, perhaps a photo or two and plenty of smiles—I didn't feel any of the 'fuddy-duddy hiker prejudice' that you encounter back home. Obviously common sense should prevail if it is to remain this way; you should always ride in control and be courteous to other trail users. For that matter, popular hiking trails are best avoided during busy weekend periods.

Despite the rapid westernisation, Taiwanese culture remains very foreign to our own. The English language won't get you far beyond the major cities and driving on the roads appears a scary prospect. Without local knowledge and some grasp of Mandarin, you'll probably struggle to get around. While this may be fun and a challenge in itself, finding the best MTB trails is far easier with the assistance of a guide. With the time constraints that I faced, a DIY tour was never going to be on the cards, so I hooked up with In Motion Asia (www.inmotionasia.com).

In Motion Asia is a Taiwanese based adventure company headed by Cam McLean—a New Zealander who made Taiwan his home around seven years ago. Cam is an all-round outdoors enthusiast who for the last

few years has made a living from taking his clients mountain biking, road riding, white water rafting, trekking and any number of other activities. His trips are tailored to suit individual needs, and encompass everything from 'team building' programs for corporate groups to more personalised trips for individuals and small groups. We took on a whirlwind two-day trip that started out with a ride on the outskirts of Taipei before heading south and up into the high mountains of the central range.

WULAI, TAIPEI COUNTY

While Taiwan's capital may be a haze of congestion, you don't have to travel too far to escape. There are a few ride options within an hour or so from Taipei that allow you to get away from the rat race and see a very different side of this country. After picking me up at the hotel, Cam piloted his VW van through the chaos and out to the aboriginal village of Wulai on the southern outskirts of greater Taipei.

We started out from a hot spring on the lower slopes of a road that wends its way up into the mountains. Kicking off with a black-top climb provided an opportunity to get accustomed to the Giant Trance 'rental' that Cam had sourced for me and allowed the legs to warm up before hitting the dirt. The road clung to the valley walls and climbed steadily into the hills, passing a police check in point along the way—you'd typically need your passport on hand to get past this point but Cam had sorted it out beforehand.

Before long we hit the dirt and pedalled, still climbing, up some rocky double-track alongside the

Tonghou River. You get the impression that, while now sedate, this river would pack a real punch during the heavy rain of the monsoon season. After one river crossing we were into the singletrack proper, disappearing under the thick canopy of the rainforest. In this perennially dark and sheltered environment, all of the rocks were damp and extremely slick—and there was plenty of rock to watch out for. This combined with the occasional exposed drop into the river and one or two steep sections was certainly enough to keep you on your toes.

For most the Wulai ride is a simple out and back affair; pedal up the hill until you've had enough, then turn around and enjoy the descent. The top part of the climb is a sizable hike-a-bike, so most turn around somewhere before that point. For those with more time (and not adverse to bike portage) the trail actually continues up and over the range before descending to Yilan on the east coast.

Inclusive of the road section, our ride was a cruisy half day adventure. Best of all, the ride concluded with a dip in the hot springs back at the bottom of the hill. Similar to what you might find in New Zealand but with more of an exotic feel—the baths we visited were traditional Japanese style so it's sans clothing and segregated men's and women's bathing. A very relaxing way to finish a ride, and after a dip in the cold pool, a refreshing way to start the drive to our next ride destination.

Wulai is just one of the ride options around Taipei—others include the more technical Ski Lift Trail in Yangmingshan to the north of Taipei along with the maze

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These days the Taiwanese are really getting into their outdoors activities. This crew was out on a MTB ride on the Wulai trail—complete with a gas stove and noodles for lunch!



Sweet singletrack on the upper Neng-Gao.



A shrine at the base of the climb where you could make an offering to ensure a safe passage.



The Taiwanese love their food and you'll find lots of interesting stalls in the villages.

GENERAL INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Taiwan is an island situated 180km off the south eastern coast of China. It is approximately 9.5 hours on a direct flight from Sydney but most airlines will take you via Hong Kong which adds an hour or so in the stopover.

CLIMATE

For the most part Taiwan has a reasonably hospitable climate, although it is best to avoid the typhoon season which extends from late June to early October. Summer is hot and humid (30 degrees plus) while winter daytime temperatures are between 16-20 degrees. Obviously it gets a lot colder up in the high mountains where snow is not uncommon. Generally speaking the more settled spring and autumn months are the best time to visit although summer riding at altitude is appealing as is winter in the tropical south.

BIKE SHOPS & HIRE

Shops range from cramped 'hole in the wall' style stores that deal in clunky commuter bikes, through to new generation 'superstores', decked out with the latest high-end carbon trickery. These big new stores illustrate a change in culture, where cycling is becoming a trendy sport for cashed up executive types and not just a basic tool for transport. It isn't too hard to find a quality bike store in most of the larger cities.

Good quality mountain bike hire is far harder to come by. Cam from In Motion Asia has ties with a store that hires out reasonable quality bikes, but the four year old Giant Trance that I rode had definitely seen better days—no oil left in the fork damper, well worn drive chain and so on... If you want to ride something nice and familiar, take your own bike. My rental cost \$75 for two days and saved me paying excess baggage fees and lugging a bike around beforehand.

TOUR INFO

Costs vary greatly depending on your requirements and the number of people in the group. Heading out with Cam for a daytrip out of Taipei will set you back around \$270 and cheaper if you can divide this between friends. This gets you chauffeured to the best riding without fuss and back to your hotel the same day. Multi-day trips average out to \$250 – \$350 per day, which includes good accommodation, fuel expenses, support vehicle, food, drinks and the obligatory post ride hot springs. Get in touch with Cam for further details.

USEFUL WEBSITES

In Motion Asia: www.inmotionasia.com
 Alan's Mountain Bike (a bike shop website that contains useful ride information): www.alansmountainbike.com.tw
 Formosan Fat Tyre Association (this site is now in 'archive mode' but it remains a good resource): www.formosanfattire.com

of trails to the east which includes the Gas Plant, The Backyard, Maokong and a host of others. While you wouldn't travel to Taiwan specifically to ride these trails, they would make a terrific daytrip to escape the city if you were visiting on business. Buy yourself some extra time to explore and Taiwan has some real gems to uncover...

NENG-GAO WEST LINE

After a three hour drive south to the industrial behemoth of Taichung, we turned east and headed for the hills. As mentioned earlier, Taiwan has some seriously big mountains and it's not long before the road climbs steeply, and just keeps going up... There are three major roads that bridge the central spine of the mountains and the highest runs from Taichung across to Hualien on the east coast. It climbs from close to sea level up to a staggering 3,275 metres over approximately 40km. To put that in some sort of perspective, the biggest climbs in the Tour de France typically top-out at around 2,200 metres and they usually start from 700m or so in the valley floors—the road climbs in Taiwan are seriously huge with gradients up to 21% not uncommon. As a result, Cam regularly takes sadistic roadies out to flog themselves senseless in the mountains, and if you are that way inclined, it is really worth

taking a road bike too.

Our goal however was the Neng-Gao West Line; 16km of perfect singletrack each way that starts at 2,000m and climbs to 3,000m with epic views of the surrounding peaks—a tough assignment I know but someone's got to do it! Once at the summit, it's a simple case of turning around and letting it rip, while being mindful of walkers and the sometimes huge drop to the left of course...

Originally a route used by the native Taiya people, the Neng-Gao was upgraded by the Japanese as a means of accessing the high mountains to police the native tribes. What remains is a popular hiking route with a good trail surface and fairly consistent gradient. Lengthy suspension bridges span deep ravines while other sections of trail are literally cut into the precipitous mountain side. Impressive as the trail construction is, it is still overwhelmed by the power of nature. Around half way up, a sizable section of the trail has fallen victim to landslip—I'm not talking about a minor rock fall; it's as though a kilometre wide chunk of the mountain has simply dropped into an abyss. This carnage comes each year with the heavy monsoon rains and typhoons that lash the island and serves as a timely reminder of how insignificant we are. Typhoon damage is also evident in the towns of this mountainous region where the powerful rivers have washed away houses, hotels and roads. The Neng-Gao itself used to be rideable right through to the east coast

but the lesser-used eastern portion has been lost to landslips (it can still be walked if you are really keen).

After a night spent at Lushan Hot Springs, we set out for an early start on the Neng-Gao. It may only be 16km each way, but the nature of the terrain means this 32km ride will probably take most somewhere between four and six hours to complete—besides, the scenery is so spectacular that you'll want some extra time to take photos!

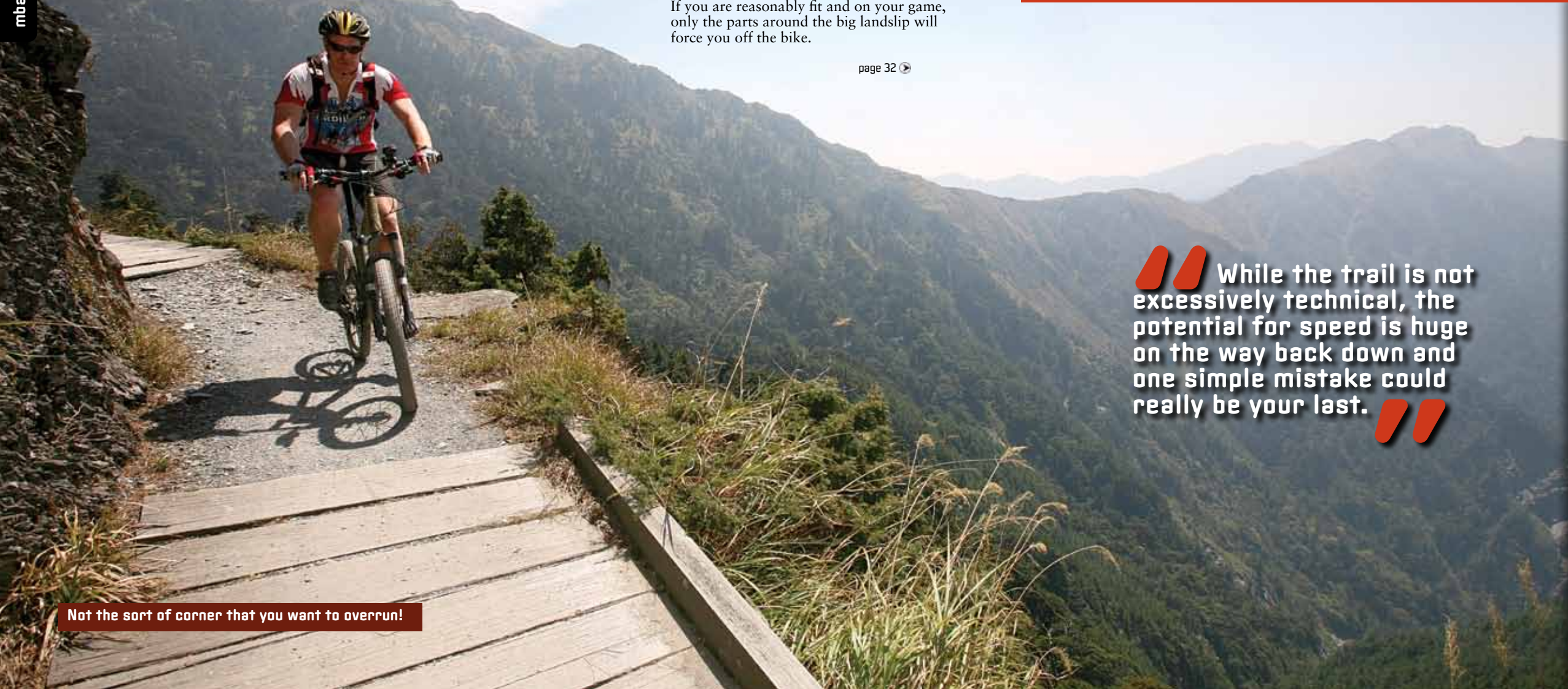
From our riverside accommodation at 1,200m we drove further into the mountains and past another police checkpoint. According to Cam, the checkpoints are more of a safety feature to keep track of people within these more remote portions of Taiwan. If you are doing your own trip up the Neng-Gao, you'll need to apply for a permit. As we climbed, the twisting road deteriorated, in places showing deep cracks where it threatened to fall into the valley below. Not long after turning to dirt, we arrived at the trail head to start our ride from 2,000m above sea level.

The first section of the climb greets you with a steep and loose scree slope—a cruel start with cold legs and lungs that are struggling to adjust to the altitude. Don't be disheartened, as it's not like this all the way.

While steep in places, it is close to 90% rideable on the way up. Some of the steepest sections have an old and cracked layer of concrete that provides terrific traction, so only your screaming legs and lungs will halt your progress. Unless your name is Schurter or Absalon, you will be hurting in granny on a few sections of this climb. You'll find some respite between the steep pitches with some nice steady sections of middle ring climbing. If you are reasonably fit and on your game, only the parts around the big landslip will force you off the bike.



Climbing to 3,000 metres with the clouds gathering in the valleys below.



Not the sort of corner that you want to overrun!

While the trail is not excessively technical, the potential for speed is huge on the way back down and one simple mistake could really be your last.



Beware of falling rocks (or large chunks of the mountain dropping away).



At least the climb affords plenty of time for sightseeing as the views are awe inspiring—not just at the top but all the way up. You'll also see that the trail is very exposed in places, and this should serve as a warning for the return journey. While the trail is not excessively technical, the potential for speed is huge on the way back down and one simple mistake could really be your last.

Over a couple of hours climbing, we watched the scenery and vegetation change, crossing incredible suspension bridges as we went—the Japanese army may have been brutal in their oppression of the aboriginals but they certainly created an amazing mountain bike trail!

I was feeling very worked by the time we reached the hikers hut at the top. There's no hiding from the fact that this is a tough climb and it really makes you earn your fun on the way back down. After some food and rest we spent a bit of time exploring, riding a few kilometres of fun singletrack across to a lookout with a huge stone monument. From this vantage point we watched the mesmerising phenomenon known as the 'sea of clouds' where the lower altitude clouds start their afternoon march through the valleys far below. On the way back we topped up with crystal clear mountain water at the base of a waterfall—there's no human habitation to worry about up here and the water was as cool and fresh as it gets.

The hour-long descent was a real eye-opener and made me realise just why it hurt so much on the way up. It was steep and letting go of the brakes for a second resulted in instant eye-watering acceleration—the corners flashed up at an alarming speed! Parts that seemed straight and uninteresting on the way up came to life and the flow of the trail was fantastic. It was great fun, even with the little voice in the back of my head warning me of the deadly drop to my left. The descent of the Neng-Gao was truly grin inducing.

While the riding close to Taipei was nice and certainly worth a look if you are in the

You'll encounter a number of impressive suspension bridges on the Neng-Gao trail.

There are free hot springs down on the Nanshih River in downtown Wulai.





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Downhill



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area, the Neng-Gao was truly something else. The combination of stunning scenery, challenging uphill and flat out descending made it one of the most memorable rides that I've done, anywhere in the world!

For those who want to experience Taiwan's big mountain scenery but don't fancy the 1,000m climb and precipitous drops of the Neng-Gao, there are plenty of alternatives. Cam takes groups all over the island; MTB destinations include the excellent cross-country terrain around Kenting to the south, the world-class Taroko Gorge to the east, and the remote trails lining the Southern Cross Island Link near Kaohsiung to name but a few. One thing is guaranteed, you won't be short of spectacular scenery and there's often a soothing hot spring to relax in with a cold beer at the end of the ride. Combine that with the friendly locals, tasty cuisine and variable climate and you have an adventure worth checking out.

Taiwan has established itself as an industrial powerhouse within our region and many Aussies have to travel there for work. If you find yourself headed to that part of the world, do yourself a favour and take your bike—the quality of riding on offer makes it well worth the effort. Trails like the Neng-Gao are truly world-class and you'll round out your next business trip with a far brighter outlook on this industrious nation. *mba*

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There's even some steep and challenging sections on the Wulai trail.

Skirting along the Tonghou River on the Wulai trail, just over an hour from Taipei.

