

# On Your Bike

The mountains of Taiwan have some great mountain biking trails and with an expanding network of bicycle paths being built around the island, pedal-power is the way to go. **story** ethan d spears

In a country that was once nicknamed "bicycle kingdom" it's no surprise that two-wheeled transport has long been a favorite mode of getting around. However, cycling purely for pleasure is a relatively new phenomenon that's sweeping the island. With the government behind the push to restore and connect an existing system of paths and old trails, irrigation paths and disused railways to create new routes, coupled with Taiwan's abundant natural beauty and warm climate, biking is becoming more and more popular among locals and tourists alike.

Cam McLean, runs In Motion Asia, a Taipei based company that specializes in mountain bike tours around Taiwan. He attributes the increased interest in the sport to an increased awareness of the many trails and beautiful countryside around Taipei. "Both local governments and private companies have been promoting all kinds of cycling in the last few years, investing in infrastructure and awareness and



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Facing page, from top: Easy access to cycling trails is one reason for the popularity of the sport; the stunning natural beauty of Hehuan-Nengao mountain. This page: Two-thirds of Taiwan is covered in mountains, the perfect topography for mountain biking.



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releasing information on ways to take public transportation to get to the great outdoors for some off road action, he says.

Indeed, easy access is another reason for the popularity of the sport. The Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system, which allows bikes on trains on several of its routes, recently opened twelve new stations for riders. Furthermore, they reduced the combined ticket price for bicycle and rider to NT\$80 per trip regardless of distance traveled. Access to these stations opens up a number of great riding possibilities in western Taipei County. The Taipei Metro also publishes a guide that gives details (in English) of hiking and cycling trails that are easily accessible from MRT stations.

### National Trail Systems

Two-thirds of the total area of Taiwan is covered with mountains of which 219 peaks reach 3,000 meters above sea level. The Forestry Bureau has now established some fourteen National Trail Systems covering the length of the island. These trails range in difficulty and length, parts of the trails are original aboriginal trading routes, other parts supply roads built by the Japanese. You may pass through National Forest Parks, by volcanic craters, over suspension bridges and through many types of unusual flora that is home to an amazing variety of wildlife. It is the diversity of these trails that make them unique and unforgettable.

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### Ski Lift Trail

A popular and exciting trail close to Taipei, is the "ski lift", part of the Yangmingshan National Park Trail System. Located just 13 kilometers outside of the city in the Neihu district, the trail is easily reached by car or by MRT to Shilin or Jiantan stations. The topography of the park is volcanic so expect to see sulphurous deposits, steam jets and of course hot springs. Red-belly squirrels, Taiwanese rabbits, Taiwanese monkeys and leafed-nose bats are particular to the area. Taiwanese blue magpies are also common. Not that you will have much chance to look out for the wildlife. Considered by some to be Taiwan's premier downhill route the ski lift can be technical and, at times, very, very fast. This 10 kilometer trail received its nickname as most riders choose to catch a lift on four-wheels for the uphill slog to the top, leaving them an all-downhill ride to the bottom. The park's close proximity to the city makes it very popular with city dwellers escaping for the weekend, so don't be surprised to find groups of hikers creeping you on from the side of the trail.

### Nengao Cross-Ridge Historic Trail

A few hours drive from Taipei is another very popular trail. Part of the Hehuan-Nengao Mountain Cross-Ridge National Trail System is the Nengao Cross-Ridge Historic Trail. The trail begins at Wushe in the west and travels up along the Talo Creek crossing the Central Cordillera Nengao at the intersection of Nantou County with Hualien County before reaching Hualien along Wugua Creek, where the 83 kilometers trip ends up. The legendary Laila tribe first built the Nengao trail more than 200 years ago. During the occupation the Japanese built over and added to parts of the trail and today stretches of the trail retain a very Japanese flavor. A Japanese Police Station can still be seen at Badagang.

The trail offers the perfect single track favored by mountain bikers, challenging climbs through marble lined gorges and exposed suspension bridges such as the Nengao Bridge by Tianchi, the highest suspension bridge in Taiwan. Jade mountain bamboo, azalea, Taiwanese hemlock spruce, juniper and camphor provide thankful shade. Cool streams flow close to the trail with pools perfect for taking a dip – a welcome respite from the rising mercury. Munzjacks, bears, flying squirrels and Taiwanese monkeys will keep you company along the trail. At 1,689m to 3,263m above sea level the trail can be challenging and riders require a reasonable level of fitness. An experienced guide able to point out the many cultural and historical sites along the way is recommended to make this amazing ride more enjoyable. After a hard ride, the hot springs in Lushan make for a great place to soothe aching limbs.

Before you go out to these trails, or any trails for that matter, you should stop in at one of the many local bike shops found in all major cities. As well as renting bikes and equipment most organize group rides and know the nearby trails well. If there is no tour you can join they will still be able to offer you advice and provide maps of the trails. ■



### NAVIGATION

In Motion Asia offers various bike tours from three to 16 days duration, in many locations all over the island. Although they generally organize corporate excursions for 4 to 40 people, if you contact them in advance of your trip he will attempt to find other interested people and put together an ad-hock group for a tour into the interior of Taiwan that only a lucky few people get to see. Visit [www.inmotionasia.com](http://www.inmotionasia.com)

For detailed information on the National Trail System, visit the Forestry Bureau at: [www.caf.gov.tw](http://www.caf.gov.tw)

For the Metro Bikes and Bikes guide, contact Taipei Rapid Transit Corporation on Tel: 886-2-218-12345 or email: [en@tprtc.com.tw](mailto:en@tprtc.com.tw)