

TAIWAN FESTIVALS

Exciting Events Happening Throughout the Year



Taiwan
THE HEART OF ASIA

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Preface

Taiwan is a land with a rich, deep cultural mix. Floating in the sea just off the East Asia mainland, it has, since long before its history began to be written down, attracted people both on their way through and looking for a place to settle down. It is home to 16 recognized indigenous tribes. Han Chinese have been coming in large numbers since the 1600s. The Dutch, Spanish, Japanese, and even the French (for the shortest of times) set up camp on the island. The result is a place and people uniquely open and welcoming to all cultures, and with a mix of festivals, traditional and modern, that fills Taiwan's calendar to bursting.

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that on a trip to Taiwan you'll find major festival fun going on somewhere pretty much every day. The events' color, pomp, and cultural richness are in turn a major reason behind the significant surge in overseas visitor numbers in recent years – supported by world-class services and infrastructure in the tourism and other sectors, which make this is a friendly and easy-to-navigate destination for the international sojourner.

The Taiwan Tourism Bureau's official English magazine, *Travel in Taiwan*, has over the years carried many articles on Taiwan's festivals, written by experienced expatriate travel writers long residing on the island. We have collected and published some of the most popular pieces in this booklet, for your easy reference.



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Introduction

There is no better way to gain admittance to another people's culture than to take part in their festivals. Know a people's festivals and you have no better portal into their history, their religion, their worldview, their soul – and how in the past they have dealt with the seasonal practicalities of life, as well as how they value life today.

So, the practicalities – where will you be going, how will you get there, where will you stay, et cetera? In seeking information, your best place to start is the Taiwan Tourism Bureau's official website (www.taiwan.net.tw). Here you'll find information on all significant festival celebrations, and links that will lead you to more detailed information for most. You'll also find information and links on accommodations – from 5-star hotels to B&Bs/homestays – places to eat, other tourist attractions in the area where each festival happens, and much more. Another great source of information is another website run by the Tourism Bureau, titled Time for Celebration – Taiwan Tourism Events (eventaiwan.tw).

Our selection of articles in this booklet shows you how complete the festival calendar is, with events spread all through the year, and shows you its splendid traditional/modern range, from events celebrated in much the same fashion in antiquity to celebrations dreamed to life just a blink ago, comparatively. Each article describes an event's happenings and gives you background on its origins, and as well provides practical information on getting there and getting around.

Here's a sample of where you'll be heading as you wade deeper into this booklet: We take you to the Taiwan Lantern Festival, which happens around the close of the traditional Chinese New Year holiday. Taiwan's official Lantern Festival celebration, each year staged by a different city/county government, is a traditional celebration with plenty of modern high-tech flourishes.

Once a year the Amis tribe, in vivid fashion, celebrates the annual harvest, in mid/late summer. The Amis Harvest Festival's events are characterized by singing, dancing, and feasting on indigenous specialties. The people of the Amis, Taiwan's largest indigenous tribe, are concentrated in beautiful Hualien and Taitung counties, on the east coast. These are unique age-old celebrations to which the general public has been warm-heartedly invited only in recent times.

The people of Taiwan have taken to cycling with great passion over the past two decades, and the Taiwan Cycling Festival, staged in late autumn, was created to introduce the full panoply of the Taiwan cycling experience to all the people of Taiwan and to people overseas – the magnificent scenery, the interlinked web of regional and local bike routes, and the comprehensive rental/repair facilities.

Welcome to Taiwan, where you'll find zestfully progressive yet tradition-loving local people who invite you to their cultural hearth as do no other people on earth!

Festival Calendar

January



February

Taiwan Lantern Festival

March

台灣燈會

April

Baosheng Cultural Festival
保生文化祭



May

Baosheng Cultural Festival
保生文化祭

June



July

August



Taiwan Fun on the Tropic of Cancer
臺灣夏至 235

Taiwan International Balloon Festival
臺灣國際熱氣球嘉年華

Amis Harvest Festival
阿美族豐年祭

Keelung Mid-Summer
Ghost Festival
雞籠中元祭



September

Taiwan Fun on the Tropic of
Cancer 臺灣夏至 235

October

Taiwan Cycling Festival

臺灣自行車節

Kaohsiung Zuoying
Wannian Folklore Festival
高雄左營萬年季

Wangye Worshipping
Ceremony
迎王平安祭典

November

Sea of Flowers in Xinshe
新社花海

December



Keelung Mid-Summer
Ghost Festival
雞籠中元祭



For more Taiwan Festivals information,
please visit timefortaiwan.tw/EN/.



Taiwan Lantern Festival

*Grand Lantern Festival Staged
in Lugang*

Text: Christine Harris Photos: Vision

Every year, the Lantern (or “Yuanxiao”) Festival marks the end of the Lunar New Year (Spring Festival) festivities. The official Taiwan Lantern Festival is staged in a different location each time, organized by a selected county or city government. In 2012, the town of Lugang in Changhua County was the host of this large-scale event.



Lugang (鹿港) is a small town located southwest of the city of Taichung in central Taiwan. It is one of the oldest towns on the island, and a popular destination for tourists in search of history and nostalgia. Many historic sites, old temples, traditional handicraft shops, and eateries serving up hearty local cuisine are located in close proximity to each other, making discovery tours on foot very convenient.

Hosting such a big event as the Taiwan Lantern Festival (台灣燈會) is not just a huge honor for the members of the organizing committee, but also a great opportunity to present their city/county. To make sure that visitors to the festival had the chance to see more than just the festival venue, the Changhua County Government set up two instead of just one festival grounds, one on the north and the other on the south of Lugang, linked by the town's main thoroughfare, Zhongshan Road (中山路), which was decorated with countless lanterns. Historic sites along the way were specially highlighted so that visitors moving from one festival ground to the other didn't miss Lugang's other key attractions.

Ever since the first government-organized large-scale Lantern Festival celebration was staged by the Taipei City Government back in 1990, the main theme lantern has been the center of attention at what came to be officially called the Taiwan Lantern Festival (Taipei continued with its own official city festival). It has become a tradition that the main theme lantern is built in the shape of the Chinese zodiac animal of the year, and as 2012 brought in the lunar calendar's Year of the Dragon, Lugang showcased a giant structure in the shape of... you guessed it.

The dragon, in the past the symbol of the emperor of China, today remains one of the most auspicious of symbols, associated with power, strength, and good luck. According to the organizers, the dragon-shaped theme lantern stood 21 meters high and appeared as though floating on moving clouds. An impressive sight in daytime, this giant burst into even more brilliant life in the evening with the help of a sophisticated lighting system inside its body and laser beams pointing at it on the outside. The

use of state-of-the-art LED lighting not only increased the brightness threefold but also decreased the energy used to one-tenth of that used for the theme lanterns in previous festivals.

The main theme lantern was ceremonially lighted at 7 pm on February 6, and every half hour thereafter a light and laser show burst forth. The main lantern was, of course, just one of the thousands of large and small lanterns presented during the festival. In the Lantern Contest Area (競賽燈區) alone there were more than 1,800 lanterns on display. In reference to Lugang's history as a sea harbor, ships were the theme of the contest, and participants created sailing-vessel lanterns in all imaginable forms.

Other lantern-display areas included a Joyful Lantern Area (歡樂燈區), where a Taiwan New Paradise (台灣新樂園) theme park was created with the help of lanterns; lantern-makers from mainland China presented their works in the Exchange Lantern Area (交流燈區); and the lanterns of the Innovative Lantern Area (創意燈區) were in the shape of aliens and robots. The rich cultural program, featuring entertaining stage performances and a food market – always an important part of big festival events in Taiwan – introduced visitors to local performing arts and local culinary specialties.

Animals of the Chinese Zodiac

1989 Snake
1990/2002 Horse
1991/2003 Goat
1992/2004 Monkey
1993/2005 Rooster
1994/2006 Dog
1995/2007 Pig
1996/2008 Rat
1997/2009 Ox
1998/2010 Tiger
1999/2011 Rabbit
2000/2012 Dragon
2001/2013 Snake
2002/2014 Horse
2003/2015 Goat
2004/2016 Monkey

Taiwan Lantern Festival Venues

1990 ~ 2000 Taipei City
2001 Kaohsiung City
2002 Kaohsiung City
2003 Taichung City
2004 Banqiao City, Taipei County
2005 Tainan City
2006 Tainan City
2007 Taibao City, Chiayi County
2008 Tainan County
2009 Yilan County
2010 Chiayi City
2011 Zhunan/Toufen, Miaoli County
2012 Lugang, Changhua County
2013 Zhubei City, Hsinchu City
2014 Zhongxing New Village, Nantou County
2015 Taichung City
2016 Taoyuan City



Baosheng Cultural Festival

Preserving Life, Preserving Culture

Text: Mark Caltonhill

Photos: Bao'an Temple, Maggie Song

It is often supposed that for an authentic, feels-like-the-long-gone-past religious experience, visitors need to head out of Taipei City and, preferably, travel to Taiwan's deep south, where traditional practices are better preserved. Parts of Taipei, however, in particular its older districts such as Wanhua and Datong, are also rich and thriving repositories of traditional life.



Located on the western edge of this modern city and tucked up tight beside the Tamsui River (淡水河), which historically served as northern Taiwan's major thoroughfare, Wanhua (萬華) and Datong (大同) are ideal destinations for visitors seeking to connect with the island's past. In Wanhua, Longshan Temple (龍山寺) is the key religious site, while the annual Qingshan Temple (青山宮) parade is a major attraction. Best in Datong, slightly to the north, are Taipei Confucius Temple (台北市孔廟) and, next door, Bao'an Temple (保安宮), dedicated to Baosheng Dadi (保生大帝).

Taipei's Bao'an Temple is worth visiting at any time of the year. Rebuilt and expanded many times, the present temple has elements dating from 1804; the 1804 structure replaced a wooden shrine dating from 1742. The complex was recognized as a national historic site in 1985 and, following a decade of renovation, received a UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Award for Culture Heritage Conservation in 2003. The temple's management sought out artisans with knowledge of traditional skills to do the work, some coming from Fujian, and engaged academic experts to ensure that the original design was adhered to. Wood carvings and the murals on the outside of the central hall were especially well restored.

Like many temples, Bao'an Temple (or *Bao'an Gong*; *gong* (宮) means "palace," and identifies this as a Daoist as opposed to a Buddhist temple) has an annual procession,

when statues of deities from other temples are brought to offer their respects to the great emperor on his birthday. Baosheng Dadi is said to have been born on the 15th day of the 3rd lunar month, AD 979. This year, the date falls on April 24.

Over the years, this temple's celebrations have grown and grown, and since 1994 have been represented as the Baosheng Cultural Festival (保生文化祭), which lasts for three weeks or longer. Activities include arts, lion dancing, feasting, martial arts, puppet shows, firework displays, fire running, and much more.

Theater is a major component in the weeks before and after the deity's birthday, with international companies performing alongside a wide range of local and community groups. The emphasis is on preserving traditional forms, with opera – Taiwanese-language opera, rather than Mandarin-language Peking opera – and puppetry to the fore. Such performances are common at temple fairs, and it is often forgotten that their primary audiences are spiritual rather than living beings, just as are those of the art on temple roofs and even the performers seen at some funerals.

The temple also sponsors religious lectures during the festival and, as a result of relationships forged during the period of restoration, invites scholars to present the findings of their research on relevant topics at academic seminars.

The main event, especially for overseas visitors looking for photo opportunities, is the procession and associated activities on Baosheng Dadi's birthday. Participants can be seen at any place along the route, which meanders for many kilometers through this old heart of the city, but the main crowd – and most photographers – gather at Bao'an Temple itself, to witness the special displays put on when the marchers, carrying their own deity statues, arrive to offer their best birthday wishes.

During similar events at other temples, these arrivals are marked by letting off strings of firecrackers and the bouncing of statues in their palanquins. So too at Bao'an Temple, but many participants will present a cultural display as well. They might, for example, be dressed as the Cowherd and Weaving Maid (牛郎織女), the protagonists of the myth behind Chinese Lovers' Day, or as the legendary emperor Shen Nong (神農), who taught humankind to practice agriculture and, by tasting thousands of potentially dangerous plants, discovered



which herbs had medicinal qualities, something of special interest to Baosheng Dadi.

The parade lasts all day, and vendors set up stalls to cater to hungry participants and viewers alike. The temple marks the start and finishing point of the route, and afterwards many costumed marchers hang around chatting, eating, and having their photos taken. Among the more popular are the lion dancers, acrobats, martial artists on stilts, and the 12 Maiden Aunts (十二婆姐), all of whom put on performances in front of the temple. This last group, actually played by a dozen men, consists of assistants to Zhusheng Niangniang (註生娘娘), a subsidiary deity to whom women pray when wishing to conceive, and whose statue and altar are on the left inside the temple. Though merely assistants to a secondary deity, they are nevertheless one of the top draws of the day.



Perhaps the most popular event, and definitely the most photogenic, is the fire running. Pairs of men, carrying deity statues in palanquins, run barefoot across smoldering charcoal. Photographers should be sure to ask in advance in which direction the running will be;

otherwise they may end up with photos of the runners' backs and have to return the next year to try again. However, that, of course, would be something pleasant to look forward to.

Bao'an Temple 保安宮

Add: 61 Hami Street, Taipei City (台北市哈密街 61 號)
Website: www.baoan.org.tw
Nearest MRT Station: Yuanshan



Baosheng Dadi

Chinese deities come in two categories: those who were real people – such as Confucius and the seafarers' goddess Mazu (媽祖) – and those who were not, such as the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝) or the gods of rain, wind, and so forth.

Baosheng Dadi, the Great Emperor Who Protects Life, is one of the former. Originally called Wu Tao (吳太), he lived in Tong'an in China's Fujian Province from 979 to 1036, during the Song Dynasty.

Having lost his parents at an early age, Wu dedicated his life to studying medicine and helping to heal people. After he passed away people began to beseech his spirit for assistance from the netherworld. With such supplications seemingly granted, and prayers to him seeming to have beneficial results, he was promoted up the Daoist hierarchy, eventually gaining the status of a "great emperor" (大帝).

Since many of Taiwan's Han Chinese immigrants in the 17th and 18th centuries came from Fujian, and not a small number from around Tong'an, it is unsurprising that they brought statues of Baosheng Dadi with them and established branch temples dedicated to him in their new home. There are now Bao'an temples in many cities and towns around the island and his birthday, the 15th day of the 3rd lunar month, is celebrated widely and loudly.

Baosheng Cultural Festival 台北保生文化祭 / April-June

Organizer: Department of Information and Tourism, Taipei City Government
Tel: (02) 2720-8889#7562 Website: www.travel.taipei/en

Taiwan Fun on the Tropic of Cancer

Festivities and Activities During the Summer Months

Text: Joe Henley Photos: Vision

Most people have heard of the Tropic of Cancer (TOC). But how many can actually define what it is? Just in case you were wondering, the Tropic of Cancer is the northernmost circle of latitude on Earth where the sun appears directly overhead at its zenith. The sun “draws” this line once per year during the northern hemisphere’s summer solstice, which occurs sometime between June 20 and June 22.

In 2015, the TOC lies at approximately 23 degrees north latitude, which means it runs right through Taiwan, cutting, from east to west, across Hualien County, Nantou County, Chiayi County, and the islands of Penghu County. Throughout the summer numerous festivities and activities related to the Tropic of Cancer are staged in 4 counties/cities and 6 scenic areas as part of the annual Taiwan Fun on the Tropic of Cancer season

To get an idea of what is going on during the celebrations, *Travel in Taiwan* visited the Kaohsiung Exhibition Center (高雄展覽館) in late June of 2014, where an exhibition was being staged showcasing the culinary and other attractions of areas located on or close to the Tropic of Cancer. The city of Kaohsiung itself does not lie on the Tropic of Cancer (not yet, anyway – the TOC is drifting south about 14 meters per year).

After walking through the glass doors at the back of the center and stepping out onto the harbor-view walkway, we saw that food and drink had been given center stage. Lychees the size of tennis balls, mango smoothies, deep-fried *aiyu*

jelly... it was a showcase of Taiwan’s agricultural bounty. *Aiyu* (愛玉) jelly, a popular treat made from the seeds of a variety of fig, was selected in a popularity poll this year as Taiwan’s number one summer snack. But it was not the only specialty item on offer. We also visited stands selling papaya milk, shaved ice, and even cactus ice from the Penghu islands.



Food is only one element of the Taiwan Fun on the Tropic of Cancer (臺灣夏至 235) festivities, however. In Chiayi County’s Siraya National Scenic Area (西拉雅國家風景區), for example, named for a lowland indigenous tribe, activities are centered on the mud springs of the hot-spring resort town Guanziling (關子嶺). Beat the summer heat by taking a dip in the soothing mud- and nutrient-rich waters with cold beverage in hand.

In the village of Ruisui (瑞穗) in Hualien County, located in the East Rift Valley National Scenic Area (花東縱谷國家風景區), representatives of the island’s unique and colorful indigenous culture stage song-and-dance performances, with the aim of preserving and promoting the traditional way of life of Taiwan’s first inhabitants. Ruisui is also the launch-point for whitewater rafting trips down the Xiuguluan River (秀姑巒溪), with exciting yet always safe adventure guaranteed.

Among the various other activities being staged by local governments during the summer are night-time eco-explorations at Little Yeliu (小野柳) in Taitung County, fun activities on the beaches of Penghu, sand and salt sculpting on the southwest coast, evening visits to Shoushan Zoo (壽山動物園) and bicycling in Liugui District (六龜區) in Kaohsiung, day-lily-season visits to Mt. Liushidan (六十石山; Sixty Stone Mountain) and Mt. Chike (赤科山) in Hualien, and visits to indigenous villages in Taitung County.

If you plan to visit southern or eastern Taiwan or the offshore islands of Penghu this summer, make sure to check out which of the many festivities and activities you won’t want to miss! Full details are available at www.taiwan235n.tw.

Taiwan Fun on the Tropic of Cancer 夏至 235 / June-September

Organizer: Taiwan Tourism Bureau

Tel: (04) 2331-2688#110 Website: www.taiwan235n.tw/en/index.php

Taiwan International Balloon Festival

Colorful Balloons Paint the East Rift Valley

Text: Owain Mckimm Photos: Maggie Song

For more than two months each summer the Luye Highland north of Taitung City is the venue for a marvelous event featuring colorful hot-air balloons, some of which have amazingly creative shapes.





It's five in the morning, and the sun is just coming up over Taitung County's Luye Highland (鹿野高台), in Taiwan's mesmerizing East Rift Valley (花東縱谷). With the Central Mountain Range (中央山脈) to the west and the Coastal Mountain Range (海岸山脈) to the east, the tableland provides stunning views along the Beinan River (卑南溪) system, the river's many tributaries giving rise to a patchwork of river terraces laid out in lush fruit fields and tea plantations.

At over 350 meters above sea level, the Luye Highland has, for many years, been a popular destination for paragliders, who come to the expansive grassy meadow with its sloping south-facing hillside to pursue their passion. Since 2011, however, the site has also been the launch pad for a grander, more romantic means of flying – the hot-air balloon.

Just as dawn breaks over the highland, a single small, black helium balloon is released into the sky to test the winds. Hundreds of pairs of eyes follow it as it rises at a slight angle, nudged to one side by a light breeze. Conditions are deemed favorable, and the hot-air balloons are prepped to fly. Ten are laid out on the grass and, one by one, are slowly inflated with air until, within minutes it seems, they stand proudly, gracefully upright, swaying in the breeze.



As we clamber into the wicker basket of one for a scheduled ballooning jaunt, our vessel struggles against its tethers as if impatient to get off the ground. "Are you ready to go up?" our pilot, Edward Oordt from the Netherlands, asks us, and with an earsplitting blast from the burner we're hoisted into the sky.

While for many the attraction of ballooning might be the serenity, floating engineless above the clouds, for Oordt, who sports a fantastic handlebar moustache, it's the sense of unpredictability. "In a balloon there's always excitement. Twenty-five years ago I was flying planes, and in a plane you just go from airport to airport, from A to B. In a balloon, it's always different. Sometimes the weather can change very quickly, or if you're flying over woods or over a city, finding a place to land can be very challenging."

It's also surprising just how big the balloons are. The one we're flying in has, according to Oordt, a volume of 133,000 cubic feet, and though it's filled with nothing but hot air the

force the balloon exerts is palpably immense. Eight of the ten balloons featured today are tethered to giant concrete dolosse in order to keep them from making a getaway, and will carry groups of four to a height of 50 meters before returning to the ground. From a distance they are tranquil giants, like icebergs floating in the water. But up close, the roars of their burners betray their frustration. They are tethered beasts yearning to be free.

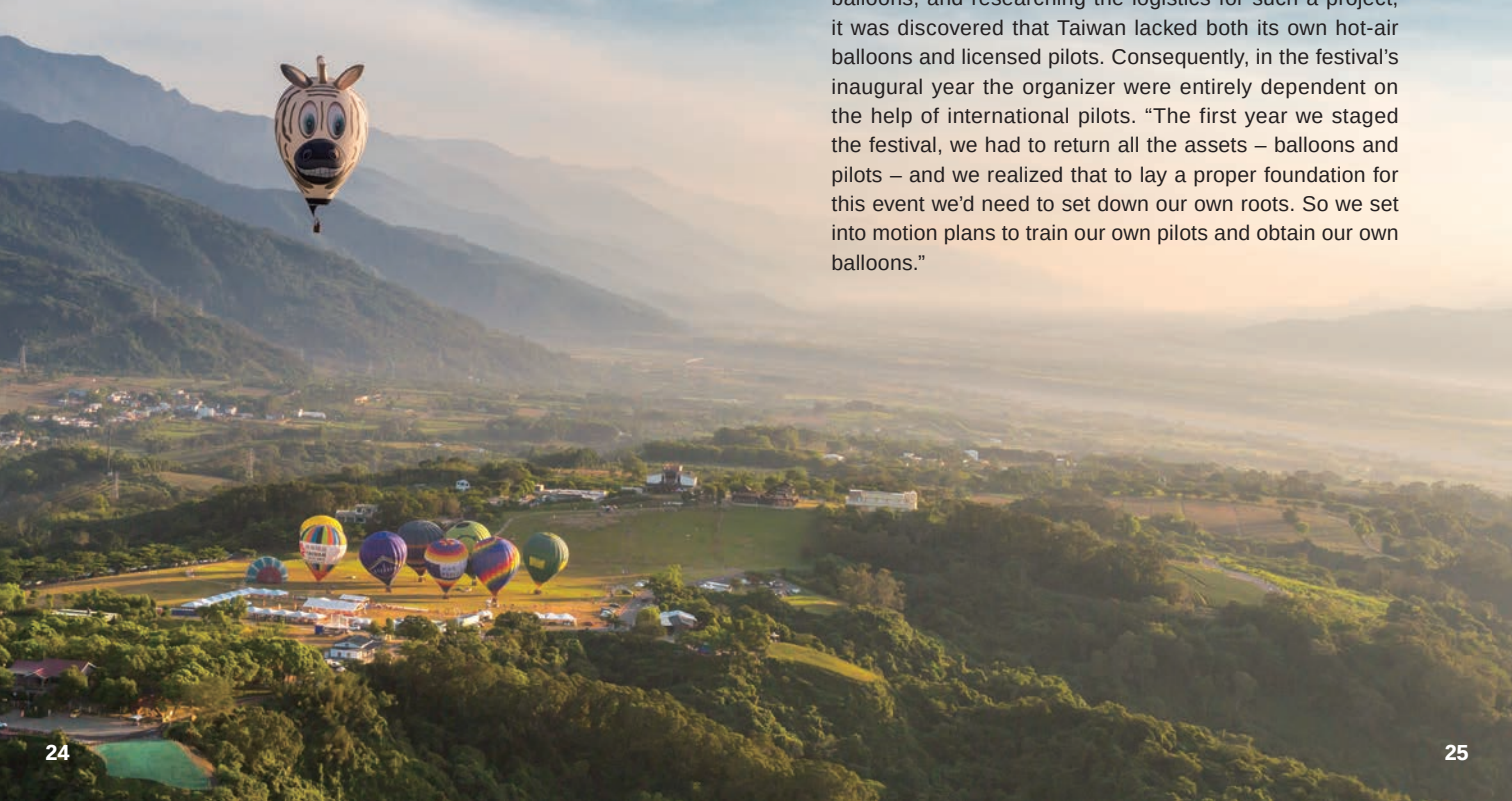
Two of the ten balloons, however, are to be let off the leash. In previous years, only tethering was allowed at the festival; but this year, for the first time, free-flying trips are being offered to groups at a price of NT\$8,000 per person. Though it may seem expensive, all available free-flying sessions right through the festival have been booked.

Of the ten balloons on-site today, six are from the Netherlands, adorned in striking sponsorship messages in Dutch. There is also a checkered light-and-dark-green balloon from the UK, nicknamed the Hulk by the

organizers; an American behemoth in the shape of a penguin wearing a cap and shades, a Hawaiian shirt, and a camera around its neck; and two of Taiwan's very own, the pride of which is the heart-shaped, strawberry-and-cream vessel with "Taiwan: The Heart of Asia" proudly stamped across its chest.

This balloon is one of the lucky two that will take to the skies unfettered today, to soar north along the East Rift Valley until it finds terra firma in some as-yet-unknown destination. It lurches slowly back and forth in anticipation of take-off. And then finally it's away, spinning slowly in mid-air until it catches the wind, then streaming forward with silent purpose over the crest of a hill and out of view.

Held over a period of ten weeks in the summer, the Taiwan International Balloon Festival is now in its third year. "For over ten years we've held a Flying Season here at the Luye Highland, focused mainly on paragliding," says Chen Shu-hui (陳淑慧), director-general of the Taitung County Tourism Department. "After the first few years many other areas in Taiwan started offering similar experiences, so we eventually decided that we needed something fresh to attract tourists to the area." After deciding on hot-air balloons, and researching the logistics for such a project, it was discovered that Taiwan lacked both its own hot-air balloons and licensed pilots. Consequently, in the festival's inaugural year the organizer were entirely dependent on the help of international pilots. "The first year we staged the festival, we had to return all the assets – balloons and pilots – and we realized that to lay a proper foundation for this event we'd need to set down our own roots. So we set into motion plans to train our own pilots and obtain our own balloons."



To date, seven Taiwanese have qualified as licensed pilots, gaining their certification from the US's Federal Aviation Administration, and Taiwan now owns six balloons, purchased from Spanish balloon manufacturer Ultramagic. There are plans to purchase four more after this year's festival.

This rapid local development has not stopped international pilots from returning year after year to Taitung. "The landscape here is so varied – mountains, valleys, plains – and if you get high enough you can even see the Pacific over the Coastal Mountain Range," says Chen. "It's not just farmland and fields. To be able to see so much spectacular scenery in one flight is something quite rare."

The dramatic landscape is also something that keeps drawing visitors back too. Only 20% of visitors are locals from Taitung; the other 80% come from all over Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Japan. Some even come several times in the space of a few weeks. "This festival provides a special seasonal attraction in an already well-established beautiful spot," Chen states. "The Luye Highland is already a picture in itself – but when you add in the balloons, it becomes really breathtaking."

This year over twenty different balloons are taking part in the festival, and different novelty balloons are being featured at different times. This is one advantage of the festival being so long – the constant variety. While most ballooning festivals last about a week, Taiwan's is a marathon at over two months long.

As most balloonists are hobbyists, Chen invites them to the festival for as much time as they can spare, often stretches of one or two weeks. "This way we get to show lots of

different balloons in one two-month-plus period," she says. "And as we invite different novelty balloons every year, no one visit is the same. Variety is the spice of life, as they say."

This year the festival features a balloon shaped like Darth Vader's head, an Angry Bird, a giant cake, a baseball-cap-wearing turtle, and the aforementioned penguin. The classic, inverted-teardrop balloon is, though, for me, hard to top. As the balloons rise and fall in the morning light, the orange glow of the burners only momentarily revealing the human presence within, they are simply ethereal – a natural phenomenon born of color and air.

The balloons fly only at dawn and dusk – a limitation stemming from the fact that during the day the sun's heat creates thermal updrafts that make ballooning dangerous. Two hundred tickets for the tethered flights go on sale daily at 5am and 3pm, with an extra two hundred going on sale after the first two hundred passengers have flown. A tethered flight usually lasts around ten minutes, and costs NT\$500 per person. In addition, the area has eateries, food stalls, and funfair rides for the kids, and in the evenings there are barbecues and other events.

Getting there: From Taitung City, a taxi to the Luye Highland costs around NT\$660 and takes around 35 minutes. Alternatively, you can take the Taiwan Tourist Shuttle Bus to the site. Take the East Rift Valley Line to the terminal stop. For more info about the bus service, visit www.taiwantrip.com.tw.

Taiwan International Balloon Festival 臺灣國際熱氣球節 / June-August
 Organizer: Taitung County Government
 Tel: (089) 324-902 Website: balloontaiwan.taitung.gov.tw/



A large group of people in traditional Amis attire are gathered in a field at night. In the foreground, several women in red and white dresses with colorful skirts and headbands are dancing. In the background, many more people are seated or standing, some wearing traditional headgear. The scene is illuminated by warm lights, creating a festive atmosphere.

Amis Harvest Festival

Celebrating a Bountiful Millet Crop

Text: Cheryl Robbins Photos: Chen Cheng-kuo

Once a year the Amis tribe, in vivid fashion, celebrates the annual harvest. The harvest festival's events, staged in many indigenous villages of Hualien and Taitung, are characterized by singing, dancing, and feasting on indigenous specialties.



There are currently 16 officially recognized indigenous tribes in Taiwan. Among them, the largest is the Amis tribe (阿美族). According to statistics published on the Council of Indigenous Peoples website (www.apc.gov.tw), the population of this tribe is about 200,000, mainly distributed in Hualien and Taitung counties in eastern Taiwan.

Similar to many of Taiwan's other indigenous tribes, millet was once a staple grain of the Amis, and many rites and ceremonies were held in association with millet-growing activities. For example, after the millet was harvested the crop was placed in granaries for storage, and following this the Amis Harvest Festival (阿美族豐年祭) was held. The festival is a celebration of the year's harvest and an opportunity to express gratitude to tribal ancestors for their blessings and protection. It also marks the start of a new year.

The celebrations traditionally lasted for more than a week, but since in modern times it is difficult for those working outside villages to leave their jobs and return home for such a long period, the length of the festival has been reduced to between one and seven days, with the average being three to five days.

Harvest Festival events take place in the individual Amis villages. The first of these events is staged around the middle of July, in Taitung, and the last is staged in Hualien at the end of August or early September. The exact dates and duration of the festival are decided by the elders in each of the villages.

There are many parts to the Amis Harvest Festival ceremonies. Just before the start of the ceremonies, the young males of the tribe may spend the night along a river catching fish in preparation for the festival's banquet. After they return, there is singing and dancing to welcome and entertain the ancestral spirits.

Traditionally, it was the duty of the males to welcome the ancestral spirits, and of the females to end the festivities and give the ancestral spirits a grand sendoff. However, in modern times such gender restrictions have been lifted.

Usually the dancing is done in a circle, with dancers

holding hands and following a specific pattern of steps. Onlookers are often invited to join in, and for this reason this event has become popular among tourists.

The Amis Harvest Festival is a good opportunity to observe an important cultural characteristic of this tribe, which is its age organization. Males of the tribe are divided into groups according to age, and each group has distinct responsibilities. In certain villages, coming-of-age rites are sometimes carried out for the young males during the festival.

The festival also is an important social event. Residents of each of the villages participate in various games and competitions. It is also a chance for younger members to search for potential marriage partners. During the dancing, the males wear a brightly decorated bag over the shoulder, which is referred to as a lover's bag. It is so called because single women of the village can show their preference for a suitor by placing a betel nut in this bag. A young man shows that this interest is mutual by accepting the gift.

Amis villages can vary greatly in size. In some of the larger villages for which Harvest Festival activities are well publicized, tourists sometimes outnumber the locals. In smaller villages, the activities may be on a smaller scale, but visitors will more likely experience the cultural aspects of the festival.

The websites of the township administrative offices in Hualien and Taitung counties are usually the best place to find dates and contact information for each village. However, this information is usually available only in Chinese. It is a good idea to call ahead to find out which activities are open to tourists, and when and where they will take place.

In addition to the activities held in individual villages, the Hualien County government also stages an indigenous cultural festival. Indigenous people from around Hualien and other parts of Taiwan dress in traditional clothing and participate in the myriad activities staged during this large-scale Harvest Festival. For more information, call (03) 822-5123.

Amis Harvest Festival 阿美族豐年祭 / July-August
Organizer: Hualien Indigenous Peoples Department
Tel: (03) 823-4531 #280
Website: ab.hl.gov.tw/en-us/Home/Index



Keelung Mid-Summer Ghost Festival

*Once a Year the Harbor City Hosts
Some Unusual Guests*

Text: Mark Caltonhill Photos: Vision



In a break with a tradition dating back 157 years, tables of Western food were laid out this year (2012) alongside the more usual Chinese fare at the Keelung Mid-Summer Ghost Festival (雞籠中元祭), for the feeding of hungry ghosts. Also for the first time, a priest performed Christian rituals beside Buddhist and Daoist counterparts. This strange turn of events derived from a unique combination of religious belief and historical circumstance.

The 7th lunar month is also known as Ghost Month (鬼月), since according to popular belief the Gates of Hell are open the full month and spirits of the deceased are free to wander the earth. Given the Han Chinese people's complex help-and-be-helped relationship with their ancestors, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Except, that is, in the case of "hungry ghosts" (more commonly called "good brethren"), who do not have descendents making regular offerings and who might therefore cause trouble rather than offer help from the afterlife. Elaborate ceremonies and fabulous feasts are prepared to placate them.

These celebrations are held all over Taiwan, but the largest and one of the most colorful takes place in Keelung. It culminates at the fishing port of Badouzi (八斗子), where floating lanterns are launched onto the sea. Curiously, these lanterns are all decorated with a single Chinese character, such as 謝 (*xie*; "gratitude"), 林 (*lin*; "wood"), and 江 (*jiang*; "river").

The reason for this lies in the Keelung festival's origins. During its long period of colonization by Han Chinese, from the early 1600s well into the 1800s, Taiwan was a frontier territory in which following the rule of law was not always easy or desired, and armed clashes were not uncommon. These were not limited to conflicts with indigenous people, or between Hakka and Hoklo-speaking immigrants, but even occurred between members of the last group, almost all of whom hailed from either the Quanzhou or Zhangzhou regions of Fujian Province in mainland China. One particularly nasty clash in Keelung in 1851 led to around 100 deaths.

To heal social wounds and prevent future clashes, an annual ceremony honoring the dead was mutually devised and got under way in 1855. Rather than being based on hometown affiliations as was normal, it was organized according to clan names, since these were shared by families of both groups. This is the origin of the character on each lantern: Each is a family name that also has other meaning. It is believed that the farther a lantern floats out to sea, the better the luck to be enjoyed by that clan in the year to come.

The festival started on August 30 with ritual ceremonies at the city's four main temples: City God Temple (城隍廟), Qing'an Temple (慶安宮), Dianji Temple (奠濟宮), and

Juexiu Temple (覺修宮). This was followed by the official Gates of Hell opening ceremony at midnight the next night at Laodagong Temple (老大公廟; 37, Lane 76, Le 1st Rd.) – said to contain the bones of some of those who died in 1851 – which was broadcast live on national television. It ended with the official closing ceremony.

Visitors to Keelung on any day of Ghost Month can catch sight of different clans taking turns to parade their lanterns through the streets, and there are international and domestic artistic and cultural events on the main plaza at the harborfront and in theaters, halls, government buildings, hotels, and on street-side stages throughout Keelung. These include dancing, Taiwanese opera, puppetry, drumming, martial arts, children's shows, traditional and modern music, circus-style tricks, painting, photographic and art competitions, folk singing, quizzes, and calligraphy.

Without doubt, however, the highlight of the month's events is the full parade of decorated floats bearing the lanterns on the evening of the full moon. These are constructed in the shape of miniature mansions, and are taken through the streets of downtown Keelung, then out past the docks toward Badouzi a few kilometers away. Here they are again worshiped before being carried into the sea at midnight, where they float away silently until the paper walls catch fire, and the burnt-out shell sinks. Around midnight everyone sets off for home, or back to downtown Keelung where the Miaokou (Temple Entrance) Night Market (廟口夜市), the city's famous year-round tourist attraction, does good business until well into the small hours.



At 6pm on August 31, the day after the floating-lantern event, the hungry ghosts were fed a choice of vegetarian or meat dishes at Zhupu Altar – with, as mentioned, Western dishes included this year. Around 11pm, after finishing eating, they were encouraged to

return to the underworld by the dancing of Zhongkui, the “ghost catcher.” Living participants at the ceremony then ate the ghosts’ leftovers.



Places of Interest

Keelung's other tourist attractions include fortifications dating back to the 19th century, such as Ershawan Fort (二沙灣砲臺), Baimiweng Fort (白米甕砲臺), and Dawulun Fort (大武崙砲臺) to the west of town, and Gangzailiao Fort (槓仔寮砲臺) to the east. Boat tours take visitors around the harbor and out around Keelung Island (基隆嶼).

On the city's east, by the main harbor's mouth, is Heping Island (和平島), connected to the mainland by a short bridge. It has a park with curiously shaped rocks and an enclosed sea-swimming pool.

The Keelung Story House (181 Xinyi Rd., next door to the city hall), has introductions to the area's history, ecology, people, and coal mining, as well as to Steve McQueen, who visited in 1966 for the filming of the Oscar-nominated “The Sand Pebbles.”



Getting There

Frequent trains run from Taipei (45-min trip; NT\$41), and buses run to and from most places in northern Taiwan. For further tourism, accommodation, and transportation information, visit Keelung City's website at www.klcc.gov.tw.

Kaohsiung Zuoying Wannian Folklore Festival

*A Great Fire Lion Visits Temples
around Lotus Pond*

Text: Steven Crook Photos: Rich Matheson



These days Zuoying, a Kaohsiung suburb, is best known for Lotus Pond and the colorful temples that surround this pretty body of water. But back in the 17th century, just after Koxinga expelled the Dutch East India Company from Taiwan, it was the military and administrative headquarters of Wannian County and thus a place of considerable importance. Today the toponym lives on in various forms, as “Zuoying District” and in the names of the district’s major mass-transportation hub and a large naval base, as well as in the names of happenings such as the annual Kaohsiung Zuoying Wannian Folklore Festival, evoking the glory of the past.



There are times when people on this island put their smartphones down and their 21st-century concerns and ambitions aside, and a much older Taiwan bursts into the foreground. The final day of the Kaohsiung Zuoying Wannian Folklore Festival (高雄左營萬年季) was one such occasion.

My friends and I were positioned in front of Zuoying's (左營) Chenghuang (City God) Temple (城隍廟), enjoying a form of entertainment that has hardly changed in hundreds of years. Dancing lions, accompanied by drum-beating and gong-thumping musicians, teased children, opened gaping jaws and snapped them shut inches from spectators' faces, and threw candies into the crowd.

But the professional and amateur *zhentou* (陣頭) troupes that perform these and other acts aren't slavish in their adherence to tradition. Modern twists on old forms include Techno San Taizi (電音三太子) or Techno Prince performances. Another example followed the lion dancers on this day. Five young men, dressed to resemble the key characters in "Journey to the West" (西遊記), danced disco-style to pop music. Even if you've never heard of this classic Chinese novel, you may well know a bit about the story (based on the adventures of a seventh-century Chinese monk who traveled to India to study Buddhist scriptures) because it inspired a Japanese TV series shown throughout the English-speaking world under the title "Monkey."

A few minutes later came the real star of the show – the Great Wannian Fire Lion (萬年迓火獅). This effigy, cute yet dignified, is far larger than a real lion. But for a yellow underbelly, it was covered with red tinsel "fur." Red, of course, is an auspicious color in Chinese culture.

The lion is set ablaze at the very end of the festival so as to carry the wishes of the faithful up to heaven, and is therefore designed to burn well. There's a very real risk of premature destruction, however, because thousands of firecrackers are detonated beneath and around it as it is paraded through Zuoying's streets prior to its sacrifice. I wasn't surprised to see a man following behind with a small tank of water and a hand-held sprayer, ready to put out any fires.

The modern Wannian Folklore Festival dates from 2001, when the Kaohsiung City Government's Civil Affairs



Bureau began coordinating and sponsoring traditional events in Zuoying District. Since 2005 the central government's Tourism Bureau has been lending a hand, and the festival – always held in mid- or late October – has grown steadily in popularity.

The Fire Lion has its origins in rites traditionally conducted at Ciji Temple (慈濟宮), a house of worship that overlooks Lotus Pond's (蓮池潭) southwestern corner. In these ceremonies, the lion was believed to serve as a mount for Baosheng Dadi (保生

大帝), a medicine deity. He's far from the most important god in the expansive Chinese folk pantheon, but his career is worth reviewing. Baosheng Dadi, which means "life-protecting emperor," is an honorific title given to Wu Tao (吳朮), a healer who lived in China's Fujian province. It's said he once brought a skeleton back to life, and following his death in AD 1036 he was credited with successful posthumous interventions in hopeless cases – clearly an exceptional physician who deserves reverence!

For the first eight days of this nine-day-long festival, the Fire Lion tours temples and other area landmarks, going as far afield as Kaizhang Shengwang Temple (開漳聖王廟). This shrine is located in Kaohsiung City's Fengshan District (鳳山區), some 8 km southeast of Lotus Pond.

After sampling the food and getting a taste of events that happened long ago, join a session of Gongpaocheng (攻炮城), a spectacle not to be missed. Though an English translation of the name – "attacking the city wall with firecrackers" – makes it sound like an act of vandalism, it's actually a game of skill in which participants hurl lit fireworks at dollhouse-sized paper models of Zuoying's old city gates. These are suspended about head-height, and filled with firecrackers. Make sure your friends have their cameras ready, because if you succeed in getting a firework through the opening at the front, the gate is sure to explode in a shower of sparks.

It's said that soldiers stationed in Zuoying back in the 19th century played this game to kill time, and also to sharpen

the throwing skills they'd need if they had to fight. If you want to play, register in advance through the festival's website or in person at one of the information centers.

Fans of the performing arts are spoiled for choice, as the festival always includes pop concerts, drumming, Taiwanese opera performances, and choral and instrumental acts, all of which are free. The schedule for the secondary stage at the Confucius Temple (孔廟) included *enka* (popular Japanese ballads) and belly-dancing. What would the Great Sage think?

The festival also gave Kaohsiung residents a chance to see a form of Chinese opera seldom seen in Taiwan, Sichuan Face-changing Opera, during which changes in mood are conveyed by use of an amazing technique. An actor waves his cape or sleeve in front of his face, and in





that split second it seems as if the previous full-face makeup is removed and a totally different color-and-pattern scheme has been applied.

This being Taiwan, the festival naturally has a culinary angle. In fact, it has two. Vendors on the western side of Lotus Pond sell everything from hot dogs to stinky tofu. Other interesting eating options can be found at the lakeside temples, which give away traditional snacks such as *ong-ku-koe* (Taiwanese pronunciation; 紅龜粿) and *tangyuan* (湯圓). The former is a turtle-shaped rice-based cake which symbolizes good luck and longevity. The latter is a popular dessert consisting of little balls made with rice flour and filled with sesame paste, crushed peanuts, and sugar, or something else sweet.

Note also that, since 1949, Zuoying has been home to many Chinese mainlanders, who came in the great exodus across the Taiwan Strait at the end of the Chinese Civil War, making this neighborhood perhaps the best in the metropolis for authentic mainland delicacies.

As you can see, you'll have much to see and do at Lotus Lake and in the surrounding district during the Zuoying Wannian Folklore Festival. Be sure to arrive with an empty stomach, plenty of space on your camera's memory card, and a wish to pin on the Fire Lion!



Lotus Pond is easy to reach. If you're coming from another city, you may want to take a Taiwan High Speed Rail train to Kaohsiung's THSR Zuoying Station and then take a Red 51 bus. The TRA (regular railway) station closest to Lotus Pond is "old" Zuoying Station (not to be confused with New Zuoying Station, part of the same complex containing the THSR station). From it, you can walk to Lotus Pond in less than 10 minutes.

Other attractions in the area include the North Gate of Zuoying Old City (左營舊城) and two sites that will appeal to ecotourists. Zhouzai Wetland Park (洲仔濕地公園) is where the Pheasant-tailed jacana, a rare wading bird, was first sighted in Taiwan; the species has returned following restoration of the environment. Also within walking distance of Lotus Pond is the 4.66-hectare Protogenic Plants Garden (原生植物園), which has a collection of indigenous plants and trees that nature-lovers will find engrossing.

Kaohsiung Zuoying Wannian Folklore Festival 高雄左營萬年季 / October

Organizer: Civil Affairs Bureau, Kaohsiung City Government

Tel: (07) 799-5678 Website: cabueng.kcg.gov.tw/FeaturedActivities/Activities08.htm

Wangye Worshipping Ceremony

*The Burning of the King
Boat at Donggang*

Text: Steven Crook Photos: Rich Matheson

Taiwan wasn't always the safe, healthy place it is today. Until the early 20th century, malaria was a constant threat and cholera epidemics were frequent. Lacking medical knowledge and influenced by traditions they had brought from mainland China's Fujian and Guangdong provinces, Taiwanese of Han descent lived in fear of plague-spreading demons. Naturally, they sought divine protection from these malevolent spirits, whom they called Wang Ye (plague gods), or "royal lords."



The moment the King Boat left Donglong Temple (東隆宮), the exodus began. The vessel wouldn't be set afire for at least three hours, but Taiwan's most famous conflagration happens only once every three years, so we wanted to snag a good spot. Judging by the crowd that swept us through the narrow streets of Donggang (東港), everyone else had the same idea.

Getting to the burn site was more like a mass escape than a religious parade. Because the crowd was so dense, I found myself taking short, shuffling steps. Every few minutes we were jostled aside so a deity-bearing palanquin, or a team carrying one of the ship's masts, could pass. But when we reached the beach we got clear views as the sails were unfurled and the anchors raised. A king's ransom in "spirit money" (yellow paper rectangles especially made for burning during folk-religion ceremonies) was then piled around the hull. Finally, volunteers laid long strings of firecrackers across this mountain of combustible material.

Around 5:30am, it was announced that "all are aboard." The signal meant that every spirit on the passenger list was in place and the firecrackers could be lit. Within 60 seconds, flames were licking the boat on all sides. Flying embers soon burned holes through the sails. The large doll-sized figurines on the main deck were shedding limbs. As the sky lightened, the hull blackened. Gaping holes appeared fore and aft. Confident that misfortune had been dispelled and prosperity was assured for another three years, most of the locals in the crowd set out for home.

Donglong Temple in Donggang, a port town in Taiwan's far southwest, is among the liveliest of Taiwan's more than 600 Wang Ye (王爺) shrines. The temple's principal deity is Marshal Wen, commonly called Wen, Lord of a Thousand Years (溫府千歲). He's a good-guy Wang Ye, a scholar born in 609 A.D. who is said to have saved his emperor's life.

For at least a century, Donglong Temple has been hosting a spectacular festival featuring Marshal Wen (who

doesn't board the King Boat) and an array of other Wang Ye (who do). In some ways, the event is similar to other large-scale expressions of Taiwanese folk religion. The pious, who believe participation staves off bad luck and brings blessings, stand shoulder-to-shoulder with agnostic gawkers. Visitors can expect to see *zhentou* (陣頭) troupes perform lion dances, stilt-walking stunts, and other forms of visual artistry to a soundtrack of gongs, drums, and trumpets.

What distinguishes the eight-day-long Wangye Worshipping Ceremony (迎王平安祭典) from other *da bai bai* (大拜拜; "big worship ceremonies") is that the center of attention isn't a deity or a temple, but a stunningly decorated wooden junk which costs as much as a Lamborghini sports car. The 2012 vessel was 13.82m long; all dimensions are decided by means of divination.

"It's by far my favorite of Taiwan's festivals," said Chris Nelson, an American who has attended the 2006, 2009, and 2012 events. "It's big, colorful, energetic, and steeped in tradition. It's both an all-night party and a glimpse into the coolest aspects of Taiwanese culture: mysterious Daoist rituals, spirit mediums in trances, decked-out temples, fireworks, and a mile-long procession to the beach."

The custom of burning specially-built boats as a way of expelling plague and other evils is perhaps 1,000 years old, and some scholars think it may have been inspired by the discovery that fire is effective at destroying pathogens.

Communities along mainland China's southeast coast would build boats, load them with religious icons, and push them out to sea. Some of these vessels were set alight, but others were allowed to drift wherever the currents took them. The boats would carry off evil and pestilence with them. Many reached Taiwan's southwestern coast, where

they were received with a mixture of awe and fear by Han Chinese settlers. Wang Ye icons that were found on such boats are today revered in various houses of worship, most notably Nankunshen Daitian Temple (南鯤鯓代天府) in Tainan City's Beimen District.





Each King Boat is a work of art, and worth seeing even if you can't make it to the festival. Completed months in advance, the Donggang boat is put on display in a storage facility at Donglong Temple so pilgrims can pay their respects and at the same time appreciate the delicate paintings of dragons, elephants, and sages that decorate its hull.

The first and final days of the week-long festival are especially interesting; the inferno happens on the latter. At the start, during elaborate rituals – including a procession to the shore – a group of Wang Ye are invited to the town, and one is identified as the chief. In 2012, the leader was Lord Geng (王耿); his name was painted on the prow of the King Boat and onto a lantern dangling from the vessel's main mast.

Before dusk on the final day, volunteers push the vessel through Donggang's streets. The small ship is believed to act like a supernatural magnet, drawing disease and malevolence on board. When it is returned to Donglong Temple, offerings and supplies are loaded on to placate the supernatural entities that have been hoodwinked into boarding. Among the items placed on board are dice for gambling, pipes for smoking, calligraphy brushes and inkstones for writing, and woks, spoons, and condiments for cooking.

The loading and many other rituals are conducted by members of local religious associations known as the seven *jiaotou*. Each group represents a different part of Donggang Town. Recruits are primarily from each respective neighborhood, but also come from families that have moved away yet maintained ancestral ties with Donggang.

Distinguishing one crew from another is easy because each wears a different-colored uniform. The color doesn't belong to that *jiaotou*, but rather indicates the group's duties during the festival. This year, for instance, the members of the Dingtong Jiao (頂頭角) wore yellow, as they had done three years before, because they were responsible for the hull. Dingzhong Street Jiao (頂中街角) members wore white, and carried the anchors. Three years earlier they had donned green outfits and taken care of the rear mast and sail.

Randall Liu (劉仁杰), a Donggang native who attended the final day and night of this year's festivities along with four co-workers – all outsiders, all first-timers – said he is neither religious nor particularly traditional, but has been to four editions of the festival. "What I love about the burning of the King Boat is that it has made my hometown famous," said the 27-year-old. "And not just in Taiwan – there are so many foreigners here!"

At least one of those foreigners plans to return – Chris Nelson, whose parting words were: "See you in 2015!"

Taiwan Cycling Festival

*Leisurely Excursions, Competitive
Races, Inspiring Scenic Backdrops*

Text: Rick Charette

Photos: Taiwan Cyclist Federation, Cycling Lifestyle Foundation

A decade or so ago, the words "Taiwan," "cycling," and "international tourist" would not appear in the same sentence. This combination is now common. As a demonstration, let's see what Lonely Planet and CNNGo, two of the most prestigious names in international travel reporting, have had to say on the subject of cycling experiences here.





Lonely Planet recommended Taiwan as one of the top 10 countries for travel in 2012. This is from its website: "Taiwan has always had a jaw-dropping landscape – oversized sea cliffs and densely forested mountains barely start to describe its majesty. And then there's the museums, which are simply bursting with treasures (including the best of imperial China, spirited across the strait after WWII), plus a thriving folk culture that includes some wild displays of Taoist and Buddhist worship. In terms of cuisine, Taiwan is a fusion- and slow-food showcase. So why is 2012 the time to visit? Because Taiwan is best seen on two wheels and in recent years the authorities have embraced the biking market with surprising enthusiasm, vision, and (most importantly) funding."

CNNGo has declared Sun Moon Lake, one of Taiwan's most famous scenic destinations and the centerpiece of the Sun Moon Lake National Scenic Area, as among 10 of the world's best bike routes: "Some of the best cycling routes in the world pass through its most beautiful scenery... Located in the heart of Taiwan, Sun Moon Lake has long been charming curious foreigners and local visitors alike. Its calm, turquoise water has also inspired many ancient Chinese poets and painters. The route around the largest lake in Taiwan is a three-hour ride, where visitors can enjoy lake scenery, experience Thao aboriginal culture and learn about the local ecology in Nantou County."

The goal behind the annual Taiwan Cycling Festival (臺灣自行車節) is to introduce the full panoply of the Taiwan cycling experience to all the people of Taiwan and to people overseas looking for new, healthy, and inviting travel destinations: the range of natural scenery that is so impressively varied for an island of this size, the alluring man-created scenic sights, the island's full and still-

growing network (over 3,800 km) of interlinked regional and local bike-route webs, the ever more comprehensive infrastructure of rental and repair facilities, the quality accommodations that span the full budget range wherever you bike, Taiwan's superb, pleasingly affordable food, and the warmhearted friendliness and hospitality of the local people.

The festival is the creation of the Taiwan Tourism Bureau, and is built around two main events, the Formosa 900 and the Taiwan KOM Challenge, complemented by a number of events smaller in scale.

Formosa 900

The Formosa 900 (騎遇福爾摩沙 900) took place November 10 to 18 this year (2012). It was a round-island tour by 10 teams that each launched from a different location along the round-island route. Each team did a leg a day, covering 900 kilometers in 9 days, and ended up at its starting point. This was not a race – a leisurely pace was maintained, and sightseeing was one of the goals. Team members were introduced to the main tourist attractions along the way, and entertained at lunch and dinner each day with iconic foods. A sample of meal themes included "temple snacks," "Tainan snacks," "Taitung-Hualien seafood," "Chishang lunchbox," "home-style cooking," and "turkey rice." A grand evening feast and party was held after the event, in Taipei, with all bikers invited.





Among the celebrated riders competing this year were Matteo Rabottini, from Italy's Farnese Vini-Neri Sottoli team, who won the 2012 Giro d'Italia KOM; Anthony Charteau, from France's Team Europcar, winner of the 2010 Tour de France KOM; and Jeremy Roy, from France's FDJ-BigMat team, 2011 Tour de France stage KOM and Combative rider. Among the many competing teams were the CCN Cycling Team, based in Malta; the KTM Cycling Team, based in Germany; and the Specialized US cycling team. There were trophies and

cash prizes in each category: an Elite, Men's in numerous age brackets, and a Women's.

There was an awards ceremony and fireworks show at Sun Moon Lake's (日月潭) Xiangshan Visitor Center (日月潭向山遊客中心) at 6pm on November 10. The next day's event was called Sun Moon Lake Come! Bikeday (日月潭 Come! Bikeday): there was a fun 30-km ride around the lake with some of the pro racers, and a 9-km family run along the lake. Both launched from the Xiangshan center at 7am.

Each team had a limit of 30 members, and each biker paid NT\$30,000 to participate. This included insurance, all accommodations, all meals, bike repair/maintenance support, etc. Teams had themes: there was an indigenous-tribe team from Taitung, a ladies' team from Taichung, a team of physically challenged bikers from Hsinchu, a husband/wife team from Yilan, and international teams from Pingtung and Hualien.

Taiwan KOM Challenge

The Taiwan KOM Challenge (太魯閣登山賽 - 台灣登山王; "KOM" stands for "King of the Mountains") was run on November 10, racers setting off at 6am, the finish line closing at 1:30pm, the winner finishing at about 11am. This was an international race for serious riders – above 16 years of age and capable of finishing the route in 7 hours or less. Start was the scenic Qixingtian (七星潭) area in the east coast city of Hualien, and the race took riders through magnificent Taroko Gorge (太魯閣峽谷). At the edge of Taroko National Park just inland from the coast, the gorge is Taiwan's greatest natural wonder, where sheer marble cliffs a thousand meters high almost kiss in places.

The race ended far, far uphill along the Central Cross-Island Highway at Wuling, Taiwan's highest road point at 3,275 meters. Riders, starting at sea level, covered 100 km, with the route featuring many winding and challengingly steep sections.



Taiwan Cycling Festival 台灣自行車節 / October-November

Organizer: Taiwan Tourism Bureau

Tel: (02)2349-1500#8338 Website: theme.taiwanbike.tw/event/2015/en/index.html

Sea of Flowers in Xinshe

Wading through an Inland Sea of Flowers

Text: Rick Charette Photos: Chen Cheng-Kuo

In the fine crisp and clear wheather of late autumn *Travel in Taiwan* spent a colorful day visiting the rural Xinshe District in Taichung City – specifically, the Sea of Flowers in Xinshe.

This was the first time in Xinshe (新社) and the festival for us and we were lucky enough to be escorted around the sprawling grounds by a number of the very kind and hospitable folk involved in management of the event.

Xinshe is a rural district in Taichung, located on a wide plain between foothills and rising mountains along the Dajia River (大甲溪) east of the Taichung urban core. The district is known for farm production and the main products grown are mushrooms, citrus fruits, grapes, carambolas, pears, loquats, sugar apples, pineapples, persimmons, bonsai – and flowers.

According to Liu Man-Wai (廖文偉), the Deputy Director of the Taiwan Seed Improvement and Propagation Station (Council of Agriculture), Xinshe is today commonly referred to as “Taichung's back garden.” A decade ago tourism was just a minor money-maker. However, since the great 9-21 Earthquake of 1999, which was centered in central Taiwan, government authorities have expended significant resources to stimulate the local economy, with tourism a primary focus, and today the area has become one of the more popular destinations in the greater Taichung region, especially for day-trips. The main attractions are the local farms, the farm-and-mountain scenery, open-air cafés, and the many quaint rustic cottage- and chalet-style getaway accommodations.

The festival is held on the grounds of the Taiwan Seed Improvement and Propagation Station (種苗改良繁殖場), established under a different name during Taiwan's 1895~1945 period of Japanese occupation. Deputy Director Liu informed us that the first edition of the Sea of Flowers in Xinshe (新社花海) was held in 2005 in an effort to create greater “brand” visibility for Xinshe produce and boost its leisure-agriculture industry. Large swaths of colorful flowers were planted over 30 hectares of showcase fields – including sunflowers, lavender, cosmos, spider flowers, sage, and begonias – and a series of related events was staged. “We grow in size and sophistication each year,” Liu said, “and in recent years have attracted more than 1.8 million visitors. Our goal is 2 million.”

The festival is always held in the late autumn. This, said Liu, is primarily because the weather in the Taichung area

is close to “perfect” at this time of year, for both plants and visitors – not too hot, and minimal rain. There are many new-theme exhibitions each year; these were the theme-project areas for the 2013 festival, which ran from November 9 to December 8: Happy Farming Exhibition, Cinderella Exhibition, Amu Forest Exhibition, Happy Farming Villages Exhibition, Incredible Fern Exhibition, Healthy and Beautiful Farming, and LOHAS Promoting Group.

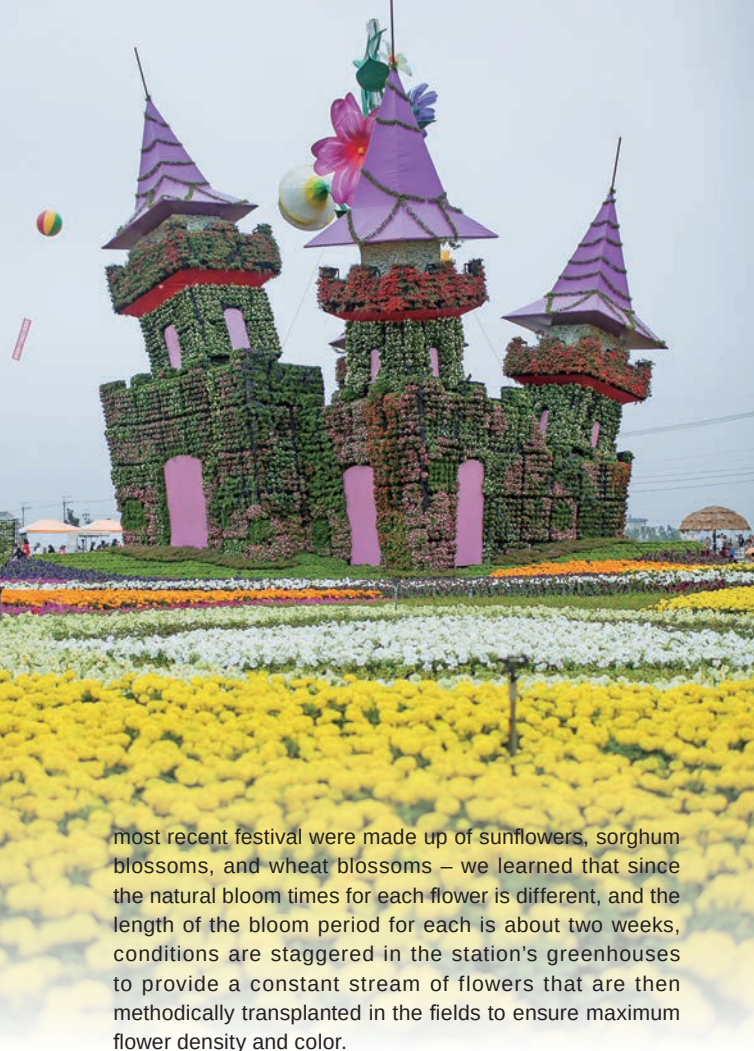
Heading out on a walkabout, our guide Chung I-Ping (鍾依萍), the station's Technical Service Section Assistant Researcher, informed us that each year the festival's various specially-themed exhibition areas are designed to highlight their unique attributes. There is an annual rotation of exhibition curators, with different agriculture-related sections within the Council of Agriculture chosen as well as organizations from outside, meaning brand-new faces and perspectives are shown each round.

Among the various 2013 exhibit pavilions, I found one of the most intriguing highlighted paddy-rice production, with neat, tiny plots laid out showing rice from transplanted-seedling stage to maturity. There was also a display presenting the different kinds of rice grown around the world, including the short-grain glutinous rice preferred in Taiwan and the long-grain, non-sticky fragrant rice eaten throughout Southeast Asia. This was also the local birds' favorite pavilion; you had to raise your voice to be heard above the chatter of the sparrows and other avian gourmards trying to get at the rice seed.

Another pavilion was dedicated to the seemingly countless herbs eaten by Taiwan folk in tonic foods and used in medicines. Over 1,000 herbs were on display, many accompanied by information on what they are used for. An especially fragrant and visually alluring pavilion showcased the orchid in all its glory, with numerous rare specimens on dramatically colorful display.

Back in the open air, while wandering through a panoramic swath of cosmos flowers – other “seas” at the





most recent festival were made up of sunflowers, sorghum blossoms, and wheat blossoms – we learned that since the natural bloom times for each flower is different, and the length of the bloom period for each is about two weeks, conditions are staggered in the station's greenhouses to provide a constant stream of flowers that are then methodically transplanted in the fields to ensure maximum flower density and color.

Long before we entered the grounds of the Taichung International Flower Carpet Festival (台中國際花毯節), our eyes were transfixed on its central attraction, a large “magic castle.” This annual festival was incorporated into the larger Xinshe festival in 2011. It has a 3D theme, with various flower-sculpture areas telling stories that seem to rise up out of the ground and take life-like form. The 2013 themes were decidedly whimsical, focused on Peter Pan, Alice in Wonderland, and other fairy tales, as well as film director Ang Lee’s Oscar-winning movie *Life of Pi*.

For the fairy tales, a pop-up storybook approach was taken. Among the most arresting visual settings were the five-story-high magic castle, a giant tree cultivated from magic beans, and a six-meter-tall rabbit wearing an outfit

made solely of flowers. Other highlights were the lifeboat used in the filming of *Life of Pi* (Ang Lee is a native Taiwan son, did all ocean-based scenes at a Taichung film facility that has the world’s largest wave-generating pool, and donated many props to the city of Taichung for tourism use), and an antique horse-drawn carriage popular for wedding shoots and sweetheart poses that was formerly used by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and Madame Chiang on formal occasions.

Walking the expansive grounds is bound to get you both thirsty and hungry. Your antidote is in view at all times – a huge food bazaar where vendors are set up under tent-roof cover. Half of the food bazaar is taken up with stands manned by local farming folk selling fresh-from-the-field fruits and vegetables, notably the main local produce mentioned in this article’s opening. Be sure to visit the juice stands – the drinks served are delicious! There is also a budding coffee-plantation sector in the area, and you can buy both fresh-packaged beans and sample fresh-brewed cups made with the local bean at growers’ stands.

The other half of the food bazaar features vendors selling night-market-style snack treats, with savory fried delicacies the main attraction. Something uniquely local is the deep-fried Xinshe mushrooms, prepared on order and served with a salt-and-pepper sprinkling – steamy-hot, chewy, and delectable. Everything is of high quality, and is appealingly inexpensive.

A personal invitation from Deputy Director Liu: You may not have visited yet, but Xinshe beckons next year and the years after, for as explained there is high turnover in exhibition highlights each year, making each visit a novel foray. In addition, live performances are staged on weekends throughout the festival, with an emphasis on music concerts. There are also in-depth local tours offered in which your guide takes you to visit recreational farms in the area, and special packages are designed each year that encourage you to stay at local cottage-style guesthouses, visit recreation/resort farms, and take in other local tourist attractions.

For more information, visit the official website of the Sea of Flowers in Xinshe at: flowersea.asia.edu.tw.

Sea of Flowers in Xinshe 新社花海節 / November-December

Organizers: Taichung City Government, Taiwan Seed Improvement and Propagation Station, COA
Tel: (04) 2228-9111 Website: flowersea.tw

USEFUL INFORMATION

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Travel Service Center of the Tourism Bureau (Taiwan Taoyuan Int'l Airport)
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Website: www.taoyuanairport.gov.tw

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Service Hotline: 0800-252-550, (07) 805-7888
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