

Full circuit

STARTING AND FINISHING IN TAIPEI, LAUREN HO TAKES IN HOT SPRINGS, SOARING MOUNTAINS, LUSH TROPICAL FORESTS AND A SERIES OF TRANQUIL HOTELS ON A ROAD TRIP AROUND TAIWAN

Mention to any local that you are road-tripping around Taiwan and their initial reaction will almost certainly be one of astonishment. 'So far!' they might exclaim, their eyes widening in disbelief. Yet this leaf-shaped East Asian island is, in fact, seven times smaller than the United Kingdom. That means the distance from Taipei, its capital in the north, to Kenting National Park, at the southern tip, is only around 286 miles - similar to the drive from London to the Lake District. Of course, as the mighty Central Mountain Range runs right through the heart of Taiwan, the obvious route is to drive around the perimeter of the island, from Taipei through the densely packed cities that line the western fringe and then back up along the quieter east coast, sandwiched between the mountains and the sea.

And so, installed in our rental car, we journey south from Taipei towards Guguan, one of the many hot springs that dot the island. Three hours later, as we turn inland, the sweep of rice paddies transforms into a dramatic tableau of soaring emerald peaks and deep river valleys. The hot spring itself is located in Bo'ai Village, a hub that emerged in the early 1900s, when the Japanese (who ruled Taiwan at the time) built a public bath. As the brilliant pastel wash of the sunset fades from the sky, we end our first day at Hoshinoya Guguan, a serene hotel - from Japan's Hoshino Resorts group - that gracefully slots into a tree-cloaked slope, embraced by the curve of the Dajia River.

The next day, as the first light seeps across the hilly landscape, I begin with a soak in our private outdoor onsen - a feature of all the hotel's 50 guest rooms - the naturally heated spring waters gently lapping my shoulders as I absorb the tranquillity of my surroundings. Later, back on the motorway, we continue south towards Sun Moon Lake where the road, set against a backdrop of ever-present rolling mountains, cuts through sleepy townships surrounded by lush, subtropical greenery. Sun Moon Lake - the largest body of water in Taiwan - provides one of the island's loveliest landscapes, popular for boating, hiking and cycling but, in driving its 20-mile circumference, we have little time to dawdle, pausing only for a pitstop at the imposing Wenwu Temple or to drink in the views.

Some 100 miles south west of the lake, Tainan is the oldest city in Taiwan and - as the former capital

for more than 200 years - is the cradle of the island's rich cultural legacy. On foot, we navigate wide streets that deviate into a warren of tiny alleys, tucked around shrines, temples and hidden markets. The air is thick with the aroma of burning incense and enticing street food as numerous stalls churn out steaming bowls of beef noodle soup or pork belly bao buns to queues of hungry locals.

The following day, the energy of Tainan ripples into a quiet ease as we approach the southern Hengchun Peninsula and the Kenting National Park - a tropical playground of exotic flora and fauna defined by far-reaching vistas, white-sand beaches and dramatic geographical formations. As the sun sets behind the imposing Dajian Mountain, we settle in at Gloria Manor, the former official guesthouse of President Chiang Kai-shek and now a design-led eco-retreat housed within the modernist bones of a Fifties building. As this is the only place to stay within the Kenting National Forest Recreation Area, we take full advantage of its botanical garden-like preserve and spend the next morning ambling along pathways, awash with butterflies, up to an observation tower with sweeping views of Taiwan's most southerly tip.

Now at the turning point of our journey, we begin the six-hour drive northward along the windswept eastern coast towards Taroko Gorge, a soaring canyon carved by the Liwu River. As dramatic as the landscape has been to this point, we are awed by the sheer magnificence of the marble-faced cliffs and the deep ravines. Winding through Taroko National Park for 12 miles, we drive the road that slices through the gorge, past waterfalls and wild rapids, past temples and shrines perched on vertiginous cliffs above dry river beds.

Back in Taipei, an aimless evening wander leads us to Dihua Street in Datong District, one of the city's oldest neighbourhoods. Here, among the 19th-century architecture, we browse through the covered arcades, past exotic medicinal tea shops offering remedies made from ginseng, birds' nests and dried wood-ear mushrooms. Later, at the lively Raohe Night Market, enveloped by the curiously enticing pong of so-called 'stinky' fermented tofu, we eat steaming pork pepper buns and reflect on our journey: the magnificent landscape, the rich Taiwanese culture, the generosity of the people we have met and the overriding sense that, for Westerners at least, Taiwan feels distinctly other-worldly and remote.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Dramatic Taroko Gorge. Taipei 101 towers above the city's skyline. A walkway in Kenting National Park. An eye-catching restaurant in Tainan, the island's former capital. Wooded trails abound in Kenting National Park. Taipei's Raohe Night Market. Tranquil Sun Moon Lake. Tiangfeng Pagoda in Tianxiang. The reception and a guest room with onsen at Hoshinoya Guguan. Wenwu Temple, which overlooks Sun Moon Lake.

Ways and Means

Lauren Ho visited Taiwan as a guest of Hoshinoya Guguan, where doubles cost from £446 (hoshinoresorts.com) and Gloria Manor, with doubles from £222 (gloriamanor.com). Eva Air flies to Taiwan direct from the UK (evaair.com). Book car hire through IWS (iws.com.tw); you will need an International Driver's Permit □



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