

WHERE TO RIDE

DESTINATIONS

PRO-RIDE

Northern Taiwan

History and Culture in Formosa



Words by Simon Hayes

Pics by Simon Hayes, and Cam McLean

Before I began working for Bicycling Australia, I'd never really considered going to Taiwan. It wasn't somewhere on the Sydney-London stopover route and places like Thailand and India were much more exotic. Naively, if I thought about Taipei at all it was to bring up a picture of a large, soulless, polluted city. As it turned out, it was completely the opposite. I found a vibrant, interesting and dynamic culture. But like many large cities, you need to know where you're going.

For this Where to Ride article, we'll be going to two regions, both within easy striking distance of Taipei. The first takes us south west into the Changhua district, an area that combines low lying rice fields, lots of industry and some thumping big mountains. Then we return north to Taipei and explore the volcanic and coastal areas to the north of the city.

You could say that Taiwan is more Chinese than China. After the end of the Second World War during which Taiwan was occupied by the Japanese, the island was ruled by mainland Chinese. All this time a civil war had raged on mainland China between the Chiang Kai-shek's ROC government and the Communist Party of China led by Mao Zedong. When the civil war ended in 1949, two million refugees, predominantly from the Nationalist government, military, and business community, led by Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan. They brought many treasures and culture with them and while China was busy destroying theirs via the People's Revolution, Taiwan protected these valuable assets. Indeed, if you wish to see what China might have looked like in the 1940s, it's probably easier to do so in Taiwan than in China.

Our first destination, Lugang is a wonderful example of this. This town is near the west coast, quite close to the Taiwan Strait. This is a wonderful town to visit and a lovely place to cycle through. During the Qing Dynasty Lugang was a major sea port and at one time was Taiwan's third largest city. In fact the name Lugang means 'Deer Harbour' as its major export was deer skins which the Dutch took back to Europe. Lugang these days has no harbour at all. Due to the amount of silt that runs down from the mountains the

coast is now over two kilometres from the old township.

The real attraction of Lugang are the Chinese temples. There are over 200 in the city and all of them are easily reached by bike. The most famous of these is the Longshan Temple on the southern side of the city. This is known as The Forbidden City and is dedicated to Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy. This temple which has four strata and three gardens is still a working temple and comes alive during feast days and celebrations. The carvings here are simply wonderful.

From the Longshan Temple it's a simple bike ride to another wonderful feature, the Lugang Old Town. This is a wonderful area of ancient laneways and markets and is a good place to shop without extravagant prices. You should try to ride through the Old Market Street and Nine Turns Lane, a series of laneways designed to hinder bandits. Many of these houses are original ancient Chinese styles, the doorways are especially beautiful.

There are unlimited ways to ride out of Lugang and being flat, it is pretty easy going, something you'd be pleased about should you visit during the warmer months. From the old city you can head through Fusin and on to the coast, or head north through the rice fields to Siansi, then Shegangang and back through Hemei to Lugang. But if you're feeling really strong, why not ride to our next destination, The Sun Moon Lake?

Sun Moon Lake

Contrary to expectations, the Taiwanese love cycling. But this is a fairly recent phenomenon, stemming in large part from Giant Bicycles CEO, King Liu who in his seventies, rode around Taiwan on one of his factory's bikes. That event sparked something of a craze amongst the Taiwanese and bicycles, which previously had been seen as a way for poor people to commute, were now a desired item for the more wealthy middle and upper classes.

For that reason, the Taiwanese government is in the process of creating designated cycle routes across the country. One of these is the road up to the Sun Moon Lake. These cycle routes are a result of the many expressways that have been built for Taiwan's large amount of traffic. Most people take the expressways, leaving the old roads more suitable for cycling. They're still

Big hill climbs near Wan-Li.





fairly busy, but people drive on them more slowly and are fairly courteous.

If this is your first time here a GPS isn't a bad idea, particularly on the lowlands. Expressway signs are in English and Chinese but country roads sometimes don't have them at all. This particular route isn't a problem as far as navigation is concerned once you get into the hills, but early on it's a bit confusing. Here's a table to help you find your way.

- Leave Lugang and head south to Fusing Township (Route 135).
- Head east on Fan Hua Rd (Route 144).
- Follow Fan Hua Rd under the Number

1 Freeway and under the main rail line towards Huatan.

- Just before Huatan turn right onto Route 137 and then onto San Fen Rd (Route 139).
- Passing under another train line head through Fenyuan Township via Da Bu Rd and then Fuxig Rd.
- Pass under Expressway 3 and head towards Caotun.
- Find your way to ZhongZeng Rd (Route 14) and follow it up the mountains to Section 4 ZhongZheng Rd and turn right onto route 147 Nan Gang Rd.
- Follow this until it hits Route 131 where you turn left.



Longshan temple, also known as The Forbidden City is a beautiful, ancient place of worship.



- After some time you will pass a restaurant on the left. Here you turn right towards Route 21 and the Yuchih Township. Ride through here and you are at Sun Moon Lake.
- Once you hit the lake, turn right to Min Tan for restaurants and hotels.

This ride above is definitely one for hearty souls. It's only about 85-90km but you need to be aware that almost all of it is uphill. Taiwan is a very mountainous country and you are now heading towards the spine. But even if you're a good climber you need to take the heat and the humidity into the equation. This ride is not for the faint-hearted.

However, you do have other options. The Sun Moon Lake is a perfect area for cycling on its own. It's very popular and you can get there from Taipei on the Kao-kuang bus (ph. 02 2312 3413). You'll need to take your bike as luggage and the buses leave every hour. The most popular ride is around the lake, a 30km loop road that takes in all the sights.

But personally I found more interest in the surrounding area and I was lucky enough to have a guide.

Cam McLean runs In-Motion Asia,

a company that specialises in outdoor adventures including road riding, mountain biking, rock climbing and rafting. Cam, a native of New Zealand really knows his stuff. You can do rides for anywhere between one and seven days, even customise a trip for yourself if you only have a short amount of time. Cam runs rides in every part of Taiwan and even across the Central Island Link, the highest road in north East Asia. This monster of a climb begins at sea level and heads into the mountains finishing at 3,275 metres. That's higher than the Alps!

"Our business has been increasing as people find out what a wonderful place Taiwan is for riding," says Cam. "A lot of people who come here for business are starting to bring their bikes with them and they schedule riding into their timetable. Most people are pretty blown away once they get out here and ride."

Cam took me away from Sun Moon Lake to the north west through Dong Guang and then to the GuoKeng Road. Man, there's some big hills around here. We rode through betel nut plantations and up steamy rainforested mountains. A truly breathtaking area and I was sorry to leave it and head back north.





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view things from a new angle



You don't have to stick to the main roads in Taiwan.



Lugang is the kind of town you can just wander around and explore. Around each corner there's something else to see.

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North of Taipei

Of course you don't actually have to travel out of Taipei to get some good riding in. There's plenty of locals and expats living there who still manage to get their training in by riding directly to the north out of the city. There are two major ways of doing this. Either out of the city via Shihlin, which incidentally, has a fantastic night market or to stay out of the city in Beitou. My personal preference is for the latter and there are several reasons why. Firstly it is a hot springs centre and a number of the hotels have hot mineral springs pumping into your bathroom, which is a fine way to

relax after a day's hard riding. It is also a good place to eat, has public transport via the MRT back into the centre of town and also has many places of historical interest. But most importantly, good riding isn't very far away.

Taiwan is a very volcanic place and the Yangmingshan National Park just to the north of Taipei is an easy way to see it. Beitou is right at the base of the national park, making it a tough, but short ride to the vents. You can do a really interesting loop from Beitou up Mt Shitan (243m), past Mt Shamao (643m) and around Mt Cising (1,107m). This area is very different in



The area around Sun Moon Lake is one of the country's main producers of betel nut. The trees line the maze of small roads in the area. It's the perfect place for riding.

vegetation than the south, being predominantly tussock style grasses and depending on the time of year, a windproof jacket in your back pocket isn't a bad idea. This area can get a bit crowded on weekends and public holidays, but it's still pretty safe as most people are sightseeing and aren't in a hurry to get anywhere.

If something a bit more challenging is on your mind however, you might try a longer ride over the mountains to the East China Sea. To do this, you need to ride up to the Yangmingshan Park and continue along the Yangjin Highway to Jinshan. This is something of an amazing ride, climbing from near sea level to 1,000 metres. The road is steep in places, but the upside is that once you get to the top it's a breathtaking plunge all the way down to the coast on the other side. You'll arrive at Jinshan and here you'll find interesting coast roads, fishing harbours and the occasional bike path. If you turn left to the north, you could complete a loop around the north and return to Beitou via Danshuei. This would be approximately 120km with some big climbs across the top. A good day out by anyone's standards!

Taiwan is an amazing place. It has a wonderful blend of old Chinese tradition with a modern Asian civilisation. The ease of cycling is a surprise and the people are very welcoming. You can fly there direct from Australia via Dragonair, or via Hong Kong with Cathay Pacific. Dragonair also now do flights to Europe via Taiwan which is perfect if you're planning on riding in France or Italy. Maybe next time you're considering a holiday you should give Taiwan some serious consideration. 🚲



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