

Travel Asia

Walking out of the harsh sun into the shadow of Taipei 101, the bamboo-shaped skyscraper that is an icon of the city, I plop down my bag and crane my neck to take in its full 508m height. Though I've been here a few days, it is the first time I've seen the building up close, and it is indeed a wonder. Another wonder? My unguarded bag – I wouldn't normally be so blasé, but things are different here.

The Taiwanese capital is as clean, quiet and green as Singapore, has a food scene to rival that of Tokyo (without the high prices and tourist crowds) and is easier than mainland China in almost every way (no visas or firewalls and even the traffic is reasonable). Plus, it's easy to reach: China Airlines operates five direct flights a week from London, but the luxe way to go is via Hong Kong with Cathay Pacific. Of course, there's the simmering dispute with Beijing, but on a micro-level it's super-safe, with very low crime rates. As a local tells me: "The only thing you have to worry about here is what you're going to eat." So that's exactly where I start.

I head to Dadaocheng, one of the oldest areas of the city, on a food tour with Jean Huang, who takes tourists to vendors and backstreet restaurants without English menus. We visit a dozen places, each with a different speciality: fish-ball soup with bigeye thresher shark at Jia Xing; salted plum cake at Long Yue Tang. And the pork is another level. "It's all freshly butchered from nearby farms," Jean says. And while you may have tried xiao long bao at a Din Tai Fung restaurant in London, you must try the soup dumplings at the original Xinyi Street location. "It's just different," Jean says (tours from £45; taipeieats.com).

Having risen to prominence in the 1860s, Dihua Street wins me over with its hotch-potch of Qing-dynasty shopfronts and Japanese colonial townhouses. Alongside fourth-generation teahouses and traditional-medicine shops with apothecary cabinets, there are newer additions giving it an upmarket air – such as the artisanal homeware shop Visible City and the San Formosan café and roastery for homegrown coffee (sancoffee.shop).

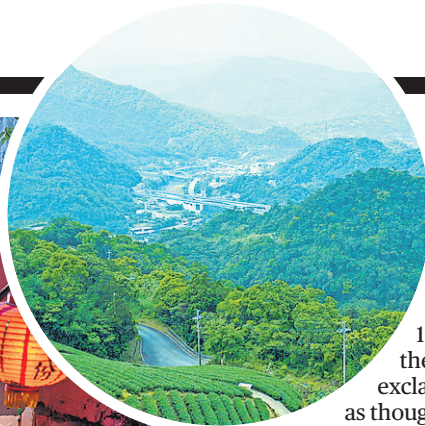
Of course, tea (especially bubble tea, invented here in the 1980s) remains a signature drink. It has even become a key ingredient in cocktails such as the Vesper, made with award-winning oolong tea at Indulge, in Da'an district (cocktails from £10; indulgebistrotaipei.blogspot.com), and the Leicha, which features traditional tea prepared by the Hakka community at the Mandarin Oriental hotel's MO Bar, in Songshan district (cocktails from £10; mandarinoriental.com).

The mist-draped tea plantations of Pinglin district, about 20 miles southeast, make a good escape. As does Jiufen, a former gold-mining town 20 miles east.

I head out with Henry Huang from Taipei Private Car Charter Tour. We visit the National Palace Museum, filled with carved jade, including the Qing-dynasty Jadeite Cabbage; the ghost-white marble memorial of the former nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek; and the incense-scented



Clockwise from below: Longshan Temple, in the Wanhua district of Taipei; the old town of Jiufen, 20 miles east of the city; a tea plantation in Pinglin district, 20 miles southeast; the skyline of the central business district



Longshan Temple and its dragon motifs ("That's how you can tell it's Taoist," Henry says). As we flit about the city, Taipei 101 punctuates the skyline like an exclamation mark, as though to remind me that it was the world's tallest building before the Burj Khalifa. We end our tour at Ningxia Night Market for oyster omelettes and shaved ice; there are many such markets to choose from, some with stalls noted in the Michelin Guide (£160 for up to three people; tripadvisor.com).

For the first part of my trip I stay at the 303-room Mandarin Oriental Taipei, which I chose for its collection of 1,700 artworks, with 10 per cent by Taiwanese artists, including Nai-Wen Chang's calla lily sculptures. The hotel collaborates with the Kengo Kuma-designed Whitestone Gallery, in Neihu district, alongside other notable galleries, and specialises in postwar and contemporary art.

The hotel arranges a tour for me with the art expert Kayla Cho: "It's a vivid, dynamic market here," she says. "We host

The Taiwanese capital is home to seriously impressive new hotels, says *Nicole Trilivas*



The stylish way to see Taipei



international art fairs and there are two art universities in Taipei.” One new highlight is the Renzo Piano-designed Fubon museum of modern and contemporary art, in the high-end shopping and financial district of Xinyi (from £29; fubonartmuseum.org).

Cho explains that a unique thing about the city is the repurposing of buildings as art spaces and creative parks – such as the Red House, a former public market in Ximending, and the Songshan Cultural and Creative Park, an old tobacco factory

that houses exhibitions and concept stores (songshanculturalpark.org). My favourite stores in Songshan are Trash Kitchen, an upcycling workshop, and One Love Taipei, selling goods made by indigenous people – there are 16 government-recognised tribes. Around the corner, don’t miss the 24-hour Eslite bookshop, brimming with gift-worthy stationery (eslitecorp.com).

The Mandarin Oriental has been an institution in Taipei for more than a decade and offers a buttoned-up, Euro-accented brand of luxury, with formal afternoon tea in the Jade Lounge, Czech-crystal chandeliers and the unmissable Cantonese restaurant Ya Ge (“Elegant House”), which has maintained its Michelin star since the first Taiwan guide was published in 2018. However, for a hotel a little more au courant (with a third of the rooms but double the rates), you need only cross the street, which is just what I did for the second half of my trip.

Housed in a 17-floor steel and glass “modern mansion” and guarded by 1930s banyan trees, the new Capella Taipei is the work of the interior designer André Fu, who also dressed the Upper House hotel in his native Hong Kong and the recently refreshed penthouse at Claridge’s in London.

“What I am most fascinated with in Taipei is its pace,” he says. “There is a subtle sense of calmness in the air of the city that I find mesmerising.”

Fu infuses this unexpected urban serenity into the 86 guest rooms with pale stone and woods, whispers of misty blues and the milky greens of a matcha latte. While parts of the hotel are theatrical and gallery-like, such as the 14th-floor lobby, there is still an intimacy here since Fu does residential exceedingly well (especially *rich* residential). It really is like nowhere else (see the private pool suites, a first for the city).

Capella Taipei is already the chicest spot in town, as evidenced by a private Prada event and a magazine shoot during my stay. Yet despite the international cachet and high-gloss dressing, there’s a local heart. The hotel hosts tours to one-off stationery shops and hidden bakeries in the leafy alleys of the surrounding micro-neighbourhood of Minsheng; sketches commissioned from a local artist adorn the menus; and the blue magpie, Taiwan’s endemic resident bird, influences the hotel’s art, cocktails and even turn-down service.

It’s the first five-star hotel to open in the city in ten years, and it’s just the quiet-luxury calling card that Taipei needs to get it on the global radar.

Nicole Trilivas was a guest of the Mandarin Oriental Taipei, which has B&B doubles from £247 (mandarinoriental.com); the Capella Taipei, which has B&B doubles from £517 (capellahotels.com); and Cathay Pacific, which has London-Taipei returns from £817 (cathaypacific.com)



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