



The tallest building in the world from 2004 to 2009, Taipei 101 reigns supreme over the city, and reflects the strong economy.

Asian Banquet

Marvelous food, museums and shopping distinguish Taipei

By Ilima Loomis

It's a crowded Friday night at Pin Xian, and for our first night in Taipei, we've decided to try this casual "quick fry" restaurant, one of the most popular in the city, just a few blocks from our hotel in the upscale Da'An district. ■ Filling our bowls from a rice cooker the size of a small bathtub, we point out our order on the restaurant's picture menu. Within minutes, the first dish comes out, still sizzling: deep-fried oysters with black pepper, heaped atop fried bunches of Thai basil. As I pop a barely cooled oyster into my mouth and bite down with a

satisfying release of hot oil and juices, I know we've come to the right place. A parade of plates later, the bill arrives. We combine our Taiwanese dollars on the table and push back our stools with a nod of thanks. As we step out into the warm September night, my friend does the math: Our entire meal—including the oysters; deep-fried softshell crab; chilled, gingery

duck breast; savory roasted pork; noodles; garlicky stir-fried greens; and a whole steamed fish; plus the four one-liter bottles of cold Taiwan Beer we had—came to less than \$50 USD, for the four of us.

With roots in Chinese culture, language and cuisine, Taipei has the economical prices and easygoing, tropical vibe of Southeast Asia, while its efficient transportation system and overall orderliness reflect the 50 years it spent under Japanese rule. It's Shanghai without the chaos. It's a more relaxed Tokyo. Put together everything you love about Asia's greatest cities, take away what you don't, and that's Taipei.

But Taipei—and Taiwan in general—is still largely undiscovered by travelers. "It's far less visited than other Asian cities," says David Borer, an American expat who spent more than a year traveling across Asia before deciding to settle in Taipei, where he now teaches business English to residents of the city. "You don't see many Western foreigners."

Not many Western leisure travelers, that is; the island's \$523 billion economy is strong and, led by semiconductor manufacturing, is the fifth-largest in Asia. That makes Taipei a business travel destination. Taiwan is also noted for entrepreneurship, represented by the infinity of food stalls and small shops that we see everywhere.

The city's business prowess reached a pinnacle, literally, in 2004 when the 101-story Taipei 101 became the world's tallest building at 1,671 feet. It's since been supplanted by Dubai's Burj Khalifa, but Taipei 101 remains a stalwart expression of the island's thriving economy. Its outdoor observation deck, at the 91st level (1,285 feet), is second highest on

Earth, and provides 360-degree views of the metro area and the green hills and more distant mountains surrounding it.

Its distinctive shape melds modern styling with that of another iconic aspect of Taipei, the city's myriad temples. Taiwan holds more than 5,000 such over all, Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian. They include gaily decorated altars, screens, statuary and

other artifacts; visitors can simply admire the splendor, or acquire some paper "spirit money" (joss paper) to burn in special furnaces just outside the temples. Joss paper may even include gold foil, or in more modern versions, representations of credit cards—perfectly reflecting the Taiwanese business bustle.



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Set on a hillside overlooking the city, the National Palace Museum holds a vast collection of Chinese art and antiquities.

Located at the northern tip of the island of Taiwan, Taipei is nestled in a low-lying basin, surrounded by the foothills of a volcanic mountain range, and bordered by the Xindian and Tamsui rivers to the south and



What's to Eat

Hot, soft and savory, the **oyster omelet** is a Taipei street food staple that was once voted Taiwan's favorite snack. Tapioca or potato starch is added to the egg pancake, giving it a slightly chewier, glutinous texture. Add a generous helping of tender oysters and top with spring onions and a spicy ketchup-based sauce, and you have the makings of a satisfying late-night bite.



west. The official capital of Taiwan province under Chinese rule, Taipei was taken over by Japan when the island became a Japanese colony at the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. The island was regained by China at the end of World War II, then in turn taken over by the Nationalist Chinese forces of Chiang Kai-shek in 1949, with Taipei remaining the capital of the newly independent island. Today the city proper is home to around 2.6 million people, the metro area almost 7 million.

"It's relatively clean, pretty quiet, very safe—and it's affordable," Borer says. Taipei's low cost makes it a popular destination for Japanese tourists, who, in addition to picking up knickknacks and tchotchkes for relative pennies in the city's many street

The Taiwanese tea ceremony is a multifaceted appreciation of the island's fine teas. The appeal of colorful stalls and a wide variety of culinary treats draws throngs each evening to the city's many night markets.

markets, can be found enjoying upscale malls in search of designer clothing at a fraction of Tokyo prices.

Drawn by the idea of such internationally popular shopping, we venture out of our hotel on Saturday and head next door to the Taipei Metro mall. We browse through several outlets for name-brand designer clothes (mostly too small for our tall Western bodies) before finding our

WHEN YOU GO

Taipei has a **subtropical climate**, so summers tend to be hot and uncomfortably humid, while winters can get chilly. For a comfortable time exploring this very walkable city, spring or fall are best. For visitor information go to travel.taipei/en.

Stay

We loved our time at the five-star **Shangri-La's Far Eastern Plaza Hotel**, which has luxurious accommodations and breathtaking views of the city and Taipei 101 skyscraper at fairly reasonable prices for such a deluxe property; shangri-la.com/taipei.

For a midrange option, the **Landis Taipei Hotel** offers elegant rooms in a classic Art Deco building just a 5-minute walk from the local transit station; taipei.landishotelsresorts.com.

Eat

To sample Taipei's famous street food without making the trek to Keelung, check out **Shilin Night Market**, the largest in Taipei, for fried chicken skewers, grilled sausages, and the famous oyster omelet. Bring plenty of local currency.



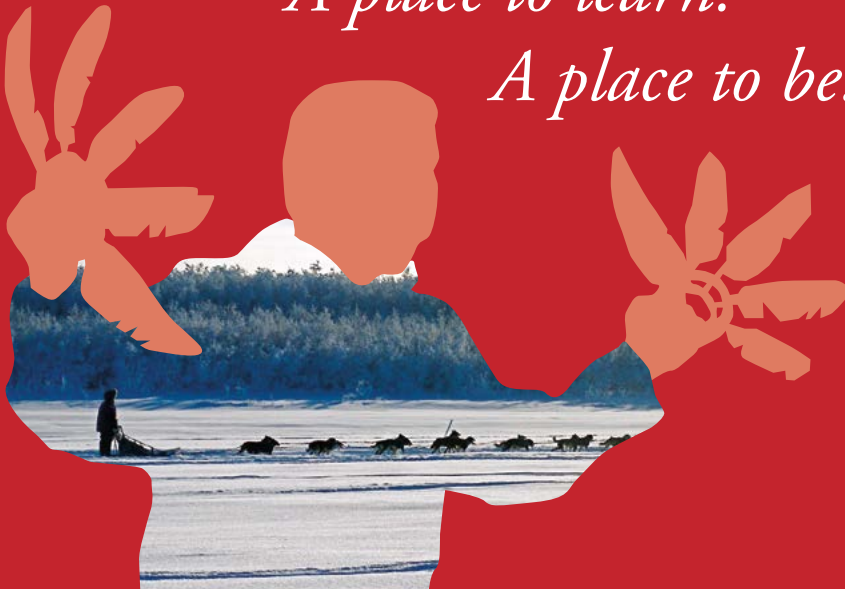
For authentic dim sum cuisine (above right) in a more relaxed setting than a traditional dim sum restaurant, try **Shi Li An** for steamed buns, savory meat dumplings and spicy sour soup.

For a fancy night out with a spectacular view, **Yen Chinese Restaurant** offers sublime Cantonese "new Chinese cuisine" on the 31st floor of the chic W Hotel; wtaipei.com/yen.



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Taipei

selves in a traditional tea shop.

Taiwan's mild climate and cool mountain hillsides make it ideal for growing tea, and connoisseurs consider Taiwanese teas among the finest in the world; almost 20 percent of world production of Oolong is here.

As we sit down at the low counter for a tasting, the shopkeeper smiles and begins warming the pot, decanter and cups, filling them with hot water as she measures the tea and holds it out for us to smell. After adding the leaves to the pot and giving them a quick rinse with hot water, she fills the pot again and covers it, pouring more hot water over the top to keep it warm. A subtle, earthy perfume fills the air.

Less formal and solemn than the ritualized tea service of Japan, Taiwan's tea ceremony is nevertheless a precise affair. After a minute of brewing, our hostess carefully empties the teapot into a small decanter, which she uses to fill our dainty cups. Like a multicourse meal that progresses from light salads to heavy roasts, we begin with a delicate green tea. I admire the color and fragrance, then take a few sips, savoring its comforting, grassy notes.

After sampling a variety of black teas and some of Taiwan's famous smoky Oolongs, we watch our hostess measure out a serving of blackened gravel that looks suspiciously like the pumice stones in my grandma's potted plants. Holding it out for us to inspect, she explains it's an aged *pu-erh* tea that has undergone a lengthy process of fermenting and drying to develop a rich, complex flavor.

After brewing the tea and reheating our cups, she decants and pours. We sniff politely, then sip. The warm liquid has a rich, dark, smoky flavor more reminiscent of a fine Scotch than the watery stuff that passes for tea at home. We exchange glances with each other—*Are you tasting what I'm tasting?*—then take another sip, and savor it for a moment in silent contemplation. Finally,



Ornate, vividly colored decoration typifies Taipei's many temples, whether Buddhist (left, Longshan Temple) or Taoist (below, Bao An Gong Temple).



my companion asks the age of the tea.

Our hostess struggles to say the number in English, and we don't understand. "Sixteen?" I ask helpfully. Smiling, she shakes her head, then writes something down on a slip of paper and passes it across the counter: 1968.

Taiwan's teas may rightly be world famous, but Taipei itself is first and foremost a food city. While there are plenty of fine dining options and restaurants representing every variety of international cuisine, locals favor food that's hot, fast, casual and fresh. Beyond the unpretentious quick-fry restaurants like Pin Xian, and cook-it-yourself hot pot dining, where customers simmer their own meats and vegetables tableside, street food reigns.

"There's food everywhere," Borer says. "It's definitely a world-class food scene."

Bats zigzag crazily through the twilight as we meet Borer at our hotel and pile into a taxi. He's taking us to Keelung Miaokou Night Market, one of the most famous outdoor dining bazaars. Located in the neighboring port of Keelung, about 35 minutes by bus from downtown Taipei, Keelung Night Market is especially known for its seafood.

Winding our way shoulder to shoulder among fellow diners under the warm, golden light of Chinese lanterns, we snack on spicy "one bite" sausages and wasabi-flavored *takoyaki* (Japanese-style octopus balls), and stop to share an egg and oyster omelet, a specialty of the region. Ducking into a side-street restaurant, we sit down for a dinner of steamed garlic crab; smooth, savory sea urchin; brothy fish soup; and stir-fried vegetables, all accompanied by more Taiwan Beer.

ON OUR LAST MORNING we wake late and make a light breakfast of pastries at a nearby 7-Eleven. (The convenience stores, packed with favorite Taiwanese snacks and drinks, are ubiquitous, with more than 5,000 locations in a country not much larger than the state of Maryland.) Then we head uphill out of the city's center to visit the National Palace Museum.

One visit provides barely enough time to scratch the surface of this collection of nearly 700,000 ancient and imperial Chinese artifacts and works of art, so after making a quick pass through an exhibit of vases and ceramics, we immerse ourselves in the museum's collection of "precious crafts," delicate curios and treasures that

display not only the Imperial mainland aristocracy's taste for elegance and finery but the astonishing skill of imperial China's master craftsmen. From dainty teapots inlaid with enamel butterflies, to ornately jeweled ladies' hairpins, to an intricately carved tiny olive pit, depicting fishermen resting in the shade of a pine tree, we marvel at the items' seemingly impossible delicacy, and imagine what it was like to be the sort of person who not only commissioned such objects of finery, but actually wore such a thing in her hair.

On our way to the airport, we stop for a quick dim sum lunch at Shi Li An. The petite buns look as soft as clouds in the bamboo steamer basket, but as I lift one in my chopsticks it sags heavily. I bite down, and my mouth fills with a silky pork broth. It's the perfect last meal, I reflect. Unassuming, tidy, and full of flavor, this is Taipei in a single bite. ▲

Writer Ilima Loomis is based in Hawai'i.