

Treasures of Taipei

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GET UP & GO

Amidst the frantic city streets and modern constructions of Taipei you can still hear the echo of distant cultures that make Taiwan so unique.

The Bao An Temple is typical of the traditional charms that influence life in Taipei, a popular Taoist temple frozen in time since its construction in 1805. Intricate wood carvings give detail to the doors and ceiling, depicting the protection offered by serpents and warriors. The temple is not a museum, but a living piece of culture.

Inside the temple-grounds children practice their painting skills while prayers and incense are presented to the image of Emperor Baoshen. Blending of ancient wisdoms and the creative expressions of younger generations is what Taipei is all about.

The narrow laneway that leads from Bao An to a nearby Confucius Temple is often turned into a small market place of an afternoon. Stalls offer exotic staples such as preserved tamarind and mountain grown oolong tea, alongside colourful displays of bamboo flutes and glove puppets.

Performing arts is something of a passion for the people of Taiwan. Glove puppets make popular appearances in public spaces during festivals, but for life-sized performances the place to visit is TaipeiEye. Every weekend you can enjoy the vibrant experience of traditional Chinese Opera, and with the benefit of English surtitles.

The contemporary arts have a special home in the city, with the National Theatre and National Concert Halls located in Chiang Kai-Chek Memorial Park, alongside the "Gate of Great Centrality and Perfect Uprightness". The people of Taiwan are not inclined to understatement.

The wide plaza between these two cultural icons is popular on weekends for marching bands, and crowds of teenagers gather around the edges to cheer their colleagues. It's easily the most colourful sight in the city.

At the other end of the park is the monument to former president Chiang Kai-Chek, a dominating building graced with blue tiles and soft grey stone. The exhibition space is impressive, but somewhat dwarfed by the bronze statue of the man himself on the upper floor of the memorial hall.

No one man has a more prominent place in the history of Taiwan than Chiang Kai-Chek, who led the migration of mainland Chinese escaping the communist rule in 1949.

These political refugees brought with them as much of China as they could carry, including the Mandarin language and the world's most significant collection of Chinese art. Over 650,000 pieces are stored at the National Palace Museum, of which only a fraction are on display at any one time.

If you enjoyed the Prada and the Hermitage, then don't miss the National Palace Museum. Exquisite artefacts are displayed on five levels of exhibition space, and it's worth allowing yourself the whole day to absorb the beauty of these extremely rare items.

The usual highlights of bronze, pottery and paintings are overshadowed by the museum's jade collection, and the crowds of Chinese speaking tourists who are devoted to the charmed powers of the stone. The number one item is the Jade Cabbage, an unusual artefact produced at the beginning of the Qing dynasty.

Its beauty comes from the life-like appearance of a white stalk and green leaves, and the subtle-inclusion of all ten colours of jade

elsewhere in this single cut of stone. Larger examples jade in all its shades are presented in the same room, each one a symbol of longevity and fortune.

The collection is always changing and is always beautiful, balancing a select few significant items with a wealth of carefully chosen compliments. Not only are these artefacts symbolic of an age of prosperity, but they take you on a journey through the entire history of China and its people, all the way back to the very first emperor.

An escorted day tour is the best way to access the National Palace Museum, as the location is some way out of the centre of the city and well off the public transport map. For most other attractions though the Metro system is an ideal means for getting around and getting a feel for the local lifestyle.

For less than \$10 your day pass can connect you with an endless list of night markets, temples and museums. Close to Taipei's old town centre is the Longshan Temple, and the Metro-stop shares the same name. Expect the unexpected here, with over 150 deities given respect against a backdrop of incense burners and courtyards.

Temples and shopping go hand-in-hand for the Taiwanese. Further uptown the Xiahai Temple is home to the City Gods, who keep harmony and justice over the people of Taipei, and nearby is the equally popular market on Dihuan St. Medicinal herbs are the feature attraction, but it's the variety of fascinatingly useless goods that makes this market so interesting.

As darkness falls the best of Taipei is still on show and the night markets start to buzz. Eating on the street is the most adventurous way to experience the culinary culture, but everything is cooked fresh on the spot to ensure it's healthy and full of flavour.

Hand-pulled noodles are something special to look out for. A single lump of dough is stretched out repeatedly to form thin strings of noodle, a technique that has been used for centuries, although the broth is sometimes a little more modern in flavour.

How very Taipei to put a new spin on an old tradition.

