



In Scoot's "Crossing Borders," we send a writer to two neighbouring cities with a quest to find out how much one could see, do, and eat under six days.

CROSSING BORDERS: ALL THINGS **MERGING IN TAIWAN**

From the southern city of Kaohsiung via high-speed rail to the buzzing capital Taipei, **Jonathan Evans** follows an open-jaw itinerary to size up the sights and delights of one of Asia's most varied, underrated destinations

>
Kaohsiung
Exhibition Center
is shaped like a pair
of binoculars.



LET'S TALK ABOUT SILKS

A paragon of hospitality excellence in a handy location – halfway between the harbour and the commercial centre – Silks Club Kaohsiung is as much an art gallery as a boutique hotel. In the lobby, *Dancing Particles* (by ART+COM) provides a wonderfully calming entrance; *Lunar Watch* by Olafur Eliasson, an interactive piece, enlivens In Jade restaurant/bar (where there isn't a happy hour, but "Exquisite Hour"); and bespoke pieces hang in each luxurious bedroom. The UKAI-tei teppanyaki/grill, sake bar and infinity pool/sauna all testify to the remarkable attention to detail – immense care has been taken to enhance all five senses, and the comfort factor is truly next-level.

Silks Club Kaohsiung

🏠 No. 199, Zhongshan 2nd Road, Qianzhen District, 80661 Kaohsiung, Taiwan
🌐 silks-club.com



KAOHSIUNG Artistic modernity meets fusion food

In 2012 I'd visited Taipei and Yilan, and fallen instantly for their madcap mix of the hypermodern and traditional. This time, I'd come to discover the broader character of this oddly overlooked island – starting with a jaunt around Taiwan's third-largest city, 260 kilometres from the Philippines' northernmost point.

Kaohsiung's uber-efficient airport, avant-garde architecture, and clean streets struck direct parallels with Tokyo, and gliding up to the Silks Club hotel, with its hypnotic kinetic installation in the lobby, only heightened the Japanese aura. The commercial centre, Sanduo, continued the theme: design-forward malls, streetscapes straight out of Shibuya, and a bustling, yet strangely calm ambience. Central Park's Scenic Lake offers photo-ops with its Japanese bridge and musical sculptures.

The KRT (Kaohsiung Rapid Transit), which opens into the park, works like a dream. Its trains are even shinier than Singapore's; individual compartments accommodate bicycles and wheelchair users; and intuitive interiors let travellers clutch a rail anywhere in the carriage. It's fantastically simple to use: buy an iPass at any convenience store, pre-load with cash, then top up using machines at stations. KRT has just three lines, each named by its colour.

Changing at Formosa Boulevard offered a sight to floor any hard-bitten traveller. The world's largest stained-glass sculpture, Dome of Light, fills the concourse with luminous colour, making this a contemporary art museum as much as a rail interchange.

A creative inspiration of another sort awaited at Pier-2 Art Center, which arose from a block of warehouses a decade ago. As the port declined, Pier-2 set the stage for a citywide embrace of public art: quirky designs now enhance stations, parks, city walls, and



EXPRESS YOURSELF

For all its advancement and prosperity, Taiwan is remarkably affordable. A one-way ticket traversing the entire nation, on a train ride lasting 90 minutes and reaching 300km/h, costs just TWD 1,480. The high-speed railway's fastidious tidiness, design, and service style recall Japan's Shinkansen with its sleek, turquoise-white interior and almost imperceptible movement.



The world's largest stained-glass artwork, Narcissus Quagliata's Dome of Light, at Formosa Boulevard KRT station



Larger-than-life artworks on view at Pier-2 Art Center.

pedestrian precincts. Its flamboyant sculptures – a red dinosaur, angular abstractions, giant robots – have revived this fading district, where children ride a mini-train as hipsters sup ice coffee at cafés.

The KRT covers vital areas, but stations are far apart, and I found myself making long walks to appreciate the city thoroughly. It was on one such stroll that I began to understand Kaohsiung's universal appeal. There were upscale cafés, one owned by a lady who'd studied in England ("I love your accent!"); the super-random Laborers' Park Night Market, a hub of weird food ("bear stone eggs"), cheap sunglasses, and fairground games; and an Italian-fusion restaurant

looking across to Sanduo's neon billboards, where I feasted on spaghetti with peanuts, chilli and chicken.

Enchanted by this synthesis of the spectacular and bizarre, I ventured out on day two with a wide-open mind. Making a loop around the harbourside, I gazed at the undulating Exhibition Centre and KUBIC's bright shipping containers that house boutiques, studios, and cafés. In suburban Weiwuying, the National Center for the Arts' elegant curves are inspired by banyan trees. Further down Sanduo 1st Road, Dan Dan Hamburger is a proudly local chain combining Western fast food with Taiwanese tastes.

On the western bank of the Love River, which slices downtown in two, a ceramic panda stood in a rest area billowing with flame trees, as fishing boats left ripples in their wake. Soon I was back at the harbour boarding a ferry to Cijin island, where the world

stopped turning centuries ago. Medieval Tianhou temple stands on touristy Old Street, while Cihou fort and lighthouse cling forlornly to the rocky northern tip. These ancient structures contrast with a mountain tunnel's glow-in-the-dark constellations.

Finally, I reached Fo Guang Shan, Taiwan's largest Buddhist monastery – an OTT theme park where pagodas, shrines, and Buddha statues are elaborately spotlit around dusk. Both a tech-enhanced art project and huge-scale architectural feat, it summed up Kaohsiung's appeal in one fell stroke.



Taiwanese-style fusion fast-food at Dan Dan Hamburger.

AD



A The imposing Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall lights up at dusk.

TAIPEI

Great grub amid medieval streets

Taipei's gargantuan station is daunting for a first-timer, but after trudging through myriad retail areas and passageways, a cheery taxi-rank official – perhaps sensing my bewilderment – saw me off (“Be careful now!”) in a yellow cab. Soon I was in another world entirely, Taipei's oldest district Wanhua, with its lanes of garment stalls and incense-waving devotees at Longshan temple. Yet from here it's one quick hop on the MRT – using the same card I'd bought in Kaohsiung! – to neon-splashed Ximen, where cocktail bars now encircle Red House theatre, and boutique hotels nestle amid garish mochi and noodle stalls.

Even in a city as sprawling as Taipei, it's surprising what you can accomplish in a day. Diving into the MRT's blissful air-con at regular intervals, I bounced around key sights, parklands, newly revived historic areas, and gorgeous enclaves I never knew existed. After walking through the serene Botanic

Gardens, I circled the magnificent Presidential Office Building towards 228 Peace Memorial Park, a green oasis of monuments and stone bridges. Within minutes I'd arrived at the awe-inspiring Taipei 101, before a complete change of scene at Dihua Street.

The city's oldest thoroughfare has undergone a renaissance of the best kind. Traditional attractions remain, but beyond the stores selling weird and wonderful foodstuffs, and Xiahai City God temple, where young women pray for children, boutiques and cafés have set up shop within the medieval architecture. Ubiquitous man-buns indicated this was hipster central, so I obligingly devoured a juicy *gua bao* (Taiwanese pork bun) at Danish microbrewery Mikkeller before heading to Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall, where late-afternoon sunlight cast long shadows over Liberty Square.

Just before sunset in Daan Forest Park, a serenade drifted over the Ecological Pool. Gulls and herons jostled for position on the central island's trees, their squawks reaching crescendos as they flew from

VIBE AND THE CITY

Caesar Metro Taipei's 745-room-and-suite behemoth offers three dining options: the cavernous, light-filled Metro Buffet, large group-oriented Shanghainese/Cantonese restaurant Jia Yan, and the more discreet Bar 98 (which serves a mean Americano, as well as snacks and alcoholic drinks). In summer, guests will welcome the spacious outdoor pool to cool off.

Located in the time-honoured Wanhua district within close proximity of Longshan, Taipei's oldest temple, Caesar Metro Taipei is also 300 metres from the MRT; but if you're in a hurry, getting a taxi is almost instantaneous. Cosy guest rooms, many with bathtubs and inspiring views, and friendly service complete the experience.

Caesar Metro Taipei

📍 No. 167, Bangka Boulevard, Wanhua District, Taipei, Taiwan
 🌐 caesarmetro.com/en



A showcase for artists and designers, Huashan 1914 Creative Park is repurposed from an old Japanese winery.

branch to branch, while swans sat stoically on the bank watching the dizzying white blur. Just minutes away I found a paradise of another sort – the entrancing Yongkang Street, where antique stores, restaurants, and galleries created a picture of perfect contentment. There was still time to explore Huashan 1914 Creative Park, a repurposed Japanese winery, where arty types meander through a maze of craft shops, cafés and cinemas.

By the following morning, the heat had become overpowering, and I succumbed to higher and cooler terrain north-east. With typical convenience, just TWD 50 on my iPass (for an hour-long bus ride from Muzha MRT) brought me through winding hillsides to the fabled Shifen village. From here, a 15-minute hike on suspension bridges above Keelung River led to Taiwan's "Little Niagara," a roaring 40-metre waterfall perfectly framed by the idyllic scenery. At Shifen Old Street, on abandoned railway tracks, tourists write wishes on lanterns before releasing

them skywards.

Back in Zhongshan before sundown, I browsed at Siping Yangguang market and joined the reverent throng at Xingtian temple before veering underground to an alleyway full of Japanese fortune-tellers. Finishing the evening in quintessentially Taiwanese style, a friend brought me to Haichen, a décor-free Chinese eatery opposite the Mandarin Oriental, where we enjoyed scallion pancake, tofu in rich gravy, egg and *kailan* soup, and meatballs. Taipei residents often eat out daily, and the happy faces here were all local ones.

On my final morning, I revisited an old favourite, SPOT Taipei Film House, before feasting on multicoloured meatball pasta at Zhongshan's chic-yet-affordable Café Marché. Zipping back to Taoyuan airport courtesy of a Lewis Hamilton-wannabe driver, I reflected on a week of enriching experiences, one that perhaps only this fascinating country among its neighbours could offer at such budget-friendly prices.

MAKE IT (TAIWAN)ESE-Y ON YOURSELF

Nuggets of advice to maximise an open-jaw journey in Formosa.

A tipping tip!

There's no need to tip in Taiwan unless you receive service beyond expectations; it's not customary.

Just the ticket

Buy an iPass (or Easy Pass) travelcard as soon as you arrive. It will save you hundreds of Taiwanese dollars on buses, trains, and ferries.

Now you're talking

Learn some basic Mandarin. Many younger locals speak English, though it's sometimes limited. So don't be offended if your café order is unavailable and the server simply replies, "No."

Go back to your routes

Bring a reliable, bilingual map at all times; not just for navigation, but for pointing out your destination to taxi drivers. Don't rely on Google Maps.

Let's go surfing

If you don't have a local SIM, many public places have serviceable WiFi, including both Taipei and Kaohsiung MRT and bus networks.

To cab it all...

Taxis are metered, so you don't have to negotiate fares; Uber offers cheaper rides, but there are far fewer cars.

