

TAIWAN... BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW IT



IMAGE: TAIWAN TOURISM BUREAU

Surfers have helped popularise the sport everywhere from San Jua del Sur in Nicaragua to Nias Island in Indonesia, but families who surf are now looking further afield. The island nation of Taiwan is on our radar as a great place to travel with teens in tow, writes **Carla Grossetti**.

“This is epic,” says my 14-year-old son Fin, who within minutes of arriving at Jinzun Harbour on the east coast of Taiwan is applying a fresh coat of wax to his 5ft thruster. “Yiewww,” shrieks a Japanese traveller who joins Fin as they gingerly descend down a concrete canyon of bollards before jumping into the East China Sea.

That “yiewwww” my son receives is part of the universal surfing vernacular – and this welcome, as he paddles out into the line-up, is as warm as the seas. Despite being the start of winter, it’s temperate enough to surf in board shorts, which makes Taiwan a magnet for those chasing the winter sun. It’s one of many reasons that the tiny fishing village of Donghe in the County of Taitung has transformed itself into an off-the-beaten-path surf town in the past decade.

Compared with surf destinations such as Indonesia and Hawaii, Taiwan is a surprising surf locale in that it’s still small enough to be insulated from the chaos and crowds that prevail in major surfing hotspots. And it’s precisely this reason that sets Taiwan apart as a holiday destination that will draw families who enjoy a fuss-free holiday clad in shorts and thongs.

A small explosion of international interest is thanks, in part, to the fact the township has hosted the Taiwan Open of Surfing since 2011, which is a WQS (World Qualifying Series) event.

We’re being chauffeured around the East Coast of Taiwan by local surfer Hsun Chien, who recently opened a surf hostel – called Yeah Surf House – which he and his girlfriend Chucky Tsai also call home. The hostel has a walled garden and bar and, of course, a laidback surf

vibe, with surf books, posters, retro prints and a lounge room filled with bronzed surfers from around the world.

While guests at Yeah Surf House sleep in a dorm, the Wishingwell B&B on the fringes of town has adjoining rooms for families who like to combine surf and travel, but don’t want to share a room.

“I’ve worked all over Taiwan, but there’s something special about Donghe. I know the people in the line-up and the neighbourhood is small and the surf is the best,” says Hsun, who like many of his friends in the village, wears many hats. Hsun works at the local surf shop, runs surfing lessons for beginners, and hosts visitors at his hostel.

As Hsun tells it, Taiwan is dotted with surfing spots that break year-round. While the better-known spots are Daxi in eastern



FACT FILE

WAI'AO PARAGLIDING

95 Shikong Road, Toucheng Village, Yilan Country
www.facebook.com/ilanfly

GROUP SURF LESSONS

Available at WaGaLiGong, which is also a surf hostel in Donghe. Guests can also hire a board and a wetsuit from here:
www.wagaligongtaiwan.com

SCUBA AND SNORKELLING TRIPS

Trips on Green Island can be arranged via:
www.greenislanddiving.com;
www.greenislandadventures.com is also a useful resource.

Taoyuan City and Jia le Shui along the Kenting Coast for more experienced surfers, spots such as Nanan Beach Break and Chenggong in Taitung County offer very forgiving waves that are friendly for beginners during a low swell.

Hsun says it's the very intimate nature of Taiwan's surf scene that makes a family holiday in Taiwan so appealing. The diversity of the language and culture on the island has also influenced its identity and makes for a beguiling mix of cultures and colourful expats (mostly surfers).

On a spare afternoon in Taiwan, Hsun steers us around to some of the region's best surf spots where we see tourists from Hong Kong learning to surf on 7ft foam boards. Hsun also

detours down dirt roads to visit breaks tucked away from the main town. We visit the Donghe River Mouth and talk tides, off-shore winds and the arrival of a super typhoon and how that may impact on the waves.

My son Fin says the best thing about surfing in Taiwan is the uncrowded waves. "I got so many waves today," grins Fin, after his second session at Jinzun Harbour. "Did you see there were just two other guys in the line-up?"

Surfing stoke aside, when there's no swell or low swell, paragliding is another sport gaining popularity in Taiwan, with the Luye Highland in south-eastern part of the country offering visitors weighing more than 30 kilograms the chance to take to the skies. The aerial view over the emerald waters of the

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East China Sea is breathtaking and offers a great glimpse into the geological forces that formed the island and the Central Mountain Ranges of Taiwan. It's also a great spot from which to indulge your inner ornithologist.

Green Island, which is about 33 kilometres to the east of Taitung City, also offers oceanic experiences that the whole family will enjoy: from diving and snorkelling in the azure seas to warming up in the Zhaori Hot Springs, one of only three saltwater thermal pools in the world.

With snorkel mask on, my son and I slip into the sea and flipper around transfixed

by the scene underwater: the sun is dancing, throwing shadows that bounce off the sand as a school of colourful fish glide past and there's a range of corals that shimmer in shades of purple, pink, green and blue. Although the island is quite small, a fun option is to rent a scooter to take in the breathtaking coastal scenery: park your bike and ramble through the rainforest to breathe in the quiet of an abandoned Taiwanese indigenous settlement or ooh and aah over the 33-metre-high Luydao Lighthouse.

What's also surprising about Taiwan is that Taipei has bloomed into a cultural capital with high-profile architecture,



exciting cultural precincts, and an influential arts scene. Teens will be transfixed with the quirky boutiques where metal heads hang, cool cafes that make a thoroughly decent brew, and low-key eateries.

As our time in Taiwan draws to a close, a quick interview with my teenage son reveals that the abiding allure of the region is, as suspected, the consistency of the surf, the uncrowded waves, and the friendly locals in the line-up. And in classic grommet style, Fin, who has consumed his body weight in dumplings in between surfs, adds that the little pinched parcels of xiao long bao are also a major drawcard.

Want to learn more about Taiwan?

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