

Getting to Taitung is half the fun. I catch the earliest train possible and leave at 6:45 AM on the TC Express. NT\$850 one way for a 5 \_ hour glorious excursion. The slower trains take 7-8 hours and cost only NT\$650. The drive is even more breathtaking, especially between Suao and Hualien, or, if you're short on time, the flight to Taitung is only 50 minutes, costing about NT\$2500 RT. I prefer the relaxed, leisurely pace of the train - by the time you arrive, you've decompressed.

About 40 minutes out of Taipei, I begin to notice the scenery and realize my holiday has begun. We ride through narrow valleys, snaking our way through the dense olive mountains, to a wide silvery river and finally join the ocean near Ilan. The eastern coastline is stunning and reminds me of California's Big Sur. The mountains hug the sea, and the train tracks follow narrow roads that barely cling to steep stone cliffs. Below, the breakers crash and churn along a rocky, weather-beaten shore, a reminder of the frequent typhoons.

As you travel south from Hualien, the train leaves the coast and meanders inland through lush, green farmland - rice paddies, betel nut palm plantations, and banana, papaya and custard apple groves. Finally, we arrive in Taitung, a sleepy seaside town, blessed with cooling ocean breezes and sunny blue skies.

Here you can walk down quiet country lanes, soak in the Jrben Hot Springs, examine ancient 5-10,000 year-old artifacts at the County Culture Center, bodysurf at a long, amber-colored beach , or just take an invigorating hike into the magnificent mountains. It's a peaceful getaway that's far from the tourist crowds of Taipei.

Nearby Green Island offers tranquil hiking and superb water sports, such as reef diving, snorkeling, swimming and fishing. It's easily accessed by ferry or plane.

For travellers seeking the less-travelled road, take the short flight to Orchid Island or Lanyu, at the southern tip of Taiwan. Step back in time as you explore the primitive culture of the Yami. Their handicrafts and boats are exquisitely decorated, and their semi-underground homes are intriguing. Tourists are a rarity from July to March, and the Yami are warm and welcoming. The two hotels offer simple lodging and meals.

You'll find breathtaking vistas along the scenic Southern Cross-Island Highway as it twists and turns through the mountains, revealing aboriginal villages, hot springs, and even waterfalls.

A soak at Chihpen Hot Springs, just 14 km south of Taitung, is always a good way to start a holiday, but this time Shelly, her son William and I got soaked fully dressed – when we ran into the Pyuma tribe's water celebration.

A boisterous parade of scooters and blue pick-up trucks crowded Chihpen's narrow main street. The revelers, mostly moms and kids were dressed in

colorful Pyuma costumes and flower garlands. They shrieked gaily as they doused each other with water – and us.

The best hotels in the county are here in Chihpen, Taiwan's oldest and most remote hot spring resort. The Japanese developed it in the 1900's, dubbing it "The Source of Wisdom.

The older Chihpen Hotel offers hot, warm and cold pools - the biggest outdoor mineral pools in Taiwan, set against a cliff of hanging banyans, swaying palms and a waterfall. Nonmembers may bathe too, for a nominal fee.

The acclaimed, Royal Chihpen Spa Hotel offers luxurious accommodation and superb food. It sits on a peaceful, verdant terrace, high upon the mountain overlooking Chihpen and Taitung's green valley.

The neighboring Chinghueh Temple is quite a gem. Two magnificent white elephants stand at the foot of the steps. Inside, sit two of the most exquisite Buddhas in Taiwan, one in white jade from Myanmar, the other of brass from Thailand.

If you're on a budget, dip into the large public mineral baths, next to the new Hoya Hotel, for only \$150 each. The hot, warm and cold pools are most peaceful early morning. But families will prefer late afternoon, when a dozen monkeys appear in the trees overhead, swinging Tarzan-style, and screeching as they pluck their leafy dinners

If you prefer to lodge in downtown Taitung, there are numerous moderate hotels near the old train station. I can personally recommend the no-frills Teacher's Hostel, a spotless, high-rise motel adjacent to the County Culture Center.