

# Urban Treasure

From delicious street food to abundant nature and great design. Taipei offers something to beguile every kind of traveller. We give you five reasons why you should travel to this exciting city right now.

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Photography Mirjam Bleeker*



Previous pages, from left to right: Songshan Cultural and Creative Park; the Taipei 101 tower.

Left page (clockwise from top left): Huashan Creative Park; it's a delight to stroll across the city in search of vintage furniture and other treasures; never a dull moment in the vibrant streets of Taipei ; Zhongshan District.



**T**aipei is the energetic capital of the island of Taiwan, and today – with a population of some 2.7 million people, and one of the youngest urban populations in Asia – it’s a city on the move and one of the region’s leading innovators in urban planning and design, green architecture and public transport. The city’s landscape is a mixture of Japanese early modernist architecture, utilitarian office towers, apartment blocks and iconic structures like the Taipei 101 (the tallest building in the world from 2004 to 2009), criss-crossed by wide boulevards with leafy, green strips and speckled with parks. With a sophisticated transport network linking light rail and subways with buses and share bikes, Taipei is a jumble of unique neighbourhoods such as pop-culture-centred Ximending, trendy Zhongshan, residential Daan, historic Datong, and business and nightlife Xinyi. Balancing efficiency and refinement with fun and a touch of zaniness, Taipei deserves a place on your bucket list. Here are five reasons why you should go there soon:

## 1 Design Hub

From green architecture to urban regeneration, and from arts and crafts to fashion, good design is front and centre in Taipei. It’s a characteristic that, in 2016, put the city in good company with the likes of Helsinki, Seoul and Cape Town as a World Design Capital. The iconic Taipei 101 – the downtown skyscraper whose ridges recall a sculptural stalk of bamboo – is certified by the US Green Building Council as the world’s tallest LEED-certified structure. In the Beitou district, a new wooden Public Library resembles a giant ark, featuring tall glass walls that place users in a forest of greenery. Taipei’s fashion and design scenes are flourishing, thanks in part to government-sponsored events such as

the Taiwan Fashion Week and programmes like Fresh Taiwan, whose grants sponsor the attendance of young Taiwanese designers at international trade shows.

“Remnants of Taiwan’s late-20th-century manufacturing boom give young designers access to relatively low-cost quality craft and production. And there’s a lot of knowledge floating around among the previous generation,” remarks Leslie Sun, owner of lifestyle shop Sunset. “It’s fascinating to see how good ‘Made in Taiwan’ can be when magic happens between the designer and the maker.” Sun returned to her native country five years ago, after having worked in the US as a publication designer. For her, the most exciting aspect of Taipei’s burgeoning design scene is its “unique hybrid of global design and local heritage and craft.” Take the Taipei government-sponsored revival of neglected mid-20th-century and older industrial spaces, like Songshan Cultural and Creative Park, a former tobacco plant set amid greenery not far from the Taipei 101. Anchored by the Red Dot Design Museum and the Puppetry Art Center of Taipei, former manufacturing spaces and workers’ residences now house galleries, cafés, bookshops and boutiques. On a sunny Saturday in December, I visited the weekly makers’ market outside the design museum, featuring three dozen stalls staffed by young Taiwanese selling handcrafted clothing and accessories, and residents flocked to one of the exhibition spaces for a two-day event at which start-ups displayed handmade shoes, textiles, artisan foods and furniture.

Bordering the Park’s grounds is Eslite Spectrum, a light and airy four-storey ‘mall’ with local design shops. Since the Park opened its doors, bars, boutiques and cafés have begun popping up on once shabby lanes, and older residents have cultivated a lush and productive urban farm, which is a clear testimony to the ability of smart design to truly reinvigorate an area. >

## 2 Green City

Ringed by emerald mountains and dotted with public gardens and mini-parks, Taipei has much to offer to both nature and urban fans. According to the Asian Green City Index, Taipei has one of the highest ratios of green space per capita in the region. “The natural spaces are really a booster,” says British ex-pat Stuart Dawson, co-founder of hiking outfit Taiwan Adventures, who has been living in Taipei for over 12 years. “From downtown, if you travel 30 minutes in almost any direction, you’ll end up somewhere green and natural.”

When I’m in Taipei, I begin most days with a brisk walk or run through Daan Forest Park, a 260,000m² oasis of trees, grass and streams adjacent to a metro station right in the middle of the city. On a recent trip, I followed Dawson’s recommendation to devote a late afternoon to Four Beasts Mountains, a string of peaks named after the lion, tiger, leopard and elephant they are said to resemble. Criss-crossed with well-marked trails, the mountains present opportunities for a quick taste of the outdoors or some serious exercise. By metro, I arrived at Xiangshan Station late in the afternoon. The reward for a mildly vigorous 30-minute climb? An orange-tinted sunset view of Taipei 101. Thanks to the lighting on the main trails, my after-dark descent posed no challenges.

## 3 Cyclist’s Paradise

In the 1990s, Taiwan’s prodigious bicycle exports earned it the nickname ‘Bicycle Kingdom’. Now, its capital city is home to a bike-sharing system called YouBike, which has become a model for many cities across the island. It supplies around 7,264 bikes, which are parked at 222 self-service kiosks dotted across the city, all near metro and bus stations (and Taipei aims for 400 kiosks by 2018). To use the bikes, you can access the system as a ‘guest’ with a chip-encrypted credit card. Or you could purchase a reloadable EasyCard – also valid on trains and buses – at a metro station and register it online with your Taiwan mobile number, if you happen to have one. YouBike’s free app makes it easy to find the

nearest kiosk with bikes available. The cheerful yellow and orange fleet is in high demand; in 2015, YouBike recorded some 60 million trips.

In fine weather, I find sightseeing by bike a pleasurable alternative to catching a taxi or taking the metro and walking. Thanks to 380km of bike paths, cycling in Taipei is safer than in most cities in my native America. Maybe that’s why Taipei residents take twice as many city trips by bike than Londoners, and five times as many as New Yorkers. Few Taipei YouBikers wear helmets, a nod perhaps to the city’s drivers, who in general respect the space of both cyclists and pedestrians.

Outside Taipei’s city centre, over 100km of smooth, wide two-lane riverside cycle ways await you. A while ago, I picked up a bike in the Ximending neighbourhood and cycled to the Xindian River. After enjoying a bowl of noodles at one of the street food stalls near Xindian’s small marina, I pedalled across the grasslands, went past the sprawling lawns of Fuhe Riverside Park and up to Treasure Hill Artist Village, a jumble of tiny grey and red brick houses once home to Nationalist war veterans. I wandered around taking in the art installations and then continued to the Gongguan district, home to National Taiwan University. After having dropped my YouBike at Gongguan Metro Station, I sat down and relaxed with a pot of herbal tea at student hangout Café Bastille.

## 4 Varied Culinary Landscape

Defining Taiwanese cuisine is no easy task, as it incorporates influences from China and Japan, as well as indigenous elements. Noodle dishes, boiled dumplings and rice porridges abound, but so do sweet and savoury breads and pastries. And pork and seafood are central to local diets. Vegetables are eaten stir-fried, blanched and tossed with fragrant sesame oil to serve cold and quick-pickled. Sushi and sashimi are almost as common as in Japan, and local fruit – from mangoes to guava and pineapples to papaya – is abundant and seasonal.

To go local, join the city’s legion of office workers for breakfast. “These days, one of

Right page (clockwise from top left): Songshan Cultural and Creative Park; coffee shop in the Eslite Spectrum department store; cycling is the best way to explore the city; bike shop in Xinyi District.



**Places to eat**

**RAW**

Taiwan's ingredients shine in dishes prepared with French techniques. The dining room manages to be both sleek and warm.  
[raw.com.tw](http://raw.com.tw)  
 301 Le Qun Third Road

**MUME**

Noma-inspired modern European fare prepared with 95% local ingredients, plus a menu of creative cocktails in a casually hip setting.  
[mume.tw](http://mume.tw)  
 28 Siwei Road

**Lao Pai Niu Rou La Mian Da Wang**

Thick noodles and a rich broth mark the *niu rou mian* (beef noodle soup) served from this corner shop on a lane packed with street food vendors.  
 7 Lane 46, Chongqing South Road Section 1

**Re Chao ('Hot Fry')**

Recognise this casual stir-fry restaurant by its glass cases displaying vegetables, bean curd and meats and fish on ice. If there's no English menu, simply point at ingredients in the cases, or other customers' dishes; it's hard to go wrong.  
 254 Jilin Road

**Places to drink**

**Fong Da Coffee**

Taiwan's original serious coffee house serves the ultimate ice drip and siphon brews. Their house-roasted beans sold by the pound make a great souvenir.  
 42 Chengdu Road

**Alphadog Craft Beer**

Small friendly spot to enjoy local and imported craft beers. Try the Taiwanese Deluxburg's OLA, a pale ale flavoured with orange peel and longan.  
 270 Yanji Street

**Beer Cargo**

Check their Facebook page to find out where this cute mobile bar is parked, offering a good selection of Taiwanese drafts.  
[facebook.com/beercargotw](https://facebook.com/beercargotw)

**Placebo**

Carved wood and mahogany chairs and tables recall Old China at this long narrow bar specialising in cocktails inspired by Taiwanese ingredients.  
 83 Keelung Road Section 2

**Places to stay**

**W Hotel**

Airy rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows, large bathrooms with Japanese 'smart' toilets, a huge gym and even a press pot for making coffee place the W at the top of Taipei's luxury hotel list. The hotel's Woo Bar is one of the most happening spots in Taipei.  
[wtaipei.com](http://wtaipei.com)  
 10 Zhongxiao East Road Section 5

**Folio Daan Taipei**

Formerly a bank dormitory, this mid-20th-century structure has been refurbished into a light and airy lodging offering good value for money.  
[folio-hotels.com](http://folio-hotels.com)  
 23 Lane 30, Xinyi Road Section 4

**Things to do**

**Sunset**

One of Taipei's premier lifestyle shops (cum coffee bar) with a curated mixture of products. Also showing stage installations.  
[sunsetssunset.com](http://sunsetssunset.com)  
 157 Lane 417, Guangfu South Road

**Songshan Cultural and Creative Park**

A former tobacco factory that now features the Red Dot Design Museum, a weekend outdoors craft market, rotating exhibitions, a café and bookstore.  
[songshanculturalpark.org](http://songshanculturalpark.org)  
 133 Guangfu South Road

**YouBike**

Use your credit card or – if you have a local phone number – an EasyCard, download the YouBike app and have fun biking around the city.  
[taipei.youbike.com.tw](http://taipei.youbike.com.tw)

**Hiking**

Taiwan Adventures offers full-day hikes around Taipei geared to various skill levels.  
[taiwan-adventures.com](http://taiwan-adventures.com)

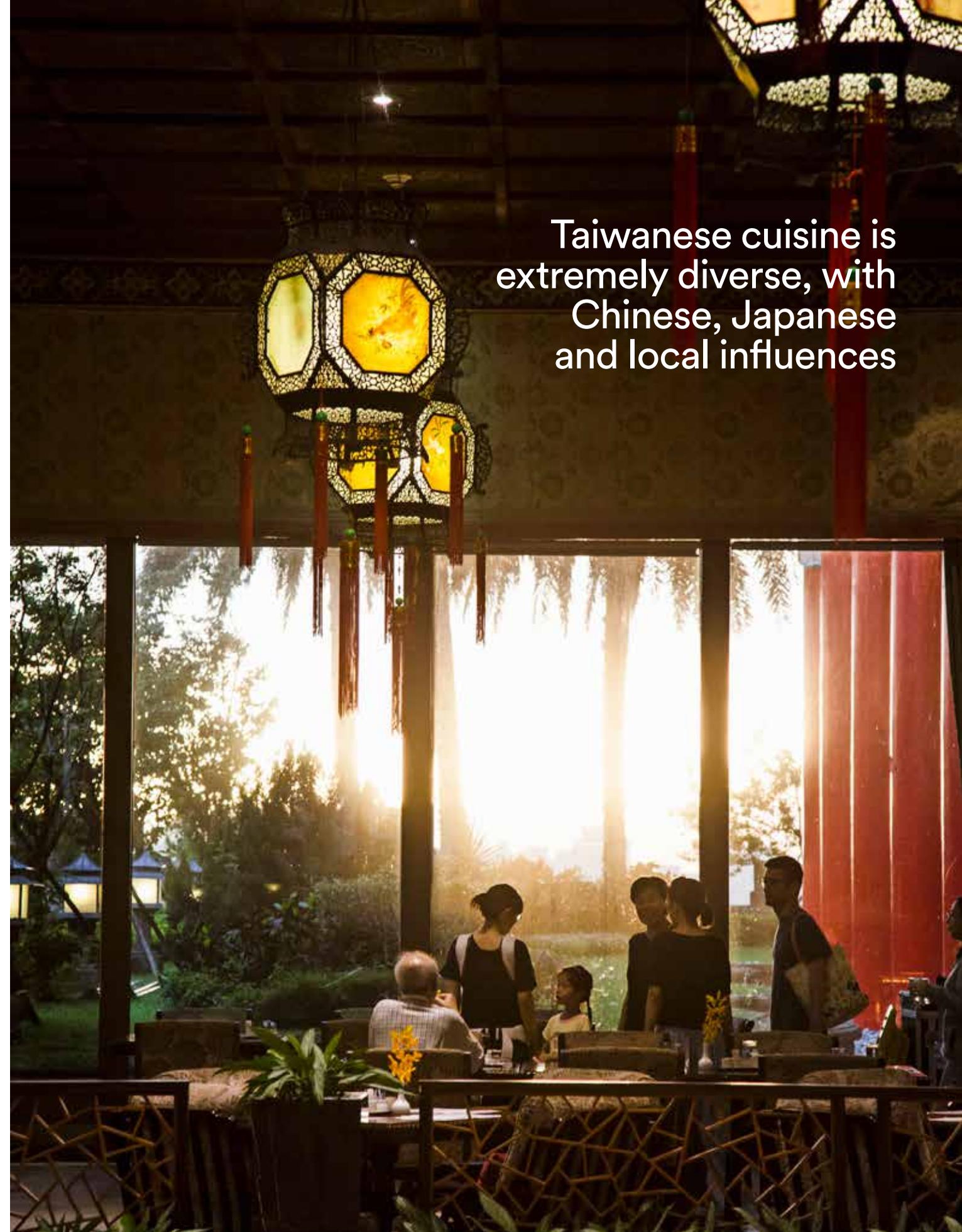
**Right page:** lobby of The Grand Hotel (1 Zhongshan North Road Section 4).

the most popular morning meals is *shao bing* stuffed with *dan bing* and *you tiao*," says Katy Hui-Wen Hung, a food writer who splits her time between her native Taipei and the UK. She's describing a portable meal consisting of a flaky griddled flatbread topped with a thin omelette and then rolled around a deep-fried cruller. Washed down with hot or iced fresh soy milk, it makes a ribsticking start to the day. It will definitely keep your stomach satisfied until lunch, when you might want to try Taiwan's ultimate comfort street food, *niu rou mian* (beef noodles). This specialty combines tender beef chunks with chewy wheat noodles in a rich broth, which is often flavoured Sichuan-style (*málà*), with chillies and prickly ash. The best versions of this national dish are offered by street stalls, serving it with fermented mustard leaves. Another must-try at the street stalls is rice porridge featuring the nation's beloved mild white milkfish, which is also eaten pan-fried and served with a piquant lime juice-and-black-pepper dip.

In the evening, people flock to casual eateries called *re chao* ('hot fry') and *kuai chao* ('quick fry'). "This is a fun and very Taiwanese part of Taipei's food culture, where they also sell delicious Taiwanese beers," says Hung. "Think 'fast food', but with quality." One could easily spend several dinners at the noisy, *re chao*-lined Jilin Road in the Zhongshan district, where the day's specials are indicated by the vegetables, iced meat and fish on display in front of the restaurants. Cold starters like sesame oil-tossed bean curd 'noodles' and fresh bamboo to dip in mayonnaise are a must, accompanied by Taiwanese beer. Hot dishes might include 'three-cup' chicken braised with purple basil leaves in soy sauce, octopus stir-fried with peanuts and scallion, and bright green water lily stems, sautéed with chillies, ginger and king mushrooms.

At the opposite end of the dining spectrum, a clutch of master chefs is creating inventive fare inspired by Taiwan's seas, rivers, mountains and plains. Modern European cuisine made with local ingredients features at MUME, which was opened by three chefs who have worked at Copenhagen's Noma and Sydney's Quay. There, you can, for instance, enjoy roast potatoes with shiitake crumble, smoked >

Taiwanese cuisine is extremely diverse, with Chinese, Japanese and local influences





## Taipei

**Left page (clockwise from top left):** RAW restaurant; park close to the Taipei Fine Arts Museum; a statue at the Treasure Hill artist village; a dish served at RAW restaurant.

beef fat butter with freshly baked bread, a 20-ingredient ‘Taiwan salad’ with salted black beans or a sorrel sauce-braised oyster paired with pan-fried ox tongue. “We are finally beginning to appreciate what we have on this island, rather than looking abroad for ingredients and inspiration,” says Taiwanese chef André Chiang of Singapore’s award-winning Restaurant André. Two years ago, Chiang opened RAW restaurant in his native country. It is a showcase not only for local ingredients, but for Taiwanese design and craftsmanship as well, with a dining room anchored by a cloud-shaped bar hand carved from local pine. The menu changes seasonally. Last December, it included a playful take on night street eats (corn kernel-encrusted baby corn cob slicked with barbecue sauce and served on a stick) and tributes to the island’s bounty (abalone with bamboo, crunchy garlic and red basil pesto).

### 5 Coffee, Beer & Cocktails

People visiting Taipei will be treated to a coffee culture with a long history, a flourishing craft beer industry and a blossoming cocktail scene.

The Japanese introduced the café culture in the early 20th century, and single-origin siphon brews and ice-drip coffee had already been served at cafés like Fong Da Coffee – founded in 1956 – long before they became fashionable in the West. Today, Taipei boasts more mainstream and third-wave coffee shops than caffeine addicts could cover in a week.

Not far from Fong Da Coffee, Leben Hsieh pulls drafts of Taiwanese and imported brews from his custom-built wooden tricycle called Beer Cargo. “Ten years ago, the city offered Taiwan Beer or imported brands. Now, we have our own crafted beers, with our own special flavours,” the baseball-capped 20-something tells me, before recommending a hoppy IPA from local Jim & Dad’s Brewing Company. A larger selection of craft beers awaits at Alphasdog, a friendly brew bar in the district of Daan, where a long table invites leisurely tasting and lively conversations with fellow beer geeks.

Cocktails too are trending in Taipei, as bartenders move beyond the classics to embrace Taiwanese ingredients. “We are



- 1 Fuhe Riverside Park
- 2 Café Bastille
- 3 Taipei 101
- 4 Daan Forest Park
- 5 Xiangshan (‘Elephant Mountain’) Station
- 6 Mume restaurant
- 7 Datong District
- 8 Taipei Confucius Temple
- 9 Public Library

telling people who we are by developing new flavours from our own region,” says mixologist and consultant Angus Zou, who set Taipei’s cocktail standards a few years ago as the owner and head mixologist of Alchemy, one of the city’s first cocktail bars. Zou sends me to Placebo, an intimate space, where I order a martini made with seaweed-infused vodka and served in a porcelain teacup, with bonito flakes and green olives on the side, while my partner enjoys a strong old-fashioned mix that incorporates black peanuts.

No matter how design-smart, green, cycle-friendly or foodie-inviting a city is, personal interactions make or break a holiday in the end. Pause to look at your smartphone or a map on a sidewalk, and you are likely to be approached by a resident offering help. I’ve been led by the hand to bus stops, walked to restaurants and shops, advised on best routes in metro stations and offered discounts by taxi drivers embarrassed that they overshot an address by half a block. Warm and friendly and eager to help, Taipei’s residents are its most valuable asset, on top of the mix of delights that make it a city perfect for both nature and city freaks. ■