



*Clockwise from top left: Snowfall on Hehuan Mountain; enjoying cherry blossom season aboard the mountain railway at Alishan; a view of Sun Moon Lake from the luxurious Lalu Hotel; the Shuilii Snake Kiln Ceramics Cultural Park.*

## The Heart of Taiwan

Taiwan's strength is in its diversity, not only in regard to its people but also to its regional characteristics. Just as Taiwan's north is defined by the fast pace of the country's capital city, Taipei, the island nation's central region is known for its undisturbed nature and breathtaking views. Benefitting from its mountainous topography, Taiwan's center has managed to preserve countless plants and animals, as well as many traditional Taiwanese customs. It's for these and many other reasons that the paths of the world's more adventurous travellers are increasingly

converging on Taiwan's interior.

**A train trip along Taiwan's North-South Main Line and its connecting service lines will show central Taiwan's serene countryside,** one filled with dense mountain forests and expansive, low-lying grasslands. Nestled within this varied landscape is **Sun Moon Lake**, the largest natural lake on the island—and a major attraction, lined with spectacular hiking trails, gardens, and ancient temples. Lulu Island, found at the lake's center, is considered a holy site for Taiwan's native Thao people. The lake means many things to many people, a fact that has travellers discovering their own interpretation.



Left: A Taiwan flamecrest; Below: a cup of Dongding oolong tea.

Taiwan's Central Mountain Range is home to rare plants and animals. Found within Taroko Gorge National Park is **Hehuan Mountain**, home to vast forests of Chinese hemlock and dwarf bamboo. Although the mountain's location at a convergence of airstreams causes a beautiful occurrence of subtropical winter snow, Hehuan is also revered for its summertime flowers, especially wild azalea. In the nearby Daxueshan National Forest Recreation Area, **Anma Mountain** is a haven for nearly a hundred different species of mountain-dwelling birds, such as the Taiwan flamecrest and the Swinhoe's pheasant. Whether exploring by foot or by bicycle, the Central Mountain Range offers awestruck visitors a testament to Taiwan's history of conservation. It's a destination that a nature lover must see to believe.

These mountains are also home to various Taiwanese peoples. And from their cultures come a bounty of unique artistic crafts, such as wood carving, paper-fan design, and, perhaps most notably, pottery. Originating in mainland China, these forms of pottery found a home in central Taiwan, where they have been improved upon by modern techniques. This pottery is often molded into the shapes of local flowers, birds, and animals. Two of the more renowned kilns where such pottery is produced are the **Huatao Kiln** in Miaoli County and the **Shuili Snake Kiln** near Sun Moon Lake. The Shuili Snake Kiln exemplifies an ancient style of wood-burning-kiln construction: built with brick on a gentle slope and stretching more than a hundred feet, this kiln has a snake-like appearance. It produces exquisite pottery, admired and imitated the world over—reason enough for kiln workers to want to keep their techniques a secret. But, in keeping with the Taiwanese tradition of hospitality, they are more than happy to show you how their art is made.

Just as the central Taiwanese have mastered the artistic depiction of nature, they've also excelled in its cultivation. **Taiwan is renowned for its tea, especially the many fragrant varieties of oolong.** While exploring the forested mountain trails of the Xitou Forest Recreation Area in Nantou County, you might happen upon fields of **Dongding oolong** growing in meticulously ordered rows. The mist that settles around the mountains creates the perfect conditions for Dongding oolong, resulting in a high level of catechin—a powerful antioxidant that



complements the healthy life style of the Taiwanese. The end product is a tea that brews to a golden yellow hue with an aromatic aftertaste.

**Taiwan is a land of innumerable wonders, and in central Taiwan, those wonders are seen in its pristine wilderness.** From snow-capped mountain peaks to grasslands, cliff-side tea plantations to mystic lakes, Taiwan's natural beauty is one of the envies of the world. Ancient cultures have not only coexisted with this beauty, but they've also used it to create unique art crafts and delicacies that exist nowhere else on the planet. It's as if, for the Taiwanese, celebration of their unique environment just comes naturally.

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