

Isle of the **UNEXPECTED**

The Portuguese quite rightly called lush, mountainous and culturally diverse Taiwan the 'Beautiful Isle' – so where are all the tourists?

Words & Pictures **Alex Robinson**

Taiwan

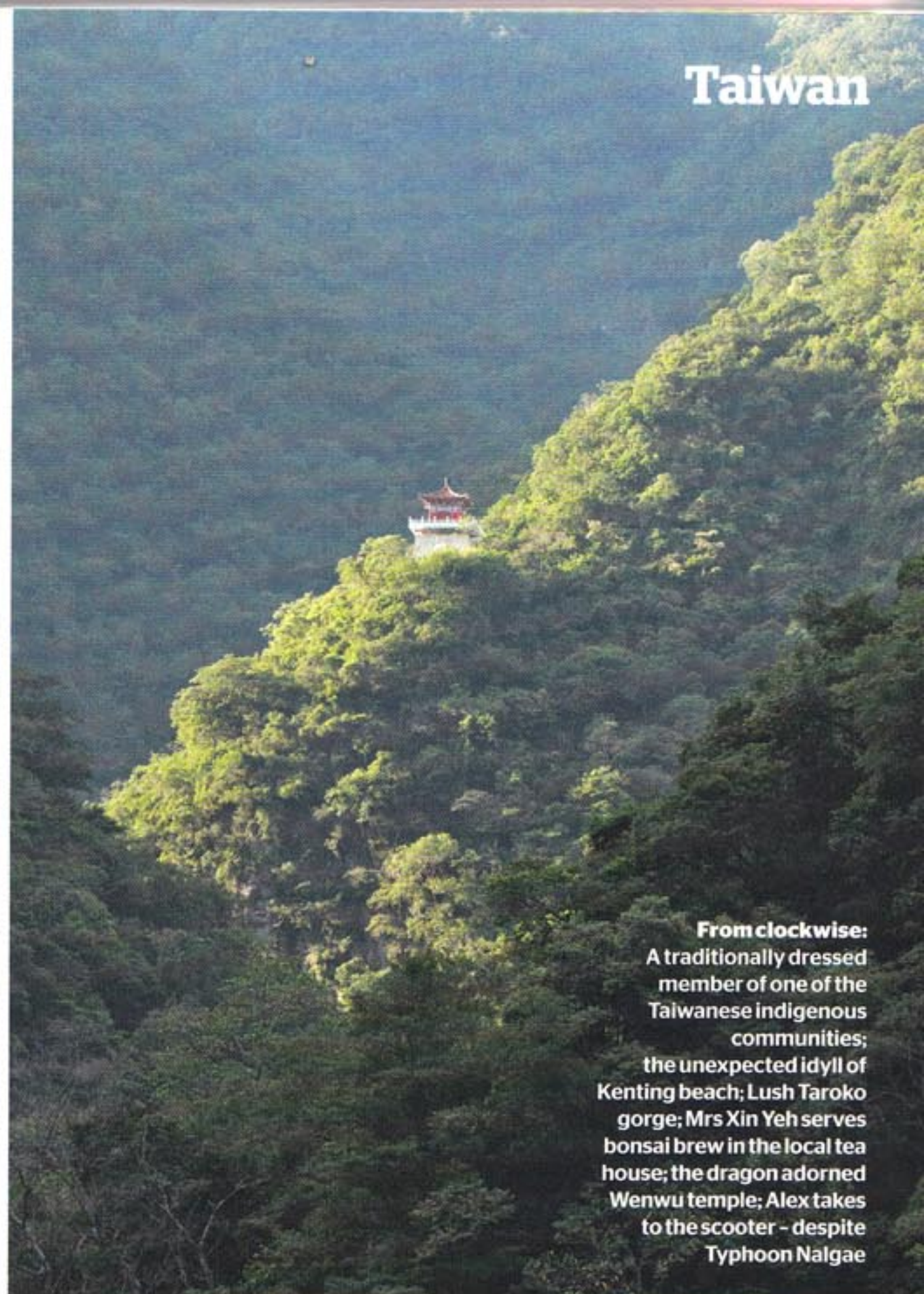
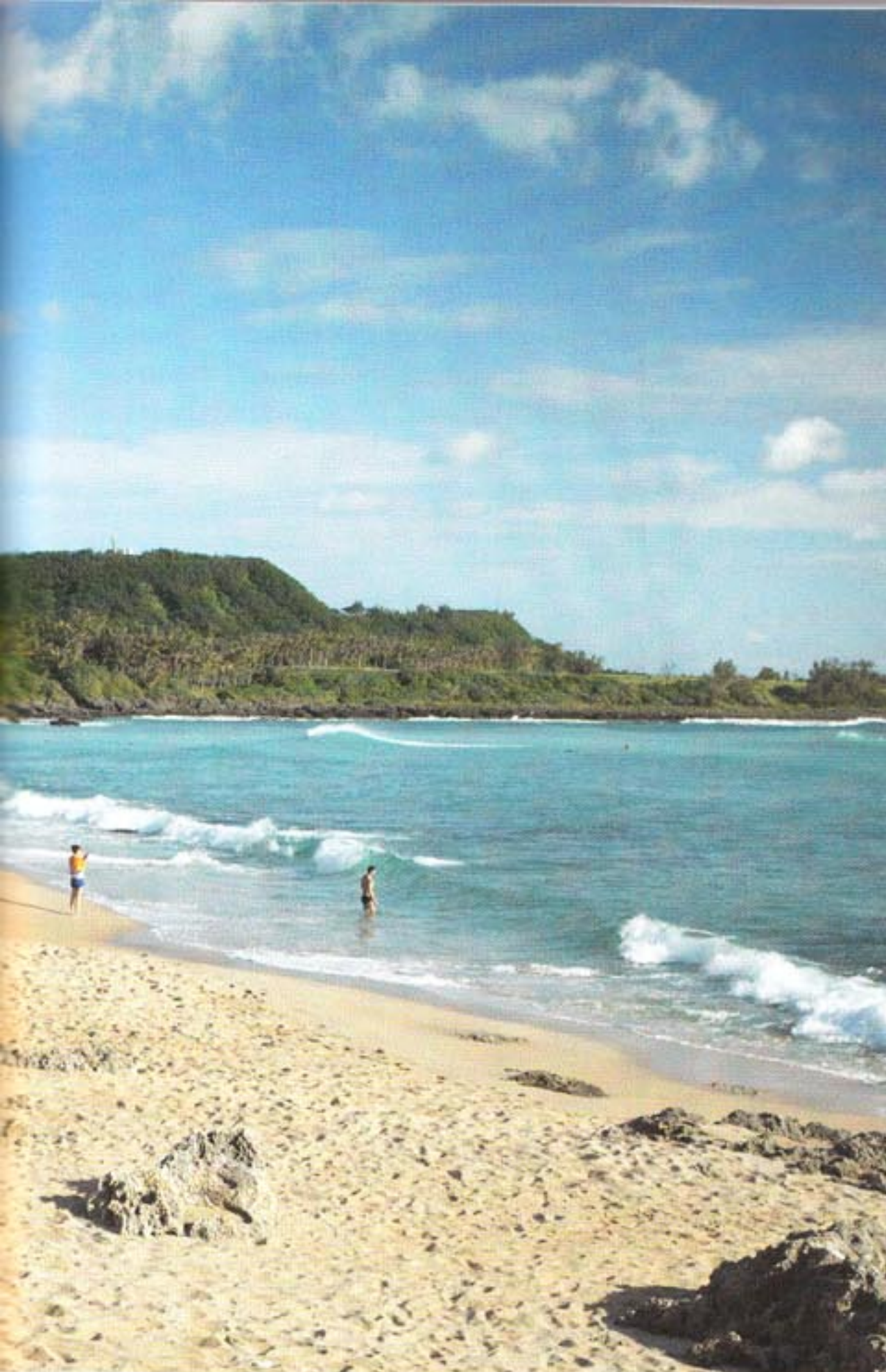
🌐 Indigenous communities, rainforests, beaches, the last bastion of Chinese culture

✈️ Fly UK-Taipei via Bangkok (from 14hrs); hire a scooter to explore

📅 Tropical/subtropical climate; best Sept-Dec

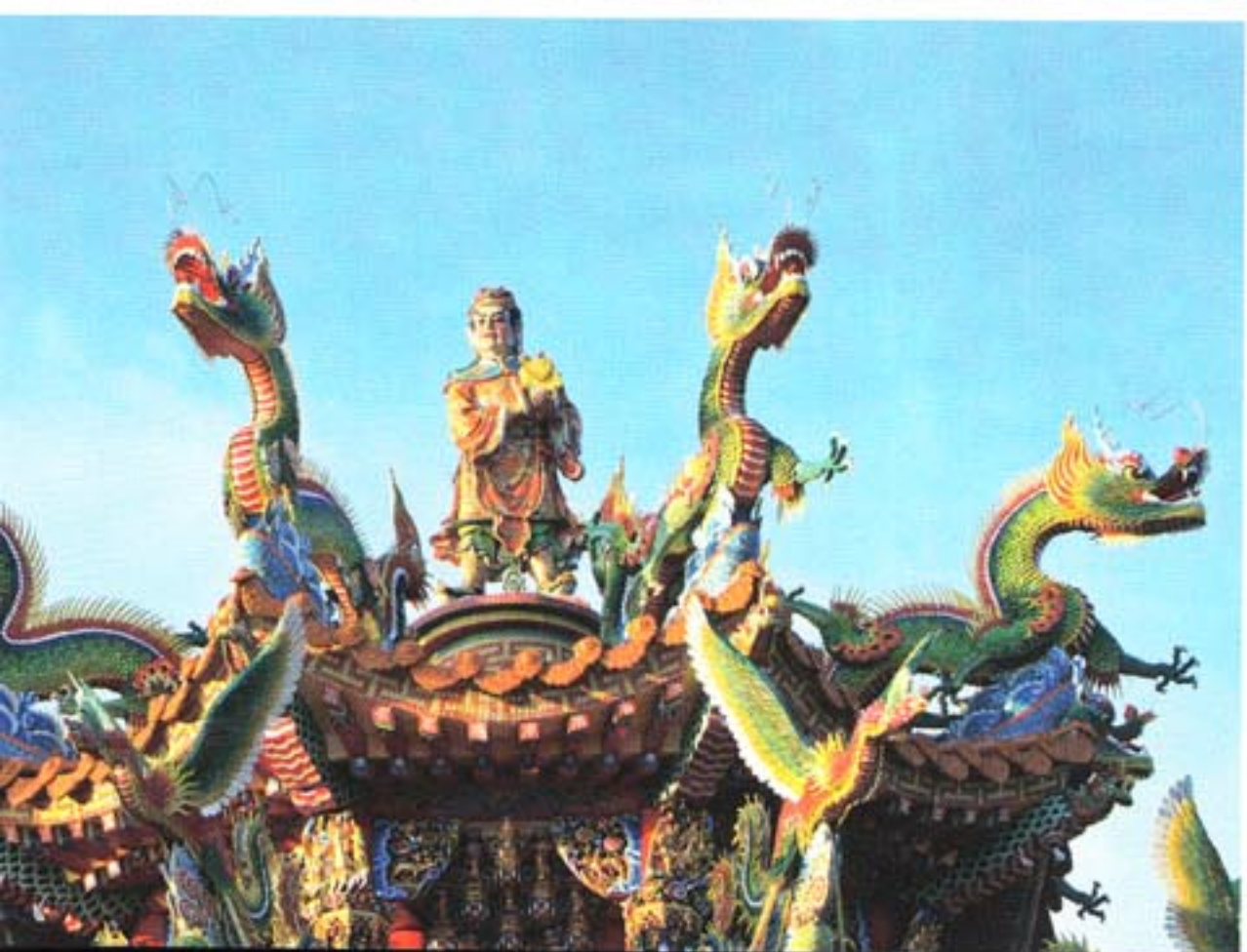


Wenwu with a view
Taiwan's ornate Wenwu temple overlooks the lush landscape around Sun Moon Lake on this little-visited island



From clockwise:
A traditionally dressed member of one of the Taiwanese indigenous communities; the unexpected idyll of Kenting beach; Lush Taroko gorge; Mrs Xin Yeh serves bonsai brew in the local tea house; the dragon adorned Wenwu temple; Alex takes to the scooter - despite Typhoon Nalgae

'Getting caught in a typhoon was the culmination of a few days in a country proving full of surprises'



◀ a cigarette suspended from the corner of his mouth and wearing Chelsea football shorts rented us two nippy little Japanese scooters. Within 30 minutes we were winding east on the sinuous Cross-Island Highway into hills swathed with betel-nut plantations. Urban Taiwan felt far behind.

The sunlight was glorious. We zipped past a travelling puppet theatre and stands of swaying coconut palms; dozens of brightly coloured little shrines dotted the roadside. Ahead in the distance, the island's central highlands lay outlined in silhouette like a Chinese silk painting. Whenever we stopped for a drink or snack, the locals were disarmingly friendly. "Where you from?" they asked. "Welcome to our country."

In a golden late afternoon we reached Sun Moon Lake. Emerald green, nestled in steep, forest-swathed mountain ridges and watched over by the vivid, dragon-decorated Wenwu Temple, it looked like a film set from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Inside the temple, in a swirling mist of burning incense, were triple shrines to Confucius and to the Taoist gods Guan Gong and Kaiji.

From 2,500-year-old Taoism to artistic techniques, traditional Chinese culture – long lost or suppressed on the mainland – thrives in Taiwan. The Taiwanese government has even applied for World Heritage status for certain complex Chinese characters that China stopped using in 1949 but Taiwan continues to use today.

Mountains & mock-Tudor

In the morning I woke to a procession of school children performing exercises on the lakeshore with military precision. After a breakfast of steaming coffee, sliced mango and *shao bing* (long-baked buns stuffed with sizzling eggs), we climbed on the scooters and headed for the misty mountains.

Just beyond Sun Moon Lake, the Cross-Island Highway narrowed and climbed sharply, twisting up the sides of green valleys filled with sparkling flood-water lakes. By late morning the air was chilly and rarefied. Bizarre mock-Tudor buildings lined the road; 'The Olde England...', advertised one, '...since 2009'.

"The Taiwanese have a thing for England," Simon explained. "Some of these hotels even have faux-Elizabethan four-poster beds and serve afternoon tea with scones."

We climbed higher still, on tiny roads swathed in drifting high-altitude cloud and fringed with an elfin forest dripping with bromeliads and wispy lichen. At midday we reached 3,422m Mount Hehuan, the highest point on the road. The mist burned away to brilliant-blue sky, revealing another magnificent view of jagged

peaks falling towards a distant tropical coast.

From Hehuan we headed further east towards the Pacific, quickly dropping into cloud again. Soon all beyond the front wheel was thick and white. The road plunged through dark, dripping tunnels where the noise of the motor scooter echoed eerily off the walls. There was no traffic. When we stopped for water all I could hear was the tinkle of a stream and the twitter of birds.

Suddenly the clouds thinned, and we descended into sunshine and a knee-weakening view. The highway clung to a vast, almost sheer-sided valley. To our right was a startling drop-off into a misty green-blue river hundreds of metres down.

As we plunged into tropical warmth, the valley narrowed further into the dramatic Taroko Gorge. Its precipitous polished walls were divided by the Liwu River, which swirled over giant marble boulders in fierce rapids. In an astonishing feat of engineering, the road cut into the gorge's sides, which towered above and below us. Green mountains loomed behind, disappearing into deep-green spurs covered in virgin forest and hulking ridges of sun-kissed rock.

We stopped at Changchun (Eternal Spring) Shrine, dedicated to the memory of the 225 or so workers who lost their lives building the Taroko Gorge Road. Set against mile-high marble, it looked like an exquisite Chinese miniature, terracotta-tiled pavilions straddling a mountain steam.

Later we alighted to walk up a tributary of the Liwu, through forest that's home to clouded leopard and Formosan black bear. As the late-afternoon sun turned deep gold, we jumped on our scooters to rush through tunnels and emerged into an inky dusk at Hualien, on the Taiwanese Pacific.

That night I sat under a canopy of stars in the tiny Crossing the Rainbow Bridge hotel. Chatting to the hotel's owner, Teyram Yudaw, I learned that Taroko takes its name from one of the island's myriad indigenous people, the Truku, and that Taiwan had not always been Chinese.

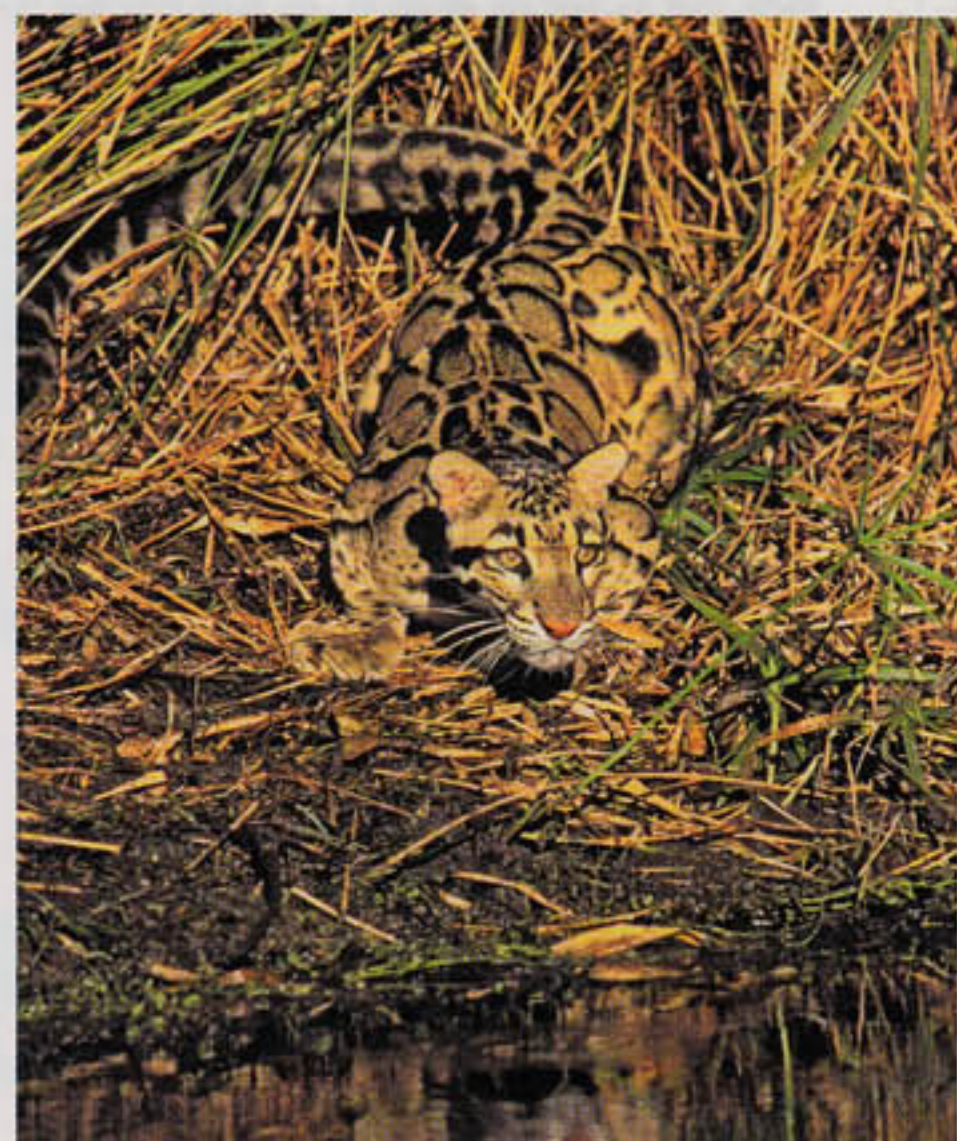
"Taiwan has half a million native peoples who were here 8,000 years before the Chinese came from the mainland," he told me. "Most of us live in the east. But we were not originally from this side of the island. My people, the Truku, lived on the flat plains on the west coast, hunting deer and wild boar, but we were pushed across into the mountains some 300 years ago."

Riders of the storm

It was a Truku guide who took us for a brisk walk in the gorge the next morning. Taroko, he told me as we looked over a river rushing round a polished slot canyon, means 'the >



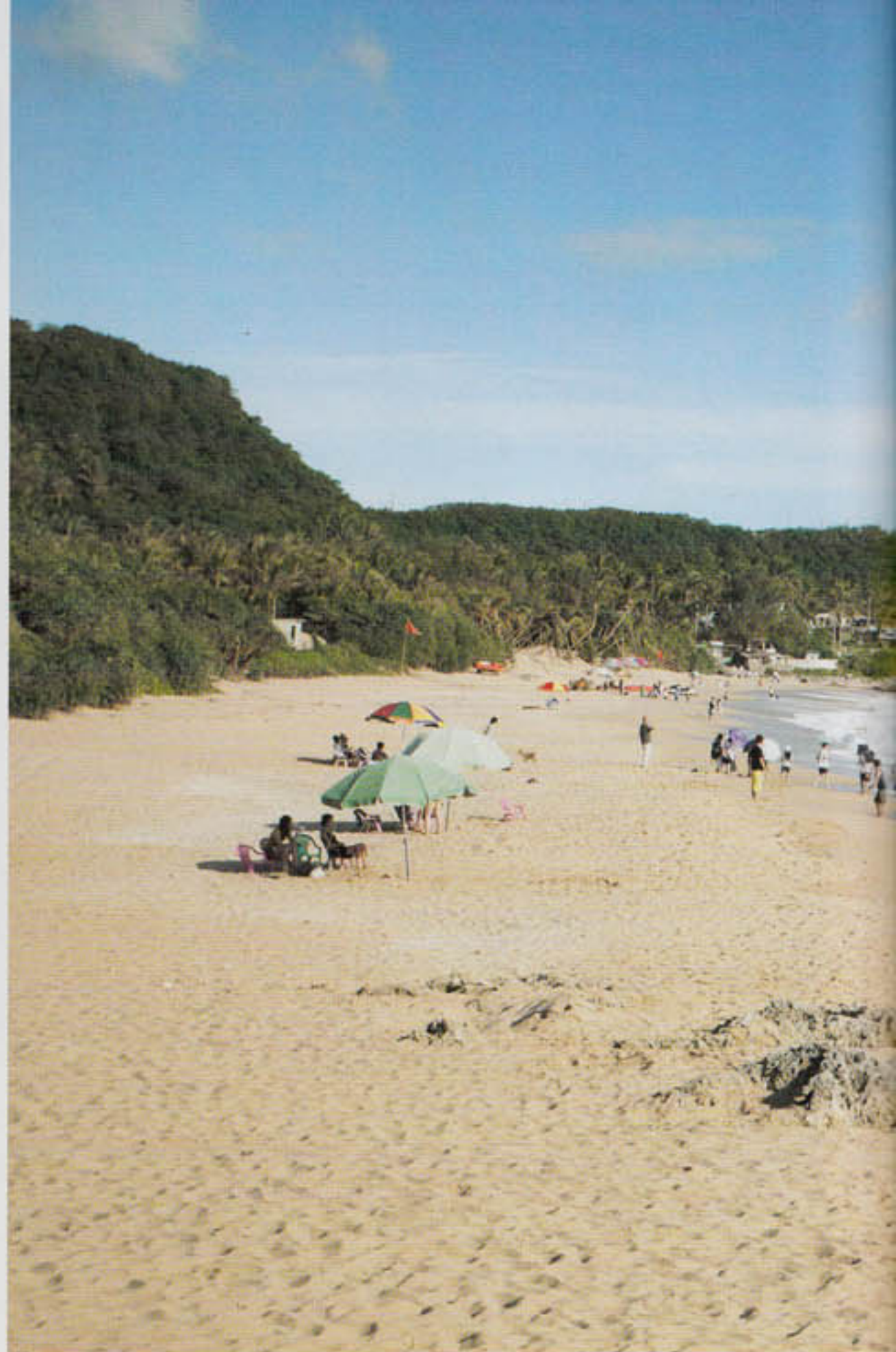
Clockwise from left: Hehuanshan road weaves up Mount Hehuan's flanks; bizarre mock-Tudor houses line the road en route to Hehuan; tropical fish make a tasty treat; Taiwanese clouded leopard lurk in the forest near the River Liwu; stopping to peer down the Taroko Gorge on the most Asian of vehicles – the motor scooter



LOCAL VIEW

Teyram Yudaw, hotel owner, Hualien

"Hire a local Truku guide for a hike to the high cliffs when you visit Taroko Gorge. Be sure to visit the Taiwan Indigenous Cultural Park (www.tacp.gov.tw)."



was on a tiny motor scooter wearing shorts, a T-shirt and a cycling cape as flimsy as a plastic bag when Typhoon Nalgae swept into eastern

Taiwan. I thought it was just a tropical shower at first but, after half an hour, rain was still whipping my face and stinging my skin; I was soaked to the bone. I could barely even make out the tail-lights of Simon's scooter a few dozen metres ahead as he pulled over.

"Do you want to stop? Looks like the rain could get heavy," he warned. I glanced around me. The huddle of houses nearby looked grim and unprepossessing.

"How far's Rueisuei?" I asked, thinking of hot tea and hot springs.

It was just 30 minutes further he replied – we pressed on.

However, with fewer than 10km to go, the rain became torrential. Our tiny scooters were buffeted around like yachts on a storm-swollen ocean as we tried desperately not to aquaplane through the vast puddles. Progress was as slow as a hearse.

It was no good. We made out the grey silhouette of a huge roadside teahouse and pulled in, seeking shelter from the storm.

"The English ruin tea," said tiny, smiling 77-year-old Mrs Xin Yeh as she handed me a steaming bonsai brew (and a slice of exquisite *bin gau* cake) and I instinctively looked for milk. "Tea is a delicious, delicate Chinese drink. It should not be spoilt with cow milk and sticky sugar."

The hot liquid slipped down like ambrosia and, as Mrs Yeh gently instructed me in the art of making the perfect cup, I gradually forgot the raging storm outside and began to reflect on my journey so far...



You beauty

Getting caught out in a typhoon had been the culmination of an intense few days in a country proving full of surprises.

I'd come to Taiwan on a whim – to visit somewhere quite unknown to me, and a place somewhat overlooked on the busy South-East Asian traveller trail. Imagining smoke stacks and factories, I'd been intrigued to discover that Taiwan is in fact the world's most heavily forested large island. The Portuguese, the first Europeans to visit, called it *Ilha Formosa* (the 'Beautiful Island'), and a quick pre-trip Google search revealed a place fringed with gorgeous white-sand beaches and dotted with thousands of volcano-warmed thermal springs.

So I'd contacted intrepid adventurer, fluent mandarin-speaker and Taiwan specialist Simon Foster of Bamboo Trails. Sensing my desire to get off the beaten track, he suggested we travel together through the heart of the island on that most Asian of vehicles: the motor scooter.

More Chinese than China

Our journey had begun in a scooter hire-shop in torrid Taichung, a 'Made in Taiwan' industrial city on the built-up west coast, bristling with factories and rushing highways. A large man with a friendly grin, >

Perfect precipices
The Qingshui Cliffs
plunge into the Pacific

I lay back in the steaming bath-water-warm pools as a storm raged around me'

◀ 'magnificent, the wonderful' in the Truku language. It was hard to disagree.

By mid-morning, when we set out on the first leg of our journey towards the southern cape at Kenting, clouds were building over the Pacific – but the weather didn't look threatening. When we took a diversion for more magnificent scenery at the Qingshui Cliffs, they were bathed in sunlight. But as we ate a lunch of red rice and chicken next to the paddy fields in a tiny Ami indigenous village it began to rain.

Shortly afterwards we were hit by the deluge and forced to find refuge in Mrs Xin Yeh's Tea House.

It was only when we reached our hotel in Rueisuei, less than a kilometre further on, that we learned we'd been caught by a typhoon. Or at least the far edge of one. The receptionist at the Hoya Spa Hotel blanched when she heard we'd been out on motor scooters; she bustled us off to the hotel's thermal springs with fresh towels and motherly tut-tuts.

I lay back in the vast and steaming bath-water-warm pools as the storm raged around me, ropes of rain pummelling the sweet-smelling frangipani trees and bending the bamboo fronds. I slept with its anger rattling the windows. By morning, however,

Nalgae had subsided leaving only dripping forest and bursting rivers.

Driving under the influence

The next day we took the coastal road through Taiwan's Eastern Rift Valley; paddy fields, palm groves and brilliant-green tea plantations clung to hills next to the ocean. We passed through villages where our Western faces brought surprise and waves.

Leaving Guanshan, I saw a string of little glass booths topped with lurid-pink lights. Intrigued, I pulled up in front of one. A grinning girl, dressed in a skin-tight sequinned bodice and made-up like a Barbie doll, squeaked and rushed to us brandishing a tray of what looked like cigarette packets decorated with lurid photos.



LOCAL VIEW

Chucky Thai
Surfer, Kenting

"Nanwan Beach in Kenting is the best place to surf in Taiwan. Visit the bar at the Afei Surf Shop & Hostel (www.afei.com.tw) to meet locals over a beer, especially on Saturday."

"Betel nut," Simon explained. "A pretty girl ensures the lorry drivers stop to buy them."

He bought a couple of boxes and opened one to reveal what appeared to be green acorns, cut in two and filled with a red paste.

"You chew them," Simon told me, popping one in his mouth and climbing back on the bike. I followed suit and in a few minutes had numbed cheeks drooling with aniseed-sweet saliva. I felt warmer all over, and Red Bull-revitalised. The tropical greens of the trees and the brilliant reds of the passing temples seemed more intense. And like a Taiwanese lorry driver, I spat yeuchy crimson goo behind me into the road.

In the afternoon we hiked through the lushness of Jhihben National Park, whose camphor tree and fern-filled rainforest covers the steep mountain slopes just south of Taitung. Jhihben is home to some of the island's unique animals including Taiwan's only native primate, the Formosan rock macaque, and spectacular birds such as the scarlet-headed mikado pheasant and the black-headed Formosan blue magpie. None came out to play, but it didn't matter: Jhihben is also dotted with dozens of hot springs, where we soaked after our long ride.

Life's a beach

More hot sun welcomed in our last day and the final leg of our journey. We clung to the Pacific coast, which by now was fringed with glorious white-sand beaches. Beike Shatan Beach was covered with millions of little shells; at Houbihu we snorkelled with groupers over coral; at Olaupi, on the southern cape, a lonely lighthouse looked out across the ocean to the Philippines. There was even a surf scene at Jialeshui, with toned and tanned Taiwanese in bikinis, board shorts and Havaiana flip-flops poised to tackle the impressive waves.

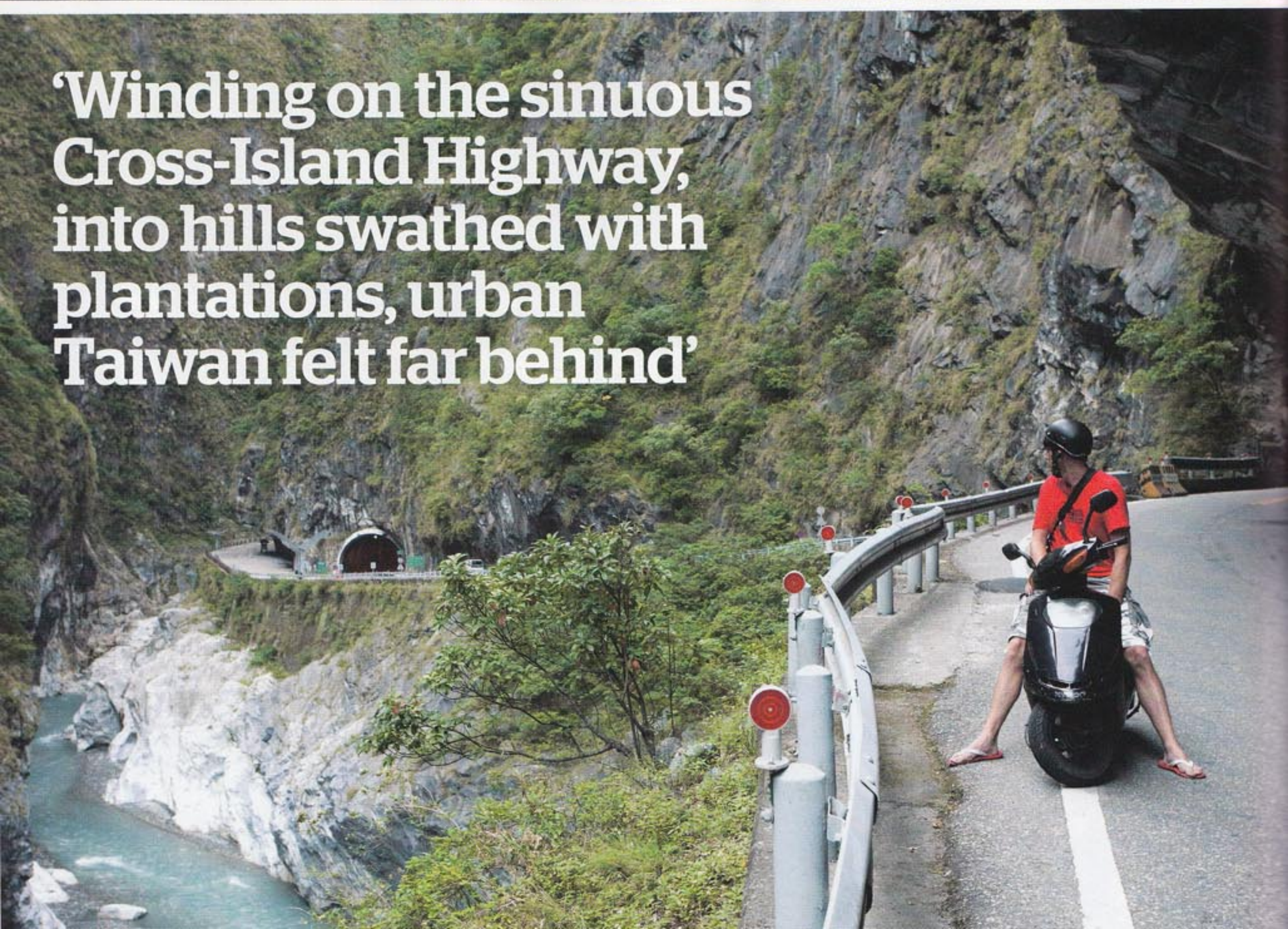
We wound into our final port of call – Kenting, in the far south – on a glorious, golden afternoon. After a short rest we went out to enjoy our final night on the town. The streets were lined with surf shops, seafood restaurants, pumping bars playing Taiwanese pop and chic beach shacks serving cocktails. It was the nearest thing I'd seen to a resort in Taiwan. But, it seemed, it was only for the Taiwanese.

Aside from Simon, the only foreigners I'd seen since arriving had been at the airport, far to the north in Taipei. Western tourists just don't come to Taiwan. As I sat in the final beach bar, margarita in hand, listening to the Pacific waves hit the beach, I struggled to understand why. ■

Alex Robinson is a freelance photographer and travel writer who has written guidebooks for Footprint, DK and Bradt



**‘Winding on the sinuous
Cross-Island Highway,
into hills swathed with
plantations, urban
Taiwan felt far behind’**





Taiwan

Footnotes

VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: Taipei

Population: 23 million

Language: Mandarin Chinese (official), Taiwanese (Min), indigenous languages including Truku, Bunun and Rukai

Time: GMT+8

International dialling code: +886

Visas: Not required by UK nationals

Money: New Taiwan Dollar (TWD), currently around 47TWD to the UK£. There are ATMs throughout Taiwan.

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

■ **Warm and dry throughout** the island, though cool and occasionally snowy up in the mountains.

■ Northern monsoon: **warm and wet in the north**; hot and sticky in the south; but cool in the mountains.

■ Monsoon rains in the south with a **chance of typhoons hitting** in the latter part of the season.

Health & safety

⚠ Hepatitis A & B, Japanese encephalitis and typhoid jabs are recommended. Crime is low; even the larger cities are safer than most in Europe. Little English is spoken outside Taipei. Taiwan still maintains capital punishment.

Further reading & information

Taiwan (Bradt 2010)

Why Taiwan Matters (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), by Shelley Rigger, a comprehensive introduction to the history and politics of modern Taiwan

go2taiwan.net – information on what to see and do in Taiwan in English

Eat Drink Man Woman (1994), movie by Taiwan's most famous film director Ang Lee, set in the country.

More online

Visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/131 for links to more content:

Archive articles

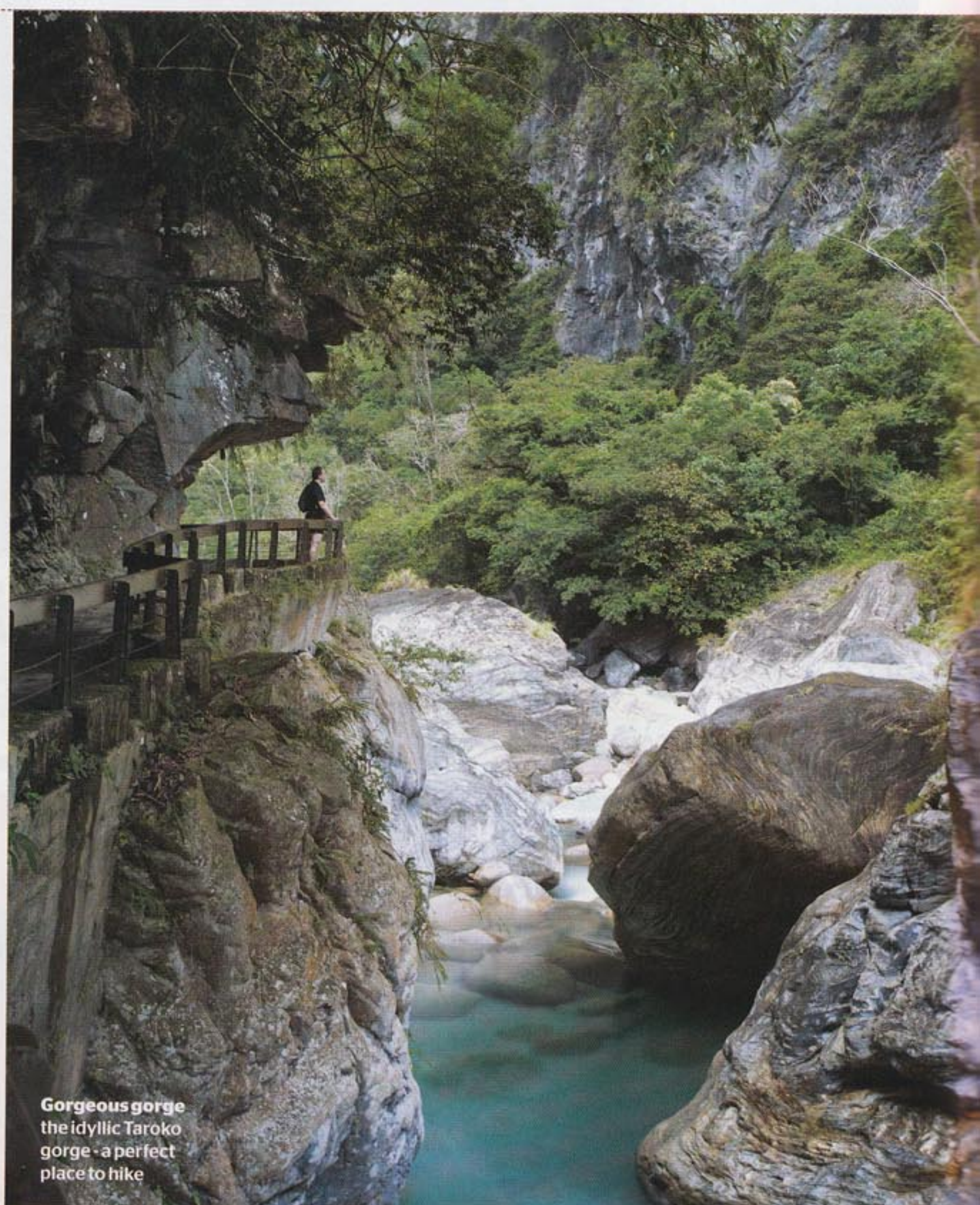
Majestic mountains and hi-tech temptations in Taiwan

– issue 87, Apr/May 07

10 trips for foodies – online, Jan 10

Planning guides

Taiwan Travel Guide



Gorgeous gorge
the idyllic Taroko
gorge – a perfect
place to hike

The trip

The author travelled with **Bamboo Trails** (+886 7735 4945, www.bambootrails.com) on a tailor-made itinerary involving a motor scooter tour from Taichung to Kenting via the Central Cross-Island, Pacific East Coast and East Rift Valley highways.

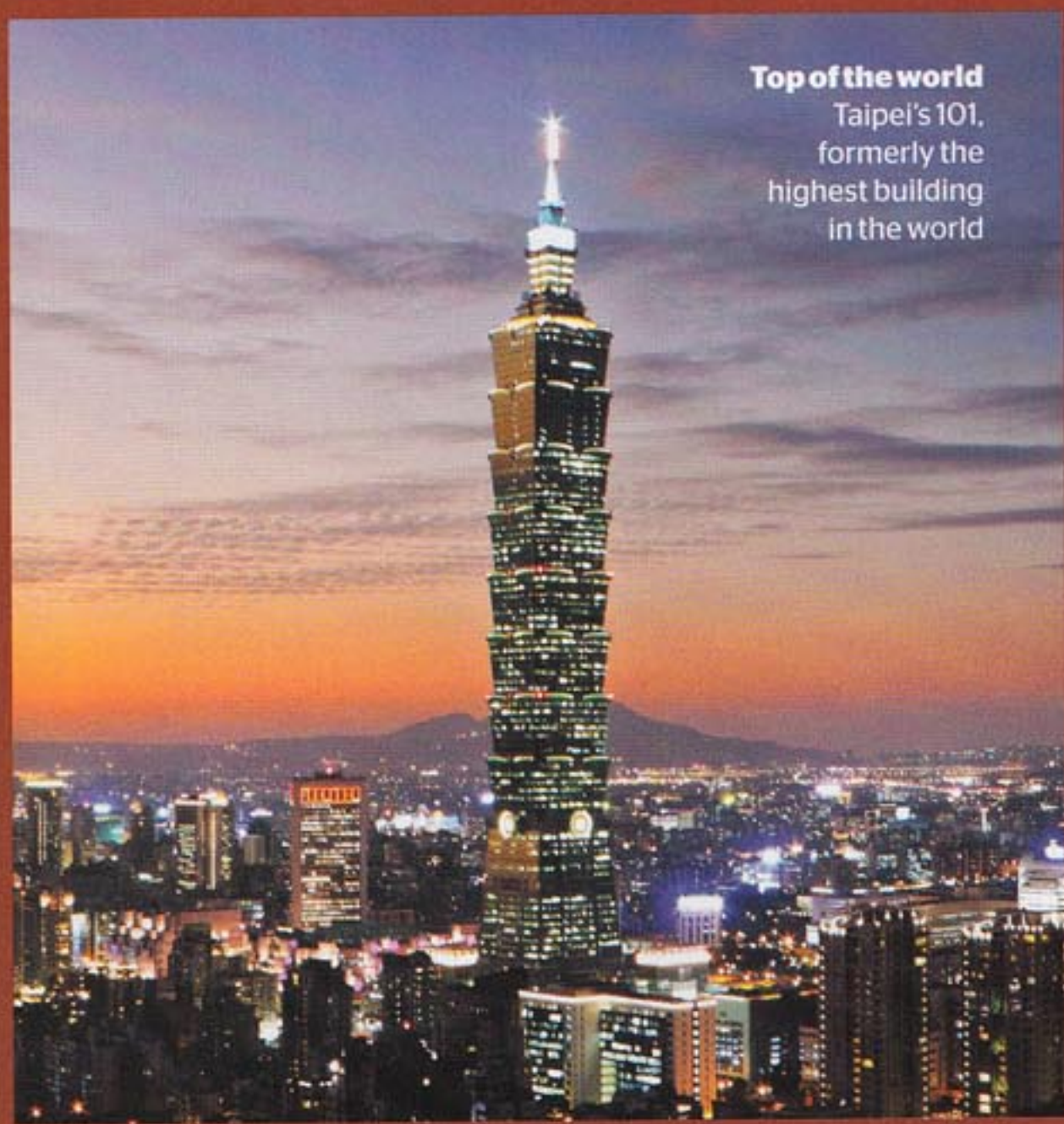
Bamboo Trails offers photography, culinary and general sightseeing tours throughout Taiwan and Asia. Its ten-day **Taiwan Full Throttle motor scooter tours** start at £1,600; 14-day General Taiwan tours start at around £1,600 including transfers, bilingual guides, tours, accommodation and some meals.

Getting there

✈ **Eva Air** (020 7380 8300, www.evaair.com) flies Heathrow-Taipei via Bangkok. Flights start at around £635 return; journey time 14-15 hours plus stopover.

Getting around

🚌 Taiwan is a little smaller than Switzerland. **Public transport is excellent**, with fast bullet trains running along the west coast and a good network of buses. Car hire is easy to organise at the airport or through Bamboo Trails. Bamboo organises motor scooter hire and bike tours – **cycling is very popular**.



Top of the world
Taipei's 101, formerly the highest building in the world

Taiwan Highlights

1. Taroko National Park

One of Asia's most impressive natural sights, with plunging marble walls, pristine rainforest, rushing rivers and a series of Taoist temples and shrines.

2. Jhihben National Forest

Camphor-wood, tree fern and bamboo forests, dozens of waterfalls, unique wildlife and easy trail walking.

3. The Central Cross-Island Highway

A spectacular road, climbing from

the industrial heartland of western Taiwan through betel-nut and tea plantations over the high mountain ridges of Hehuanshan and dropping to the Pacific through Taroko Gorge.

4. Sun Moon Lake

Honeymooning couples flock to this gorgeous mountain lake set in a bowl of verdant hills dotted with Taoist temples.

5. Rueisuei

One of Taiwan's first hot spring resorts, offering soothing medicinal and iron-rich volcanic

waters (said to cure rheumatism and infertility) at an average temperature of 48°C.

6. Kenting National Park

Pristine white-sand beaches, coral snorkelling, Pacific surf and cocktails in Kenting town.

7. Rift Valley Scenic Area

Tea plantations, hot springs, mountain ridges shrouded in forest and rushing rivers.

8. Qingshui Cliffs

Dramatic, almost sheer-sided cliffs covered in sub-tropical

forest fall into an inky blue Pacific.

9. Taipei 101, Taipei

At over 500m high, this fluted skyscraper was the world's tallest building until 2010 (when it was surpassed by the Burj Khalifa, Dubai). It remains the icon of modern Taiwan.

10. National Palace Museum, Taipei

Great repository of Asian art, including the royal treasures of Imperial China's Forbidden City.

Cost of travel

Taiwan is good value. A room in a top-end hotel in Taipei costs £75-100; characterful accommodation in the countryside costs less. A mojito at a beach bar costs around £2; a litre of bottled water 40p.

Accommodation

Hotels in Taiwan are of a high standard and range from stylish designer pads in Taipei to homey B&Bs and guesthouses in the countryside. **Gala Hotel** (186 Sung Jiang Rd, Taipei; www.galahotel.com.tw) is a slick contemporary hotel in the heart of Taipei with spacious

suites, a decent restaurant and a spa offering shiatsu massage next door. Doubles from 4,890TWD (£107).

Set in hills near Jhihben National Forest, **Rainbow Resort** (www.rainbow-hotel.com.tw) has airy rooms and an adjacent spa complex fed by thermal spring water. Doubles from 4,200TWD (£90).

Owned and managed by Truku indigenous people, **Crossing the Rainbow Bridge** (Chong-De Village, Sioulin Township, Hualien; www.teyra.com.tw) has cosy modern rooms set in a tropical garden at the entrance to Taroko Gorge. Doubles from 2,200TWD (£47).

Food & drink

Taiwanese cooking fuses mainland Chinese with Japanese and indigenous Taiwanese influences. Seafood features strongly on menus. Favourites include **oya misua**, a meaty sweet-and-sour soup with glass noodles, sautéed prawns, grilled or stir-fried cuttlefish and san pei chicken.

What to pack

Swimming gear, a sarong, snorkel and mask, and sandals. For the forest: loose, shirts and trousers, a mosquito net, sturdy shoes/boots and a sunhat. A **fleece/jacket for the mountains** (can freeze in winter). ■