THE PERFECT 10 | KAOHSIUNG

Harbour secrets

Tradition with an arty twist in Taiwan's port city

HELEN FOSTER

Clockwise from main: Dragon and Tiger Pagodas; Lingya district; Centre for the Arts in Weiwuying; Dome of Light at Formosa Boulevard station; below: beef noodle soup

01 Not only is Kaohsiung usually pronounced incorrectly (it's gow-shung, not kow-seeung), its image is normally of a dreary industrial town; it's home to Taiwan's largest port, after all. But Kaohsiung has been shrugging off its working-class reputation for a while, and the arrival last October of the futuristic National Kaohsiung Centre for the Arts in Weiwuying has firmly put it on the cultural map. Built on nearly 10ha of an old military training base, the centre contains five performance spaces showcasing everything from opera to puppetry, and regularly hosts international artists such as the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Even if you don't catch a show, it's worth a visit to see the jaw-dropping architecture. It's like standing in a spaceship; khh.travel; npac-weiwuying.org.

02 The city's Lingya district was once a nondescript residential area of boxlike apartments. One day, an artist belonging to a local group called the Wallriors picked up a spray can and everything changed. Now, huge murals run in a riot of colour for block after block; a giant stag towers over one building, goldfish swirl across the front of another. While street art can sometimes proliferate in dodgy neighbourhoods, Lingya is just a short walk from the arts centre and is safe to explore. Head north on Jianjun Road and you'll find the works on your right. This is not your average graffiti; facebook.com/thewallriors.

03 The sleepy dog lying between the flag-topped front gates of the former Japanese Navy Fongshan Communications Centre barely glances up as visitors wander inside. It's a far cry from what would have happened had they tried to enter in 1945, after Taiwan was handed to the Republic of China. The radio station became an interrogation camp for the Chinese navy and was used as a place to question subversive servicemen. Today, it stands, partly derelict, as a monument to Taiwan's unsettled past. Photographers love its weathered appearance. Don't forget to look up at the buildings' roofs, which were covered with dirt to dampen any impact from bombing. Time has seen nature take over and they're now thriving gardens in the sky.

04 Metro stations don't normally make the list of a city's must-sees but Kaohsiung's Formosa Boulevard station is home to The Dome of Light, an installation by Italian artist Narcissus Quagliata and one of the largest glass artworks in the world. Comprising 4500 glass panels, it covers more than 660sq m and took more than four years to complete. Find it by the main ticket concourse and marvel at how it was constructed without a single panel cracking.

05 Many bars in Kaohsiung adopt an international theme, such as British/US hybrid Black Dog Pub or the Japan-esque izakayas that line the waterfront by Wufu 4th Road bridge. For something unique head to the tiny TimeS Antique & Bar. You'll be amazed what's hidden behind the nondescript metal door. Owner Peter is obsessed with 1950s Americana and the walls are lined with treasures such as old radios and Viewmaster toys he ships from the US, many of which still work. It's a bit tricky to find, but trust in Google Maps and walk up the alley towards the row of fairy lights. Don't worry if you hear barking as you approach; that's Mojo, the bar's chihuahua. His bark is definitely worse than his bite. If you're a dog person he'll be sitting on your lap scoffing treats in minutes; facebook.com/timesantiqueandbar.

06 Beef noodle soup is the unofficial national dish of Taiwan and is said to have originated in Kaohsiung, so it's no wonder you'll get an amazing bowl at one of the two branches of Gang Yuan Beef Noodles in the city. The chunks of beef stewed in rich broth for hours fall apart with the touch of a chopstick. During the day, foodies should head to Yancheng, where a maze of tiny restaurants and stalls feed the hungry. Graze on a steaming basket of dumplings from Yonghe, or try a bowl of the peppery broth from the father-and-daughter eatery at 119 Qixian 3rd Road (look for the faded green tables and maps on the wall) that will leave your mouth zinging for hours. Tiny Lane 151, Daren Street, is studded with bao (steamed bun) sellers, bakers and traditional tea shops with leaves wrapped in beautiful packaging. They make great gifts.

07 If Disney built temples they would look like the bright cartoonesque collection that circles Lotus Pond. Most famous are the Tiger and Dragon Pagodas with their giant creature statues; for good luck you must walk into the mouth of the dragon and out the mouth of the tiger. Walk two minutes northeast and you'll find the Spring and Autumn Pavilions dedicated to Kuan Kung, the god of war. Finally, pay homage to the giant image of the High Heavenly Xuan God at the last temple on the lake, Zuoying Yuandi.

08 A five-minute boat ride from Gushan Ferry Terminal brings you to Cijin Island, famous for the seafood restaurants that line the Old Street. But with fame comes queues. If you want to beat the lunch crowds, slip into the Cijin Sunset Bar where you can order a cold Taiwan beer and a selection of snacks with a view of sea, sand and palm trees. As the name suggests, it's also a great place to watch the sunset, but it does get busy so snag your spot early. Before embarking for the island, take time to wander the triangle of backstreets that fan east from the port. They have an intriguing mix of traditional shops, offices and temples, and trendy new cafes. The beautifully presented fruit and ice cream dishes at Ootoro Milk are worth a stop.

09 No one should leave Kaohsiung without visiting the Pier 2 Art Centre that stretches 1.5km from the Love Pier light rail station to the Hamasen Railway Cultural Park. Its parks, warehouses and walls are packed with paintings, installations and sculptures so huge they dwarf the queue of people standing next to them for selfies. It's relatively quiet in the week but attracts a sea of people at weekends, so pick your time carefully. Pier 2 is also home to Sunny Hills, where you can pick up one of Taiwan's famous pineapple cakes. Don't go home without one; pier-2.khcc.gov.tw/eng; sunnyhills.com.tw/store/en.

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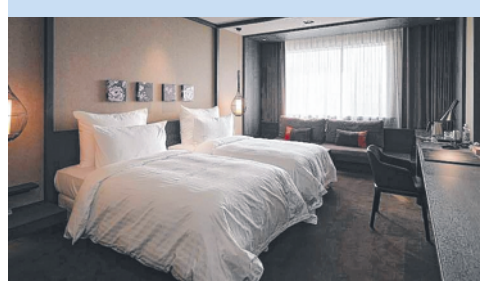
10 Dua in the local dialect means "to stay", and sleek Hotel Dua is a modern oasis in a town where accommodation is dominated by budget hotel chain Kindness. The 158 rooms are decorated in a stylish slate grey-and-white palette that you'll find echoed throughout the property's communal areas, including in the stylish rooftop restaurant and bar Etage 15. Kaohsiung is relatively warm year-round and a drink here is a good way to end the evening. The hotel is also close to Formosa Boulevard metro station and Liuhe, possibly the most popular of Kaohsiung's many night markets. Note that on its website, Hotel Dua's rooms are measured in ping, a Mandarin measurement that converts to just over 3sq m; the smallest rooms are 10 ping, the largest measure 28 ping. A standard 10-ping double starts from about $160 a night; hoteldua.com.tw.