

On Taiwan's southeastern coast, the alluring, snail-shaped county of Taitung is Taiwan's wonderful secret. Taitung escapes mass tourism, despite having some of the island's most stunning geography and being a hub for its deeply rooted cultural traditions. A powerful typhoon struck Taitung on 8 July 2016, causing two deaths, many injuries and significant damage to the region's infrastructure. At the time of writing, the clean-up operation was underway and looked likely to take several weeks. Travelers should consult their national government for more advice.

Balloons galore

Come summer, Taitung also has the most enchanting skies in Taiwan as hot air ballooners congregate for the Taiwan International Balloon Fiesta. Every July and August, colorful and outrageous balloons float above the grassy and placid Luye Plateau, a half-hour drive from Taitung town. Fabulously, the festival is totally free, although if you want a bob about in a basket you'll have to buy a ticket (NT\$500 for a tethered ride or NT\$9,000 for a 45-minute trip). Make sure to catch one of the night-time 'glow shows' when tethered balloons, lit from within, dance to music like fireworks in giant bubbles.



Fiery festival

Taitung town is a sleepy grid of tree-lined lanes directly next to the ocean. With most of the younger generation wooed away by the faster economies of Taiwan's west coast cities, grandmas and grandpas rule the roost here. This lends Taitung a traditional sense of living history not found anywhere else on the island. The year's ultimate drama comes during Bombing Master Handan, a raucous festival held at Chinese New Year. The streets are filled with smoke and sparks as onlookers pelt a half-naked man in a sedan chair with pink bricks of firecrackers. The man is a stand-in for Lord Handan, the God of Wealth, and the firecrackers are to keep him warm and happy.

Even if you can't make it for Handan's rowdy to-do, history is apparent all over Taitung. Streets are dotted with lovely, old Japanese-era buildings recognizable by their dark-tiled roofs and black beams. On a sunny afternoon, every other road seems to yield another Taoist temple with scarlet pillars and fearsome ceramic dragons. Tianhou Temple is the boldest and biggest with its ostentatious swirling dragon eaves and swaying red lanterns within.

