The Nation’s First Long-Distance Gondola: 2,364,682 People Realize Their Dreams of Flying by Taking the Maokong Gondola

The Maokong Gondola formally began operations on July 4, 2007, and the skyline of Taipei was now marked by new spectacular moving scenery. The Maokong Gondola is the first recreational cable-car system in Taipei City and the longest cable-car system in Taiwan with a length of 4.03 km. (The gondola in the Formosan Aboriginal Cultural Village is 2 km long, the gondola in Wulai is 0.38 km long, and the gondola in Hualien Farglory Ocean Park is 0.33 km long.) There are four stops along the way, with a complete ride taking from 17 to 20 minutes. Up to December 31, 2007, an equivalent of 2,364,682 people had taken the gondola ride. The Maokong Gondola has rapidly become one of the most popular tourist spots in Taiwan.

The Cradle in the Sky Rocks out a New Development for Maokong

The Maokong Gondola is located in Muzha, in Wenshan District in southern Taipei, a place famous for its “Iron Goddess of Mercy” tea. In the 1980s, the government promoted the development of leisure agriculture and established the “Muzha Tea Garden for Tourists”. As a result, Maokong became a new promised land with many local restaurants and tea houses offering tea of a special flavor and night scenery of Taipei to a continuous flow of tourists. In recent years, however, as many new tourist spots have been developed in the suburban areas of Taipei in response to the two-day weekend policy, Maokong had been gradually losing its appeal to tourists. To revive local businesses, improve the environment, solve the traffic problem, and improve the quality of leisure activities, the Taipei City Government implemented a major project for local development which changed the designation of preserved areas in both Zhinan Li and Laoquen Li of Wenshan to land for building constructions (i.e., construction of service facilities for leisure agriculture) and land for building parking lots, and the areas designated for development also underwent some changes. The Maokong Gondola is the major outcome of this project.

The construction of the Maokong Gondola was designed by the Department of Transportation of the Taipei City Government which is in charge of the system, and also determined the route. The New
Construction Office of the Public Works Department of the Taipei City Government signed contracts with the Chunyuen Construction Co. Ltd and the POMA Company of France to separately build the required mechanical and electrical operating systems. The Maokong Gondola has adopted the single-cable ventilated cable-car system which is equipped with a high-transport quantity and low unit transport fee that prioritizes the function of leisure entertainment. This system is the most popular one for the newly constructed gondola sites. Each cable car can carry eight passengers and travels at the speed of six meters per second. The cable-cars are launched at a frequency of one per 12 seconds. Thus, at peak running times, the system can service 2,400 passengers per hour.

As for its route, the Maokong Gondola makes four stops along the way to its Maokong destination, including: Taipei Zoo Station, Taipei Zoo South Station, Zhinan Temple Station, and Maokong Station. There are also two corner stations. This route connects the Taipei Zoo, Zhinan Temple, and the Maokong area as a tourist area. The combination of “the MRT, the gondola, and on foot” provides a route without cars and without traffic jams; it eliminates the possibility of getting lost and does not increase air pollution from motorized vehicles which in turn helps preserve the charm of Maokong’s tea gardens and its sense of beauty. Moreover, the route of the gondola directs tourists traveling the MRT Muzha line and visiting the Taipei Zoo to the Maokong area, where they help revive local businesses and industries.

The Maokong Gondola's Unprecedented Construction and its Amazing Popularity

The POMA Company of France noted that the Maokong Gondola has six station areas, five interconnected zones, and a 90 degree angle as part of its route; it is a most complex, unique, and user-efficient (99% effective use since August 2007) gondola system that the company has ever built. It is unprecedented in the history of cable-car construction anywhere in the world.

One distinctive feature of the Maokong Gondola is that it employs an automated circulating cable car system. With the gondola site so close to the Taipei Zoo, it is essential to protect the zoo animals from excessive noise, while preserving the wooded surroundings to the greatest extent possible. The construction manager therefore decided to ship a small crane and steel rods to create a structure to which the supporting pillars of the cable line could be connected rather than the usual manner of digging out a road on the slope to the various construction sites. The construction workers then built a shipping pulley line to ship construction materials and workers to the construction sites. The workers set up stakes and a line to construct the pillars one at a time that would support the cable line that varies from 3 to 70 meters above the ground. They had to ensure the solidity of the pillars and the safety of the overall construction while doing the least damage to the natural ecological environment, a demand that doubled the difficulty in constructing the whole system. This “mission impossible” was fulfilled thanks to the hard work of the construction team.

However, just as other major construction projects, the construction of Maokong Gondola from the very beginning attracted public attention and proved to be a source of heated discussion and criticism. For example, it was criticized as potential source of damage and pollution to the natural ecological environment; moreover, noise emanating from it could disturb local residents. Other issues included its effect on the special cultural features of the Maokong area, and the problems of safety and comfort of the gondola system itself. Even though system itself was not listed as something that needed to be investigated for its effect on the environment, the Taipei City Government still came up with an “Investigative Report on the Effect on the Environment with respect to the Construction of the Maokong Gondola System” to enlist opinions from all sides and ensure that the development would not adversely affect the area. The prerequisites with regard to the planning and constructing of the gondola included: minimum effect on the natural environment, maximum benefit for local development, and meeting public needs and providing for its well-being. All related details were carefully considered, and all deficiencies and defects were to be addressed as soon as possible.
Though a few minor defects needed to be overcome, the Maokong Gondola has proved to be a great success. The trial period began on July 4, 2007. In spite of some complaints, the gondola has gained widespread praise. The public has come in great numbers for a ride on the gondola for a total of 2,364,682 for the first six months (the number reached one million on September 23, and two million on December 9).

Even though the operation of the Maokong Gondola has been positive, the Taipei City Government has taken great pains in ensuring the safety and comfort of the public. For example, since Maokong experiences significant rainfall and thunderstorms, lightening arresters and electric generators were installed at each station and post. Moreover, hardware and software for monitoring lightning and assisting in management of the terminal were installed to predict with a great degree of precision the movement and the speed of thunderclouds. The operating system serves to determine the need for temporary stoppages and the appropriate time to restart operations. In addition, when the wind reaches Level 7, the operating system automatically shuts off, and it can withstand earthquakes of a magnitude of 6 on the Richter scale. To provide cars that are suitably ventilated and optimize passenger comfort, ventilation holes were added to the lower part of the car, and an adjustable window that can be opened or closed was also installed.

In its early stages the Maokong Gondola went through a period of trial and adjustment. To increase its stability and improve the maintenance of the system, it was decided, after careful discussion and evaluation, that in addition to regular daily maintenance, starting from July 30, 2007, the gondola system would not operate on Mondays. This day would be reserved for careful and detailed maintenance procedures. Such careful prevention policies were adopted to ensure the safety of the public and the effective operation of the Maokong Gondola so that each and every individual may feel worry free when embarking on the gondola ride and enjoy the beautiful natural scenery along the route and realize their dreams of flying in the sky.

Looking Down from the Sky, Enjoying a Bird’s-eye View of the Most Beautiful Mountainscape of Taipei City

Now, let us introduce you to the scenery of the four stations along the route of the Maokong Gondola. Once you arrive at the Taipei Zoo of the MRT Muzha Line, simply follow the signs that read “Maokong Gondola”. A walk of about 350 meters will take you to the Taipei Zoo Station of the Maokong Gondola. Now get ready to board the cable car and enjoy the view that has been hailed as “the most beautiful mountainscape of Taipei City”.

In order to ensure the public of a pleasant tour around the Maokong area, the Taipei City Government has designed a variety of special tourist tickets, including a ticket for three gondola rides (valid for three rides of the gondola without date or time limitations), the 321 Maokong tourist ticket (valid for three gondola rides, unlimited rides on all buses in the Maokong area, and one ride on the zoo vehicle at the zoo), the Maokong edition of the Taipei tourist passport (valid for three gondola rides and unlimited rides on the MRT and buses for a one-day period), and group tickets for tourist groups or package tour groups. The public can buy the kind of tickets that meet their needs and tour schedules.

Once on board, as you leave the Taipei Zoo Station, the cable car rises up gradually,
moving along with the rises and falls of the hills. You can see different views from the car at different heights and from different angles, including daytime and nighttime views, and those on sunny days and rainy mist-filled days. When you look out from the cable car, you get a bird’s eye view of Taipei Zoo, the Giraffe Chimney of the Muzha Garbage Incinerator, and the riverside parks along the Jingmei River. You also have a sky view of the trains of the MRT Muzha line to see who goes faster.

Once you pass “Corner Station One”, you soon arrive at the “Taipei Zoo South Station”. You have the option to get off here to visit the zoo. If you choose to stay on board, the cable-car soon reaches “Corner Station Two” and rises gradually as the view of Taipei Zoo changes into one of hills and valleys. After a 90 degree turn at “Corner Station Two”, you arrive at the “Zhinan Temple Station”, the highest point of the ride. The gondola then gradually descends downhill, easing it way along the valley by Zhinan Creek. After enjoying the view of several waterfalls, you reach the “Maokong Station”, the final stop.

When you reach either the “Zhinan Temple Station” or the “Maokong Station”, you may decide to get off and take a walk along a hiking trail or an ancient trail in the tea growing areas if you have the time. Naturally, tasting the tea in one of the tea houses in the Maokong area is a delight to experience as well as the hospitality of the local people and the distinctive culture and atmosphere to be found here.

If you are on a tight schedule and have only 40 minutes to spare in the air, other than looking upon the such notable landmarks as the Taipei Zoo, the Giraffe Chimney of the Muzha Incinerator, and the No. 2 Freeway, you can also catch sight of the Financial Tower of Taipei 101 and the street scenes in Wenshan District. On a clear day, you can see as far as Guanyin Mountain. Such a green mountain view, accompanied by the rich musical sounds of big-crested hawks, birds-of-five-colors and speckled Frogs, is the most unique and the closest to the nature in all of Taipei. If you take the gondola ride in the evening hours, you can delight in the night view of Taipei with its countless jewels of lights. One trip is enough to know why the Maokong Gondola is a must for enjoying the night views of Taipei.

Celebrating a Record Number of Passengers, the Public has all the fun

Once the Maokong Gondola was opened to the public, the Taipei Rapid Transit Company issued “Information on the Operation of the Maokong Gondola” in Chinese, English and Japanese for the public to become aware of the gondola system and related tourist information. It also encouraged the public to take the MRT to arrive at the gondolas, an environmentally friendly and convenient mode of travel.

The operation of the Maokong Gondola created a new wave of tourism. Those who have not yet had a chance to take a gondola ride are eager to come, and those who have encourage their friends and relatives to join in on the fun. In less than six months after the gondolas started running, the number of passengers reached the number of 2 million on December 9, 2007. To celebrate such an significant feat, the Taipei City Government, the Taipei Rapid Transit Company and other sponsors held an activity entitled: “The Warmest Party of Gratitude at Year’s End in Celebration of the 2 Million Passengers Riding on the Maokong Gondola.” Famous stars and pop idols sang songs one after another to share the overwhelming success the Maokong Gondola has achieved among the public. Many prizes were given out on that day, and everyone who joined in had a whole lot of fun!

Judging from the fact that the running of the Maokong Gondola is improving and getting smoother, it is estimated that during the New Year holidays in February 2008, the number of passengers will reach 3 million. The Taipei Rapid Transit Company has planned to celebrate this event with a wide range of activities, such as painting the cable cars, and setting up an LED to fill the Maokong area with a romantic atmosphere, enabling the string of cable-cars to create the image of sky lanterns sailing in the sky.

If you haven’t yet had a ride on the Maokong Gondola, give it a try in the new year!

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