

Stories

Secret Passages at the Grand Hotel

Whether viewed from a distance on the Zhongshan Expressway or up close from Mt. Jiantan, the Grand Hotel presents an imposing figure, one of grandeur, luxury, and sophistication. And this was precisely as its designers intended, as the hotel initially hosted foreign dignitaries and the First Family's elite guests.

Initially, the hotel was run by the Duen-Mou Club, headed by First Lady Soong Mei-ling. According to writer Lee Tung-hao, parties would be held every three to five days, with "ambassadors and dignitaries dancing gracefully to music until dawn". In an era when public dancing and singing were prohibited throughout Taiwan, the Grand Hotel was one of the few places where nighttime revelry continued. With the threat of war still looming, the hotel also constructed secret passageways east and west to guarantee the safety of President Chiang Kai-shek and his esteemed guests. The passages are now open for tourists to explore.

The actual running of the hotel unsurprisingly fell into the hands of members of the First Family. Soong Mei-ling appointed her niece Kung Ling-wei as general manager. Also known as "Kung Er", Kung Ling-wei was the second daughter of former Premier Kung Hsiang-hsi and a descendant of the union between the powerful Kung and Soong families. Often described as "domineering", Kung had direct access to the First Lady, which meant she had a free hand in the running of the Grand Hotel.

In the conservative social atmosphere of the time, Kung Ling-wei defied norms by wearing male attire, enjoying cigars, and remaining unmarried throughout her life. Born into an influential family, she was one of the few women of that era to confidently present a non-traditional gender image to the public.

Taiwanese People's Party Headquarters

Like many streets in Taipei, Datong District's nondescript Tianshui Road is lined with buildings and scooters parked on the pavement. But if you ever happen to stroll down Tianshui Road, take notice of number 45, which was once the headquarters of the first political party formed by the people of Taiwan—the Taiwanese People's Party.

The founding of the party in 1927 was the collective response of intellectuals such as Chiang Wei-shui, Lin Hsien-tang, and Li Ying-chang to their grand dream of political, economic, and social freedoms. The founders resisted colonial oppression in politics, advocated for economic fairness for farmers and workers, and fought for the eradication of social ills such as opium abuse.

At first, the Japanese colonial government tolerated the formation of the Taiwanese People's Party, but within four years it reversed its decision and sent in police to forcibly break up the party assembly and arrest the leadership. As you stand at no. 45, the ground beneath your feet is the very place where sixteen members of the Taiwanese People's Party were taken away by the police. Party leader Chiang Wei-shui was arrested and died within six months at the early age of 40.

Although the Taiwanese People's Party headquarters were demolished, as you stand here you can reflect on Chiang Wei-shui's words, "Compatriots must unite; true strength lies in unity."

Yin Hai-kuang Residence

Wenzhou Street's Alley 16, Lane 18, is a quiet little alley that twists and turns. Sixty years ago, two types of people frequented it: thoughtful young students seeking out Yin Hai-kuang for his advice on philosophical and political matters, and military and police agents tasked with surveillance, who shadowed Yin Hai-kuang and others as they came and went.

Yin Hai-kuang was a liberal philosopher who taught at the nearby National Taiwan University. In 1960, he was censored by the government for his writings in the independent periodical *Free China Journal* and his work with figures such as Lei Chen to set up an opposition party. As a consequence, Yin could no longer teach at university, his works were banned, and he was put under lifelong surveillance. Nevertheless, Yin continued to think and write in this small house until his death in 1969.

In the article that led to his censorship, "The Great River Flows Ever Eastward", Yin expressed his belief that reasonable aspirations for freedom, democracy, and human rights would inevitably be realized and could not be obstructed by a minority. Although he did not live to see these aspirations fulfilled, today we can pay our respects to this champion of freedom by freely entering the quiet, narrow alley that leads to his former residence without fear of surveillance.

Freedom Lane

Cheng “Nylon” Nan-jung played a crucial role in Taiwan’s pro-democracy movement. This narrow alley was on his daily route to the office of his magazine, where he ultimately self-immolated for his beliefs.

From March 1984 to April 1989, every working day Cheng would walk to the door of No. 11, open it, climb to the third floor, and enter the editor-in-chief's office. The magazine he founded, *Freedom Era Weekly*, frequently published articles critical of the government, demanding the lifting of martial law and the dissolution of the secret police and advocating for Taiwanese independence.

The articles directly challenged government authority. To protect journalists and other contributors from persecution, their names were often omitted and instead it was stated, “All editorial responsibility is borne by the editor-in-chief, Cheng Nan-jung.”

On the morning of that fateful day, April 7, 1989, hundreds of police surrounded the magazine offices to detain Cheng, and fire engines were stationed at the entrance to the lane. In response to *Freedom Era Weekly*'s publication of a legal scholar's draft “Constitution of the Republic of Taiwan”, Cheng was charged with sedition.

Refusing to be silenced, Cheng locked himself in his office. As the police broke down the magazine's front door and prepared to breach the metal office door, Cheng poured gasoline over himself and set himself on fire.

Today, the 3rd floor of No. 11 houses the Cheng Nan-jung Foundation. The editor-in-chief's office looks exactly as it did at the time of the tragic event.

Changqing Temple & Banyan Tree

For many people in Taipei, the mention of Guting might bring to mind the bustling and towering buildings outside the metro station along Heping West Road. But just a couple of turns from there is Jinjiang Street. Unlike the hustle and bustle of Heping West Road, the residential buildings along Jinjiang Street are generally four or five stories tall, and noisy traffic and crowds are noticeably absent.

Venture into the alleyways of Jinjiang Street, and you'll come across a temple dedicated to the Earth God known as Changqing Temple. Behind the temple stands an ancient banyan tree with a circumference of up to ten meters that is believed to be over 250 years old. Members of the local community often gather under the tree to chat and socialize.

What many may not know is that this temple was the center of Guting Village, which was founded during the Qing Dynasty when immigrants from Quanzhou in Fujian began cultivating the land. The original settlement was not large, but the construction of waterways such as Liugong Canal led to the development of the nearby Jingmei area, which in turn led to an increase in the population around Guting.

Changqing Temple became the spiritual center for these pioneers, while also serving as a testament to inter-ethnic cooperation and coexistence. After the Second World War, many Hakka people migrated to the Taipei area, and a large number settled in Guting, where they formed the Bo Gong Association and played an active role in the temple's renovation and in the ceremonies held there.

Meanwhile, the adult children of Chinese immigrants who were originally settled in the nearby Nanjichang area decided to purchase properties in Guting and also became worshippers at Changqing Temple. All local residents, regardless of their ethnic background, can find shelter under the ancient banyan tree and seek blessings at Changqing Temple.

Beitou Children's Amusement Park

As you walk from the Beitou to Xinbeitou metro station, you'll pass by a number of hot spring resorts and a popular public bathhouse loved by locals. When winter comes, this area is the top choice for Taipei residents seeking to ward off the chill.

As far back as the Japanese colonial era, people loved to soak in hot springs in Beitou. The present-day Beitou Children's Amusement Park was originally part of the public baths, allowing parents to enjoy a springtime soak while their children played in the park next door. Almost a century later, the children who once slid down the terrazzo slide are now white-haired senior citizens. Yet the very same slide they once enjoyed can still be found in the park, faithfully serving the newest generation of Beitou residents every weekend.

In keeping with the park's century-old history, tropical plants dating from the Japanese colonial era surround the park. Full of tropical charm, the exotic plants were chosen to fit the Japanese colonial image of Taiwan as a "country of the South". Today, the colonizers are long gone, but the scent of the greenery they planted still wafts through the air in Beitou.

Hexing Coal Mine

The idea of a coal mine might conjure images of remote villages in old movies, with mountainous paths, rail carts, and perpetual mist. It's hard to imagine that the bustling Xinyi District ever contained an old mine.

Visitors can start by grabbing a bite in the bustling Wuxing commercial district near Taipei Medical University. After that, hop on a bike for a 15–20-minute ride or take a leisurely 30–40-minute stroll up a slight incline, and you'll arrive at Hexing Mine.

The mine, which opened in the late Japanese colonial period, ceased operating in the 1970s. Since then, the city has renovated it and transformed into a themed tourist attraction. Inside are exhibits showing what the mine looked like and how the mining process worked. Nearby, there is even a bat cave, providing visitors with an opportunity to get a closer look at these distant mammalian relatives hanging from the ceiling. If you're interested in geology and landscaping, keep an eye out for the stalactites inside the mine and the various techniques used to prevent soil erosion on the slopes above.

This little mine may be somewhat lacking in size, but it gives visitors a glimpse into the former prosperity of the mining industry. After exploring the mine, you can take a stroll to the nearby Four Beasts Mountain Trail for a tranquil, scenic hike.

Note: Hexing Coal Mine lies in Xinyi District's Liuhe Borough. The nearby Taihe Borough also contains a coal mine, Dexing Coal Mine, and the local community leader is happy to provide guided tours upon request.

Wufen Shangxi Mural

Every day during peak hours, crowds of people commute between Neihu and Xizhi. If you're one of them, the next time you pass between the two areas, take a moment to notice the natural boundary of Neigou Creek.

Taipei City Government has used ecological methods to transform Neigou Creek, successfully restoring the local ecosystem and bringing back greenery, insect sounds, and bird calls, with pathways along the creek providing a place for a leisurely stroll. In addition to the natural environment, the cultural landscape is also worth visiting, in the form of the Wufen Shangxi Mural.

This mosaic artwork spans two hundred meters and allows the viewer to imagine farming life as it was in this area a century ago—tilling the soil in spring, tending the crops in summer, bringing in the harvest in autumn, and storing it for winter. It also depicts coal being mined and transported to Nangang via the Wufen Suspension Bridge.

Artist Yen Sung-tao made his debut in manga, but went underground for a decade, before returning to view to create oil paintings of the local landscapes of Taiwan. Yen volunteered to paint the Wufen Shangxi Mural. It involved multiple visits, revisions, and six months of painting to lay down the lines, before handing the colouring over to students from Neihu Community College, Donghu Junior High School and Kangning College of Medical Care, among others.

Maybe you only ever passed through this place on your commute before, but when you stop and look you can appreciate an artwork that is both about and by the local community.

Nangang Tea Exhibition Center

Today's exploration of Nangang takes us in the footsteps of early pioneers as we venture into the mountains. In the drizzle, following the winding path along Dakeng River. On one side is Jiuzhuang, once one of the eight major villages in Nangang, while the other side leads to Xizhi.

During the Qing Dynasty, many immigrants from Anxi arrived here, mostly tea farmers. Wang Shuijin and Wei Jingshi are considered the most important tea masters of that time. The area around Nanangang's Laoliao was also the birthplace of Taiwanese Baozhong tea.

Wandering through the misty tea gardens, a faint and delicate fragrance permeates the mountain town. This place was once a crucial path for Taiwan's tea, mining, and osmanthus industries. Passing by traditional red-brick old houses along the way, you can imagine the prosperity of the tea industry back then. Although it may evoke a sense of nostalgia today, Laoliao has become a secluded earthly paradise.

When you enter the tea exhibition center, you can listen to the tea master recount the historical context of tea cultivation and processing during the Qing Dynasty. You'll hear about the path along which tea was transported from Nangang to Dadaocheng for export, bringing economic prosperity to Taipei, all underscoring the significance of this place as the leader in tea production.

The busy mind finds tranquility here. Accept a cup of heartwarming Baozhong, or unlock your senses by savouring the distinctive Qingxin Oolong. Take a sip of liquid blessings, satisfy body and mind, and allow everything to fit to a T.

Stargazing Rooftop Garden, Taipei Performing Arts Center

Though some may overlook it, Taipei Performing Arts Center (TPAC) is an internationally acclaimed landmark. In 2021, American news channel CNN selected it as the world's most transformative building, while the UK's *Guardian* newspaper also praised it as the best architecture of the year, and it even featured in the Taipei entry in a *Time* magazine list of the world's top 100 destinations.

This international attraction was designed by an international team at Rotterdam-based architectural firm OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture), who won the bid in an international competition. The design was personally led by Rem Koolhaas, OMA co-founder and Pritzker Architecture Prize laureate. Koolhaas's design gives the impression that TPAC's ground floor is floating, creating a novel and even fantastical viewing experience.

The exterior features 1,200 pieces of curved glass, crafted by an international team of specialists, that are both transparent and concealing. Inside, two of the three theaters operate independently but can also be connected to form a 2,300-seat grand theater. According to Koolhaas, inspiration for the design came from the famous Taiwanese dish, hot pot.

Another highlight is the stargazing rooftop garden. As the name suggests, visitors can look up at the stars or look over Jiantan and even the entire Taipei Basin. The TPAC team has also held concerts on the rooftop, allowing audiences to enjoy music amidst the greenery.

Dah Hsian Seetoo Library, National Chengchi University

Search “Taiwan’s most beautiful library” on Instagram, and you’ll discover many recommendations for the Dah Hsian Library at National Chengchi University Library in Wenshan District. The library is a popular spot for taking photos and checking in on Facebook.

From the lakeside library, groups of lively mallards are often seen happily paddling in the water. As you enter the library, the high-ceilinged atrium conveys the bright spaciousness of the entire building. You can admire the magnificent, beautiful seven stories of bookshelves from the ground floor or go up to the top floor and look down.

The building was constructed using a “full precast” construction method: assembling the pre-made concrete structure like a box of building blocks. This hi-tech, advanced construction method was entirely carried out by the Taiwanese company Ruentex Engineering & Construction.

The library was named after Dah Hsian Seetoo, a well-known Taiwanese business management scholar and the former teacher of the library’s donor, business tycoon Samuel Yin. Entry is not limited to Chengchi University alumni, so everyone is welcome to come and enjoy the scholarly atmosphere of the library.

But before you come, be sure to visit the library website and read the guidelines for information on buses, parking, and library rules.

Nishi Honganji Temple Square

Nowadays, Nishi Honganji Temple Square is a place for relaxation and tourism, featuring a Japanese-style bell tower that's a great place to take photos. You can also enjoy tea and Japanese sweets at the Rinbansyo (formerly the abbot's residence) next to the square.

Once upon a time, this plot of land measuring slightly over one-hectare was crowded with over a hundred corrugated-iron and wooden shacks. Over 340 households lived in this square, all sharing the same address—No. 174 Zhonghua Road.

The residents came from various provinces in China and were soldiers and their families who followed the Chinese Nationalist government when it fled to Taiwan. Not enjoying the privilege of occupying government-allocated housing, the soldiers and their dependents erected illegal, hastily constructed houses on the square.

At first they made do, perhaps thinking they were just passing through Taiwan and would soon return home, but over the next two to three decades, many of the immigrants started families and gradually accepted the reality of putting down roots in a foreign land. Later, with efforts towards urban renewal and beautification, the illegal structures were demolished and the residents dispersed, leaving no trace of the past.

On the morning of April 5, 1975, the Nishi Honganji Temple burned down. To this day, the cause remains unknown. Then, in 2011, Taipei City Government started restoring the historic site, partially reconstructing Japanese colonial era buildings belonging to the Taiwan Branch of the Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha and creating the present-day space for tourism and leisure.