

Seeing Taiwan: Back to Nature on Taiwan's Recreational Farms

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As societies become wealthier and more modern, people tend to move from farms to cities, leaving behind the countryside and the traditions of previous generations. This gives rise to nostalgia, a longing for quieter, simpler times. And for the Taiwanese — an entrepreneurial people with a love of travel — that longing for bygone times has fueled a new kind of get-back-to-nature tourism that caters to these nostalgic impulses through short stays at farms, forest reserves, former military camps, and other rural retreats.

The Taiwan Tourism Bureau calls this new type of tourism facility “recreational farms,” although some of them are not, strictly speaking, farms. But they all have certain features in common: they are in rural areas, offer simple, comfortable accommodations, and provide an educational as well as recreational experience. In a world in which amusement parks, beach resorts, city hotels and other aspects of modern travel are all starting to look exactly the same, these farms are different and unique — and for that reason alone they are worth visiting, with natural beauty and back-to-nature activities as bonuses.

Although the bulk of visitors are Taiwanese, most of these facilities — especially the larger ones — are also prepared to receive English-speaking guests. Notify them in advance and you will usually be met by an earnest young guide who will explain the facilities in good English, as well as provide some history and other insight about the place.

These recreational farms have evolved over the years, from working farms or veterans’ camps, into tourist retreats that offer a wide variety of pastimes. Wuling Farm, located in Heping Township on the Central Cross-Island Highway, is a good example. This was once a working veterans’ farm, where retired soldiers from mainland China grew peaches, pears, apples, and other crops. Over the years Wuling evolved into a tourist attraction, highlighted by the landlocked Formosan Salmon. Today tourists can go there to view Taiwan’s most famous fish, and learn about its habits and life cycles.

Wuling is also well known for its fruit, especially peaches and apples, which are organically grown on the mountain slopes. Over time, Wuling has added other pastimes and tours, which range from botanical walks to herbal medicine excursions, led by knowledgeable guides. In the fall, when the maple leaves turn crimson red, Wuling Farm is transformed into an area of special beauty, highlighted by crisp mountain breezes and views of distant snowcapped mountains. The farm also offers cottages and hotel-style rooms to overnight visitors.

Fushoushan Farm is another former veterans’ stronghold. Located in Wufong Township, near Lishan on the Central Cross-Island Highway, this retreat was a favorite of ex-president Chiang Kai-shek, who often visited Taiwan’s high mountains. One of the highlights of Fushoushan Farm is an opportunity to stay overnight in one of the Chiang family’s former holiday residences. Song Lu Villa, where Chiang’s son Chiang Ching-kuo liked to stay, offers the plushest guest rooms, while Fushou Villa and Dagan Pavilion, at Tianchi Pond, are also open for overnight guests. Tianchi Pond is located at the highest point on the farm; a high mountain trail, seven kilometers long, leads to the pond from the main recreation area.

Many of the most popular recreational farms offer hands-on opportunities to learn more about the island’s crops. Luye Recreational Tea Farm, located in Taitung County’s Luye Township, lies in the broad, fertile plain that runs between Hualien and Taitung. Here guests can take lessons on growing, picking, curing, and of course brewing and

drinking the high-quality local tea. This valley is one of Taiwan's best lowland tea-growing areas, and the tea is famous for its rich, strong flavor. Home-stay rooms are located among the tea fields, and the farm also provides an adrenaline-inducing option: tourists can paraglide from the tea plantation to the broad plain that lies far below.

At Chu Lu Ranch, near Beinan Township in Taitung County, visitors can explore the feeding and caring of cows, the milking process, and the production and packaging of milk, cream, and butter. Chu Lu Ranch first opened 35 years ago, just as the Taiwanese were beginning to drink milk, and over the years, it gradually began to open its doors to tourists. Today it is one of the top visitor farms in Taiwan, and it lies in a tranquil rural area, with grassy hills and forested paths, plus a gift shop where visitors can pick up a carton or cone of freshly made ice cream.

The Flying Cow Ranch in Tongsiao Township, Miaoli County, offers similar dairy delights. Like Chu Lu Ranch, it was established in the 1970s, and in 1995 it opened its doors to nature-loving tourists who wished to learn about dairy farming, enjoy some peace and quiet, and drink the free cup of milk offered to visitors.

Cingjing Veterans' Farm, in Renai Township near Wushe on the Central Cross-Island Highway, is one of the oldest tourist farms in Taiwan — it was first opened to visitors in 1961. Cingjing is another high-mountain farm, located at 1,750 meters above sea level. Up here, peaches, pears, and apples grow in abundance, and tourists are invited to learn about these local fruits. In August and September, the fruits are ripe for picking, and visitors have the chance to climb up into the treetops on ladders to pick a few boxes of the choicest fruits.

Over the years, Cingjing has evolved to fit the needs of Taiwan tourists. It now has grassland and forest walks, sheep-shearing and fruit-gathering events, a recreation center, park, guest house, and many other attractions. History and culture buffs will enjoy Cingjing, as many of the residents and their descendants are ethnic minorities from Yunnan Province in mainland China, who sided with the Nationalists during the Chinese Civil War in the late 1940s, and subsequently immigrated to Taiwan. Many of their cultural traditions are still alive, including dances, exotic Yunnan cuisine, and traditional festivals in which visitors can participate.

Another recreational farm is Donghe Farm, a 600-acre retreat located in the Huadong Mountain Range that lies between Hualien and Taitung, where guests can hike, bird-watch, and camp in an area of unique natural beauty. This is a return-to-nature retreat that features fresh air, clean water, and fine sea views.

For a full list of recreational farms, visit the Taiwan Tourism Bureau website, at <http://eng.taiwan.net.tw/lan/Cht/search/list.asp?layer3=69&layer2=10&layer1=> This page lists contact details and provides links to the farms themselves (farm sites have limited information in English).