

Travel: Enjoying the Vistas of Maokong

The hillside teahouses of this outlying district of Taipei have become much more accessible since the opening of the Maokong Gondola cable-car system.

BY BRIAN ASMUS

Replete with stunning mountainside vistas of Taipei's financial district and even as far away as Danshuei, Taipei's southeastern suburb of Maokong, near Mucha, is the place to go to drink Chinese tea. Be advised, however, that standards vary from the nearly clean to the downright dirty, from quaint red-bricked structures that have been designed with aesthetics in mind to the shack converted to take advantage of the tourist flows. Also be sure to read the "Getting There" section below, as the potential to lose your way should not be underestimated.

Since the opening of the cable-car system known as the Maokong Gondola a year ago, the area has become one of Taipei's major new tourist attractions.

The two main kinds of tea grown in the area and sold at its teahouses are Wenshan Baozhong (Wenshan is the name of the local district) and Tieguan Yin (Iron Goddess of Mercy). While both are types of oolong tea, the former is lighter and the latter tends to be much more robust. After you order, you will be given leaves, a small teapot, teacups, another teapot to keep already brewed tea while you are preparing a second round, and hot water. Fill the teapot to about two-thirds with tea leaves, add hot water, let it sit for 10 seconds, and then pour the contents out. This exercise serves to rinse the leaves and remove impurities. After that, you can get about four or five servings from each batch of tea leaves. Steep to taste.

Some customers patronize the teahouses for the tea only (or perhaps accompanied by snacks), while others go for an entire meal. The restaurants in the vicinity offer some interesting dishes that merit a taste. First is the bitter melon, pineapple, and chicken soup, something that I have never seen the equivalent of anywhere else in the world. The bitter melon provides nice chewy crunchy bits that release green and bitter notes; the pineapple covers the sour and sweet portions of the taste spectrum while delivering acidity to offset the chicken fat in the stock; it also adds nice pulpy textures in the mouth. As the soup is made with a whole chicken, it is best shared among at least four people.

Other must-tries are the deep-fried beancurd or alternatively the hong-shao doufu (marinated in soy sauce), as well as some of the various mountain greens. One notable variety of local vegetable is called shansu, though be advised that its slightly viscous texture (think okra) might not be to everyone's taste.

Below is an introduction to some of the teahouses along the main stretch heading west from the hilltop cable station. As there are more than 60 teahouses in Maokong, this is by no means an exhaustive list.

Zih Zai Tian 自在天

LaoQuan St., Lane 45, No. 27

http://www.amcham.com.tw

Tel: 2938-1113

Situated on the more westerly side of the horseshoe-shaped canyon that faces Taipei, Zih Zai Tian does not provide the most magnificent views of the city and distant mountains. That said, it benefits from less frenetic traffic, both pedestrian and automotive. In my view, the design and décor are the finest of any teahouse. Inside there are red brick walls, red tiled floors, and beamed ceilings with thump-thumping fans. Outside is a stone terrace. Whether inside or out, Zih Zai Tian is just the ticket if ambience is your foremost requirement.

Tea is the primary focus, but the kitchen does serve up a few simple dishes such as chicken with mountain herbs (NT\$200), black pepper beef short ribs (NT\$200), eel (NT\$200), honey-glazed pork ribs (NT\$190), “Indian-style” beef curry (NT\$190), and Sichuan-style gongbao jiding or diced chicken with chili and peanuts (NT\$190). A much broader range of desserts, cookies, and Chinese snacks is available to go with your tea.

In general, visitors searching for quiet will need to be forbearing on Sundays when boisterous local families flock to the hills. That is doubly true with Zih Zai Tian, as I learned on a recent Sunday visit. Parents had left their little angels unattended with free rein to run and play and scream and fight, while seminars on tea and calligraphy were also being conducted. That meant loudspeakers bellowing out such wisdom as “tea should be drunk and appreciated in quiet contemplation.” The irony, as far as I could tell, was lost on both the speakers and students alike.

Sing Hua Lin æ••èŠ±æž—

LaoQuan St., Lane 45, No. 30

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Tel: 2939-4866

If the crowds, chaos, and clamor are bumming you out at Zih Zai Tian, walk across the street and down 20 meters to Sing Hua Lin. While there is no view to speak of, red-bricked Sing Hua Lin is highly conducive to relaxed tea drinking despite being surrounded by a rather ill-kept lawn and an under-utilized back terrace. The concrete tables and benches are less than inspiring, but the large windows allow natural light to flood in. As we were by ourselves, it was quiet and relaxed. Although pop music was playing as we entered, the waiter (no doubt a student from nearby National Chengchi University) quickly switched this to the dreaded zinging zither. After about 15 minutes, we begged him to switch back to pop. Why must tea drinking be accompanied by music with an air of pretentiousness? I would have been even happier with some classic jazz like Billie Holiday or Nat King Cole. Only the simplest of snacks, such as preserved green olives with Chinese herbs, pistachios, melon seeds, and some cookies, were available for food. There is no kitchen to speak of.

Siao Muwu â°•æœ”â±‹èŒ¶â•Š

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 38, No. 28

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Tel: 2939-0649

<http://steahouse.myweb.hinet.net>

Housed as its name implies in a cabin, Siao Muwu possesses a balcony, albeit somewhat rickety, that offers some of the nicer, more sweeping views from the mountain. It also serves coffee, beer, wine, and cocktails for those who may have had their fill of tea. While the kitchen prepares main courses and snacks, the food ain’t much to crow about. Given

the better alternatives literally next door, stick to the beverages. The interior is fairly scruffy and the wine bottles that lie in the rack look like they have been there for a long time, baking away in the heat. Look them over very carefully before making a purchase. Still, the place does have a kind of down-home roadhouse sort of charm.

Longmen Kejhan 龍門街

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 38, No. 22-2

電話: 2939-8865

Tel: 2939-8865

Right next door to Siao Muwu, this venue offers a broader, easier-to-manage outdoor seating area along with the same great vistas; it also appears to be much cleaner. Less of a teahouse and more of an outside bistro, it has an ambience that is fun and fashionable. This message apparently resonates with would-be patrons as it was quite crowded. If you want to get away from the madding crowd, this is not the place to go.

Da Guan Yuan 大觀園

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 38, No. 22-1

電話: 2937-7920

Tel: 2937-7920

When you get hungry, this is clearly one of the best options along this stretch of the mountain. Grilled shrimp, stir-fried mountain vegetables, and other honest, down-home Taiwanese dishes are sure to satisfy even the more discriminating of palates. The kitchen is noticeably cleaner than others in the area. If the sun is not too hot, opt to sit up on the second floor where you get better views and a cool night-time breeze. During the summer, only the hardiest souls will be able to stand the noon-day heat and glare.

Cha Sin Guan She 茶新館舍

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 38, No. 20

電話: 2939-8333

Tel: 2939-8333

One more door down is Cha Sin Guan She. With virtually no outdoor seating, this restaurant/teahouse tends to get overlooked during the summer. When I stopped by, there was nary a patron of any kind. The warm wood paneling makes it a more attractive option when the weather cools and patrons' thoughts turn to coziness, however.

Weifeng Huayuan 風華園

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 38, No. 18

台北市中正區南門路38號18號

Tel: 2936-0030

“Breeze Garden” struck me as a bit run down and seedy. The heavily tree-lined hillsides limit the view, while the arbored tea-drinking area is adjacent to a parking lot. The wait staff was certainly friendly enough and Weifeng does have a kitchen. I sensed, however, that this is more of a place for teenagers and college students to kick back with their friends over cigarettes and competitive swearing rather than a family venue. Feel free, though, to take a look for yourself.

Shangyang Teahouse 尚陽茶室

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 38, No. 16-2, 1F

台北市中正區南門路38號16-2號1F

Tel: 2938-5255 or 2939-1317

Along with Da Guan Yuan, this is the best of the bunch when it comes to dining. While the terrace offers stunning views, the aesthetics are somewhat marred by the sight of power lines and the kitschy painted concrete-bamboo fencing. At night, the energy-saving fluorescent lights (both inside and out) are just too bright. A nice row of Chinese lanterns hanging along the edge would offer a more welcome and subdued ambience.

Regardless, the food is spot on. Two of us shared beef with green onions; stir-fried mountain vegetable with small fish, chopped garlic and ginger; and deep-fried doufu. Together with a large Taiwan beer, the price came to NT\$690.

Yuan Syu Yuan 緣·緣·緣

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 38, No. 16-2, 2F

台北市中正區南門路38號16-2號2F

Tel: 2936-7089

Located on the second and third floors of the same building as Shang Yang, Yuan Syu Yuan (“from destiny to destiny”) has the better views. The shabby astroturfed wood floors and rickety wood separations on the top floor, however, do not offer much in the way of inspiration. The teahouse on the second floor is entered by crossing stones that dot a small indoor pond. Around the outsides looking out are a series of curtained private rooms that permit more intimate enjoyment of tea with family and friends. I could not help but feel that this, too, would be a better choice when summer sun gives way to winter winds. When it comes to dining, the establishment touts its tea cuisine, though a glance at the kitchen did not lend me much reason for optimism.

Dong Shen Yuan 東·深·園

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 38, No. 14-1

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Tel: 2234-1679

Mobile: 0928-099-179

One of the many simple teahouses with nothing special to proclaim about them, Dong Shen Yuan has very little by way of spectacular scenery, nor is the building anything special. What it does have in spades is a very friendly family. It reminded me of small family-run hotels or B&Bs in the Aegean. The father, mother, and son get extra kudos for patiently pointing out competing teahouses in the area with open, friendly smiles. Think of this as a place to just chill. After the sun has set on overcast nights, you won't be able to see much of Taipei's skyline anyway.

Others that have been recommended, but that I did not visit personally, include:

Big Teapot Tea Emporium á¤§èCE¶á£°èCE¶æ£§

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 38, No. 37-1, 2F

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Tel: 2939-5057

<http://0424392656.travel-web.com.tw>

Mountain Water Inn á±±æ°'á@¢

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 40, No. 10

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Tel: 2234-1239 or 8661-9421

<http://www.ample.com.tw>

Han She Teahouse á¬è^•

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 40, No. 6

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Tel: 2938-4934, 2234-8208

<http://06102181.shopcool.com.tw>

Three Stone Teapot Museum ä,‰á¢@çÿ³èCE¶á£°á•šç‰@é¤

ZhiNan Rd. Sec. 3, Lane 34, No. 36

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Tel: 2938-3797

<http://realwolf.myweb.hinet.net/about.html>

Getting There

If you know which teahouse you want to visit, a convenient way to get there is to take the Muzha line of the MRT to the Zoo station. Take exit 2 and walk about five minutes to the gondola station. The cable car makes a stop at Zhihnan Temple (æŒ†â—â®) before proceeding to Maokong Station. The cable car is in operation from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Friday, and from 8:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. weekends and holidays. The last car up leaves at 9:30 p.m. Passengers can use the MRT system's EasyCards to pay for their tickets. Prices are set at NT\$30, NT\$40, and NT\$50. Be prepared for lengthy queues on weekends.

Signs direct you to the teahouses. Each of these will have one of three colors: red, blue, and yellow; it will also have a number. This is supposed to help you find the general direction. Even those working at the teahouses, however, often don't seem to have a clue as to which color or number their respective establishment has been assigned. Many also seem unable to advise prospective customers who call ahead regarding which of the three main lanes to take to get to their teahouse. You will need, therefore, to take two or three patience pills before setting out.

From the cable station, Lane 38 of Zhinan Rd. Sec. 3 provides the widest choice of teahouses. Lanes 34 and 40 offer additional options. For those who are driving, it is best to be forewarned that as you ascend the hill from near Chengchi University, it is easy to get confused about which lane you are on. Lane 34 veers off to the right (before eventually meeting back up with Lane 38 at the top of the crest), while higher up, Lane 38 branches off to the left, taking you straight up the hill to the cable station.