

Seeing Taiwan: TITF – Combining Business and Pleasure in Travel

Traveling is a kind of magic that can open up a rich new world of possibilities. It removes people from their habitual pursuits, and pushes them in unexpected directions. In doing so, it refreshes the soul with new sights, sounds, and experiences. But magical though it is, travel is also big business. In 2008, 3.84 million visitors came to Taiwan, where they spent US\$5.94 billion on hotels, food, souvenirs, transportation, and entertainment. Also last year, more than 8.4 million people left the island to travel overseas, while many more made trips within Taiwan itself, again spending large sums on vacations and business travel.

When those two threads are combined – the magic of travel together with its commercial potential – the result is one of the biggest and most popular shows on Taiwan’s annual exhibition calendar: the Taipei International Travel Fair (TITF). Unlike most of the trade shows held at the Taipei World Trade Center, which are of interest only to insiders in a particular industry, the travel fair excites the imaginations of professionals and the public alike. This year’s fair, which will be held from October 30 to November 2, is expected to be the biggest ever, and organizers anticipate that once again, huge crowds will be lured by the enticing displays.

TITF was originally launched as an industry event, where travel agents and tour operators from overseas could come to buy blocks of travel services, such as hotel rooms, bus tours, and air tickets, and put them together into tour packages. But in the early 1990s, when outbound travel from Taiwan boomed and the show moved into the then newly opened World Trade Center, the TITF added a whole new dimension, as overseas destinations from around the world flocked to Taiwan to market their own attractions. Attendance boomed as Las Vegas showgirls, Zulu dancers, and other exotically dressed performers from the four corners of the globe made an appearance among the colorful displays.

Today, TITF has grown into a glittering showcase that presents the best that global travel has to offer. The 2008 fair broke all previous records: 62 countries set up exhibits, and the event attracted 215,000 visitors, of whom more than 20,000 were from the travel trade, an illustration of the muscularity of Taiwan’s travel business. Attendance has surged more than 20% per year since 2003, when only 88,000 visitors attended the exhibition.

The fair remains a two-pronged event that combines travel business with vacation pleasure, with the trade professionals and casual visitors pursuing separate agendas. Travel buyers from overseas – tour operators who package itineraries by combining hotel, airline and ground transportation – will be busy buying services from Taiwan-based hotels, travel agents, airlines, and bus operators. Part of the show is dedicated exclusively to the trade, as only trade visitors will be allowed into the exhibition on the first morning, while the public can attend on Friday afternoon, and all day on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday.

For people who attend the show, a walk through the booths is like taking a vicarious holiday. The entire world is on display, with an emphasis on the Asian countries that supply most of Taiwan’s visitors. Last year, not counting Asia, the range of exhibiting countries from overseas was evenly mixed, with Europe and the Americas accounting for most of the overseas participants. Adding to the festive atmosphere are the many stage shows held frequently throughout the fair. Past performances have included dancers from Hawaii, drummers from Korea, Aboriginal dancers from Taiwan, and musicians and other performers from Japan, Macau, Malaysia, Brunei, and elsewhere.

The TITF also serves as a fresh reminder of the diversity of domestic travel opportunities available to residents of Taiwan. Nestled among the booths will be displays featuring the five-star international hotels of Taipei, the High Speed Rail, National Palace Museum, and Taroko Gorge, as well as the beaches of Kenting, the one-time battlefields of Kinmen, and the cypress forests and famous sunrises of Alishan. Lesser-known attractions will also beckon, including the Qing-era temples of Lukang and Tainan, the fresh seafood of Kaohsiung, and the splendid Buddhist monasteries that dot the island—including those of Foguangshan in the south, Chung Tai Chan in mid-island, and Dharma Drum mountain, an hour's drive from Taipei. The enticing brochures and displays cover a broad range: from exotic foods and old-fashioned branch railway lines to aboriginal culture, hot springs, and remote rocky seacoasts.

Taiwan's various city and county governments will also be promoting their local sights and pastimes, while the Taiwan Tourism Bureau will highlight unique aspects across the entire island, including night markets and other aspects of urban life, the scenic wonders of the East Coast and National Parks, and the wide variety and taste sensations of the cuisine found in Taiwan.

Every year the show reflects the latest travel trends, and the exhibition this year will showcase the growing importance of the Mainland China market. While tourism into Taiwan from most overseas markets fell in the first eight months of 2009, reflecting the global recession, China was a dramatic exception. This year it has overtaken Japan as Taiwan's number one source of visitors, with an annual growth rate of 175% in the first eight months, compared with 2008.

Arrivals from Japan dipped 4.3% in the first eight months of 2009, compared with 2008, and overall, tourism is down from most markets, making China more important than ever to the economy and tourism of Taiwan. But Taiwan is also important to China, and local governments and travel professionals from different parts of the Mainland, especially those cities now served by direct links, will be on hand to advertise their attractions to both the people and trade professionals of Taiwan.

Since one of the purposes of the TITF is to showcase new attractions, the participating countries will be promoting new (or newly renovated) spas, theme parks, resorts, and other attractions. The show is organized by the Taiwan Visitors Association and supervised by the Taiwan Tourism Bureau.