

FEATURES



The entrance to the Huaxi Street night market in Taipei's Wanhua District. PHOTO: GEORGE TSORNG, TAIPEI TIMES

NAKE ALLEY LIVES ON

Despite the city's efforts to sanitize Wanhua, much of its disreputable history survives in the shadows — giving the neighborhood's night markets a wonderfully dodgy edge

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Longshan Temple (龍山寺) in Taipei's Wanhua District (萬華區) is an important center of Taiwan's religious culture. It also represents an unsanitized version of Taiwanese social life that is a million miles from the high-tech success stories and political wrangling that dominate international media coverage of Taiwan. The temple's immediate environs are home to several night markets that are popular with both domestic and international tourists because, despite the best efforts of the government, they remain obdurate in the face of political correctness and the higher aspirations of urban conformity.

If you arrive via the MRT system, this recalcitrance is on show at the transcendently uninspired Longshan Temple Underground Mall (龍山寺地下街), an utterly failed attempt to corral the district's disorderly life into some sort of ordered and easily administered shopping arcade. It is revealing of the gulf in understanding between the city's government and its people that several large commercial spaces have been converted into warrens of alleys holding as many as 10 businesses dealing in divination, traditional beauty treatment and massage. Much of the more than 4,000m² of floor space remains unoccupied, lending the mall a rather derelict atmosphere.

Visitors should probably get out of this underground mausoleum of unrealized city government dreams and hit street level as quickly as possible. Once you're in the sluggish flow of people jamming the Guangzhou Street Night Market (廣州街夜市), which is only a short step from many of the MRT exits, you're likely to simply get carried along and, before you realize it, have explored the Huaxi Street Tourist Night Market (華西街觀光夜市) and nearby Wuzhou Street Night Market (梧州街夜市).

The Guangzhou Street Night Market sets the tone. It pulls big crowds throughout the week, many of whom are there to gorge on street food. Others are lured by the neighborhood's darker associations; Guangzhou and Huaxi streets used to be the center of a flourishing red-light district. This has been cleaned up courtesy of the city government, but it is oddly cheering to see pirated Japanese pornography and oversized latex dildos being sold openly, albeit in the darker corners of the market.

The diseased orangutans that used to be chained here for the cameras of the curious are gone, and the public execution of snakes — which were once slit open and skinned alive before gawking audiences as salesmen hawked snake gall and turtle blood cocktails — is now much more low-profile. But the Huaxi Street night market still has many snake produce shops, even if "No Camera" signs hang conspicuously over the storefronts.

The Huaxi Street night market is also known for its luxury seafood restaurants, most notably Tainan Tan-Tsu-Mien (台南擔仔麵), which has operated since the late 1950s. This and similar establishments provide an excellent dining experience, but don't expect night market prices. Excellent Japanese food is also available.

There is plenty of good traditional snack food on Huaxi Street, but for a real taste from the streets, walk a few hundred meters along Guangzhou Street to the Wuzhou Street Night Market, where foodies can push the envelope of what they can swallow. Bits of pig you don't normally see outside an abattoir are there, stewed to perfection, served in highly flavored sauces and ready to be washed down by a Taiwan beer from a nearby convenience store.

Walking north along Huaxi Street Tourist Night Market, the bustle gradually dies down, and the market proper ends at the corner of Guiyang Street (貴陽街) and Huaihe South Road Section 2 (環河南路二段), which also marks the beginning of the Hebin No. 2 Market (河濱二商場). This is not really a night market, although it does remain open until 10pm. It is a center for the sale of hardware and kitchen equipment, and if you are looking for a 20-gallon cauldron or an industrial-strength extractor fan, you will certainly find one here. It is a fascinating place to browse.

All of this can be found by heading west from Longshan Temple along Guangzhou Street. By heading east you will find at the first intersection the Xichang Street Night Market (西昌街夜市), which is more low-key and caters to a more local clientele. There are a number of interesting stores selling herbs for medicinal teas, and further down the warren of allies extending off into the less visible fringe of this bustling district, the oldest profession continues to ply its trade.

While Huaxi Street is labeled as a tourist market, the transformation from its older and more disreputable past — when it was known as Snake Alley — is not, for better or for worse, complete. The area around it, ranging from Xichang Street to the east to Huaihe Street to the west, is still too full of the rough-and-tumble life of old Taipei to be totally drowned out by the ice cream vendors, restaurant chains and the ostentatiously "traditional" boutiques that have colonized the area. A hint of the mean streets still hangs about Longshan Temple and its environs. It is this, above all, that distinguishes this network of night markets from similar venues in other parts of the city.



Top left: A tout hawks snake produce in a shop off Huaxi Street in Taipei's Wanhua District.



PHOTO: GEORGE TSORNG, TAIPEI TIMES



Clockwise from lower right: Old-school snake oil merchants still ply their trade on Guangzhou Street; Wuzhou Street Night Market pulls no punches when it comes to traditional Taiwanese food; a large commercial space in Longshan Temple Underground Mall has been subdivided into a warren of divination, beauty treatment and massage shops. PHOTOS: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES