

FEATURES

PAGE 16

SATURDAY, AUGUST 9, 2008



Imagine a busy Taipei night market without the eardrum-bursting music, cacophonous noise and tourists, and you have the Jingmei Night Market (景美夜市). Tucked away next to a large hill in southern Taipei, this market — which runs to approximately two large street blocks — has a subdued, local feel in comparison to its counterparts in Shilin (士林) and on Tonghua Street (通化街). There are few fast-talking hawkers, many shops stick to practical items like bedding and underwear, and things usually shut down earlier, at around midnight.

But Jingmei Night Market is far from quiet. On weekends it gets crowded end-to-end with visitors, and what is normally a brisk 20-minute walk on the market street can easily take 50 minutes. The market has a few novelties, but its main draw is its well-established food vendors, and a nearby nature hike with expansive views of the city also makes Jingmei worth a trip.

A quick way to arrive is by MRT. Get off at Jingmei Station (景美捷運站), exit No. 2, which is close to the north end of the market and runs along Jingmei Street (景美街). Two fresh fruit vendors mark the entrance. There are plenty of shops and food vendors on this side, but save your appetite for the more popular restaurants at the end of the market street.

If you're looking for fun oddities, don't enter the market street yet. Behind the Geant hypermarket, a stationery store on 11-1 Jingmei St (景美街11之1號) sells self-inflating whoopee cushions (NT\$100), a one-piece plastic moustache, nose and glasses disguise set (NT\$70) and vampire claws (NT\$80).

The goods at this side of the market are unremarkable: imported clothes from China and Southeast Asia, knick-knacks for kids and cheap jewelry. But it's comfortable enough for a leisurely stroll; many of the shop fronts have awnings that keep the street dry during rain and cool during the day. Elderly folks often wander about from shops selling sundries or incense and supplies for nearby temples.

While the market gets noisy with the chatter of food vendors, the only loud music comes from Kao's record store (小高音樂城), which plays Taiwanese karaoke music at a festive but civilized volume. Kao's sells mostly DVDs and the latest Mando pop hits.

At the record store the street splits in two directions for a short distance. A few non-descript shops are on the left, so follow the right side, where the record store faces, to a market favorite, Jingmei Shanghai Fried Dumplings on 55 Jingwen St (景美上海生煎包, 景文街55號). It sells meat or leek dumplings at NT\$10 each, and long lines at this stall usually form at around 5pm.

Amid the many stores that sell pajamas and undergarments, Little Hong Kong (小香港) on 28 Jingmei St (景美街28號) is a fashion oasis for the teenage and college crowds. Bright fluorescent colors are all the rage with students this summer, says proprietor and Hong Kong native Jimmy Yang (楊興隆). A few iconic T-shirts were on display: one with Elvis Costello in fluorescent green (NT\$490), another with an airbrushed portrait of Martin Luther King Jr (NT\$390). And even in Jingmei you can find Che Guevara: here his portrait is printed on a belt, Andy Warhol style, which accompanies a pair of pre-faded jeans (NT\$1,680).

At the southern end of the market is the Tsai (蔡) family, whose sign says they've been in business for 35 years. They serve a variety of tasty stir-fry dishes ranging from lamb fried rice (羊肉炒飯, NT\$70) to oyster omelets (蚵仔煎, NT\$45). The food is cooked on a small grill in front of the customers; be prepared to stand in line here.

The (relatively) quiet night market

Jingmei's main attraction is its night market's street food, but a nature hike with nice views of the city also makes the area worth a visit

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER



Clockwise from top left: The Xianji Yan Hiking Trail near Jingmei Night Market offers a nice one to two-hour walk, with panoramic views of southern Taipei; Jingmei Night Market has the usual offerings of traditional snacks, street food, as well as clothing and basic sundries; Songshe Teppanyaki, which has been in Jingmei Night Market since 1994, is a local favorite; Jingmei Shanghai Fried Dumplings enjoys a loyal following at Jingmei Night Market; Jingmei Night Market has a subdued atmosphere in comparison to some of its Taipei City counterparts.

PHOTOS: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

Sharing a cafeteria space with the Tsais is Songshe Teppanyaki on 137 Jingmei Street (松舍養生鐵板燒, 景美街137號), which also enjoys a steady following. The shop's proprietor, Tseng Chu-wei (鄭竹圃), has been in business for 14 years and says he sees up to 400 customers on weekends. Selections include the usual seafood and meats, but for newcomers, Tseng recommends the pork steak with black pepper sauce (黑胡椒豬排, NT\$150). The sauce is stewed for 18 hours, making it a customer favorite, he says. While most of Tseng's customers are locals, he says there are a few regulars from outside of Jingmei.

Next to the Tsai family, Jingmei Douhua on 86 Jingmei St (景美豆花, 景美街86號) has been a popular destination for tofu pudding (豆花), the traditional Taiwanese dessert, since it opened in 1978. Like many others in the market, the shop is a family business run by Chung Wen-lung (鍾文隆), 42, who quit his job in publishing to take over from his father.

Many shopkeepers seem resigned to the fact that Jingmei remains a "locals" market, one often overshadowed by the flashier Shilin and Raohe (饒河) night markets. But Chung hopes this will change. As Taipei appears to be promoting itself as a tourist destination, Chung says the city government should consider "raising the visibility" of the market.

Chung also says getting there is easier now with the Jingmei Stream Bikeway (景美溪河濱腳踏車道), which connects with other bike paths that go as far as Tamshui (淡水). "Now people can even ride their bicycles here from Wanhua (萬華)," he said.

Another local attraction is the Xianji Yan Temple (仙跡岩廟), close to the top of the nearby hill. Start at the head of Xianji Yan Hiking Trail (仙跡岩觀山步道), which is on Jingxing Road (景興路) and runs along the hill parallel to Jingmei Street. The entrance is marked by a set of signs in English and Chinese. This uphill climb takes about 25 minutes at a steady pace, and the top offers a near-panoramic view of Taipei. For even better views continue past the temple to the highest peak in the area, Xizikou Shan (溪子口山), which stands at 142m. This hike can be done both during the day and the evening, with ample street lighting running along the entire trail.

The trail continues on marked by a pathway made of stone and makes for a pleasant hike of around two hours. It takes you to Section 4 of Xinglong Road (興隆路四段), but an easier way to get back to public transport is to follow the path down to Section 5 of Xinhai Road (辛亥路五段), which is close to either the Xinhai or Wanfang Hospital MRT Stations (辛亥站, 萬芳醫院站). Follow the signs to Jingmei Shan (景美山), which leads to a long set of stairs to Xinhai Road. The walk from Xianji Yan Temple to Wanfang Hospital station takes an hour at a leisurely pace.

Alternatively, work up a large appetite by starting with a hike to Jingmei. To get to the Xianji Yan trail from Xinhai Road, take the MRT to Xinhai Station, walk along Xinhai Road towards the Xinhai Tunnel (辛亥隧道), and turn right at the last alley before the tunnel. Follow the alley and turn left to get to the trailhead.