

FEATURES

Soldiers made up fully half of the passengers flying out of Nangan (南竿) airport. In the terminal one group stood in formation as their platoon leader instructed them to deposit their bags at the check-in counter. Outside on the tarmac a conscript posed in front of the airport's blanchd white exterior as his friend rapidly snapped photographs. He was celebrating his last day on Matsu (馬祖) and couldn't wipe the smile off his face. When I asked him when he planned to return, he wasted no time before answering: "Never."

Although understandable — he had just spent the better part of the past two years on Matsu fulfilling his mandatory military service — it's nevertheless a shame for the island chain, which is starved for tourists. It's also somewhat of a surprise. With sandy beaches, lush jungles, mountainous terrain and well-maintained infrastructure, the archipelago should be a tourism mecca.

But in an ironic twist of history, what could have been one of Taiwan's top tourist destinations was closed off for more than four decades and continues to keep visitors away because of its reputation as a heavily fortified military outpost only a few kilometers off the Chinese coast. Since 1994, however, Matsu's martial face has undergone a rapid transformation, from cold-war frontline to an island retreat that gives visitors a sense of what life was like in a militarized zone.

When the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) sought refuge on Taiwan in 1949, it retained control over the Matsu and Kinmen (金門) archipelagos. Matsu, however, largely escaped the ravages of the artillery battles that devastated Kinmen in the 1950s and 1960s.

At the height of the Martial Law era, some 15,000 military personnel were stationed on Matsu; today, there are between 8,000 and 9,000. On the road heading away from Beigan Airport toward the guesthouse, large cement signs with slogans such as "Seek Life in Death" (死裡求生) remind troops to remain vigilant.

The Matsu archipelago was named after Matsu, goddess of the sea, and consists 36 islets, 10 of which are inhabited. On a weekend at the



Below: The beach near the Aegean-like village of Cinbi on Beigan.

Left: Gun outposts give fishermen access to the sea.

Above: Beigan and Nangan islands possess complex networks of tunnels, some of which are now open to the public.

Right: An abandoned military installation on Beigan Island.

PHOTOS: NOAH BUCHAN, TAIPEI TIMES

end of July, I spent one day each visiting the main islands of Beigan (北竿) and Nangan.

Entering Cinbi (芹壁) Village, located on the central-west side of the island, it's easy to forget that the Beigan was the scene of such tension during the cold war. Nestled on the side of a mountain, the village — which, according to legend, was once a base for pirates — is a series of century-old houses made from granite, wood and tile roofs that are linked together by high terraces and narrow walkways. Formerly homes for fishermen, they have been renovated into quaint guesthouses.

After settling into the simply furnished rooms, we drove to the top of Bi (壁) Mountain. Along the road overgrown and abandoned military installations — some with shell casings still littering the ground — provided respite from the blazing sun and an ideal vantage point from which to observe the sandy beaches of Tufanli (土反里) on the southern part of the island.

Along another road heading north, we encountered gun emplacements partially hidden under green tarpaulin with maps of the Taiwan Strait and instructions on how to fire the artillery painted on the cement walls.

Signs warning of land mines and restricted areas are a common sight. Although the former are clearly marked on barbed-wire fences along some of the beaches, the latter are often in disrepair, faded or simply non-existent. More than once I wandered up a finely pruned path or down a well-kept road that ended with soldiers holding automatic weapons motioning me away.

A large sign that reads "Always on the Alert" (枕戈待旦) greets the ferry as it arrives at Nangan's main harbor of Fuao (福澳). Larger than its northern neighbor, Nangan is the seat of the county government and home to more restaurants and guesthouses.

With the arrival of the KMT in late 1940s, the names of many fishing villages were changed to reflect the islands' militarization. For example, what was once Nioujiao ("Cow Horn," 牛角), a village on the northeast coast, became Fuxing (復興) Village, which means "restore" China to KMT control. Similar to Cinbi, Nioujiao's houses are built in the rustic east Fujian architectural style using cut rock, timber and tile.

Located a few minutes up the road from Nioujiao is the Tunnel 88 (八八坑道) distillery, a large factory operated by the military during the Martial Law era and today run by the county government.

Like its northern neighbor, Nangan retains a hidden and complex network of tunnels carved into the mountains, many of which are now open to the public. One of these, a quick ride from Tunnel 88, serves as the distillery's storage facility for kaoliang (高粱) and *laojiu* (老酒).

The Beihai Tunnel (北海坑道) on the southern coast is an underground quay carved from rock and a supply route that protected ships from enemy artillery fire. Facing Beihai's entrance are more tunnels, their long, damp passages interspersed with rooms decorated with propaganda and pictures of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣中正) that open up to turrets mounted with large coastal artillery guns pointing towards the sea.

Although the military carved out so much rock under Matsu's mountains, it also planted considerable foliage on the island as a means of providing natural cover. The most common species of planted trees are acacia, Chinaberry tree and white popinac.

Ferries depart Nangan to Beigan starting at 7am and return from Beigan at half-past the hour. The last ferry is at 5:30pm.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

>> Daily flights to Beigan and Nangan leave Taipei's Songshan Airport on Uni Air. One-way tickets are NT\$2,000

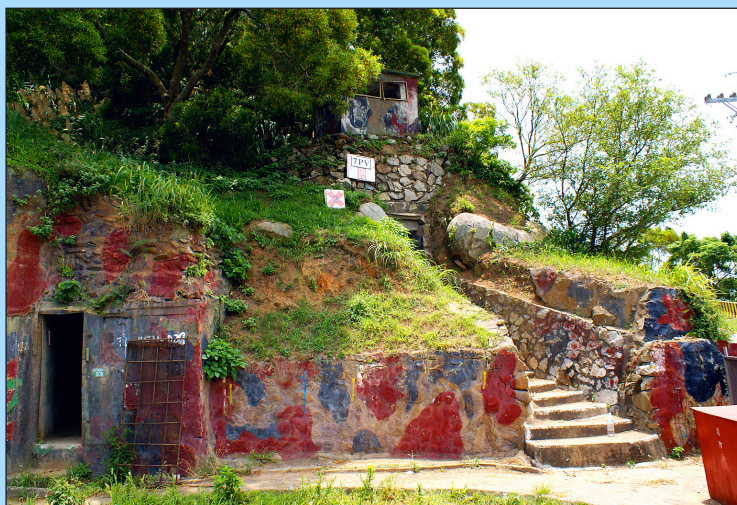
WHERE TO STAY

Beigan

>> Cinbi Guesthouse (芹壁度假村): Unique architecture and simple rooms located on the beach. Call (08) 365-5456 for more information

Nangan

>> Coast of the Dawn: Small hotel on a mountain with stunning views of the ocean. Visit www.coasthotel.com.tw for more information



A trip down martial lane

It only takes a weekend to wander Matsu's islands of Nangan and Beigan and delve into Taiwan's cold-war past

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