

# TRAVEL

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## Climb every mountain



Top row from left: Sulfur barrels at the now-abandoned sulfur works at Da You Keng; Chien Tien Temple, at one end of the Datun Shan West Peak hike; The store that marks the start of the Datun Shan West Peak hike.

PHOTOS: BRADLEY WINTERTON



Left: "The Gate" on the route to Da You Keng. Below: The sign at the start of the trail to Datun Shan West Peak. Bottom right: A hiker makes his way toward Datun Shan West Peak. Bottom left: One of Da You Keng's two volcanic vents.

PHOTOS: BRADLEY WINTERTON



All is silent except for the hissing roar of the vent. The huge column of steam is sensitive to the slightest breath of wind and changes its configuration by the minute, presenting photographers with innumerable opportunities. Not a blade of grass grows among the white and gray rocks, and at the valley bottom stand rusted canisters from the now-abandoned sulfur works. It's poetic beyond words, almost entirely because nothing has been touched by the hands of tourism officials. It's where Dante would have entered hell after being lost in the very wood you've just left, and indeed the ancient Europeans always associated hell with such magnificent, lonely places.

There's only one way across to the other side of the valley but you'll find it easily enough. From there the broad trail formerly used by the sulfur workers descends by an easy gradient down to the coast road. It isn't particularly overgrown, but buses along the road back to Yangmingshan village and Taipei are rare. For more certain access to public transport, return the way you came.

### DATUN SHAN (大屯山) WEST PEAK

My favorite hike in the Yangmingshan area, this takes about five hours round trip from Beitou MRT Station (北投捷運站). Take the S7 (小7) minibus that leaves from the station exit (one departs at 12:30pm daily). It runs along the left of Hell Valley (地獄谷), then turns left, passing a mural depicting the joys of mountain life. At a T-junction, 20 minutes from the MRT station, it takes a left, and you get off 300m from there. There's a store selling snacks [see photo], and the trail begins next to this. If an S7 isn't in sight at Beitou, take the S9 (小9) instead, which shares the route as far as the T-junction, but then turns right. The trail entrance is 326 paces left from this T-junction.

The route climbs up steps for half an hour and eventually arrives at a fork — go left to the Observation Tower for excellent views of Taipei, Tamshui and Yangmingshan, then follow the level path running right. After some 20 minutes a muddy trail branches up to the left — you'll see the thin ropes in place to help in wet conditions.

Now you can't lose your way — just keep following the trail as it contours around the hillside. After roughly 30 minutes you'll pass a ropeway on your right leading up to the unimpressive Datun Shan South Summit. Ignore it, and you'll quickly arrive at a sign warning you the way ahead is difficult. It isn't really, and is actually the finest part of the hike. Strong white ropes are in place and there are well-used footholds. It's a scramble suitable for all except the severely arthritic — even young children will find it easy and fun.

Ten strenuous minutes later you arrive at the Datun Shan West Peak. It's a beautiful and peaceful place, and I sometimes lie on the rocks there and admire the view in all directions for up to an hour. The descent is down another ropeway, longer than the first, leading through a wood to an old temple that stands on the paved track. Turn left here and in half an hour you'll be at the Chien Tien (clear god) Temple (青天宮). The half-hourly S6 minibus returns you to Beitou MRT station.

### SISHOU (FOUR BEAST) MOUNTAIN (四獸山) ROPEWAY

Sishou Mountain, very close to Taipei 101, may be tame, but it boasts a horrendous ropeway that's the most terrifying ascent I've ever managed to accomplish. Halfway up I found myself muttering, "Never, under any circumstances, do this again."

But if you really enjoy a challenge, proceed as follows. From Taipei 101, continue east along Xinyi Road (信義路) until it becomes Fude Street (福德街). Keep going, and turn right at Dadao Road (大道路). You'll immediately see a colorful religious building on your left. Go inside, up the first set of steps you see, and when you get to a courtyard bear right. Climb more steps and continue upwards along the road for 10 or 15 minutes until you encounter yet more steps

leading upwards, this time with railings painted red. Go up these. You're now on the Hushan Hiking Trail (虎山登山道).

It's everywhere paved, and when it levels out keep an eye open for a sad-looking building on your left. Immediately to the left of this, a rough path heads up into the woods, with a piece of dirty rope to assist you. This is the track you want, or might think you want when you first set off up it.

After 25 hard, slippery minutes you'll arrive at the start of the ropeway proper. This leads directly to the summit of Sishou Mountain. It doesn't seem steep at first, but the multiple ropes — at some points there are four or five running parallel — soon give the game away. Before long only knots in the ropes and various scooped-out footholds in the rock save you from what could easily be a nasty fall.

Yet the lights of Taipei 101 twinkle over your shoulder, and at times you feel you could reach out and touch them. I met hearty locals who assured me they sauntered up to the ridge by this route on a regular basis. Once, however, was more than enough for me.

### HUANG TI DIEN (皇帝殿)

This is an exposed but popular ridge of polished rock you can walk along easily if you don't suffer from vertigo and the weather is dry. It's only 1.6km long, and there are ropes in place to help you up the two tricky sections — one where you first clamber up onto it from the path, the other after the end of the ridge itself.

Take the MRT to Muzha Station (木柵捷運站), exit the station and then walk straight ahead to a row of bus stops. From here take bus 666 (don't let the number scare you unduly). Get off at Shih Ting Village (石碇村), around half an hour away, and walk up the side road you'll see to your left. After 1.6km you'll arrive at a parking lot, again on your left, at the far side of which the trail up the hillside begins. The ridge starts about 20 minutes' walk later.

There are several options for getting back, but I recommend you take one of the routes down to the right, in other words back to where you started from. One trail I tried to the left was long and eventually petered out. Then I had to scramble down a steep and overgrown river valley — no fun at all when it started to get dark.



*Escaping the polluted confines of Taipei doesn't have to mean a long journey or digging deep. The mountains that circle the capital offer a series of hiking trails of varying difficulties and at a minimal cost*

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
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### Yangmingshan's (陽明山) most spectacular but least visited attraction;

Datun Shan's (大屯山) choicest route; a scary climb within spitting distance of Taipei 101; and an airy ridge walk. Taipei is fortunate in being circled by hills that offer hiking opportunities on every side. Here are suggestions for four excursions, all relatively short, yet each with its own distinctive thrill.

#### DA YOU KENG (大油坑) (YANGMINGSHAN)

Yangmingshan has two major vents of volcanic origin, each spouting a column of steam into the air amid sulfur-spattered rocks. The lesser of them has a parking lot, toilets and a convenience store and receives hundreds of visitors every day. The other, Da You Keng, is much more impressive but gushes away in lonely isolation. It's the most astonishing natural phenomenon in the Taipei area and less than 45 minutes' walk from a bus stop. But almost every time I've been there there's been no one else in sight.

Take the S15 (小15) minibus from the left of Jiantan MRT Station (劍潭捷運站) to its terminus at Qingtiangang (擎天崗), 40 minutes away. Go up onto the grasslands and take the paved path, marked as leading to Fenggueikou (風櫃口), that runs along the left-hand edge of the plateau. After five minutes you'll reach a prominent stone gateway marked "The Gate" with a sign "Bayan 6.6km." Go through it and down the track, avoiding diversions to the left and right. After 15 minutes you'll then find yourself in a wood, and a short way into it you'll see a small shrine on the ground on your left.

Continue 133 paces along the track from this shrine and you'll see the unmarked path to Da You Keng, beginning on your left on the opposite side of the stream. Cross the stream by the boulders, and after 10 minutes through low scrub you'll arrive at a scene of awesome desolation and exceptional grandeur.