

TRAVEL

The coastal village of Yehliu is best known for its scenic rock formations, but an unusual Lantern Festival tradition offers another reason to visit

Like many cities, towns and villages in Taiwan, Yehliu (野柳) is getting ready to celebrate Lantern Festival (元宵節) on Monday with concerts, fireworks and a luminous display of lanterns. But this scenic north coast village near Keelung (基隆) — best known for its striking rock formations — celebrates with an unusual tradition that includes a cold swim in the harbor and a walk over embers.

The ceremony takes place on Monday morning and is the feature event of the Cleansing of the Harbor Festival (台北縣野柳神明淨港文化祭), which is being sponsored jointly by the Taipei County Government (台北縣政府), Wanli Township (萬里鄉) and Yehliu's Baoan Temple (保安宮).

As the festival's Web site explains, the ceremony represents an appeal to the gods for "tranquility" and "safety" at the harbor neighboring Baoan Temple.

According to local legend, more than a century ago, a shipload of merchants perished when their boat sank after hitting a reef as it approached the shore. Since then, villagers have worshipped a number of deities, among them Sagely King Kai Zhang (開漳聖王), to provide protection around the harbor.

In one of the main rituals, devotees chosen by Baoan Temple — mostly local youths — take the gods on a swim, so to speak, to "cleanse" the harbor waters.

Statues of several deities are placed in seven or eight palanquins, each made of a chair affixed to two bamboo poles. Holding the palanquins by the poles, some 20 to 30 devotees make a running charge off the harbor dock and swim to another port roughly 100m away.

After their swim, they move onto the "firewalking" ritual, walking barefoot over a bed of smoldering embers made from wood chips and popping firecrackers while carrying the palanquins.

The ceremony is considered a baptism of sorts for the New Year. As the festival's Web site puts it, by "entering the water and emerging from the fire," the gods ensure safe passage for boats, as well as a plentiful catch for fishermen in the coming year.

Festival spokesperson Stacy Tseng (曾瓦西) said last year's ceremony attracted some 1,000 people, but organizers are expecting this number to increase to over 5,000 from this Saturday to Monday. The Taipei County Government, which is sponsoring the festival for the first time, has planned more tourism related activities and events.

Saturday's events include a public "plunge" from the harbor for those who want to experience the cleansing ritual for themselves. Registration is closed as of press time, but there will be other events, including a seafood buffet lunch special for NT\$200 per person and a cooking demonstration in the late afternoon. On Sunday a lantern-lighting ceremony is scheduled to take place at 6:20pm, followed by a Japanese dance performance and a set by *taike* (台客) rockers the Clippers (夾子大樂隊).

All events take place near Baoan Temple. If you want to catch the official ceremony on Monday, plan for an early day, as the events start at 8:30am.

YEHLIU TAKES THE PLUNGE FOR LANTERN FESTIVAL

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER



Yehliu celebrates Lantern Festival with a walk over embers and a cold plunge into the harbor.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE TAIPEI COUNTY GOVERNMENT

IF YOU GO

WHAT: The Cleansing of the Harbor Festival in Yehliu (台北縣野柳神明淨港文化祭)
WHEN: Main events held from Saturday until Monday. Monday's official ceremony runs from 8:30am to 12:30pm
WHERE: Wanli Township, Yehliu Village, Taipei County (台北縣萬里鄉野柳村)
ON THE NET: www.神明淨港.tw (Chinese only)

GETTING THERE

FROM TAIPEI:

► Kuo-Kuang (國光客運, tel: 0800-010-138) runs several buses to Yehliu from its depot next to Taipei Main Station. Take either the Taipei-Jinshan Youth Activity Center (台北-金青中心) or the Taipei-Dharma Drum Mountain (台北-法鼓山) bus, and get off at Yehliu Station (野柳站). Traveling time is approximately one hour

FROM TAMSUI:

► Take the Tamsui-Keelung (淡水-基隆) bus, which departs from the bus stop directly across from the Danshui (Tamsui) MRT Station (淡水捷運站), and get off at Yehliu Station (野柳站). Traveling time is approximately one hour

FROM KEELUNG:

► Take the Keelung Bus Company's (基隆客運, tel: 0800-588-010) Keelung-Jinshan (基隆-金山) bus, which departs from outside of Keelung Train Station (基隆火車站), and get off at Yehliu Station (野柳站). Traveling time is approximately 30 minutes

OTHER LANTERN FESTIVAL HAPPENINGS:

► **WHAT:** Pingsi International Sky Lantern Festival (2009台北縣平溪國際天燈節, www.2009lightup.world.hbpr.com.tw). Pingsi in Taipei County is best known for its "sky lanterns," paper lanterns that float up into the air like hot-air balloons. A limited number of free lanterns will be available on a first-come, first-served basis

WHEN: Saturday at Pingsi Junior High School (平溪國中) from 6pm to 10pm and Monday at Shifen Sky Lantern Plaza (十分天燈廣場) from 6pm to 10pm

► **WHAT:** Taipei Lantern Festival (2009台北燈節, www.taipei-festival.com). Taipei's lantern festival celebration starts tomorrow with displays in the area around Taipei City Hall (台北市政府). The building's entire front wall will be transformed into a "light-painting" art installation

WHEN: From tomorrow until Feb. 15