

TRAVEL

THURSDAY, MARCH 5, 2009

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IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

» Take the plane, train or bus, or drive to Taitung City. From there, three flights a day leave for Green Island from the Taitung airport, costing NT\$1,000 one way. Flights from Taitung City take only about 12 minutes. Most people go by ferry, which costs NT\$460 per adult one way.

Be aware that flights can be canceled if there is strong wind or rain, due to safety concerns for the small 19-seat planes that land on Green Island's short runway. Ferry departures are generally only canceled during typhoons.

Ferries leave from the Fugang Fishing Port (富岡漁港) north of Taitung City. Taxi rides from Taitung airport to the port take less than half an hour.

The peak travel season for Green Island is the summer but because it's in southern Taiwan, the climate is generally warmer than Taipei all year-round.

Where to stay

» Numerous bed-and-breakfast *minsu* (民宿),

or homestays, have popped up in recent years to cater to tourists. Taiwan's Tourism Bureau has a book on *minsu* in Taiwan that lists several on Green Island. They are inexpensive, ranging from around NT\$1,500 per night. You can learn about local island life from the owners and their family members, who often live on site.

One *minsu* that stands out, literally, is the Green Ocean Castle (綠海城堡), which is built in the shape of a Mediterranean-like building, with large balconies, a spacious red-tile living room, arch-shaped windows and tastefully decorated bedrooms, some with ocean views. In the warm, casual living room, guests who are divers or snorkelers trade stories about their underwater adventures. Tel: (089) 67-1023 or 0911-736-739. On the Net: giob.myweb.hinet.net.

Those on a tight budget or who love the outdoors can camp at the Green Island Camping Area (綠島露營區), where tent sites are on individual raised wooden platforms, with a communal shower and

toilets nearby. Reservations should be made in advance at the Visitor Center.

Useful phone numbers

» Green Island Visitor Center (綠島遊客中心) (089) 67-2026

Taitung County Government (089) 32-6141, www.taitung.gov.tw

East Coast National Scenic Area Administration, Tourism Bureau (089) 84-1520

Daily Airlines (德安航空公司) (089) 36-2489

Jinsing Ferry Boat (金星客輪) (089) 28-1477

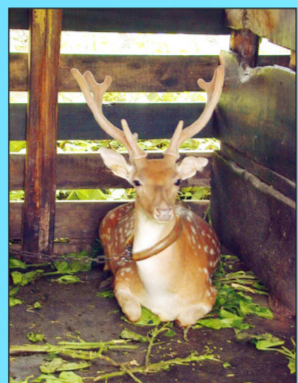
Lyudaojihhsing Ferry Boat (綠島之星客輪) (089) 28-0226

Kaisyuan Ferry Boat (凱旋客輪) (089) 28-1047

Jhaorih Hot Spring (朝日溫泉) (089) 67-1133

Sika Deer Ecological Park (綠島梅花鹿生態園區) (089) 67-1017

24-hour toll-free travel information hotline 0800-011-765, staff can provide assistance in Chinese, English and Japanese



From prison to paradise

Green Island may be small, but it's perfect for a quick get-away

BY CINDY SUI
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Thirty kilometers from Taitung City off the southeastern coast of Taiwan lies Green Island, a tiny islet of only 16.2km² with about 2,000 residents.

Previously overlooked by vacationers, the island was better known as the place to which the government banished political prisoners during the martial law period from 1949 to 1987. The old prison stands as a stark reminder of that dark chapter in Taiwanese history. A second prison remains active.

Also detracting from the island's travel destination appeal was the notorious boat ride from Taitung. A strong current runs through the nearby waters making the boat ride choppy and some passengers seasick. Vomiting bags are provided at every seat.

Despite these factors, in recent years tourists have flocked here, with hundreds to thousands arriving daily during the peak summer season.

Visitors come because Green Island has everything else going for it: a beautiful landscape, spectacular rock formations jutting out from the shore, ocean views, green hills and open spaces, a laid-back atmosphere and perhaps most important of all — beautiful coral reefs.

It's especially popular with snorkelers, scuba divers, swimmers and people who just want some peace and quiet away from grind of urban life.

Green Island's beautiful scenery is the result of its having been formed by ancient volcanic activity. Over the years, wind and tides have sculpted the rocks along the coastline into shapes supposedly resembling people and animals, hence their names: Sleeping Beauty (睡美人), Pekinese Dog (哈巴狗), Ox Head Hill (牛頭山) and Confucius Rock (孔子岩). Trying to figure out which rock is which can provide some idle entertainment.

But perhaps the most popular attraction is found underwater.

Coral reefs surround the island, providing refuge for a wide range of marine life. More than 150 species of hard coral and at least 50 types of soft coral are believed to exist in the surrounding waters. Some of the species are unique to the Black Tide, a strong current in the northern part of the western Pacific Ocean, which begins off Taiwan's east coast and flows northwest.

The underwater scenery around Green Island is considered some of the best in the

world, according to Taiwanese diving experts who have dived in other popular places such as Palau, the Philippines and Malaysia.

Divers and snorkelers head to the Shihlang Diving Area (石朗潛水區), Chaikou Diving Area (柴口潛水區), and Dabaisha Diving Area (大白沙潛水區), which is also good for swimming.

Even non-swimmers can enjoy the rich coral resources because they lie in shallow waters.

For those who don't want to get their feet wet, glass-bottom boats offer rides that can open one's eyes to the marine world.

Yet the island is confronted by challenges it has never faced before because of increased tourism and over-fishing.

Although there are only 2,000 long-term residents, 6,000 motorbikes are registered on Green Island to cater to the tourist market. Most tourists prefer to whisk around the normally placid island road by scooter than by bicycle, despite a campaign by the local office of the Tourism Bureau to promote the latter.

Tourists who don't know how to dive or snorkel also damage the coral when they float in groups on the shallow water, said Lin Su-ling (林抒琳), recreation section chief of the Tourism Bureau's East Coast National Scenic Area Administration.

"They get scared in the water so they stand up, stepping on the corals," said Lin. Her office hopes to improve the quality of tourism on the island.

"We hope tourists will spend two or three days in Green Island, instead of rushing around, so that they can enjoy the peaceful atmosphere, help the local economy by staying in the homestays, and learn to snorkel or dive properly," said Lin.

Islanders are also contributing to the destruction of the natural environment. Local fishermen use methods that harm the fishery resources, including fishing "guns" (actually spears), fish bombs and overfishing — causing a drastic reduction in coral reef fish, except at two areas that are protected, residents said.

"The coral is still very pretty. Green Island's coral reefs are among the top 10 in the world. The biggest problem is the fish are almost all gone," said Yu Ming-hung (俞明宏), a local diving instructor of the Flying Fish Diving Center (飛魚潛水). Yu remembers seeing significantly more fish when he moved from Taipei to Green Island four years ago.

The fishermen also lure the fish to the water's surface with bright lights at night and catch even small fish, not just the mature ones.

Once home to Taiwan's most notorious prison and a symbol of the country's White Terror period, Green Island has over the past decade reinvented itself as a popular tourist attraction.

PHOTOS: TAIPEI TIMES AND COURTESY OF THE TOURISM BUREAU AND FLYING FISH DIVING CENTER

"Fish near corals should be protected," Yu said. "It takes several years for the fish to grow to maturity."

Alarmed by the environmental damage, some residents have formed the Green Island Township Ecology Protection Association (綠島生態保護協會), which is urging the government to do more to protect the island's precious natural resources, such as by encouraging fishermen to change their methods or helping them transition into other careers as coastal clean-up crews or protection workers.

"There are only about 25 people who depend on fishing for a living or for their own food; the government can easily stop the destruction to fishery resources by giving these people other jobs," said association head Tien Hui-hung (田輝鴻).

Coral reef fish may contain ciguatera, which can harm the brain and nervous system, but restaurants buy the fish from the fishermen and consumers eat them because the fish look pretty and are tasty, Yu said. But the level of ciguatera in the fish is apparently not high enough to have caused local consumers to get sick.

The Taitung County government office in charge of managing the fishery industry said inappropriate fishing is not the only cause of the problem. Climate change has also caused the fish population to decline, county officials said, but they said that laws currently allow fishermen to use harmful methods, such as lights at night, and fishing is allowed in all coral reef areas around the island, except the two small protected zones — the Shihlang Diving Area (石朗潛水區) and Chaikou Diving Area (柴口潛水區), which on a map look like two dots on the coastline.

Although the economic downturn and several typhoons caused the number of tourists to drop to 310,000 last year, down from about 380,000 in recent years, the number of people visiting Green Island is expected to increase in the long term.

As people cut back on overseas travel due to the lack of year-end bonuses or salary raises, Green Island may be seen as a perfect option — one that is easy to get to and inexpensive.

Tourists, however, can do a lot to protect Green Island's ecology by simply renting bicycles instead of scooters, taking care to not damage coral when they are in the water, and not ordering coral reef fish on menus.

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