

TRAVEL

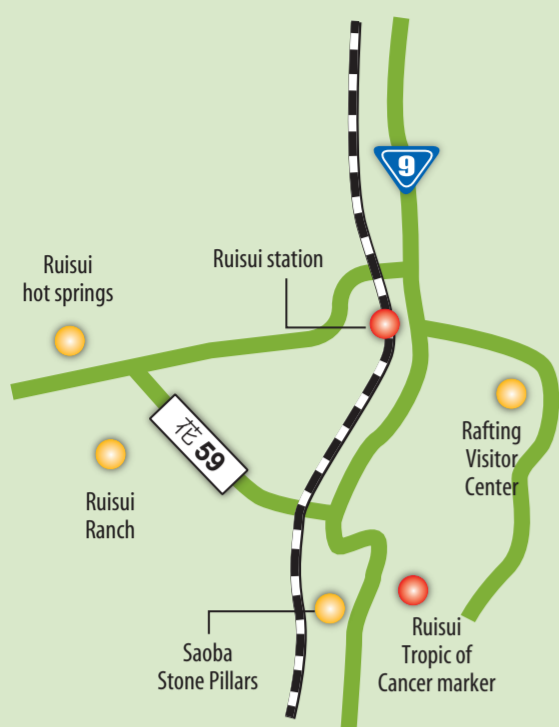
THURSDAY, MARCH 12, 2009

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Four wheels move the body, two wheels move the soul

While Guanshan parlays cycling mania into tourist dollars, Ruisui exploits its hot spring resources

BY RICHARD HAZELDINE
STAFF REPORTER



IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE BY TRAIN

- >> Taipei to Guanshan about five hours, NT\$731
 - >> Guanshan to Ruisui 90 minutes, NT\$141
 - >> Ruisui to Taipei four hours and 10 minutes, NT\$591
- Note: Travel times and ticket prices are for Tzuchiung Express (自強號) trains

LOCAL TRANSPORTATION

- >> Scooters can be rented near the Ruisui train station for NT\$400 per day from the **Fu Tai Scooter Shop** (富泰車業行). Tel: (03) 887-0802

THINGS TO DO

- Guanshan**
- >> **Rice School** (米國學校) 24-1 Changlin Rd, Guanshan Township, Taitung County (台東縣關山鎮昌林路24-1). Tel: (089) 814-903
 - >> **Bamboo Art Workshop** (竹軒工藝坊) 5.2km mark, Guanshan Circular Cycle Path, Guanshan Township, Taitung County (台東縣關山鎮環鎮車道5.2km). Tel: (089) 810-188
 - >> **Qing Qing Strawberry Farm** (青青草莓園) 8km, Guanshan Circular Cycle Path, Guanshan Township, Taitung County (台東縣關山鎮環鎮車道8km). Tel: (089) 812-519

- Ruisui**
- >> **Ruisui Ranch** (瑞穗牧場) 157 Wuhe Village, Ruisui Township, Hualien County (花蓮縣瑞穗鄉舞鶴村157號). Tel: (03) 887-6767. On the Net www.rareseed.com.tw

- Rafting**
- >> **Hsiouluguan Rafting Visitor Center** (秀姑巒溪泛舟遊客中心) 215, Jhongshan Rd Sec 3, Ruisui Township, Hualien County (花蓮縣瑞穗鄉中山路三段215號). Tel: (03) 887-5400

PLACES TO STAY:

- Guanshan**
- >> **Shan Shui Shen Holiday Village** (山水軒渡假村飯店) 73 Hsinfu Road, Hsinfu Borough, Guanshan Village, Taitung County (台東縣關山鎮新福里新福路73號). Tel: (089) 812-988. On the Net: www.sss988.com.tw. Doubles start from NT\$2,900
 - >> **Ru Yi Villa** (如意山莊) 69 Sinfu Rd, Guanshan Village, Taitung County (台東縣關山鎮新福路69號). Tel: (089) 812-900. On the Net: www.ru-yi-bnb.com.tw. Doubles start at NT\$1,800

- Ruisui**
- >> **Huang Jia Hot Spring Villa** (黃家溫泉山莊) 321 Beiwu Rd, Ruisiang Village, Ruisui Township, Hualien County (花蓮縣瑞穗鄉瑞祥村北五路321號). Tel: (03) 887-6629. On the Net: www.8876629.com. Simple, wood-paneled doubles start from NT\$1,500 on weekdays
 - >> **Higashi Oka Hide Kawa** (東岡秀川) 31-6, Ln 2, Hot Spring Rd Sec 3, Ruisui Township, Hualien County (花蓮縣瑞穗鄉溫泉路三段2巷31-6號). Tel: (03) 800-6788. On the Net: higashi.hlnb.com.tw. Opened last year and has slightly more upmarket doubles starting at NT\$2,500
 - >> **Butterfly Valley Resort** (蝴蝶谷溫泉渡假村) 161 Guangdong Rd, Fuyuan Village, Ruisui Township, Hualien County (花蓮縣瑞穗鄉富源村廣東路161號). Tel: (03) 881-2377. On the Net: www.bvr.com.tw. Rooms start from NT\$8,000

A hassle-free train ride through stunning scenery, a spot of leisurely cycling and a soak in a hot spring — just the ingredients for a relaxing long weekend. All this and more can be found in the East Rift Valley (花東縱谷), one of Taiwan's most beautiful and unspoiled regions.

The valley — a sliver of land sandwiched between the Central and Coastal mountain ranges stretching 150km from south of Hualien to just north of Taitung — is around a four- to six-hour train journey from Taipei, depending on your destination. Driving takes longer.

There are several interesting small towns to stop off at along the valley.

Heading back to Taipei from Taitung, our first port of call was the sleepy township of Guanshan (關山) in Taitung County.

Getting off the train, the surroundings are slightly underwhelming as Guanshan looks similar to other one-strip farming towns that straddle Provincial Highway No. 9 between Taitung and Hualien.

But Guanshan is different; it has capitalized on the cycle mania that has swept the country in the past few years and turned itself into an east coast cycling mecca of sorts.

The idea is simple: Take a 12km-route circling the township along underused agricultural paths that snake through picturesque farming country, turn it into a cycle path and viola! You have an instant tourist attraction that draws visitors in their thousands.

BESPOKE BIKING

Although we arrived on the Monday following the extended Lunar New Year break — a relatively quiet day — the numerous bicycles lining the road near the trail's starting point indicated how busy the area can get. It was chockablock with thousands upon thousands of bikes of varying shapes and sizes ready to rent for around NT\$100 each per day.

The relatively flat trail can easily be navigated in around an hour by any competent cyclist. But there are numerous attractions along the way, such as the local farmers' association's Rice School (米國學校, near the 4km marker), which teaches visitors about the ins and outs of rice farming, the Bamboo Art Workshop (竹軒工藝坊, 5.2km), where you can make various bamboo trinkets, and several pick-your-own strawberry farms. The trip can easily morph into a

very enjoyable half or even full day.

And if, like me, you never tire of looking at the reflection of mountains and clouds in paddy fields, then you will not be disappointed.

But don't forget your wallet, as at around the halfway mark (6km) is the ticket office. Tickets cost NT\$100 per person and include entrance to the expansive, but ultimately unexciting Guanshan Water Park (關山親水公園).

A BED FOR THE NIGHT

There are several reasonably priced resorts, hotels and homestays, or *minsu* (民宿), in town, with most congregated near the cycle path's starting point.

We stayed at the Shan Shui Shen Holiday Village (山水軒渡假村飯店), which although a little pricey at NT\$2,900 for a Taiwanese "double" (my feet poked out the bottom of the bed), did include free bike hire, a one-hour private spa session (a tonic for those cycle-weary legs), and even a free car wash should you choose to travel there on four wheels. They also pick up guests from the train station, although if traveling light it would be quicker to walk.

After a day's cycling, we hopped on the lunchtime train for the 90-minute ride north to Ruisui (瑞穗) in Hualien County — Taiwan's dairy country and home to some of the nation's less-frequented hot springs.

Ruisui's hot springs are a reasonably well-kept secret, but that is changing rapidly. A couple of years ago during our last stay, there were just a few budget hotels, but now there is a proliferation of places to suit most budgets. From the high-end Butterfly Valley Resort (蝴蝶谷溫泉渡假村) with rooms starting at NT\$8,000, to our hotel, the rather more frugal Huang Jia Hot Spring Villa (黃家溫泉山莊), at NT\$1,500 for a simple, wood-paneled double with private spa.

There is an information booth with the contact details of all the hot springs in the area just outside of the station. Scooters can be rented nearby.

Although uncrowded, Ruisui's hot springs may not be to everyone's liking as the water is a murky, reddish brown color (caused by iron, the locals said). But once you get over your initial reservations the benefits to the skin are palpable — as long as you don't shower afterwards.

The other main attraction, about 5km south of town along Provincial Highway No. 9, is Ruisui

Ranch (瑞穗牧場), where city folk can sample life on a dairy farm. Well, they can sit down and relax while watching the cows and a family of ostriches go about their business.

RUISUI RANCH

It may not sound exciting, but the layout of Ruisui Ranch is such that you can easily fritter away a couple of hours sitting in the shade, taking in the Rift Valley scenery and snacking on the various milk-based products on offer at the ranch shop.

Meanwhile, the animals — especially the ostriches — provide the entertainment and are a guaranteed hit with the kids.

The clever folks at Ruisui even get visitors to pay for the pleasure of feeding their livestock, with bunches of grass available for NT\$10.

The shop offers fresh milk (NT\$30 per cup), milk puddings (NT\$35), cheesecake (NT\$30) and milk bread, steamed or fried (NT\$10 and NT\$15) among other produce. The ranch's specialty, milk nougat, comes in four flavors: original; green tea and pumpkin seed; coffee and hazelnut; and pine nut.

Once the ruminants are fed, should you have a spare 30 minutes or so, just down Highway No. 9 at the 275km marker are the ancient Saoba Stone Pillars (掃叭石柱), which stand imposingly on a hill at the mouth of a picturesque valley.

The two upright rocks may resemble a poor man's Stonehenge, but mock them at your peril. One of the sight's information plaques relates that a few years ago when one of the stones fell down, the local government investigated the possibility of moving them. That was until a string of "strange phenomena" convinced locals and officials to leave them be.

Just across the road from the pillars is the Tropic of Cancer marker, where one can pose for a photo and ponder if the proximity of the Saoba pillars is merely a coincidence.

For the more adventurous, Ruisui is also the main stopping off point for rafting trips along the Siougulan River (秀姑巒溪).

With a wide range of activities to choose from and so much natural beauty to take in, the East Rift Valley literally has something for everyone. Just make sure you take a book to wile away the hours on the train.



Ruisui Ranch, above left and center, and the Saoba Stone Pillars, above right, are just two of the many attractions that draw hoards of visitors to the East Rift Valley.

PHOTOS: RICHARD HAZELDINE, TAIPEI TIMES

ILLUSTRATIONS: TAIPEI TIMES