

TRAVEL

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Visitors get intimate with the sheep at Cingjing Farm.
PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES



Above: Bowang New Village is a simple but colorful place to visit, and is fascinating for its links to a relatively unknown chapter of Taiwan's history.
Right: Shi Wai Tao Yuan's interesting take on the log cabin.
PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES

Scratch the surface of the corny castle-style buildings and sheepshearing show, and Cingjing's natural beauty shines through

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THE HILLS ARE ALIVE ...

Below: It is a steep climb up from Cingjing to the heights of Hohuanshan.
Bottom: Provence Rose Lodge pays homage to Tudor-style timber-frame building techniques.
PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES

Located high in the Central Mountain Range in Nantou County, Cingjing Farm (清靜農場) and the new tourism center that has developed around it have become a mecca for Taiwanese in search of a few days rest and recreation at a mountain wonderland. The result is something of a cross between an alpine village and Disney World.

While the word kitsch does not even begin to describe activities such as the Sheep Show (綿羊秀), with its real live sheepshearer and attendant sheep dog, both from New Zealand, or the fairy-tale bell towers and faux Tudor architecture that have come to dominate the landscape, there is, behind this theme park facade, much to enjoy, not least given the thinner crowds and lower accommodation tariffs during the winter months.

The cool air of Cingjing makes it a hugely popular summer retreat and the price of good quality bed-and-breakfast accommodation there during the high season often rivals that of five-star hotels in the capital. Weekday visitors during winter can get anything from a 20 percent to 50 percent discount on room rates if they are prepared to risk the less than certain weather and the winter chill. And while the mountain flowers are not in bloom, the skyline, made up of some of Taiwan's highest peaks, remains dauntingly beautiful. There is the possibility, however slim, of seeing them capped with snow.

While there are no official figures for the number of people who pass through the Cingjing area, it was indicative of the cachet that the location has acquired with domestic tourists as a holiday getaway that staff at Shi Wai Tao Yuan (世外桃源), a family-run bed-and-breakfast, were already handling bookings for the upcoming Lunar New Year period when I visited earlier this month.

Shi Wai Tao Yuan is typical of the mid-range bed-and-breakfasts that are springing up in Cingjing, which provide friendly if somewhat haphazard service at reasonable prices. The guesthouse, designed as a crescent of stylish cabins surrounding a slightly fussy garden, provides a lovely environment for sipping tea and inhaling the bracing mountain air. While only 500m away from the No. 14 Jia Provincial Highway (省道台

14甲線), Cingjing's main thoroughfare, there is a mood of rustic isolation that tourists are clearly willing to pay handsomely for.

There are numerous pricier choices for a somewhat more elaborate mountain chateau experience, a popular option being the Provence Rose Lodge (清境普羅旺斯玫瑰莊園), a recent extension to the Cingjing CBS Farm (清境長白山農場), which proprietor Cheng Chiu-wen (鄭秋文) claims to be the first guesthouse in the area to adopt the alpine architectural theme. Appropriately, it is located quite close to the Swiss Garden (小瑞士花園), a formal affair that is best visited during the warmer months.

Provence Rose Lodge aims to emulate the elegance of an English country cottage with its dark wood beams, slate flooring and large rose garden. (When in bloom, guests are invited to pick the flowers for a rose petal bath.) Provence Rose Lodge has five-star aspirations (which are reflected in its room rates), with large, well-appointed rooms, though its effort to create a French-style restaurant and bakery is less than successful as the staff doesn't pass muster.

The experience of eating at Provence Rose Lodge put me off sampling the fare at any of the other European-themed dining establishments in the area. Fortunately, culinary highlights in another and unexpected form are on offer — the cuisine of the Shan people from China's Yunnan Province, who form a distinct community in the vicinity.

Bowang New Village (博望新村) is the highest veterans' village in Taiwan, located at an altitude of 2,044m. Together with the second highest, Shouting New Village (壽亭新村, 1,700m), these communities were built to house Shan irregular troops who fought for the Chinese Nationalist (KMT) Army during the Chinese Civil War. While the Shan people and their culture are not particularly visible around Cingjing, they arguably provide the area's main gastronomic distinction.

The veterans housed in Cingjing brought their Yunnanese food with them, and this has been developed by a number of restaurants, which imbues the place with an air of multiculturalism. It is remarkable that more is not made of this in the

tourism bump, but this has not prevented a number of Yunnan-inspired eateries becoming popular.

Mesler Restaurant (美斯樂風味店), located in a recently renovated space that stands out from the low-ceilinged houses that line Bowang New Village's single street, serves up home-style Shan dishes that are quite distinct in flavor from what is available in the various Yunnan/Burmese/Thai restaurants of Taipei. Some of the herbs used, such as fresh *Angelica sinensis* (當歸) and knotweed (香蓼), are not readily available in the capital, and lend the food very distinctive flavors.

Aside from the restaurant, Bowang New Village is worth visiting for the fascinating exhibition of photos from its early days that is displayed there. The collection is permanently housed at the Cingjing Community Development Association (清靜社區發展協會) at the top of the village street.

Venturing into wilder mountain territory requires no more than a half-hour drive on to Hohuan Villa (合歡山莊), a location that offers some truly spectacular views and an opportunity to make a quick and easy ascent of Hohuan Chianshan (合歡尖山), a hike that can be completed in 30 minutes, but which puts you on top of one of Taiwan's 100 highest peaks (3,217m). Located close by are the trail heads for Hohuan East Peak (3,421m) and Hohuan Main Peak (3,416m), both of which can be climbed in about three hours with a minimum of preparation.

On the side of the trail to the east peak, the pylons from the days when a chairlift operated from what is still known as the Ski Villa (滑雪山莊), which now offers inexpensive, simple accommodation for hikers, can be seen.

For those who find summiting mountain peaks a bit too much like hard work, a visit to Taiwan's second highest 7-Eleven (1,743m) might provide a substitute sense of satisfaction. There were certainly more people shopping there than there were on the peaks, huddled over hot drinks and oden (黑輪).

It is easy to dismiss Cingjing, with its sheep show and corny castles as something of an Asian fantasy of alpine pastures, but you only have to scratch the surface to find that it is much more interesting than that.



Online resources:

>> Cingjing Farm has an adequate English-language Web site at www.cingjing.gov.tw/en/about/index.php, with brief introductions to the history and culture of the area

>> Shi Wai Tao Yuan offers double rooms from NT\$3,800 per night; more information at www.sity.com

>> Provence Rose Lodge in Ching Jing is offering 40 percent discounts on weekday room rates for next month and January. Weekend room rates start at NT\$4,000 per night for a double room. More information at www.prl.com.tw

>> Mesler Restaurant is located at 23 Bowang Lane, Tatung Village, Renai Township, Nantou County (南投縣仁愛鄉大同村博望巷23號). More information can be found at tw.myblog.yahoo.com/wesler-tw