

TRAVEL

16

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Kinmen

comes out fighting

The battle-scarred island has been transformed over the past decade by a project that turns once dilapidated communities into oases of cultural tourism

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When Chinese communist troops landed at Gungingou (古寧頭), Kinmen, on Oct. 25, 1949, they seized Beishan House (北山古洋樓) and turned it into a command post from where they planned to take the rest of the island. After three days of heavy fighting, the Nationalist army gained the upper hand and drove the invaders out.

With its bullet-riddled walls and crumbling roof, Beishan House is a powerful reminder of Kinmen's militarized past. Beishan (北山), where the building is located, however, offers a glimpse of the island's future.

The village, and several others at locations across Kinmen, have been renovated as part of a project begun 10 years ago by Kinmen National Park (金門國家公園) that restores once dilapidated communities — some dating back several centuries — to their original appearance.

After Kinmen National Park authorities finish renovating a traditional Fujian-style or Western-style house, they lease it out as a guesthouse business (for a comprehensive list of these guesthouses, as well as detailed maps of the villages where they are located, go to guesthouse.kmnp.gov.tw).

It's a novel idea. Tourists aren't just visitors to these single- and multi-clan villages, but residents — if only for a few days. And the villages are ideally situated as jumping off points to uncover Kinmen's other riches, such as its stunningly beautiful beaches, teeming wildlife, and for military buffs, the remnants of war.

Among the villages I visited during a three-day trip last week, Zhushan (珠山), Oucuo (歐厝) and Shuitou (水頭) highlight Kinmen's potential to become an oasis of cultural tourism — though a few problems are yet to be rectified.

The villages are easy to navigate. Following geomantic practices, they were built with a pond and public courtyard in the center around which the village, with narrow alleys branching off from tiled streets, was constructed.

Signs in English and Chinese located next to the ponds explain each village's points of interest. Small signs in Chinese detail the provenance of a temple or the lineage of an ancestral hall, providing visitors with a deeper understanding of the family or families behind a particular community's development.

My temporary abode, located in Zhushan, was a clean though somewhat spartan room in Lexis Inn (萊喜樓), a two-story, Western-style house built in 1928 by Xue Yong-nan (薛永南), a Chinese merchant who earned his fortune in the Philippines. Neglected during the Martial Law era, it was renovated to its former glory in 2001 and opened as a guesthouse three months ago by a retired academic from Taipei.

The Lexis Inn's architectural flourishes combine Chinese and Western aesthetics. An enclosed stone courtyard at ground level rises up to a wide balcony on the second floor, its stone balustrade punctuated by brick columns. Slouched in a chair, the symphonic roar of cicadas all around, it is an ideal place to plan a day's journey or enjoy the panoramic view of the pond below and the terra-cotta roofs in the distance.

A few kilometers northeast of Zhushan, the thick walls enclosing Oucuo remind visitors that before the Chinese Civil War Kinmen was no stranger to external threats, including bandits and pirates. Inside is a cluster of two-chamber houses with broad swallowtail roofs, intricate wall carvings of

animals and glazed tiles depicting colorful tableaux of Chinese deities.

The flat-roofed houses in another part of the village reveal the importance of fishing to the local economy — the space on top of the buildings was once used to dry the day's catch.

I headed down to the beach, located a few minutes from the village on foot, to take a swim.

Emerging from the dense foliage that lines a well-maintained path, the broad sandy beach comes into view. Oucuo Beach (歐厝沙灘) was deserted except for a family crouched over a pail of clams and flocks of birds feasting on small crabs.

After wading in the cool water, I hopped on my rented scooter and rode along the coastal road to Shuitou, a 700-year-old community. Legend has it that before the village was constructed, fishermen built a settlement here to shelter from the ferocious winds that batter the Taiwan Strait in winter.

Shuitou's most famous landmark is Deyue Mansion (得月樓), a large stone structure built in 1931 by Huang Hui-huang (黃輝煌). The Huang family settled in Shuitou in 1315 and 300 years ago opened the village's schoolhouse. In the center of Deyue Mansion stands an 11m-high tower, once Kinmen's tallest structure, which overlooks the village's one-story homes, ancestral shrines and open courtyards.

From Shuitou, I rode 10 minutes north to Cih Lake (慈湖), a nature reserve that is home to all manner of birds. With its intertidal pools and clear views of Xiamen's (廈門) recently built skyscrapers 2km away across the sea, it's an ideal spot for taking pictures.

There is much more to see on Kinmen, for example the Shanhou Folk Village (山后民俗文化村) or the sunrise from Taiwu Mountain (太武山), and renting a scooter is the easiest way to get around. But for visitors who are adverse to this mode of transport, free bike rentals are available at nine locations across the island (most guesthouses also lend guests bicycles for free).

Kinmen National Park has been very astute here, not only in promoting this healthy activity, but also for publishing an easy-to-use map that details different bike paths around the island that pass through all the tourist hot spots. Bus tours are also available. More information can be found at the main bus station, located in Jincheng (金城), or pick up a map at the airport.

With all the money spent and effort expended on renovating entire villages, it is somewhat disappointing that Kinmen has no nightlife. The ubiquitous night markets found in Taiwan are absent here. Nor are there many restaurants. In fact, it's a running joke among some residents that Kinmen is starved for a good place for a sit-down meal (Taiwanese-style banquet halls devoted to tour groups excepted). I wandered around for an hour on my second night before finding something as simple as fried rice and dumplings.

What's more perplexing, though, is the almost superstitious fear many locals have of the sea. Penghu (澎湖) has made great use of its beaches with all manner of water sports. On Kinmen, talk of a swim is, more often than not, met with looks of panic. Consequently, beaches remain underdeveloped or littered with the detritus of war, such as rusting iron spikes and barbed wire.

But Kinmen's drawbacks are easily overlooked. With its unique cultural heritage and stunning natural beauty, the island is an ideal place to spend a few days soaking up some sun and history.

Where to stay

- Lexis Inn (萊喜樓): Recently renovated house in Zhushan (珠山). Rates range from NT\$1,200 to NT\$1,400 per night. On the Net: guesthouse.kmnp.gov.tw/hotel/hotel_view2.asp?Tkey=12
- Zhushan Laoye Guesthouse (珠山老爺): Recently renovated traditional Fujian-style guesthouse in Zhushan. Rates range from NT\$1,000 to NT\$1,600 per night. On the Net: guesthouse.kmnp.gov.tw/hotel/hotel_view2.asp?Tkey=25
- Piano Piano B&B (樓樓民宿): Upmarket guesthouse located in Zhushan. Rates range from NT\$2,000 to NT\$3,000 per night. On the Net: www.pianopiano.com.tw
- Shuitaogetou Guesthouse (水頭歌頭): Upmarket guesthouse located in Shuitou (水頭). Rates range from NT\$1,200 to NT\$1,600 per night. On the Net: guesthouse.kmnp.gov.tw/hotel/hotel_view2.asp?Tkey=17
- For a comprehensive list (including detailed maps) of Kinmen's guesthouses, go to: guesthouse.kmnp.gov.tw (Chinese only)

What to take

- SPF30 sunscreen and mosquito repellent. If you plan on riding a scooter or a bike around the island, be sure to wear a long-sleeve shirt to prevent sunburn



The patio at Piano Piano B&B guesthouse in Zhushan.

PHOTO: NOAH BUCHAN, TAIPEI TIMES



Top: A well-maintained alley in Zhushan.
Above: A family frolics on Chenggung Beach.

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A reminder of Kinmen's turbulent past.

PHOTO: NOAH BUCHAN, TAIPEI TIMES



Shanhou Folk Village.

PHOTO: NOAH BUCHAN, TAIPEI TIMES

Getting there

- Uni Air (立榮航空), Mandarin Airlines (華信航空) and TransAsia Airways (復興航空) operate flights from Taipei's Songshan Airport. One-way fares average NT\$2,000

Scooter and bicycle rentals

- Kinmen National Park (金門國家公園) provides bicycle rentals free of charge at nine locations throughout Kinmen. Pick up a map at the airport for more details
- There are many shops in Jincheng (金城) offering scooters for rent. A 125cc scooter costs about NT\$400 per day

Island tours

- Kinmen National Park (金門國家公園) offers a variety of bus tours of the main island, which range from NT\$200 to NT\$350. Tickets are available at the main bus terminal in Jincheng. Call 082-332-814 for more information

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