

LETTERS FROM THE EDGE

TAIWAN



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT Banyan tree temple in
Penghu; Island causeway
arch; Matsu morning market
cook; Sukiyaki; Shopping for
snacks at Matsu market;
Matsu goddess; Matsu market
pancakes; Little Taiwan Rock;
Garlic snail vendor. **MAIN PHOTO**
A Mediterranean-style village on Matsu.



Taiwan

WHERE ON EARTH

TAIWAN'S Outer



LETTERS FROM THE EDGE

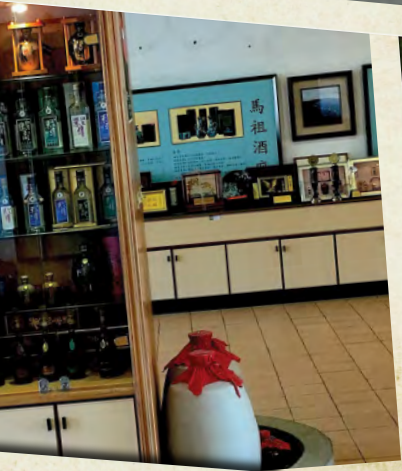
TAIWAN



Islands

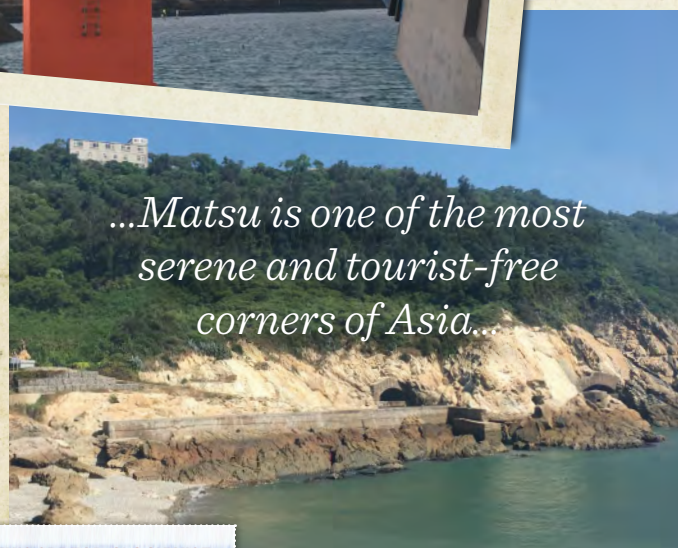
by ELYSE GLICKMAN





EVEN WITH TAIPEI'S GROWING POPULARITY among globetrotting gourmets, there's a different Taiwan even the most well-travelled westerners have not yet discovered. It lives and breathes on the Matsu Islands and Penghu Archipelago. These destinations are hideaways in the truest sense. In addition to the obvious allure of pristine beaches, well-preserved historic villages and numerous options for active travellers, the islands provide a rare opportunity to experience the building blocks of Taiwanese cuisine in its purest, freshly caught state, influenced equally by the Fujian culture of Southeastern China and years of Japanese occupation.





...Matsu is one of the most serene and tourist-free corners of Asia...

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Old Town Penghu; A village on Matsu; Thorn Bird Coffee owner; Rainbow Bridge; Oyster farm on Penghu; Fresh Penghu prawns; Sorghum wine, Qimei's iconic weir; Breaded chicken skewers; Penghu market vendor; Sorghum wine tasting room; Sashimi platter; Sticky Penghu ribs; Military tunnel on Matsu; Penghu crawfish.



Established restaurants on the islands are generally multi-generational family businesses with a no-frills sensibility, while trendier spots are operated by young, entrepreneurial Taiwanese integrating modern flair from their global travels with traditional preparations. Several places are outfitted with "lazy Susan" tables covered with at least a half dozen large platters and hot pots of fish, squid, oysters, and vegetables that grow in abundance in or near sea water.

More to Love in Penghu

A double heart-shaped fishing weir built on Panghu's "South Sea" island of Qimei (*chee-may*) centuries ago is the islands' defining landmark. Although it is a favourite photo spot, the fish trap's romantic design reflects the resilience of a way of life.

Save for garlic, pepper and a "Venus" spice with a similar tang and colour to paprika, one will not find fancy sauces, garnishes or elaborate presentations. In Magong City, fish and seafood are the stars at almost every restaurant, from the Four Points Sheraton Penghu banquet to Cauliflower Old Memory Restaurant, which looks like it could be a grandmother's dining room. There are many fried indulgences, such as cuttlefish balls and fried squid, as well as some east-west fusion items like lobster club sandwiches.

Near Magong's airport, one can find Zuoli Lane, where fish and oysters of different sizes are sorted and prepped to be sun-dried on bamboo mats. The fruits of the workers' labour not only find their way to the mainland but also shops like the one at the Penghu Visitor's Center and several boutiques on Central Street in the "old city." The pungent fish are soon transformed into "XO" sauces and other condiments made with squid, oysters, scallops and tiny salty fish, as well as dried fish worked into a variety of dishes from stir fries and *huôguô* (hot pot) to *chàofàn* or *chàomiàn* (fried rice or noodle dishes).

Peanuts, sponge gourds, angled loofah, pumpkin and other savoury melons we enjoy in »



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD

FROM TOP LEFT Penghu tile detail; Matsu sunset; Tunnel 88, Sorghum wine aging; Venus spice fish, Matsu.



«the Sheraton's banquet dishes also make regular appearances at more casual nightly feasts and afternoon luncheons as do watercress and sea spinach deliciously laden with garlic and chili oil. Taiwan Beer or Apple Sidra sodas are served with every meal, providing crisp foils for the salty, earthy and spicy dishes. Shaved ice, cactus ice cream and pineapple cakes often finish off the meals in a bright, tropical way.

In addition to the quirky and cute Cauliflower Old Memory Restaurant, every restaurant offers different iterations of squid vermicelli, stir-fried rice noodles with pumpkin, octopus and pork rib stew, steamed loofah, spare rib noodle soup, sashimi-like sides, simple prawns, hot pots, and a coda of fresh fruit, brown sugar cake, and hot pink cactus desserts. Excellent bets include the unassuming Zhangjin Restaurant, the modern 668 Restaurant in Magong City, Xingyuewan Tian Mother Restaurant, and Qimei Yucun Restaurant.

An enjoyable way seafood enthusiasts can “go to the source” is to catch a ferry to the Marine Leisure Farm's Aqua Farm experience. It's as much a floating classroom as it is a relaxed lunch spot where one can pass the day eating unlimited oysters as well as grilled squid and seafood for about US\$17. Excursions to Qimei, the southernmost island in the Penghu archipelago, allow fans to dive deeper into unfamiliar culinary territory as well as view impressive natural wonders such as elegant basalt columns, scenic hiking and bike trails, and unusual rock formations like “Little Taiwan,” which resembles a scale map of the mainland.

Street food vendors are fixtures at most of Penghu's natural landmarks, preserved historic towns, and the 200-year-old Tongliang Banyan at Bao'an Temple, tempting visitors with the aromas of grilled seafood, spice and fire. At the basalt columns, the vendor of stir-fried sea snails with garlic, oil and chili is regarded as a

local legend. Locals send their friends to Duxingshi Village, a former Japanese military village in Magong — a great spot to observe Japan's continuing influence on local culture.

Matsu: Forward March

Matsu, an outpost of Taiwan's military that did not open up to tourists until 2003, is both a paradise and a paradox. This little group of islands is defined by its many training facilities for young soldiers, and many wars — particularly in the 1950s during its war with Mainland China. Today, Matsu is one of the most serene and tourist-free corners of Asia. Hilly roads give way to thick patches of greenery and villages with unexpected architecture evoking the Mediterranean. The beaches are truly unspoiled at this point in time.

There's a certain novelty in landing at Matsu Nangan Airport, grabbing your luggage, and walking directly to Tunnel 88 in less than two minutes. The former military cave has been repurposed into a perfect spot for aging sorghum wine, which has a whisky-like aroma and flavour profile. Matsu Distillery, a few minutes' walk from the cave, displays beautifully crafted bottles and offers samples of different expressions.

Pizza King, a ten minute-drive from the distillery along Nangan Township's main drag, sells Taiwanese spins on pizza. However, our hosts insist on ordering hearty seafood soups, fried chicken, seafood and fish covered with the red “Venus blood” seasoning, which the restaurant owner says is its signature item.

In addition to family-style restaurants with spicy stews and hot pots (like Longfushanzhuang, across from the island's Beigan Airport), Matsu is also dotted with several quirky coffee and tea houses appointed with air-conditioning, reading rooms, art galleries, cute souvenirs, and ocean vistas to enjoy with hot and iced



Visit

Penghu

Four Points Sheraton, Penghu

NO.197 Xindian Road, Magong, Penghu County

Penghu Visitors Center

No.171, Guanghua, Magong City, Penghu County

Cauliflower Old Memory Restaurant

No. 4-2, Dongwen Vil., Magong City, Penghu County

Zhangjin Restaurant

No. 9, Minzu Road, Magong City, Penghu County

668 Restaurant

36, Lane 9, Xinyi Road, Magong City, Penghu County

Marine Leisure Farm (via South Sea Visitor Centre, Magong)

www.phhc.com.tw/travel.php

Xingyuewan Tian Mother Restaurant

881, Taiwan, Penghu County, Xiyu Township

Duxingshi Village

www.dxsx.phhcc.gov.tw/English

Matsu

Pizza King

Lianjiang County Village, Nangan Township, Lienchiang County 209

Matsu Distillery

www.matsuwine.com.tw/english.htm

Thorn Bird Coffee

No.222, Fuxing Village, Nangan Township, 20941, Taiwan

Art Forest

North Hill Village, Sakamura Village No. 47, Matsu

Coast of the Dawn Hotel

No. 6, Ren'ai Village, 209 Nangan, Taiwan

Lin Yihe Wine Factory

Book through www.taiwanday.com/privatetours-matsu

Longfushanzhuang

No.273, Tangqi Vil., Beigan Township, Lienchiang County

210, Taiwan

(Opposite side of the Beigan Airport)

drinks. Thorn Bird Coffee, named for the Colleen McCulloch novel, is a converted former military building. Art Forest, at a tourism information center in Sakamura Village, serves gorgeous bottles of iced tea and coffee, as well as desserts set alight with blue pea flowers, which evoke the "blue tears" marine organisms that liven up the islands' waters in the spring. The Coast of the Dawn Hotel, a dorm-like dwelling upgraded with Italian-style decor, and photography-adorned public spaces, serves a flavourful but light breakfast that is ideal fuel for a hike or bike in the island's sultry climate.

One of the island's most unusual dining experiences can be enjoyed, by advance appointment, at Lin Yihe Wine

Los Angeles-based writer **ELYSE GLICKMAN's** last story for **TASTE&TRAVEL** was about Bogotà.

Cook



SERVES 2

Pumpkin Rice Noodles

Almos t ever y res t Aur Ant in Penghu offers a version of this popular t aiwanese dish.

Dried Rice Noodles 200 g

Vegetable Oil 2 Tbs

Garlic 3 cloves, minced

Ground Pork 200 g

Pumpkin or Butternut Squash 200 g, peeled and diced

Water 1 cup

Light Soy Sauce 4 Tbs

Dark Soy Sauce 2 Tbs

White Pepper 1 tsp

Spring Onions 2, sliced thinly on the diagonal

Cilantro to garnish

- 1 SOAK** the dried rice noodles in cold water until they are pliable, then drain and set aside.
- 2 HEAT** the oil in a wok or large skillet and add the garlic. Sauté for about 30 seconds until aromatic then add the ground pork and pumpkin or squash.
- 3 SAUTÉ** over high heat until the pork is starting to brown then add the water, soy sauces and pepper. Reduce to a simmer and cook, covered, until the squash is just tender.
- 4 ADD** the rice noodles and toss in the pan until cooked through and well coated with the sauce, about 5 minutes. Stir in the spring onions, garnish with cilantro and serve immediately.

Factory. Located in Jinsha Village, on Nangan Island, it offers the opportunity to make a jug of the local sorghum wine and sip some with brimming platters of food.

Travellers are becoming increasingly familiar with mainland Taiwan's cosmopolitan mix of skyscrapers, dining scenes, bars and green spaces. However, there's much to be said for exploring a slower-paced way of life on these islands...and doing it before everybody else has. **T&T**