

ASIA'S SECRET HOTSPOT

TAIPEI CITY, TAIWAN, IS AN EXOTIC WORLD CAPITAL KNOWN FOR ITS FOOD, FINANCE AND FASHION.

BY KELSY CHAUVIN





Tune in to Taiwan's queer scene at fridae.asia and utopia-asia.com. Both sites post info about queer Asia (the latter site even has a programmed Google map showing all the points of interest).

Les Love Boat manager Olivia Wu

or a small country, Taiwan has a lot going on. The mountainous oval island sits 100 miles southeast of mainland China, and measures just 250 by 90 miles. But from its capital city of Taipei, home to the world's second-tallest skyscraper, Taipei 101, it's easy to see how this diminutive island holds a prime spot in the global economy. Here, high fashion and high finance blend with a rich aboriginal culture whose traditions are very much alive and still inform this dynamic world travel destination.

Culture shock can surprise a first-time visitor to Taiwan. Day one may have you gasping over how commonplace it is to see people wearing medical face masks here, as you dash across an intersection before 100 motor scooters run you down on your way to a packed noodle shop for some beef-tendon soup—they say eating collagen is amazing for the skin. (Be sure to hit up Lao-Zhang Beef Noodle Shop for the absolute best in town.)

The culinary heritage of Taiwan relies on stronger flavors and more exotic fish and meat dishes than you're used to in the West. But don't let that discourage you from stepping out of your comfort zone, because, as clichéd as it sounds, many of those exotic dishes taste way better than they look.

Such a different culture can be overwhelming, but within a day or two what at first feels daunting will soon become familiar, as if the country's energy has seeped into you like a strong cup of Assam tea.

Taipei City stands at the northern end of this lush green island. Home to 2.6 million people, the capital city feels exceptionally organized. If you happen to be visiting from New York, there is one thing that will really rock your world: immaculate, air-conditioned subway stations. Yes, it makes sense to keep the subways cool, especially in such a humid climate, where summer temperatures regularly exceed 100 degrees. Yet, if you're used to a dingy, hot American subway system, Taipei's metro, or MRT, feels more like an engineering miracle, enhanced by being affordable, spatially logical, wired with cellular and Internet access and, amazingly, accessorized with potted plants that go unsullied by the masses.

In other words, parts of Taipei can feel like you've walked into the City of the Future. Or at least the movie set for it.

For the lesbian traveler, Taipei gets spicier with the abundance of highly visible "tomboys" and their girlfriends. Not only do they seem to be everywhere—they are the city's eye candy. But locals will admit that lesbians and gays still haven't achieved full acceptance, just as you might expect in a place where traditional family life is the most important ingredient in the culture—and personal privacy is greatly respected and encouraged.

However, the tides of tolerance are turning for Taiwanese queers. In August, Chen Pin-ying, editor of the Chinese-language *Lez's Meeting* magazine (lezmeeting.com), organized "Barbie and Barbie's Wedding"—essentially a mass lesbian wedding and kiss-in that drew thousands of supporters to downtown Taipei.

"I feel very hopeful that Taiwan will legalize same-sex marriage soon," said one of the brides, 32-year-old stylist Celine Chen. She may not have to wait much longer, considering that the Taiwanese government is already toying with the idea of introducing marriage-equality legislation. The fact that a remarkable 30,000 people flocked to Taipei's Gay Pride Festival in 2010 doesn't hurt the cause either.

But for specific Taipei deets, start with Les Love Boat and GinGin Books, which are just a stone's throw from each other, near National Taiwan University. Les Love Boat (lesloveboat.com) is an LGBT catchall shop where you'll find the utterly handsome store manager, Olivia Wu, ready to style you in locally designed clothes and tank top-style binders that will bring out the tomboy in every gal. Along with providing a great inventory of media, toys and admittedly cute pet wear, the shop also hosts one-on-one fortune-telling and offers massage—both regular and "knife massage," which uses dull-edged cleavers to karate-chop your tension away.

Similarly, GinGin (ginginbooks.com) sells LGBT books and other goods, not to mention serving as a safe and welcoming gathering place for the local queer community since 1999. Proudly proclaiming "We fly our own way!" GinGin also hosts lectures and other public events.

The lively, hip enclave called the Red House (redhouse.org.tw) is the place where queers grab cocktails and kick back on the giant open patio. The area, right off the Ximen MRT stop, is home to the recently renovated Red House Theatre, a 1908 red-brick octagonal performance hall that's helped turn the surrounding area, formerly a public market, into a mini West Village.

If you're ready to dance, hop over to Luxy (luxy-taipei.com) for Wednesday ladies' night with hot local and international

DJs. Karaoke is a staple of the gay nightlife scene in Taipei and beyond, but ask around for where the best spots are. There are sure to be lots of them.

No trip to Taipei would be complete without dumplings, and there's only one place that will make you forget about every other dumpling you've ever had in your whole life: Din Tai Fung (dintai fung.com.tw). These incredibly light, succulent steamed dumplings, soup-filled or stuffed with crab, mushrooms or truffles and pork, have made Din Tai Fung restaurants a growing international chain. But it's at the original restaurant (on Xinyi Road) that you'll get to peer into the kitchen at the madness of two dozen white-clad workers hand-making dumplings by the gross—one of the most frenetic and efficient culinary sights you'll ever see.

Once dinner's done, you're ready for an amazing treat that will top off any visit to tantalizing Taipei. Head to Yong Kang 15 (also the address) for a taste of "mango shaved ice" and you'll know why the place is packed day and night, though this ice cream and fresh fruit dessert is worth trying all over town, including at the bustling night markets and simple street vendors. If fruity isn't your thing, try the artistic "toasts" drizzled with honey, sauces and chocolate fondue at one of two Dazzling Cafés (cafe.dazzlingdazzling.com).

If you're considering your first visit to Asia, Taipei City may not seem as alluring or exotic as Bangkok, Hong Kong or Tokyo. But the beauty of this world-class city is precisely that it doesn't need to hype itself, because its busy streets are so chock-full of amazing, authentic restaurants, night markets, temples and nightlife. It's up to the rest of the world to come seek it out. ■

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While Taipei City is the pounding heart of the island, there is much more to see and do outside of the capital. **Tainan City** and **Taichung**—whose names share the same etymology as one of the island's 14 aboriginal tribes—both stand as thriving metropolises on opposite sides of the Tropic of Cancer, each with their own histories, huge populations, bustling cultures and vibrant nightlife scenes. For a slower pace, head to **Fulong Beach**

or one of the other beautiful "bathing beaches" that dot the subtropical island. Head inland to witness the breathtaking verdant beauty of Nantou County, where the gentle tides of **Sun Moon Lake** will ease you into a storybook break from reality. On one of the lake's north-end high roads, **Fleur de Chine Hotel** has balconies for every room—and magically, mineral water from the local hot springs piped into each panoramic bathtub.



HONG KONG NIGHTLIFE SPARKLES

A QUICK TRIP THROUGH
SKYSCRAPER CITY'S
QUEER SCENE.

BY KELSY CHAUVIN

In a city of 7.1 million people, Hong Kong's queer nightlife may seem a difficult to uncover. Maybe it's the narrow roads and winding sky bridges, or because really fun places don't need advertising, or because gays are everywhere here already. It's undeniable—Hong Kong is one of the world's most effervescent cities. You'll see all the top fashions before the rest of the planet, and you'll go on to spotting fine gay women and men dressed to kill at lounges like Psychic Jack, neighborhood hangouts Déjà Vu or Zoo, and late-night clubs like Propaganda. But for the mainly-girl scene, plan your trip to coincide with a Les Peches party. Run by delightful couple Abby Lee and Betty Grisoni—both long-term Hong Kong transplants—Les Peches (find them on Facebook)

consists of “The Lounge” (first Tuesdays of the month) and “The Club” (third Saturdays), both at the seductive Central club Lakage. Several times a year Les Peches bends toward the intellectual with “The Salon,” introducing women to workshops and lectures on everything from feminism today to creative cocktails. Getting to Hong Kong and its surrounding area is fairly simple: the city has a great airport that's just a quick train ride away from both Kowloon and Hong Kong main stations, and a virtually endless number of hotels—from harbor views at the opulent Shangri-La to the more modest Ice House. But whether you're into haute couture or crazy cheap markets, add “The Pearl of the Orient” to your Asia travel itinerary next time you're in the neighborhood. ■



Hong Kong lobster with baked egg whites and grated ginger at Shang Palace, Shangri-La Hotel Kowloon