

KITEWORLD

MAGAZINE

GAME OF THRONES

DEFINING MOMENTS

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MADE IN TAIWAN

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It was already gone midnight when I arrived at Taipei, Taiwan's capital in early November. Despite the hour I was warmly welcomed in the arrival hall of Taoyuan international airport by the country's 'Godfather of Kiting', Tony Fish and his wife, Li-Ming, as well as their two small children Sean and Dora.

A good hour after leaving the bustling city lights behind we arrived at his enclave. I could make out palm trees in the dark before walking through the gate of his club and towards a big shed made almost entirely out of surfboards. I slept like a baby in the really cute little timber-lined guest room.

A true waterman today, Tony's story is an intriguing one. He windsurfed for several years before becoming one of Taiwan's first kites and now owns a kite, wind, surf and SUP school called Spot Club in Zhunan, in the Miao-Li province on the west coast. As a teenager he would hang with the city gangsters in his hometown Taichung (literal Chinese translation is 'Middle of Taiwan'). At 14 he was given a gun and told to shoot a gang member from another alliance. He bailed and went into hiding on a voluntary school trip to beautiful Sun Moon Lake, which is where he met his first watersports mentor; an American priest who taught him to windsurf. Immediately hooked, he promised himself that he would open up a windsurfing shop when he grew up. He spent the next ten years or so working and saving up. There were so few people involved in windsurfing in Taiwan at the time that his first four business attempts in Taichung failed. Tony never gave up on his dream though and about ten years ago moved to the coastal town of Zhunan. His fifth attempt at opening a windsurfing shop succeeded with Spot Club in 2003.

Tony's team were already doing their chores in the yard when I got up the next morning. As probably the first female kite pro to visit Taiwan, everything seemed at least as exciting for the locals as it was for me. After a quick coffee I took a stroll with Tony's kite instructor, a girl called Hill, a very cool chick, 28, just 45 kilos with very eccentric looks, she's incredibly bubbly and has a lovely nature. She would prove to be like so many people I encountered. She lived on the east coast of Australia for several years and her English is absolutely perfect. She led me to the spot in front

of the club which boasts an incredibly wide, fine sand beach where I'm told that the beach break can get up to four metres on really windy days. The water was choppy and brownish, not because it was dirty, but due to all the sand moving with the strong winds of the Taiwan Strait. Blowing side-shore at 20 - 30 knots during the main kiting season, the northeasterly trades play their part in transforming the surrounding sand banks into super fun little wave parks. Five miles downwind there's a rivermouth spot that offers perfectly flat waters, ideal for freestyle and also works in the winter (October to March) northeasterly winds at semi low-tide. Although lighter at 14 - 25 knots there is wind in the summer too and the water looks cleaner as it comes from the south.

Taiwan island lies approximately 160 kilometres off the south coast of mainland China in the Pacific Ocean. Korea and Japan lie to the north with Hong Kong and the Philippines neighbouring to the south. An important point for travels to and from Asia, when the Portuguese seafarers reached the coast of Taiwan for the first time 400 years ago, it's easy to see why they called the island "Ilha Formosa" - the beautiful island, and why I think there will be more kites here in the future.

The hospitality shown to me by the kiting community is another reason I believe it will grow in popularity. Tony organised a BBQ for me on my first weekend and close to a hundred wind and wave addicts showed up at Spotclub; their oasis from their busy city lives. A number of influential people from the local government also came along to celebrate with me 'a la Taiwan'. I stayed up til late, talking and laughing, playing the guitar and singing with the locals. I even toasted with the Mayor of Zhunan with a Taiwan beer, 乾杯! / (gān bēi) / Cheers!

Tony and his wife took me to local markets and temples over the next few days so I could learn more about the local customs and traditions as well as to dig in to the local cuisine. Cooking in Taiwan features a tasty mix of Asian cultures that I already knew: Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Philippino and Malay etc. but what I really liked about the restaurants was that everybody sits around a round table that has a big turning platform in the middle. A large variety of dishes are ordered, served onto the platform and everything

INTRO → Taiwan is our latest hot tip for kitesurfers who place exploration high on their holiday check-list of must-have factors when searching for their next destination. Gabi Steindl reports on her own findings after three-and-a-half weeks making friends, bouncing around the island and soaking up the culture last November





is shared as you spoon various yummy foods onto your plate. Drinks (water, wine and beer) are all drunk via very small glasses, a bit like shot glasses, and one never drinks alone in Taiwan! You raise your glass, choose one person to cheer with, call out their name, look into each other's eyes, smile and both take a sip.

Next stop on my adventure was Taitung on the east coast, aka: 'The Hawaii of Taiwan'. The ASC (Asian Surfing Championships) Taitung Open was about to start; the country's biggest surfing competition and Tony had organised a booth to promote his school at the event. The road trip there took us past several big cities, yet Taiwan is actually a relatively small island, just 394 kilometres long and 144 kilometres at its widest point. However it is not easy to get from one side to the other with the Central Mountain Range forming a steep barrier running from north to south. Comprising more than one hundred peaks over 3,000 metres, it divides the island unequally into two parts. Reaching the very top of the mountain pass after a whole day driving, my tired little eyes nearly popped out of my head when I got my first glimpse of the coastline to the east. Surrounded by steep mountains that fell right into the sea, the Pacific Ocean glowed in the brightest turquoise on the horizon.

Coming down from the pass and driving through the little villages felt like we were in another world to those of the days before. Rice fields, orchards and Japanese houses in various states of use and disuse, Tony and Hill told me that Taitung is today known as the hub of Taiwan's indigenous culture, with many of the neighbourhoods largely aboriginal with their own celebrations and unique attributes. Developed by the Japanese in the early 20th century, it has emerged virtually unscathed from the modernisation in Taiwan due to its shortage of flat, open space and 'unfavourable' position facing away from mainland China.

We sleep well on simple, authentic straw mats and are greeted with beautiful sunshine the next morning. I grabbed my surfboard and went straight to the beach, paddling out to a group of local surfers. Turning around in the line-up and looking back towards this coast for the first time I really felt like I was in Tahiti. The view of the tropical, palm-lined mountains lining the Pacific Ocean shore was mind-blowing. The vibe in the line-up was super friendly, too. I wish so much to be able to capture moments in the water like this with my camera. Everything around me was so different to how I had imagined Taiwan. It was absolutely 'Formosa'!

Taitung has a really unique vibe, featuring lots of small, chilled out, groovy cafes and the area is lush and abundantly covered, radiating in many colours with tropical flowers and vegetation. Another thing there is a lot of here is surfboards. You see them stacked up everywhere, including on mopeds equipped with surfboard racks. There are a lot of longboarders here as the majority of the waves in the area are quite fat and slow. Again, everyone is very welcoming and I felt extremely safe and had no trouble whatsoever hitching a ride back on one of the scooters after a late sunset session at Donghe Bridge.

Most of the surf action in the area is concentrated around Donghe village. Surfing got really popular here in the last ten years, a complete contrast to the previous decade when the few westerners brave or foolish enough to attempt to surf in Taiwan often found their sessions curtailed by warning shots from an ROC coastguard boat.

A large proportion of Taitung's coastline is rocky, but there are a few kick-ass spots that are great for kiting, including Tuli, Donghe and Xingchang. The northeasterly trade winds are generally lighter here (16 - 25 knots) and not as reliable as



the west, however there are clean, peeling waves that frequently roll in between two and five metres along this turquoise Pacific coast. Beware of the strong rips at most spots, though. I was given the full rundown on the area by Mark, a South African that Tony introduced me to. A unique character, he is a totally passionate windsurfer who moved to Taiwan several years ago for the wind. Recently becoming father of his first child with a local girl, he's 'the man' and knows all the best spots around here. We explored the area together, shared laughs, stokes as well as a little tear when I smashed my finger on my SUP one day, requiring a few stitches and a few days out of the water.

During one of my days off the water I had one of the most amazing experiences in Taitung at the Teihua Music Village. An abandoned dormitory for Taiwan railway workers that since 2010 has become a new cultural space where aboriginal bands and singers perform. There are also handcraft bazaars and organic farmers markets, however, it's when the dusk falls that the village comes alive. Surrounded by trees, there are bars, cafes, a wide open grassy area where people chill out on picnic blankets, order drinks from the bar and sit back to soak up the evening. The indigenous music is hard to be put into words. Sung in the language of the musician's tribe with traditional melodies, ballads and chants with no fancy equipment. I sat for hours sipping my Taiwan beer listening to the different artists whose vocals get right under your skin. It was interesting on the drive home to find out that neither Tony or any of the other Taiwanese in our group understood the lyrics either; too old, too indigenous, but who cared? We were all buzzing with a natural high from the sounds.

A new chapter in my Taiwan adventure opened up when I accepted an invitation from Jose Chuang, president of the Taiwan Ocean Recreation Sport Association, who kindly offered to show me his home in Kenting. Another hotspot for surfing on the southern tip of Taiwan located on the Hengchun-Peninsula, you have the option of kiting the waves of the Pacific on the eastern side, or enjoying the perfect flat water action in the waters of the Taiwan Strait in the west, or the Luzon Strait in the south. I enjoyed an incredibly peaceful session all alone near Jialeshui Beach, one of the main surfing spots in the area. Another kiting highlight was riding near the gates of Houbi Gang, the largest fishing port on the Hengchun Peninsula, where more than 500 fishing boats moor up. Fishermen and ferry-passengers alike all had a curious smile and a wave for me as they headed into the harbour.

I enjoyed another real Taiwanese 'night market' in Kenting that was packed with hundreds of people and small stalls and for a few good hours ate, bought souvenirs and enjoyed being part of the craziness. For the next few days Jose put





his work into showing me the potential kite spots. 45 minutes north is Ghinzi Beach that looked as pretty much perfect for kiting as it could get. A very long bay with a wide, sandy beach and a lovely Pacific Ocean beach break. Sadly there was no wind. However, thanks to my little angel Jose I did get to sample local delicacies such as crumbed squid beaks, fried puffer fish skins and the most amazing oysters during a fantastic seafood dinner that marked the end of my time in Kenting. The next morning I took a 40 minute flight from Kaohsiung to the Penghu archipelago - 64 islands (formerly known as the 'Pescadores') located in the Taiwan Strait, the windiest waters in Asia, notorious for its mean currents. Penghu literally translates to mean 'roaring sea' and is where the windsurf adventurer Arnaud de Rosnay went missing mysteriously in November 1984.

Gary and Alex are two windsurfers I'd been in touch with over email and were already waiting for me in the arrivals hall. Both settled here in the islands because of the incredible wind statistics. Alex Mowday moved here in 1990 and with aid money from the government built a windsurf (now incorporating kitesurf) centre right at Rainbow Bridge, the major landmark of Makung and features an artificially created 400 metre beginner pool that offers perfect conditions for the rookie wind and kitesurfer.

During the days of martial law, and even for several years after, private sailing vessels were forbidden by law, so water sports in general have come a long way in Taiwan. That the local government of a key strategic area like Penghu is so enthusiastic about promoting windsurfing on the island is a good indicator of just how far the ROC government has stepped away from its traditional

defensive war footing. In general, however, Penghu (just like Taitung) is an exception and kitesurfing and other water sports are developing only very slowly in the rest of Taiwan. The tense relationship with China affects the people here and the country. The use of the beaches and activities along the coasts were severely restricted for a long time. But not only politics slow down progress, also the attitude of the older generation who are largely scared of the water. They superstitiously believe there is a monster in the water that will pull them under and drown them. Thus many parents warn their kids of rivers and beaches, instead of encouraging them to learn to swim. Many have never seen the ocean apart from on TV; which is so ironic as Taiwan is an island.

The main wave-spot of Makung for kites and windsurfers is 'Longmen' or aka: 'Dragonsgate'. During winter, extremely reliable and strong winds (word has it, the strongest in Asia) bring regular swell to the north-east coast that breaks on sand banks and reefs. Longmen is the shape of a boomerang and its pebbled beach drops steeply off into the sea. The spot boasts three different conditions: to the left and a bit further out small waves can be ridden with side-shore wind or used as ramps for tricks; centrally there is a decent flatwater area; and to the right there are slightly larger waves with the prevailing wind coming in more onshore. I get to enjoy some wild rock'n'roll-sessions on my five metre in this spot. Most of the days when the wind is blowing you find the sky overcast, however, when the sun breaks out for a few minutes, the water transforms into shimmering blue and turquoise tones.

Renting a motorbike and exploring the main island of Penghu turns into a true highlight. With only a few streets it is small enough to not easily get lost and

to find your way around even without Chinese language skills. On Taiwan mainland it's rather difficult as a foreigner, with heavy traffic and with most street signs in Chinese (only the main highways and roads are signposted in both English and Chinese). Penghu in general differs in many respects from the mainland. Although amenities and comforts of modern life have found their way here too, residents hang onto their simple, modest lifestyle, which is very different from the hustle and bustle of the cities. It is an island paradise with incredibly friendly people, quaint villages, beautiful landscapes, clean beaches and ocean basins naturally shaped by the tides.

I had one more stop planned on my tour to the most northern tip of Taiwan to stay with Jason Tsai, the North and Ion importer, a great guy and totally obsessed kitesurfer. We took the most breathtaking drives, via volcanic mountains, mostly over 1,000 metres high, stretching for the entire journey along the coastal road that spans the northern tip of Taiwan, leading us to Fulong in the Gongliao township. A gigantic golden sand dune flows next to the estuary of the Shuang River with a beautiful, traditional old bridge stretching across it. Right next to it is a stunning, super wide beach that splits the river from the ocean and a clean lefthander was peeling its way directly along in front of a beautiful temple. 25 knots, a handful of windsurfers and surfers were out in front of the incredibly high mountainous backdrop. The wind angle was a little too cross-off for wave riding and pretty gusty, but I had an amazing time regardless.

My return flight left in a few days and I still had to check out the big smoke, so Jason drove us to Taipei. The capital of the Republic of China, seat of the

YOU SHOULD HIT TAIWAN, MAN!

Although she met a handful of windsurfers, the only kites that Gabi met throughout her whole trip were Tony and his team and Jason Tsai. There are hundreds of miles of kiting potential around the country that are completely untouched and worth exploring. Cliffs and rocky beaches make a large portion of the coast quite dangerous, particularly in the north, but to come to Taiwan in a group and to explore this very special area would be an adventure of a lifetime for any kiter. Armed with a good bi-lingual road map and a big smile, the welcoming and helpful nature of the Taiwanese should keep your difficulties to a minimum.

TRAVEL AND ENTRY: Direct flights to Taipei from all over Europe and with a passport valid for at least six months you can stay without a visa for 30 days.

COMMUNICATION AND GETTING AROUND: The Taiwanese are very obliging and helpful and it's not unusual to cause some special attention on the streets. The national language is Chinese (Mandarin), however most young people speak English. In rural areas it may be difficult if you only speak English. The coach and train network is very well developed and for taxi rides it's advisable to have the address written down in Chinese characters. Crime rates in Taipei and Taiwan in general are low and you can feel safe here. However don't behave too frivolously with money and be more cautious at the night markets.

FOOD: Most restaurants only have Chinese menus, but most also have pictures of the dishes. There is a lot to discover, and sushi lovers will love Taipei! Bubbletea is a must-try with pearls of tapioca in it and is available on every street corner. As is papayamilk and the 'stinky tofu' - a famous speciality. Love it or hate it, you should try it!

MEDICAL NEEDS: Medical care throughout Taiwan is very good. No vaccinations are compulsory on entry to the country, however it's recommended that you're up to date with Tetanus / Diphtheria / Pertussis / Polio and Hepatitis A & B.

WINDS: Strong north-easterly monsoon winds blow ('normally') consistently from October to April. October and December are statistically the windiest months. The temperatures during winter are generally mild to warm, between 12 - 28°C / 54 - 82°F. The water temperature is 18 - 20°C / 64 - 68°F. When the wind is hauling it can get a bit chilly, so a hoodie and a beanie is always a good idea to throw into the luggage.

IT'S USEFUL TO KNOW: That Taiwanese people LOVE karaoke, beer and betel nut - which can be bought legally on the street in small pastic bags. A karaoke experience is a must, however experimenting with the betel nut may be skipped.

USEFUL WEBSITES:

Tony Fish at Spot Club: www.spotclub.com.tw
 Kenting Surf Shop and B&B: www.kentingsurfshop.com.tw
 Aswey 'South Paradise Surf': www.asweysurf.com
 Alex Moday, 'Liquid Sports' Makung: www.liquidsportpenghu.com



government and as well as being the economic and cultural centre of Taiwan, I spent a full day sightseeing in Taipei. I visited 'Taipei 101', a building that until recently held the record as the world's highest building, with 101 floors above ground and five below. Taipei is littered with so many other places of interest, including the national palace museum with the biggest art collection of Chinese treasures, old temples, hip shopping quarters and night markets.

One of the main kite spots for the inhabitants of this metropolis lies directly by the river Danshui which borders Taipei to the west. We checked the conditions on one of my last afternoons and it was really amusing to walk through busy downtown Taipei with our kite gear. Unfortunately the wind wasn't blowing but there are other spots in the area, such as Tamsui, BaiShaWan, DingLiao, Suao, however all are quite fickle and require sunny skies with almost no clouds to enjoy a consistent breeze for kiting.

I had seen so much potential in Taiwan, but as can be the case anywhere in the world, I'd been unlucky with my timing. I did however receive a call two nights before I was due to leave from Jose Chuang in the south who told me that there was sunshine and wind predicted for Ghinzi beach for one more possible last ride in Taiwan. Jason thought I was mad, but I made the eight hour train journey south, sessioned some onshore wind and a wild, heavy beachbreak and made it back to Taipei shortly after midnight.

The next morning I had elephant tears running down my cheeks when saying goodbye to Jason at the airport. My 'Made in Taiwan' adventure had taken me 2,500 kilometres across the truly fascinating and extraordinary country, and was an exceptional experience. Taiwan, a little piece of paradise in our crazy world surprised me in so many ways. The people and places that I was privileged to get to know over three-and-a-half weeks and all the special experiences will always have a very special place in my heart. Wo(我) ai(愛) ni(你): "I Love Taiwan". *kw*

