

Head in the Clouds in Shi Jhuo

MOUNTAIN HOMESTAY AT ALISHAN, TAIWAN



Nature has its way of putting things into perspective. If you're looking for an escape from the stresses of city life, you'll find it in the magic of Shi Jhuo.

Located in the Alishan national scenic area in Chiayi county, south Taiwan, Shi Jhuo is a hidden gem away from the usual tourist route. This area is famous for its mountain wilderness and hiking trails. There are no noisy tourist buses or pushy locals hawking their wares. All you get is the beauty of nature and a peace of mind that comes easily when you're 1,450 metres above sea level.

Of oolong, bamboo and fireflies

It all begins the moment you breathe in the fresh, cool mountain air. The weather, which averages around 18 degrees Celsius and plunges to 4 degrees in winter, is the reason why most of Shi Jhuo is covered by neat green carpets of tea fields.

"The higher the tea plantations, the better the tea leaves," said Charlies Liu, 56. He's the owner of the Small Swiss Homestay, a cosy four-room guesthouse that sits on the edge of Shi Jhuo mountain, with a view to die for.

The drive up is a mini-adventure: there's the winding bends along betel nut plantations, the rush of excitement as the air turns chilly (a welcome reprieve from the Taipei summer!) and clouds of mist fogging up the road ahead. Sipping some freshly-brewed oolong tea that Charlies thoughtfully packed, I let my mind wander as he shared his tales of the mountains.

Oolong is harvested four times a year in Shi Jhuo. The end of the year marks the final round of harvest, when the persimmons are also ready for picking. From January to March, you can go deep into the Alishan mountain trails or bamboo forests

with a hike in the Yushan National Park. Here you can plant young bamboo shoots, observe how the natives work, and get close to nature with a forest bath. During the summer from April to July, you can watch fireflies at night, cut bamboo shoots and pick some tea leaves. Come autumn, be immersed in the spectacular "sea of clouds" formations (*yun hai*) that Alishan is famous for.

Stargazing at Alishan

After sunset, it's another world at Alishan. We spent the evening enjoying fresh local produce like bamboo shoot for dinner, and for dessert we tried the famous fig jelly ice in the neighbouring town of Fenqihu. On the way back, we stopped to admire the pitch-black sky filled with clusters of twinkling stars. It was mind-blowing, and we continued with more stargazing through the panoramic windows in our room.

A few hours later, we were whisked away to a secret viewing deck, which only locals know of, to catch the sunrise. Against a backdrop of the Alishan mountain range, the sun rose in less than a minute. As the birds started chirping, so did the rest of the land.

The Small Swiss Homestay is one of 22 homestays in Shi Jhuo town, most of which are run by locals who own tea plantations inherited from their forefathers. Charlies' father, for instance, left him a bamboo forest and tea plantation, which his siblings look after. He left a government job to follow his dream of developing eco-tourism in his hometown, and now heads the town's association of homestays. "I want guests to experience the real Alishan lifestyle and protect my home from the harmful effects of tourism," said Charlies. "It's a delicate balance." □

TEXT & PHOTOS
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Get your peace of mind with a tranquil homestay in Shi Jhuo.

How To Get There

From Taipei, take a High Speed Rail train to Chiayi (1.5 hours). From the Chiayi HSR station, there are two ways to get to the Shi Jhuo homestay.

The more convenient method is to arrange prior transport (a two-hour drive) with the homestay.

The other way is to take a 20-minute taxi ride to Chiayi railway station, where you can either take the Alishan Forest train and alight at Fenqihu station, which is a 10-minute car ride from Shi Jhuo town; or take a public bus (1.5 hours), get off at the Shi Jhuo station opposite a 7-11 convenience store, and then call the homestay owner for a free pickup.

When To Go

The peak period is from March 15 to April 15, when the Alishan cherry blossom are in full bloom. Try to avoid weekends as traffic jams plague the Alishan forest recreation area. August and September are the best months to catch the "sea of clouds", where you literally stand in cloud clusters. During the winter months of October to December you can watch the falling maple leaves. January to March is a busy period of harvesting and other activities, and is a great time to be in the countryside. The summer is the best time for hiking and firefly spotting.

Accommodation

The Small Swiss Homestay (<http://small-swiss-so-buy.com>) is a gem of a guesthouse. Other reputable homestays include the Chang Qing Homestay (<http://egreen.idv.tw/node/4>), Yun Ming Ju Homestay (www.yunmingju.com.tw) and Siang Ting Homestay (<http://siangting.ho.net.tw>).

Attractions

During winter, have a go at picking tea leaves and persimmons. From January to March, try hiking in the mountain trails or bamboo forests, where you can plant bamboo shoots and take a forest bath to get close to nature. If you go from April to July, you can watch the fireflies and cut bamboo. Or just enjoy the sea of clouds and bask in nature's wonder.

Food

A must-try in Chiayi is the famous Pen Shoei Turkey Rice at 325 Jhong Shan Road in the town centre. In Shi Jhuo town, have a dinner at the Yun Yu Restaurant on the

main Shi Jhuo street; the cook does a mean fresh bamboo soup, tea tree oil chicken and wild vegetables (address: 21-17 Shihjhuo, Jhong-he village, Juci township, Chiayi county). For a great fig jelly dessert, go to Uncle Ai Yu's House (address: 151 Fenchihu, Jhong-he village, Juci township, Chiayi county).

Information

Visit the websites of the Alishan National Scenic Area (www.ali.org.tw) and the Chiayi County Tourism Bureau (www.tbocc.gov.tw).

Currency

The currency used is the new Taiwanese dollar (NT\$). As of December 2008, NT\$100 = US\$3.00 or €2.37.

