



(above) Taipei 101 towers over the Taiwanese capital; (below) visitors flock to the Beitou thermal valley for its soothing spa waters



## WELLNESS HOTSPOT TAIPEI

It's best known for its amazing food-filled night markets, world-class museums and skyscrapers, but there's also a host of health-boosting activities bubbling just beneath the surface of Taiwan's bustling capital, discovers Helen Foster

I haven't been told off before 8am since I left home – and I can safely say I've never been told off by an elderly lady with a hand towel on her head before. But nor have I soaked in a hot spring in Taipei before. I quickly learn that dripping water over the side is something your fellow bathers do not approve of!

I've travelled on the metro about 30 minutes north of Taipei's city centre to Beitou, a natural thermal valley. A small spa town has grown up around the springs here, which are famed for their green-and-white-tinged sulphur water – only found here and in Akita, Japan – which is said to be good for everything from your skin to your joints. Locals even claim it boosts the metabolism. No wonder it's so popular.

One thing's for sure, this place is definitely taking the unique selling point of being a spa town seriously. The train to nearby Xinbeitou station is decorated with wood panelling like the inside of a sauna, and a cute icon

in a towel adorns the doors. Beitou is filled with spa hotels, but I decide to take to the waters like the locals do and visit the Millennium Hot Spring, where a leisurely soak costs just A\$1.70.

There are three hot pools arranged on a hill, with the lowest one the 'coolest' – like a nice warm bath – and the top one the hottest. They're open from 5.30am to 10pm but you need to time your arrival carefully as the baths are emptied and refilled every 90 minutes to ensure they stay clean, and there's a 30-minute

gap in between. You also have to make sure that you're dressed for the occasion. Women can't wear bikinis, only one-piece swimsuits, and men, you can forget your boardies – you must wear Taiwanese swim shorts (which look at bit like cycling shorts).

There's water etiquette to adhere to, too – breach it and one of the attendants will blow their whistle at you. The main thing to remember is you can't just soak your feet until you get used to things. You have to submerge your body straight away, which

means the hottest pool is only bearable for a few minutes.

Thankfully, I've read up on all the rules, so no whistles are blown at me. In fact, this early in the morning (thanks to jetlag, for once) I'm the only tourist in the place. I'm bathing with the locals who've come for a soak before starting their day. Almost all are over 65 and full of vigour. Some are soaking, others doing tai chi, and off to the right a few couples are even ballroom dancing to a tape recorder. There's definitely something in the water here.

### THE RUNDOWN

**GETTING THERE:** Cathay Pacific flies to Taipei via Hong Kong from most state capitals. Visit [cathaypacific.com](http://cathaypacific.com)

**STAYING THERE:** The modern Amba Taipei Zhongshan is a short metro ride from Beitou (and anywhere else you'd want to see). It's very clean and quiet, and costs from A\$120 a night. Visit [amba-hotels.com](http://amba-hotels.com). For something luxe, try the five-star Grand View Resort, which costs from A\$550 per night. Visit [gvr.com.tw](http://gvr.com.tw)

**MORE INFO:** [eng.taiwan.net.tw](http://eng.taiwan.net.tw)

### 3 MORE GOOD-FOR-YOU REASONS TO VISIT TAIPEI

#### 1 FIGHT WRINKLES WITH NOODLES

Join the queue at Ay-Chung Flour-Rice Noodles on Emei



Street in busy Ximending – the secret ingredient is pig intestines, which are packed with collagen.

#### 2 TAKE A WALK UP ELEPHANT MOUNTAIN

This stair-filled hike takes about 20 minutes but rewards



you with great views of Taipei 101, the city's – and formerly the world's – tallest building, towering at 1640 feet.

#### 3 GRAB A 'FAUXNUT' AT TAMED FOX

Run by a dietitian, this cafe is famous for healthy carrot cake



doughnuts. It's also the place to go for your smashed avo fix. You'll find it off Ren'ai Road in the Da'an District.