



Green Island's lush, curving coastline

Open prison

A dreaded detention centre during the Kuomintang's White Terror campaign, Green Island, with its lush hills, hot springs and coral seas, now lures tourists. Joshua Samuel Brown visits Taiwan's answer to Robben Island.

It is a clear blue morning on Taiwan's southeastern shore. I'm standing at the foot of the dock in Fukang. A preternaturally pale middle-aged Taiwanese man wearing lipstick and eye-liner hands me my ferry ticket. It's my second trip to Green Island, home of Taiwan's once-feared political prison, and once again a transvestite is involved.

Two years before, I'd broken into the courtyard of the Oasis Hotel, the facetiously nicknamed political prison. Once a fearsome symbol of repression, it now stood in disrepair. I was prepared for ghosts, but nothing living. So I was doubly startled to run into Taiwanese Vice-President Annette Lu Hsiu-lien, with a television crew in tow. She spotted me before I could skulk back into the shadows, so I decided to make the most of it. "Madam Vice-President," I said, "I'm a foreign journalist and I'm here researching a book on Taiwan's history." She laughed.

"Then you must know I was put behind these very walls for advocating democracy." Smelling an interview, I suggested it must be bittersweet to revisit the place where she had suffered. "Oh, I suffered all right," she replied. "Room service was terrible!" Giggling came from her entourage, but the man behind the camera was less amused, grunting: "Why is this foreigner on the set?"

"You have to leave now, darling," the vice-president told me. "I'm working." It was then I noticed that Annette Lu's Adam's apple was bigger than mine. The tearful return of former political detainee to her place of captivity was a sham, part of a comedy sketch. The woman to whom I'd been directing my obsequiousness was neither woman nor politician, but a transvestite who made a tidy living impersonating the famous for laughs on late-night television. Perhaps the urge to cross-dress as women

springs from the decades of jailhouse repression suffered by a large, confined, mostly male population. What a difference a few decades free from martial law can make to a once-uptight society.

Back to the present day, and my latest encounter with gender-benders is behind me, along with mainland Taiwan. It's low season on Green Island and, disembarking from the ferry, I have my pick of scooters. I score a 125cc Sanyang for NT\$200 (\$50) and the old woman renting the bikes doesn't ask to see my passport. "Why bother?" she says with a laugh. "You can't get the bike off the island." Nor is there much chance of hiding it: circumnavigation takes 45 minutes on the one coastal road, which meanders like a drunken snake in pursuit of its own tail. It also offers some of the most gorgeous scenery in Taiwan: beautiful coves, lush windswept hills and rocks named after mythical animals and fairytale characters. The only other road on the island leads up Amei Mountain, a peak with a 360-degree view of the ocean.

Low season also means I have my pick of hotels. I settle on the Lu Yie Shan Zhuan, a yellow-tiled, newly built five-storey establishment overlooking scenic Kungkuan Cape, a steal at NT\$1,000 a night. After a dinner of wild-deer hotpot at a nearby restaurant, I set off for the famed seawater hot springs on the island's southern tip.

One of only three such establishments in the world, the Chaorih (Sunrise) Springs is a mixture of old and new spa design. At the end of the beach sit three ancient circular stone pits filled with geothermally heated seawater. Closer to the road is a modern complex containing a series of interconnected modern tiled pools, ranging in temperature from just above freezing to just below scalding. Also in the complex are a number of privacy

grottoes and three massage showers. While most tourists are lured by scenery, sea and spa, the name Green Island will always be associated with Taiwan's political history. This is because its most famous landmark is the political prison, which once housed those considered enemies by the Kuomintang during Taiwan's White Terror campaign, Chiang Kai-shek's final play for power in a war he'd already lost. A museum, a subtle, understated monument with pictures of those imprisoned and killed lining the walls, takes up one wing of the prison. Even more sombre is the prison itself, which sits much as it did decades ago, except that the gates stand eternally open.

Although the weather is fine and most of the shops offering scuba and snorkelling excursions are operating, I stay on land for the rest of the day, hiking green hills, climbing crumbling guard towers and walking in abandoned artillery trenches, all relics of the island's years as a military outpost.

Green Island will probably never make Asian tourism's A-list, but as long as there are travellers who appreciate lush hills and historic hot springs, blue skies and coral-filled seas, history and transvestites, Taiwan's answer to Robben Island will never want for guests.

Getting there: Most visitors fly to Taipei or Kaohsiung, then to Taitung for connecting flights (prices vary) to Green Island, which can also be reached by ferry for NT\$800 from Taitung. Eddie Viljoen of Green Island Adventures (tel: 88 6 9720 65479) can arrange package tours around diving and snorkelling. See greenislandadventures.com.