

The Bicycle Kingdom starts living up to its name

12/03/2012

1. **Each year, Lonely Planet compiles a top ten list of destinations. For 2012, the guidebook specialist includes Taiwan in its ‘best in travel’ compilation. Yes, it’s for its “jaw-dropping landscape” and “museums simply bursting with treasures” but they’re not new so why is 2012 the time to visit? Because of Taiwan’s world-class bike paths, that’s why.**



2. According to Lonely Planet, Taiwan is worth a visit because the country is...
“...best seen on two wheels and in recent years the authorities have embraced the biking market with surprising enthusiasm, vision and (most importantly) funding. This year sees the linking of thousands of kilometres of paths, including two round-the-island routes, and a host of other cycling friendly infrastructure projects.”
3. That’s quite some praise for an island off the Chinese mainland that’s famous for *making* bikes, but not *riding* them. Taiwan has long been known as the ‘Bicycle Kingdom’ but that’s because it’s where most of the Western world’s bicycles were once built.



4. Much of the low-end production has since moved to China and elsewhere in Asia but Taiwan remains a key destination for bicycle industry executives because mid- to high-end production of bikes and parts is still carried out on the island, or is controlled by Taiwanese companies.
5. And now, thanks to bicycle advocacy efforts, by companies such as Giant and Merida, Taiwan is becoming a Bicycle Kingdom for real. Protected networks of bike paths are being built and riding a circuit of the country is becoming a rite of passage for many Taiwan residents.
6. But the network is by no means complete and what has been built is used patchily, a demonstration that cycle-only networks have to be designed as a whole, not in bits. No matter how good the infrastructure, if a wide, safe bike path doesn't connect to other wide, safe bike paths, it can be minimally used, undermining the reason for building the infrastructure in the first place.



7. Visitors to the Taipei International Cycle Show, held every March in the Nangang Exhibition Halls, get free tickets on the MRT light rail system but few international visitors seem to use these tickets. Instead, they jump

into taxis, and complain about prices when the taxis inevitably get stuck in Taipei's famous traffic jams. Even fewer of the international visitors ever venture out on bikes. Most assume Taipei has no cycle paths because the highway network is so densely packed with cars and scooters. In fact, a five minute bike ride from the Nangang Exhibition Halls, on backroads, and you're on the Keelung River bicycle path, which links in to Taipei's other riverside bike path network.

8. This bike route is hard to see from the elevated highways or even the adjoining road as it's hidden by flood defence walls. But once you descend to the river network, the cycling is easy. There are lane markings, sign-posts in English, kilometre markers, and ramps for ease of access for cyclists. Where there are steps, these have often been given mini-ramps to enable bicycles to be wheeled up or down.
9. The bike paths are, in fact, two lane roads, and it's possible to cycle for many miles on these flood access 'roads'. The bike paths wind through downtown, over and under Taipei's many bridges. With elevated roadways soaring above your head, and routes for pedestrians sometimes separated with low-walls not just paint, the bike paths by the rivers in Taipei are model examples of segregation done well.
10. But, on weekday mornings, when you'd expect such superlative bike paths to be full of bicycle commuters, there are almost none. 'Build and they will come' only seems to work at the weekends in Taipei: that's when the bike paths are used by locals.
11. The riverside bike paths aren't in recreation-only areas, they skirt down-town, but because the links to the river paths have not been put in place, there are few cyclists in evidence.



12. **MOTOR MYOPIA**

Taiwan has a bullet train service and city light rail transit systems, but the country is still very much motor dependent. For a population of 23 million people, Taiwan has 5.7 million cars and 14 million motorcycles. There are just 1 million bicycles.

13. Taiwan is a small, sweet potato shaped island, 394 kilometres (245 miles) long and 144 kilometres (89.5 miles) wide at its broadest point. It's possible to drive from one end of the island to the other in a day, a fact which meant 'The Road in the Air' (2007) the country's first 'road movie', if it were to portray a multi-day trip, usual for road movies, had to be enacted with bicycles rather than a car.

14. While cars are now emitting less noxious gases by both design and by an Environmental Protection Agency 'clean air' law, scooters often escape sanctions and many of the older, cheaper ones are powered by very dirty two-stroke engines. According to the Taiwan Country Analysis Brief of 2005 by the US Energy Information Administration, Taipei has "the most obvious air pollution, primarily caused by the motorbikes and scooters used by millions of the city's residents."

15. Taiwan was late building its motorways – the first was only constructed in 1978 – but it has made up for this in prodigious growth ever since.
16. The construction was paid for by strong economic growth. The post WWII ‘Taiwan Miracle’ saw Taiwan become a major manufacturer of goods shipped to the West. Taiwan is one of the ‘Four Asian Dragons’ – the others are Singapore, South Korea, and Hong Kong – which became economic powerhouses.
17. Despite a recessionary blip thanks to the global financial crisis of 2007 and beyond, economic growth in Taiwan topped 10 percent in 2010, the highest rate in almost 30 years.

18. With a successful economy comes calls for “improved roads” to reduce congestion. Many of Taiwan’s existing motorways – especially through cities – are double-deckers. No. 1 Freeway in Taipei is a 20 km elevated bridge built in 1997 on top of the original motorway. New motorways are now proposed that will damage sensitive wildlife areas and are meeting vocal opposition. Some major new roads have escaped assessment by Taiwan’s Environmental Protection Agency by being a few metres less than 5km long, although campaigners say other stretches will be built later, and also under 5km. Anti-roads groups such as the Green Citizens’ Action Alliance question why billions of dollars are spent on short stretches of road which will despoil mangrove swamps and lead to yet more traffic congestion.



19. On the plus side, for cyclists, many of the elevated roads are built over access roads operated by Taiwan’s Water Resources Bureau and these can be converted to cycle use (although cycling under elevated sections of road is far from pleasant).

20. **CYCLING VOICES**

Grassroots cycle advocacy is in its infancy in Taiwan. Most of

the advocacy efforts to date have been led by semi-commercial organisations such as Giant's Cycling Lifestyle Foundation. City councils have taken part in 'Car Free Days' but when mayors have been wheeled out on bikes to highlight the promotions they tend to be pictured not to Dutch style roadsters but next to sport bikes (usually from Giant or Merida, naturally) and the mayors are made to wear Lycra jerseys (usually from Giant or Merida, naturally).

21. The Green Party in Taiwan – not yet a political force to be reckoned with – is usually pro-bicycle and has sometimes called for cash for cycling infrastructure and for changes in traffic law to make bicycles vehicles, as is the case in most Western countries.
22. On the ground, opposition to car- and scooter-dependency tends to be small and low key. Taipei has a Critical Mass style group called, rather sweetly, Bike Smiling. It's rare for Bike Smiling to get more than ten or 20 riders on its monthly rides.



23. One of the key reasons why it can be difficult to make room for bicycles on Taiwan's roads is the problem of on-street parking. This is a problem globally, of course, but in a country where most people live in apartments and don't own garages to store their motorised vehicles, the street is where cars and scooters are parked.

24. Bike Smiling, the Green Party and other bicycle advocates lobby to reduce on-street parking to make more room for cycle lanes but, when protected bike lanes are built, city authorities tend to take space away from pedestrians not cars and scooters.
25. **INVESTMENT**
Taiwan is green. Green as in the colour: viewed from on high in Google Earth, Taiwan is almost all trees. But zoom in and the grey bits are the large coastal cities such as Taiwan's capital, Taipei. Taiwanese cities are choked with fumes from the infernal combustion engine.
26. Although it's still in thrall to the car – with more and more motorways believed to be the answer to congestion – the Taiwanese Government is also investing in bicycle infrastructure to encourage more people to get on to their bikes.
27. This investment comes from the Sports Council. Cycling in Taiwan, on the whole, is seen as a recreation and a sport not yet a form of mainstream urban transport, but this is slowly changing.
28. Some high-profile individuals cycle to work in Taipei, such as Ho Chen Tan, the former chairman of Chunghwa Telecom, Taiwan's largest service company. Others, such as academics, hi-tech workers and ex-pats, are also biking to work, some of them attracted to cycle commuting by the new city bike schemes, such as You-Bike in Taipei.
29. The former name of Taiwan is Formosa, which means 'beautiful island'. In parts, the island is no longer beautiful. Factories and urban sprawl have taken over. But much of the country is still wilderness and, even in the deepest asphalt jungle, there are nature hotspots (some are literally hot, Taiwan has volcanic spas). Many of these nature areas are today accessible by bicycle and by foot rather than by car. For instance, in Taipei, there are recreational cycle paths along both sides of the valleys of the Danshui, Keelung, and Xindian rivers. Some stretches of the river routes are as wide as standard two-lane roads and were originally built as access roads as part of the

city's flood defences. Converted to cycle use they now form a backbone for a growing cycle network.

30. The riverside routes are dotted with bike rental businesses, each with hundreds of bikes for hire. On the scenic river cycle route to the Guandu Buddhist temple, 15 miles from downtown and perfectly way-marked, there is a road for cars, and then an elevated two-way bike route next to a wooden-plank footway segregated from cyclists with a knee-level concrete wall.

31. President Ma of Taiwan opened this year's Taipei Cycle show and is sometimes pictured upon a bicycle. He's been helped to this position by a bike boss, King Liu, founder of Giant of Taiwan (the pair are pictured here). King Liu has the ear of Government ministers and he has helped to get cycling on the national radar. Giant is the world's biggest maker of mid- to high-end bicycles.



32. Now 80, King Liu only 'discovered' cycling when he was 73, yet in seven years he's had a transforming impact on the cycling culture of Taiwan. In 2009, he paid for a delegation of Taiwanese industrial and political leaders to make a fact-finding bike tour of the Netherlands.

33. Taipei has a smaller equivalent of London's Barclays Cycle Hire scheme but U-Bike (also known as YouBike) isn't funded by a bank, it's run by an offshoot of Giant. Giant also funds the Cycling Lifestyle Foundation, a lobbying group run by King Liu's daughter, Vicky Yang. This group is influential, but Rome wasn't built in a day:

34. "The Government takes the solutions that we propose very seriously," said Yang. "However, we understand that seriousness does not necessarily mean prompt or immediate actions, so we are still working with the Government on our propositions. Our passion won't fade."

35. The Cycling Lifestyle Foundation started life as a sporting organisation. It now works on cycle commuting issues, too.
36. “After 18 years of promoting cycling as a recreational sport, our next step is to encourage cyclists to bike to work,” said Yang. “We need to work with the Government in creating a cycling friendly infrastructure.”



37. For Rory McMullan, project director of Integrated Transport Planning of China and a former marketing consultant at Giant’s Taiwan HQ, the growth in cycling infrastructure in Taiwan is impressive:
38. “The status of cycling has grown enormously in the last ten years. An array of committed and talented people working in Government, planning consultancies, universities and environmental groups have worked to raise environmental awareness.”
39. He added: “Bicycle clubs have flourished, cycling has become a fashionable way to get fit, and excellent quality bicycle lanes are located around all the big cities, making family leisure cycling a popular family weekend pursuit.”
40. But for David Poo, the ex-director general of Taipei City Transport (he planned the MRT, Taipei’s light rail system),

- cycling within Taiwanese cities is not at anywhere near the same level of sophistication as the recreational routes. He has always cycled to work (he's now chairman of transport company Mega Trans International) and is sanguine about the potential for cycle commuting in Taipei.
41. For instance, space isn't taken from cars, it's taken from pedestrians: "My experience in Taipei traffic and in other Taiwan cities is that commuting bicycle riders tend to be forced onto pedestrian sidewalks, when they exist." He believes there was no historical lack of multi-modal planning but that plans weren't carried through to completion:
 42. "It is very important to have coordinated planning for public transport and cycling facilities, including bike parking lots. Cycling is probably the most effective 'last mile' solution for mass transit systems. I was responsible for the initial functional plans for the Taipei Rapid Transit (MRT) system, some 30 years ago, and we planned for large bicycle parking lots at most of the MRT stations.
 43. "We gave top priority to bus stops, locating these spaces closest to the MRT station entrances; the next priority was for bicycle parking, then motorcycle parking, and last was for car parking, if any. However, when the stations were built in the late 1990s, the cycling environment had not improved; the recommended bicycle paths were not built, and motorcycle parking overflowed into the bike parking spaces."
 44. Nevertheless, getting to work by bike is no longer unusual. "There are many, many more commuting cyclists today than there were 10 years ago," agrees Poo.
 45. He doesn't believe enough money has yet been allocated to urban cycling: "The majority of cycling investments have gone toward constructing leisure cycling paths. So far, comparatively little investment has gone into bicycle commuting facilities, or public bicycle systems. These are areas that I am working on through local government transport departments and environmental protection departments, and we are hoping to see better results in the next year."

46. As well as carrots for cyclists, he wants to see sticks used against motor users:
47. “Private car and motorcycle users should pay more for the external pollution and congestion cost they incur.”
48. And, for Poo, it will be necessary for cities to get tough on the subsidised road storage for motor users: “We must reduce roadside car and motorcycle parking to make more room for safer dedicated cycling paths.”

49. Naturally, it needs brave political leaders to even suggest removing parking spaces. However, one group of residents more open to change – and which cities want to attract – are those who work in the high-tech sector.

50. Hsin-Wen Chang, head of the Department of Transportation Technology and Management at the National Chiao Tung University in Taipei, believes catering to this sector can transform Taiwanese cities:



51. “Local government is making great efforts to create an environment that will attract high-tech employees. The recreation environment is a key factor in attracting such employees.” Creating bike paths – recreational at first – attracts many in the high-tech economy, says Chang.
52. Hsinchu Scientific Industrial Park – Asia’s ‘Silicon Valley’ – employs 130,000 people and generates \$35 billion in annual sales. Improving nearby leisure amenities to attract even more companies is something the Taipei authorities take seriously.
53. “Starting in 2002, the city government has built a 17km-long bike lane along the coastline, which was completed at the end of 2005, involving an investment of \$18 million over three consecutive years,” said Chang.

54. “On behalf of Hsinchu county government, I investigated and planned 300 kilometres of bikeway by in 2008. Both central and local governments have been trying to stimulate the development of recreational cycling.

55. “The National Development Plan 2008 and the Tourist Double Plan also stressed the importance of building a national bikeway system. Approximately \$130 million of investment will be invested in bikeways in the future.”



56. But what will convert recreational cyclists into every day, commuter cyclists? “This is a big big question,” admitted Chang. “I have been doing research on this for many years. Creating and expanding public bike schemes is a key solution.” But, like David Poo, Chang believes parking for cars and scooters is the biggest issue to tackle. “If we can eliminate much of the road side parking, we will have more space for cycling paths,” she said.

<http://www.bikehub.co.uk/news/bike-to-work/the-bicycle-kingdom-starts-living-up-to-its-name/>

Q1: Are more bike lanes needed in the city or area where you live?

Q2: How often do you ride a bike?

Q3: What is this city/area like for cyclists? Could things be improved?

Q4: Are bicycles the best transport option to help make a green future, or are there even better options?

Stored online at
Peacemakerfoundation.com
Campaigns & Projects to Promote Health & Wellbeing