

HEALTHY SOUL

Boasting easy access to nature's bounty and the patronage of a wellness-loving local clientele, hot spring resorts in Taiwan provide the ultimate experience in restorative breaks. Mavis Teo visits two of the best.

Hoshinoya Guguan boasts spectacular views of the verdant forested valleys surrounding it.



A poetic panorama of cypress forested hills unfurls before me like a scroll of a Chinese landscape painting. From the floor-to-ceiling window of my suite 800m above sea level, the verdant vista before me is a balm to my frazzled senses. The three-hour car journey from Taipei to Hoshinoya Guguan in central Taiwan now seems worthwhile.

To many who live beyond her emerald fringes and crystalline coasts, the archipelago of Taiwan is the home of melodramatic Hokkien soaps and bustling night markets with moreish street food – probably the kind of things that appeal to mass travellers, rather than the well-heeled. However, unknown to many, there is a high-end travel industry in the country. Fortunately, this segment that includes luxury hot spring resorts, has the support of a large domestic market. Even on what is considered a warm day for hot spring bathing – it is 24 deg C in March, Hoshinoya Guguan (hoshinoya.com) which opened in June 2019, is running at full occupancy with mostly local guests. And it is a week day.

FROM JAPAN TO ASIA

For its second overseas resort outside of Japan (the first is in Bali), the onsen-centric Hoshino Resorts couldn't have chosen a better destination. The Japanese had introduced hot spring bathing to Taiwan during its 50-year occupation of the country after winning the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Because of Taiwan's geographical position on two major tectonic collision plates, it has over 400 geothermal sources, many of which were discovered by the Japanese, who were suitably impressed by the quality of the mineral-rich waters. Thus, a hot spring culture in Taiwan was born.

Since then, around 100 hot spring resorts have sprung up in four major hot spots. Hot spring wellness in Taiwan has also evolved to have its own identity. For spas, you'll find a comprehensive menu that goes beyond the traditional shiatsu massage that their Japanese cousins offer. There are treatments that soothe the mind through sound meditation, or target backaches with precision through Traditional Chinese Medicine diagnostic methods.

In many of these places, the F&B menu is based on Jīe Qi (an ancient Chinese practice of planting and harvesting crops according to the Farmer's Almanac, which splits the year into 24 seasonal periods) with local produce from Taiwan's fertile arable lands. Not only are ingredients used according to what is available and in season, they are chosen and cooked to address what the body needs then. The offerings, whether of a culinary or holistic nature, are always refined, as they should be for the discerning traveller. The fact that the only two Relais & Chateaux members in Taiwan (Villa 32 in Beitou, and Volando Urai Spring Spa & Resort in Wulai) are both hot spring resorts goes to show the level of sophistication of Taiwan's luxury hot spring industry.

AN UNDISCOVERED GEM

The CEO of Hoshino Resorts, Mr Yoshiharu Hoshino, was initially sceptical about Guguan in Taichung as the site of the Taiwan hotel. He visited and was humbled to find the quality of the sodium bicarbonate-rich waters as good as the ones in Japan.



Clockwise from above: A spacious ensuite-onsen tub at Hoshinoya Guguan is best enjoyed with floor-to-ceiling views; most of the trees on the property's grounds were left alone during construction; an omakase dinner at the resort is served on beautiful Japanese ceramics





Although Wulai is just 30 minutes away from Taipei city centre by train, I always feel like I am entering a lost Eden as the car draws close to the destination.

Clockwise from left: The hike to the Wulai waterfalls is very popular with locals; the interiors of Volando Urai's rooms and suites are simple with a dreamy quality; guests at the resort are treated to daily drum and singing bowl performances



While the hotel stays true to its Japanese heritage through minimalist design by Rie Azuma of Azuma Architects & Associates (so as not to compete with the natural beauty of the hotel's backdrop of lush mountains), cuisine and its onsen operations, Hoshinoya Guguan pays tribute to its host destination by using Taiwanese produce in its restaurant, and through guest activities. Because Guguan is in a Hakka enclave, the hotel offers thunder tea-making to guests.

Guguan is a quiet hot spring town set against a dramatic mountain range that leads to Xueshan (Snow Mountain in Chinese), the second highest mountain in Taiwan, and also the source of the water that flows underground through the earth's molten core. At Hoshinoya, the spring water pours out into the indoor and outdoor hot spring pools, as well as the spacious tub in each of the 49 suites furnished in a palette of browns and greys.

Harnessing nature's gifts and showcasing them seems to be Azuma's guiding principle when designing the hotel and its landscape. Most of the trees – some very old Formosan gum trees and Chinese firs – were left alone. Walkways and gazebos lined with colourful blooms and waterways circumvent them, taking guests on a meditative walk around the grounds or a guided garden tour where they learn about indigenous plant species.

In the evening, a cicada chorus rises from the grounds as an accompaniment to the shuffle of guests heading to dinner. While it offers a selection of Japanese, Chinese and Western breakfasts, the hotel's only restaurant offers only Japanese a la carte dishes or a kaiseki meal at dinner. No complaints here. I am delighted to tuck into the sweet sashimi of local seabream and savour sturgeon from Taiwan's southwestern coast in broth delicately scented with mullet roe – just some of the eight courses expertly created by Executive Chef Shunsuke Fujii.

Although the spa is closed for a menu tweak during my stay, there are enough mind and body programmes to ensure that my wellness objectives are met.

I attend the onsen masterclass to learn how to maximise the benefits of an onsen session with light stretches and small rituals for mindfulness. In fact, after a hike on the Shaolai trek which can be accessed from the hotel's back gate, a soak does wonders for one's muscles and mind. At the end of the morning guided walk, guests are invited to lie down on a mat on soft grass (you may forgo the mat if you prefer). As the dappled sun and a crisp breeze caresses me, I am amazed by how a short, simple act can elevate my mood. Looking up at the passing clouds through tree foliage, I exhale deeply, feeling thankful for such a pleasure.

THE HEART OF ABORIGINAL CULTURE

En route to Taipei, my last stop for some shopping before I fly home, I make a detour to Volando Urai (volandospringpark.com) in Wulai on the outskirts of Taipei. After all, Volando is a fixture on my itinerary whenever I am in Taipei for a hot spring jaunt. The Relais & Chateaux member offers a very different experience from Japanese onsen hotels, and even Hoshinoya Guguan.

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Partially shrouded by mist from foliage and steam from fumaroles, the mountains of Wulai are a moving canvas of kaleidoscopic greens. Wulai is rich in farmlands, tea plantations and aboriginal culture as it is home to one of the largest Atayal communities in Taiwan.

As such, Maître de Maison Chiang Chun-Lin seeks to connect guests to the local environment through cultural shows such as a musical put on by aboriginal singers on Friday evenings. He also believes that connecting people to the nature stills one's mind – one of the main objectives of a wellness retreat. Thus, it is little wonder that in Volando, guest experiences and even art displays marry nature with culture.

At 4pm everyday, a trained staff member will beat a drum from an alfresco deck along the jadeite Nashi river. Guests can then hear sounds from a gong from a white house perched on a forested hill on the opposite bank reverberating across the river. That house belongs to Wu Zong-lin, an artist whose lotus pond sculpture sits in the hotel lobby. This exchange is likened to a conversation. The emotions of the artists are expressed through the tempo and rhythm made with the instruments.

The theme of performances emulating a non-verbal interaction is repeated in a silent chess game played on a floating raft every morning. It is inspired by a Chinese proverb on how staying silent while watching others play chess is the mark of a true gentleman. The idea behind this chess performance is to instill focus and the importance of listening to one's mind and soul. While guests are welcome to watch these performances, the staff will play on whether there is anyone watching. The purpose of having such a routine is so that the staff can internalise these concepts through habit and go about their jobs with a calm mind and pass on positive energy to the guests.

Healing energy can also be found in spades at Dasha Spa where I surrender to the gentle ministrations of a therapist in a 90-min massage with oils blended for my constitution, during which I fall into a deep sleep. From the use of a gadget that diagnoses health issues by tapping on meridian points according to the tenets of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the therapist had earlier identified that I suffer from poor-quality sleep and indigestion.

Since wellness is central to an experience at Volando, one can count on eating healthy (in fact, guests are offered immunity-boosting tea made with leaves from the chameleon plant at arrival), and do so without compromising on taste. At Soyan restaurant overlooking Nashi river, chef Jackie Zhou turns out beautifully plated French dishes using Taiwanese produce. My duck confit doesn't overload my digestive system yet gets the thumbs up for the right balance of crisp and tender. As I crave Taiwanese fare for lunch the next day, I head to Siliq, the Chinese restaurant. There, I polish off a bowl of beef noodles in a consommé perfumed with maqaw, an indigenous peppercorn with anti-inflammatory properties used widely in aboriginal cooking.

While human touch clearly matters more than thread count at Volando, it doesn't cut back on the usual accoutrements that a high-end traveller is used to. What sets Volando apart from other luxury hotels is the extra mile it goes to. One evening six months after my last trip to Taiwan, I find myself listening to a CD commissioned by Volando for their guests as keepsakes. The soothing instrumentals take me back to Volando where I am watching the chess performance and reading an introduction written by the artistic director. "Peace is always present at Volando. It is my wish that you find and take this gift with you."

Although his words were not written with the gift of foresight, they could not be more apt now. While we must try to get a handle on our emotions and stay healthy in these trying times, I still find myself hoping that I can travel to Taiwan this winter for a much-needed retreat. **P**



At the time of print, Taiwan has fewer than 500 confirmed cases of Covid-19, partly because of the country's readiness in deploying intervention and prevention measures. The locals' sense of community spirit and civic-mindedness has also been crucial in preventing community spread. For updates on entry restrictions, check at [cdc.gov.tw](https://www.cdc.gov/tw) and [boca.gov.tw](https://www.boca.gov.tw).

At Volando Ural, sound therapy is considered important to nurturing mindfulness. A silent chess game is played every morning, with sounds from singing bowls used to represent chess moves.