

# The Taroko Gorge of Taiwan



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon  
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**NATURE** lovers visiting Taiwan cannot afford to miss the Taroko Gorge, the island nation's foremost scenic attraction that is often touted as one of the most spectacular natural wonders of the world.

Stretching 19km inland from the east coast of the island at a point about 15km north of the town of Hualien, the gorge had been etched by Liwu River in a very slow and lengthy process that lasted a few million years, resulting in sheer cliffs of solid marble over 300m high in places.

In 1956, the government of Taiwan, under Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek, decided to construct a road cutting through the central mountain ranges from the east coast to the west coast for the ease of troop movements in the event of an attack from communist Mainland China. Retired Kuomintang servicemen were employed for the task. Work was so tough and dangerous that 450 men lost their lives during the 4-year construction period.

In recent years, the Tourism Board of Taiwan has worked with local bus companies to provide tourists with regular and economical bus services from major train and bus terminals throughout the island to tourist attractions in the vicinity. So my wife and I decided to go on a one-day visit to the Taroko Gorge from its entrance to Tianxiang, taking in all the major sights.

We boarded the earliest bus for Taroko Gorge and got off at the entrance arch. Crossing the Liwu River via a nearby bridge, we spent sometime at the Visitors Centre located a 10-minute walk away and then trudged through a long tunnel to Shakadang, a 1.5km-long footpath cut into the sheer cliff along the river.

We hopped aboard the next bus for Buluowan Recreation Area and watched a documentary on the Taroko tribe there. Then we walked down to the main road and went through another tunnel to reach Swallow's Grotto, a series of magnificent cliffs with road tunnels chiselled through them. This is truly one of the most spectacular stretches of the Gorge.

About 1km further up is another equally, if not more, spectacular stretch – the Tunnel Of Nine Turns – which cuts a twisted road of short tunnels and half tunnels through solid marble cliffs. Unfortunately it was closed for maintenance at the time of our visit.

A third bus took us to Tianxiang on the western terminus of the Gorge where I spent some time exploring the temples and pagoda perched high on a hill slope. From the pagoda I enjoyed a most impressive overview of the Gorge.

Back on the main road, I walked through two tunnels and quite a long stretch of road to reach Lvshui, just in time to catch the bus to the last stop of our visit – the Eternal Spring Shrine. I spent almost two hours exploring the shrine and the hill slope behind it, visiting the Light of Zen Temple on an adjacent hill before finding my way back to the carpark to catch the last bus leaving the Gorge. ■

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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

