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Pilgrimage Routes to Catholic Churches in Taiwan

Cathy Teng / photos Kent Chuang / tr. by Phil Newell

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The Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Wanjin Village in Pingtung County's Wanluan Township is one of Taiwan's oldest existing churches.

"Buen Camino!" ("Good Path!") is a phrase you are sure to hear on the Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James) in Spain, as pilgrims from around the world wish each other a safe journey.

Legend has it that after St. James ("Santiago" in Spanish), one of the 12 Apostles, was martyred, his remains were carried to Galicia in today's northern Spain, and laid to rest in the place where the city of Santiago de Compostela now stands; centuries later they were rediscovered, and believers built a shrine there. Since then, pilgrims from all over the world have set off from their homes to make a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, a journey that it is said every Catholic should make at least once in their lives.

In our own time, the long pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella has become enormously popular. According to official statistics from Spain, in recent years more than 300,000 people per year have made the pilgrimage. Each year more than 1000 people from Taiwan make this journey. But did you know that Taiwan has its own Catholic pilgrimage routes?

Creating the "Taiwan Camino"

The driving force behind the "Taiwan Camino" is Matthew Chiang, a pious Catholic. From his head of salt-and-pepper hair you can tell that he has already seen much in life. Early on he worked in the civil service, but later he switched over to the non-governmental sector to advocate for environmental sustainability. He has also spent many years working with the Bunun indigenous people of the Sima-un community in Nantou County, as well as serving as head of international volunteers for Caritas Taiwan.

Despite his many jobs, in recent years Chiang has focused his attention on the Taiwan Camino. In 2016, when he was invited to the Vatican to attend a mass celebrating the canonization of St. Teresa of Calcutta, he took time out to travel to Spain and made his first pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

During his journey of more than a month, Chiang found that the pilgrimage fit right in with his own fondness for hiking and also with his faith. As he walked, he thought to himself: "What if Catholic churches all over Taiwan could be linked together and interactions between believers could be energized, while also rediscovering local history and culture, enabling the Catholic faith to become more deeply ingrained in daily life?" Starting in 2017, he spent two years visiting parishes across Taiwan, gathering the stories of the churches and priests, and compiling them into the book *Camino of Catholic Churches in Taiwan*.



The Camino de Santiago, leading to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain, is marked by waymarkers decorated with seashells. (courtesy of Matthew Chiang)



Matthew Chiang walked the Camino de Santiago three times. After returning to Taiwan he began promoting Taiwan's own "Camino." (courtesy of Matthew Chiang)



A tour of century-old churches

The history of the Catholic Church in Taiwan can be traced back to 1626, when Spanish Dominican friars followed soldiers ashore at the place the Spanish called “Cape Santiago” and began to proselytize from a base in Keelung. To commemorate this event, Chiang designed a pilgrimage that starts off at Fulong Train Station, goes to Cape Santiago Lighthouse, and proceeds to Shicheng Train Station. Although there are no churches along this route, the name Santiago immediately reminds one of the pilgrimage site in Spain, providing a link between the Taiwan Camino and international Catholicism. In 2019, an archeological team working on Heping Island in Keelung discovered the remains of the Convento de Todos los Santos (Convent of All Saints), testifying to this period of history and providing another link between Taiwan and the outside world.

In 1642 the Dutch drove the Spanish out of Taiwan and Catholic proselytizing ended for over 200 years. It was only in 1859 that Spanish Dominican friars crossed over to Taiwan from mainland China and landed at Kaohsiung. Setting up a base near the Love River, they began moving from south to north, blazing a new trail as they built 30 churches that are now over a century old.

The “1859 Century-Old Churches” route starts at Wanjin in Pingtung County, and strikes out northward. The first stops on the journey are the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception (1861) in Wanjin, built in the style of a Spanish fortress, and the Renaissance-style Holy Rosary Cathedral (1859) in Kaohsiung. When you arrive at the Our Lady of China Sanctuary (1913) in Meishan, Chiayi County, don’t forget to go and pray before the statue of the Virgin Mary attired in Qing-Dynasty

apparel. The Church of the Holy Name of Jesus (1875) in Puxin, Changhua County, was the starting point for Catholic missionary work in central Taiwan.

At the end of the route, in northern Taiwan, you can visit the Immaculate Conception Cathedral (1887) in Taipei City, which serves as the see of the Archdiocese of Taipei, as well as St. Joseph Church (1883) in Luzhou, the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima (1889) in Tamsui, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church (1919) in Shiding.

A pilgrimage that takes in all of these century-old churches is like a journey through time, back to the days when Catholic Dominican missionaries blazed a trail across Taiwan spreading the grace of God.





Chiang designed a pilgrimage route based on the year 1626 that follows Taiwan's beautiful Northeast Coast. The route passes by the Cape Santiago Lighthouse. The cape was named by early Spanish explorers, linking this Taiwan Camino with the world.

Like a United Nations

In fact, Spain has numerous pilgrimage routes. The best known and most popular is the 800-kilometer "French Way," which starts in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port and crosses the Pyrenees. There are also the "Northern Way," "Portuguese Way," "Silver Way," and "English Way."

Visiting Catholic churches across Taiwan, Chiang was surprised to discover that there are many potential pilgrimage routes here as well. These include a "French Way" (the Paris Foreign Missions Society route), a "Swiss Way" (the Bethlehem Mission Society route), an "American Way" (the Maryknoll route), an "Italian Way" (the Camillians order route), a "Belgian Way" (the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary missionaries route), and a "German Way" (the Society of the Divine Word route).

Chiang explains that after 1949, religious freedom was suppressed in mainland China, causing numerous Catholic organizations to move their missionary work to Taiwan. For example, priests from the Maryknoll Catholic Foreign Mission Society relocated from China's Guangdong Province to Taichung, from where they began working with indigenous communities in the mountains of Nantou. Chiang suggests that people can go from Puli to Wushe, visiting the indigenous communities of Bukai (Chinese name Wujie) and Sima-un (Qubing) and hearing stories about Fr. Peter Wu, while experiencing Atayal and Bunun culture along the way, and ending up at the Holy Love Camp beside Sun Moon Lake. This Maryknoll route is currently the best developed pilgrims' way in Taiwan.

The Swiss Bethlehem Mission Society moved from Northeastern China to Taitug in Eastern Taiwan. Fr. Jakob Hilber founded St. Joseph Technical Senior High School, introducing Swiss and German technical skills into Taiwan. Taking the Bethlehem Mission Society route along Taiwan's eastern seaboard, you can see a series of Catholic churches in Dulan, in the Amis indigenous communities of Piyoxo (Xiaoma), Torik (Duli), and Pasongan (Basang'an), and also in Changbin and Duoliang. All were designed by Br. Julius Felder, and it is worth spending several days to make a tour of these buildings.

The Italian order of the Camillians (also known as the "Clerics Regular, Ministers to the Sick") came from Yunnan Province to Taiwan, setting down roots in Yilan County and Penghu County. St. Mary's Hospital in Yilan's Luodong Township and St. Camillus Hospital in Penghu were both founded by this group. Chiang suggests a three-day walk around the Penghu islands starting from the Catholic church in Magong, to see the path trodden by the Camillians in their efforts to care for residents' health.

The Paris Foreign Missions Society came from China's Fujian Province to Hualien County to carry on their missionary work. They immersed themselves in the culture of the local Amis and Bunun indigenous peoples. Walking this pilgrims' way takes five to six days, but with the beautiful scenery of the East Coast before you the journey is never dull.

Hearing Matthew Chiang describe each route with fluent familiarity, one can't help but think of the missionaries who have come to look after the faithful in each given area or community. Taiwan is fortunate to have had priests from so many countries dedicate their lives to this island and its people, and we should not forget this friendship from overseas. It reminds us that it's a small world, and that Taiwan has long been home to a little United Nations.



The nave of Our Lady of Fatima Church at Sima-un, a Bunun indigenous community in Ren'ai's Wanfeng Village.



The Holy Spirit Church at Bukai, a Bunun indigenous community in Ren'ai's Fazhi Village. The American priest Fr. Peter Wu dedicated his life to the three Bunun communities of Bukai, Sima-un, and Qatu.





Matthew Chiang's "American Way" pilgrimage route visits churches built by the US-based Maryknoll Catholic Foreign Mission Society. The route starts in Puli in Nantou County and the first stop is the Church of the Holy Martyrs of China at Alang Snuwing, a Seediq indigenous community in Chunyang Village in Nantou's Ren'ai Township.







Wan-Ta Church at Alang Marosan, an Atayal indigenous community in Ren'ai Township's Qin'ai Village.

Part of Taiwanese culture

In recent years, people have been avidly seeking out local stories about old streets and markets in Taiwan. Catholic culture has been in Taiwan for almost 400 years, and has long since become part of its cultural landscape. In fact, the Dadao-cheng area of Taipei, which Taiwanese often recommend to foreigners as a place to visit, is home to a century-old Catholic church—the Immaculate Conception Cathedral—right next door to Blessed Imelda's School. Originally a beautiful Romanesque building, the church was severely damaged by bombing in World War II and had to be rebuilt. Through familiar festivities such as the Christmas Eve parade of the Virgin Mary in Wanjin, and the "Silent Night" Christmas Eve celebrations in the Bunun community of Luluna (Luona) in Nantou County's Xinyi Township, people have grown accustomed to the distinctive combination of Catholic ritual and local culture.

When talking about his unforgettable pilgrimages in Spain, Chiang tells of not only his meetings with pilgrims from all over the world, but also his daily attendance at Mass. Despite the differences in language, he saw that religion was deeply embedded in local people's lives, and he was greatly moved by the way that churches welcomed anyone to enter at any time to feel the atmosphere of the blessings of God.

Based on his experiences of pilgrimages in Spain and of walking the Jeju Olle Trail in South Korea, Chiang believes that Taiwan's walking culture can become more diverse. "Walking is not just about recreation or exercise, but rather each path

surely has connections with history. For example, the Raknus Selu Trail is linked to the camphor industry, while the Tamsui † Kavalan Trails include the route followed by the missionary George Leslie Mackay." In promoting the Taiwan Camino, Chiang hopes both to reinvigorate church spaces and also to provide local residents and international visitors with a way to get to know Taiwan by walking.

In 2006 the German comedian and TV presenter Hape Kerkeling published his journal of his pilgrimage in Spain, which appeared in English as *I'm Off Then: Losing and Finding Myself on the Camino de Santiago*, and was turned into the film *I'm Off Then* in 2015. Those were the words with which he parted from his friends as he set off on the pilgrimage, which became an indelible memory for him. "I'm off then" is the starting point of any journey, no matter what it links together. Why not be "off then" on the Taiwan Camino? It is a choice you will surely be glad you made.





Priests from various foreign lands have dedicated their lives to Taiwan, asking nothing in return. We cannot but admire such friendship from abroad.



Matthew Chiang leads some friends on a Taiwan Camino walk, getting to know Taiwan on foot. (courtesy of Matthew Chiang)



Catholicism has been in Taiwan for almost 400 years, and is part of the cultural landscape. The photo shows the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Wufengqi in Jiaoxi, Yilan County.

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