

Vegan Asia

Teresa Bergen's new book *Vegetarian Asia* (reviewed on the next page) prompted us to contact some of the people mentioned or listed in her book. So on these two pages we hear from vegans who live, or have recently lived, in Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and South Korea.

Taiwan

Jesse Duffield (a New Zealander) now lives and teaches in Japan, but he spent four years in Taiwan from 2007-2011 and still visits the country regularly. His *Vegan Taiwan* blog is at <http://vegantaiwan.blogspot.co.uk> and the photo shows him (with pizza) at Veggie Joy, a vegan fast food outlet in Taipei.

Taiwan is the most vegan-friendly country in Asia. A vibrant democracy, Taiwan is rich in culture and history, has a beautiful countryside, a highly developed infrastructure, and at least one vegetarian restaurant in almost every neighbourhood.



There are three large vegetarian religious groups in Taiwan. I Kuan Tao are an exclusive group with Chinese roots, many of whom migrated to Taiwan after the Chinese Civil War ended in 1950.

Chinese Buddhism, which has been practised in Taiwan for centuries, takes its philosophy of compassion seriously, with all temples and many followers being vegetarian. Most other Taiwanese, who follow a mixture of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, hold

vegetarianism in high esteem, and many eat vegetarian on certain days of the month or during important times.

Despite this, Taiwanese are mostly urban dwellers who have little contact with animals, and while some high-profile animal-cruelty cases have caused outrage, farm animal welfare isn't on the radar of many Taiwanese; visitors may be disturbed by blatant cruelty such as aquariums in fish restaurants. However, the country's many animal rights groups receive much good publicity, and Taiwan was the first country in Asia to ban shark finning. From my limited experience riding around the countryside, farm animals - including those on factory farms - are treated better than in western countries.

The third group, of most interest to vegans, is the followers of Supreme Master Ching Hai, the leader of millions worldwide and inspiration behind the Loving Hut chain. She teaches her followers to meditate, be vegan, and promote the environmental message. It is due to the tireless work of this group that veganism is emerging so quickly in Taiwan. Taiwan has the best food labelling system in the world. It is illegal to label food as "vegetarian": it must specify whether or not it's vegan or it contains dairy or egg.

Taiwan has many vegetarian buffets, from large and elaborate to simple neighbourhood eateries. Followers of SM Ching Hai are also opening more and more vegan restaurants. With these, and microwaveable meals, sold at the ubiquitous convenience stores, one can set out for a day's adventure without planning ahead for the next meal.

Taiwan is well known for mock meat products. But contrary to claims in reputable guidebooks, most fake meat (including those sold at Chinese vegetarian restaurants around the world) is not vegan: it often contains whey and egg, and sometimes even real meat. It should only be trusted if it's produced by a reputable source, such as the followers of Supreme Master Ching Hai.

The contrast between Taiwan and Japan, where I now live, is astounding, given their close proximity and that Taiwan was part of Japan for the first half of the last century. Vegetarianism is rare in Japan, and veganism, which is almost unheard of, is often met by reactions of laughter or disbelief. The situation is improving in the major cities, which offer a great variety of international vegetarian and vegan restaurants - however finding food in the countryside can be very challenging.

Taiwan's great food, culture, and the friendliness of its people makes it a great travel destination and a fascinating country to live in.

Vietnam

Paul Tarrant and his family run the *Karma Waters Vegan Restaurant* www.karmawaters.com in Hoi An in Vietnam, and they are also responsible tour operators (with a strong environmental emphasis).

Our restaurant strategy is to make veg*n food available to all, so we have a simple functional décor with meal prices starting around US\$0.75 (very basic local veg*n dish) and then upwards. We get equal numbers of Vietnamese and foreign tourist customers. We do *not* want an exclusive foreigner tourist place that average locals are unable/unwilling to eat at.

The issue of Global Climate Change (Global Warming) is very important in developing countries such as Vietnam, which is becoming badly affected. So one of the most important ways to connect to people to change their lifestyles is to provide them with enough relevant information on issues so that they can understand they need to become veg*ns - mostly just talking about health has little effect on most people!

In general the Vietnamese aspire to being good practising Buddhists and so they respect veg*ns. But there is very little connection in their minds between veganism and global warming - in fact there's very little awareness of global warming at all.



My mother and I, and my wife and two young daughters, are all vegans. I personally follow the Five Buddhist Precepts (the Christian Ten Commandments, or other similar practices designed to nurture spirituality, can just as easily be applied). I believe the planet itself is a living being of a higher order than we humans. The issues facing our living planet and the largest number of species of mammals on the planet - human beings - are mostly caused by human lifestyles! We humans are now irreversibly eating this planet and one of two things will most likely happen; either we change our lifestyles and our man-biosphere relationship or we will not be able nor allowed to survive as a species on this planet!

For more information on our vegan philosophy see www.karmawaters.com/organic-vegan-green-1.phtml

Malaysia

Stephanie Lai (a Chinese-Australian vegan and social justice blogger) has lived and worked in Malaysia, China and Australia. Her *Vegan About Town* blog is at <http://veganabouttown.blogspot.co.uk>

As Chinese-Malaysians, my family eats just about everything and we really love that about ourselves, so it was a huge shock to them when I went vegan as an adult. They reconciled it as being about the family religion (Buddhism, though I myself am not Buddhist), or about my Australian upbringing, and the concession they make to my veganism is that we go to meaty restaurants that happen to have excellent vegetarian options, and then overordering so that I am overwhelmed by choice. Some friends like to show off their love for me by telling me about amazing vegetarian restaurants and then making sure I eat there, again overwhelming me with choice.

It's easy to be vegetarian in Malaysia, but vegan can be harder. Malay, Indian, Nyonya and Chinese food dominate the landscape, and each cuisine brings with it different difficulties. Indian food is so regularly vegetarian, but ghee is everywhere.

The cities are filled with amazing vegetarian Chinese restaurants, as well as Jain restaurants. Hawker stalls are frequent, and the dishes are cooked in front of you so it's easy to point and specify exactly what you want, though everything is cooked on the same pan or in the same pot, so it can be hard if you very strictly want to avoid cross-contamination.



The photo shows char kueh teow (rice noodles, chillies, bean shoots, tofu, etc) in a Penang restaurant.

In most places English is all you need to get by, enough to specify that you are vegetarian, or strict vegetarian, meaning vegan, and fortunately there is a common understanding of what that means.

South Korea

Mipa Lee is an artist and illustrator. Her blog *Alien's Day Out (life as a vegan in Seoul, South Korea)* <http://aliensdayout.com> is written in English and focuses mostly on vegan food (a great variety of it!), and eating out.

I usually eat at places that I know are veg-friendly, such as Korean restaurants with bibimbab [rice mixed with various seasoned vegetables] or lots of veggie side dishes, Indian restaurants, Mexican restaurants, or vegan buffets. I would say



that most restaurants have at least one thing I can order or ask to be veganized. I tend to avoid Korean BBQ or seafood restaurants because it's doubtful that there will be anything vegan, and they're also environments I'd just rather not be in.

As a vegan in Korea, eating out does take a little more planning and patience, such as researching and suggesting veg-friendly places to your friends, or asking the cook to modify

a dish. It does have its challenges, but it gets easier with practice. It also helps to remember that being vegan isn't about being perfect or beating yourself up over accidentally eating an animal product. Accidents and mistakes happen. The best thing to do is just remember for the next time and move on.

This is an excerpt from an interview with Mipa at www.vegetarianinkorea.com - click on the 'Press' link on Mipa's website for the rest of this interview, and for others.

Vegetarian Asia by Teresa Bergen

Paperback or Kindle e-book 2012 (in the e-book format each country is also available separately). Search for "Teresa Bergen" on Amazon. There's also a Vegetarian Asia section on Teresa's own website www.teresabergen.com

'Fascinating' is one of those words I tend to overuse, but it certainly applies to this book, which takes a close look at the vegetarian/vegan and animal welfare/rights situations in more than 20 Asian countries. If you're visiting Asia it will very obviously be useful, but it's also an absorbing book for the armchair traveller.

Teresa first published *Vegetarian Asia* in 1994 but she has now completely rewritten and updated it. The book is based on a combination of personal experience (she has visited the majority of the countries), and on research, and dozens of interviews with vegetarian and vegan residents and travellers.

Each chapter starts with a snapshot of the current state of vegetarianism and animal welfare in that country, including information about relevant religious or philosophical traditions and organised vegetarian groups. The bulk of the book focuses on which common dishes are usually vegetarian or vegan, or can easily be made so. There's also advice on etiquette, and asking for vegetarian/vegan food in different languages.

For most countries there's a good amount of vegan information. I asked Teresa how much harder it is for vegan rather than vegetarian travellers: "Whether it's harder for vegans depends on the country. In many parts of Asia, such as Cambodia, Japan, Indonesia, Korea, etc, the hardest ingredient to avoid is fish sauce. If you can get them to leave out the fish sauce, most offerings will be vegan. However, in places like India and Bhutan you can find vegetarian food without much trouble but it's likely to contain dairy products."

Fancy a trip to Tibet? "Few plants grow at Tibet's high altitude. With vegetables scarce, food is very limited. So being a vegetarian in Tibet is considered a great sacrifice." However "you'll find Indian, Nepali, Chinese and western food in Lhasa, and even a couple of vegetarian restaurants. But outside of big cities ... vegetarian food is rare."

Some of these countries (for example Cambodia, East Timor, and Burma) have experienced great political strife and hardship in recent years. As Teresa says in her introduction: "If you visit countries where many people suffer poverty and/or abuses to their basic human rights, your concern for animals might seem comical, or even arrogant." (There's an interesting article by Maureen Chen on vegetarianism in Cambodia at www.vegsource.com/news/2010/05/vegetarianism-in-cambodia.html)

As elsewhere in the world, vegetarian and vegan ideas are still marginal in most of Asia (despite the influence of Buddhism and Hinduism), but there is progress to be seen and in a number of places the seeds are sprouting forth.



Malcolm Horne