



SECOND NATURE

UNDERCOVER IN THE MOSSY MOUNTAINS OF TAIWAN IS A STRIPPED-DOWN SPACE SWAPPING WI-FI AND MIRRORS FOR WIDESCREEN JUNGLE. TAKE OVER THIS HILLSIDE HIDEAWAY FOR A BACK-TO-BASICS BREAK OF YOUR OWN

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS SCHALKX



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ON THE DRIVE NORTH-EAST FROM TAIPEI early one morning, mountains fill up the horizon like an endless pod of moss-covered whale backs to the sea. The road twists higher into the Ruifang hills – the green spine of Taiwan – en route to Jiufen, a former gold-mining enclave intersected by Old Street, the lantern-lined main drag of whimsical tea houses and food joints which, along with clean, salty air and sweeping views of the East China Sea, draw shoals of day-trippers to the town from Taipei. But those who know Jiufen's secrets can slope off down alleyways to hole-in-the-wall cafés for home-made kumquat lemonade or follow rambling downhill paths to temples in the jungle that covers Keelung Mountain. Only they might chance upon Shu Shu House – and, most likely, walk past. Reached by a hidden stairway at the very end of Old Street, it seems, at first, to be a run-down concrete cabin, the kind found all over Taiwan with walls blackened by decades of rain and humidity, so battered that even a pressure washer can't save them. Flanked by giant ferns and banyans, and partly consumed by vines, the house seems to creak and squeak with the branches in the wind. Shu Shu – which roughly translates

arranges a pluck of osmanthus blooms in a tiny earthenware vase. 'I feel that way there will always be harmony in the house.'

It's easy to see how this place is an expression of Lin, a leading Taiwanese floral artist and founder of CNFlower, whose installations and love for uncultivated natural forms have attracted clients such as Chanel and Aman. But he is not a man of airs and graces. 'My obsession with flowers began early on,' he tells me when we sit down with his wife Ivy Chen for tea: a home-made blend of peppermint and Chinese liquorice root. 'I started out as a bouquet delivery boy. On my first day, I was tasked with three drop-offs: to an office, a strip club and a morgue. That's when I realised the power of flowers and the many different emotions they can carry.' Chen shares his passion; she used to host a show about gardens on Japanese TV and, like green-loving Lin, has never been much of a city dweller. Despite having a flourishing career in the capital, Lin previously lived in Xizhi, another rocky area east of Taipei. But with a mushrooming workload, the commute became punishing. He reluctantly swapped his former cabin for an apartment in Taipei's suburbs – and at once felt trapped. 'I get my inspiration from nature, so being in the city for

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as 'counting trees' in Chinese – is a fitting name. It is also a clue to the botanical passions of its owners.

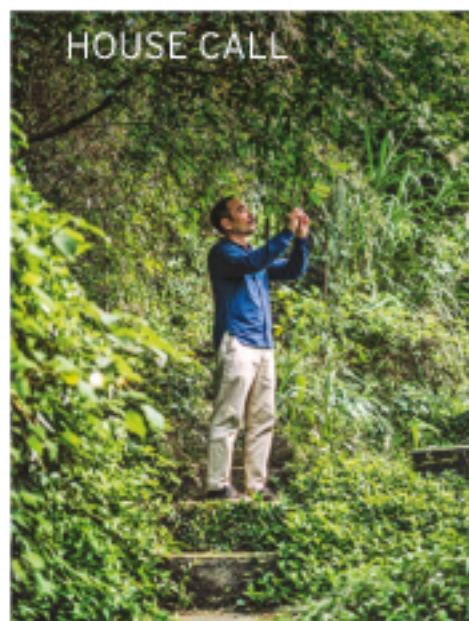
Upon entering through Shu Shu's heavy wooden doors, visitors climb a staircase to end up in the open-plan living/bedroom, which could be the moody set of a grey-toned Wong Kar-Wai or Zhang Yimou film, with wildlife, framed by windows, playing the leading role. A cast-iron bed occupies a good part of the space, its headboard an antique Chinese door richly decorated with hand-carved motifs left by the previous owner, a retired calligrapher. A rickety Indonesian oakwood cabinet is filled with glassware and Japanese ceramics. A gnarled branch sits in a time-worn pail, seemingly unarranged, just nature's sculpture. It is apparent that the rough beauty of the house has been enhanced by a respectful curatorial eye and the Japanese principle of *wabi-sabi*, along with a spirit of reuse and minimal intervention.

At the small dining table are very simple wooden folding chairs. A vintage German workbench functions as a desk, a cotton-covered window seat a reading and tree-gazing nook. The sparse furniture and modest *objets d'art* that have been repurposed here share one common denominator. 'All the materials are natural,' says gently spoken owner Alfie Lin as he delicately

too long mentally drains me,' he says. And so he began scouring the surrounding mountains for a weekend retreat 'to escape and recharge'. He searched for one, two, three, four, five years. Then, one day, he chanced upon an online listing for a 40-year-old cabin in the Jiufen mountains, whose calligraphy-artist owner had grown too old to make the trek uphill every day. Lin was won over by a photograph of its battered façade. 'I just had a feeling this house was really special.' He was heartbroken when he found out another buyer was about to put down a deposit. But he and Chen moved swiftly and, through sheer ardour, won the bid.

In the two years that followed, Lin flew to floral assignments in Spanish fincas and Scottish castles with a floor plan of the building in his pocket. 'I didn't want anything pre-planned or tailor-made,' he says. 'Instead, I listened to what the house was telling me to do.' In his time off, he combed antique markets in search of pieces that would fit the space – glassware from France, daffodil-yellow vases from China. And so a series of coincidental acquisitions gradually turned into the interiors of Shu Shu House. But there were also some practical decisions. Before the couple moved in, the place underwent a thorough renovation. Original floorboards were restored and painted blue. Additional windows were added – carefully positioned to let the outside in. On good

Opposite, clockwise from top left: a sloping alleyway in Jiufen; a wooden linen cupboard in the bathroom, the main living space, and a stone bathtub facing the jungle at Shu Shu House. Previous pages, clockwise from top left: a French hammered-copper bathtub in the spa room; the bedroom and living space; a German workbench used as a writing desk; vintage furniture and quirky finds in the spa room



days, views from the first floor reach as far as Keelung islet, about five miles off the rugged nearby coast. In the bathroom, almost the whole west wall is made of glass. The sink doesn't have a mirror above it, and instead looks out onto the trees. 'When you're here – you don't need to worry about looks,' Lin explains. Nor privacy in the jungle. Even in the ground-floor spa room, where a hammered-copper bathtub is positioned beside large windows, there is no witness but the sunlight-dappled foliage.

The lack of a kitchen is intentional, so as not to lose touch with the local community – though the cabinet in the living area neatly conceals a mini fridge. 'We want to support our neighbours. Eat at their restaurants,' says Lin. A TV and an internet hook-up have also been left out, and 3G connection is spotty this high up. 'The calm brings out the best in people,' says Chen. 'Our guestbook is filled with drawings and poems from friends who suddenly discovered their creative side away from the distractions of the city,' Lin adds. 'We never intended it to be a

guesthouse.' But when he shared photographs of his new cabin online, he was inundated with weekend rental requests. Over the years, friends, friends-of-friends and friends-of-friends-of-friends have stayed – all carefully vetted. Shu Shu House isn't meant to be a place like home – it is a home, and it isn't for everyone.

It starts raining and a thick mist completely blankets the house in a matter of minutes. 'Jiufen can be a moody lady – she does as she pleases,' says Chen. But somehow, Shu Shu House is even more homely and charming this way, set against a soundtrack of raindrops and crackled jazz playing from an old B&O radio. Nature seems closer and Taipei even further away. 'We love to listen to the water tapping on the roof,' Lin muses. 'It's all very poetic.' 📌

Shu Shu House is occasionally available to rent overnight. For rates and availability, visit facebook.com/shushuhouse

Above, clockwise from top left: owner Alfie Lin in his garden; binoculars; hillside temples in Jiufen; tea served in Japanese ceramics; spa room; living space



SHOPPING IN

TOKYO

THE NON-STOP METROPOLIS OF 38 MILLION IS THE MOST DENSELY POPULATED ON EARTH, WHERE TRADITION-TWISTING SELLERS JOSTLE FOR A SPOT BY ADDING ORIGINALITY TO EXTRA-SPECIALISED CRAFTS

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS SCHALKX



STYLE FILE



CLASSIC KEEPSAKES

Few washi-paper goods match the quality of the ones found at **Haibara**, which sells delicate envelopes, gorgeous folding fans and postcards. In business since 1806, this spot is an exemplar of the rejuvenation that has swept through the historic district of Nihonbashi over the years. Among the age-old spaces that have been given modern makeovers is toothpick purveyor **Saruya**, founded in 1704. A 20-minute walk away, the low-slung and modest **Natsumo** shop front stands out in upmarket Ginza. The chopstick expert stocks around 2,500 sets in lacquered bamboo, hand-painted porcelain and bumpy ebony wood. haibara.co.jp, nihonbashi-saruya.co.jp, e-ohashi.com

LOCAL CRAFTS

What started out as a magazine with style-focused travel tips has grown into a concept shop selling quality Japanese crafts. **D47 Design Travel Store** works with small-scale producers in each of the country's 47 prefectures. As a result, its shelves are stacked with cotton socks

from Nara, colourful wrapping textiles from Shizuoka and porcelain from Saga. Plus, its next-door museum has cool exhibitions on sake brewing and fermentation. hikarie.com/d47designtravelstore

GROCERIES

Almost every possible variety of Japanese rice is sold at **Akomeya** – more than 12 types of which can be bought by the scoop, polished in store and packed up beautifully, while the friendly staff advise on the best cooking methods. There's also a range of kitchen products for sale, including soy sauces, *furikake* seasoning, artisanal sake and earthenware pots. Akomeya has outposts around the city, but the ones in Ginza and Kagurazaka have on-site restaurant Chubu, which dishes up simple, wholesome food. akomeya.jp

HOMEWARE

Tired of her job as a fast-fashion buyer, Sae Yamamoto decided to slow things down with a place of her own. At riverfront warehouse **Ten**, she celebrates local artists and

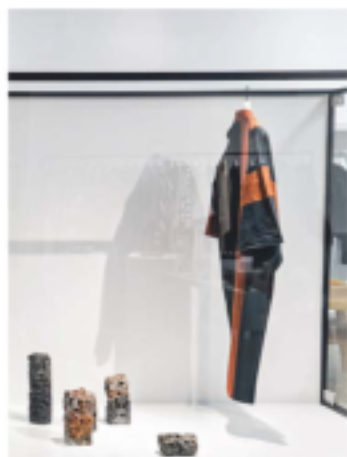
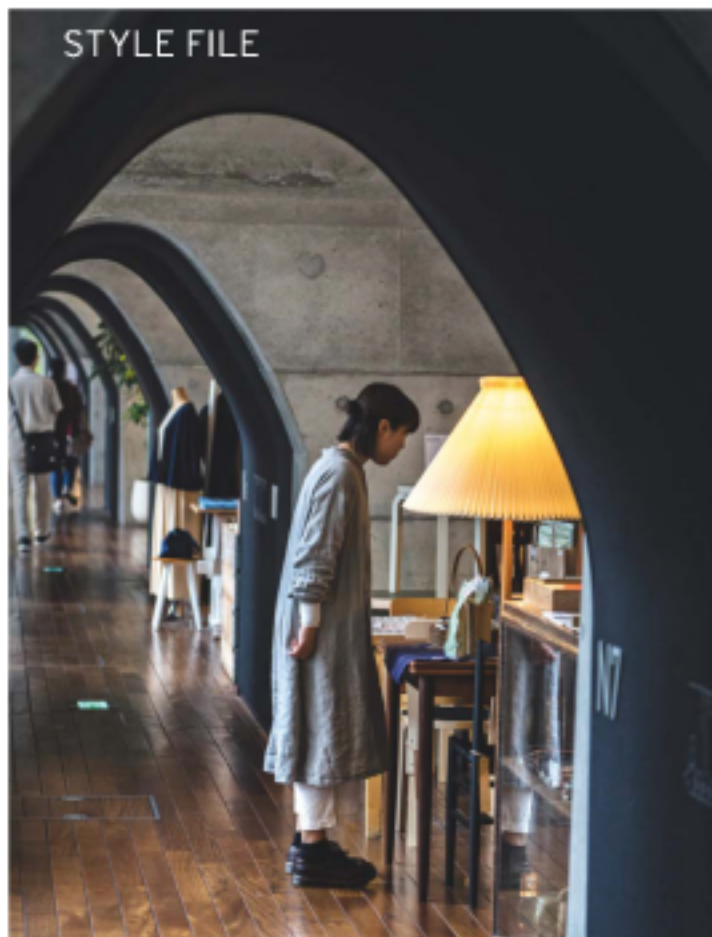
ceramicists who follow a sustainable approach in their craft. The collection is ever-changing, though regulars include Tokyo Kodo's wood-scented fragrances. Gifts are wrapped in *furashiki*-style cloth dyed by Yamamoto herself. 10-tokyo.com

HIGH DESIGN

Window-shopping is a joy in the stylish Aoyama area, where stores such as Prada, designed by Herzog and de Meuron, are architectural standouts. Nearby, the **Spiral** complex takes its name from its upwards-twisting exterior, and is worth a visit for its free art exhibitions and offbeat lifestyle shop. Meanwhile, in the Daikanyama district, the **Kashiyama Daikanyama** building is made up of seven stacked, box-like structures. Each one houses something different: a contemporary art gallery; a select shop curated by Opening Ceremony's Carol Lim and Humberto Leon (where Tokyo-based Hender Scheme is displayed alongside Jacquemus); a bakery; and a French restaurant. spiral.co.jp, kashiyama-daikanyama.com

Above from left: Coteau restaurant at the Kashiyama Daikanyama building; clothes at Dover Street Market. Previous pages, left, clockwise from top left: boomboxes at Beams; international crafts at Cabinet of Curiosities; homeware at Ten; modern geta shoes at Graphpaper; Shibuya district; ceramics at D47 Design Travel Store; boutique at Kashiyama Daikanyama; rice at Akomeya; Tokyo at night. Previous pages, right, façade of Haibara washi-paper shop

STYLE FILE



QUIRKY CONCEPTS

Built to resemble a small town square with a retro barbershop and an optician, **Hibiya Central Market** occupies the third floor of the Tokyo Midtown Hibiya development. Right in the centre, **Cabinet of Curiosities** has coffee-table books, dishware and one-off crafts from Morocco and Mexico. A few steps away, the all-white **Graphpaper** outpost matches heavy-duty Chacoli tote bags with its own line of Fila sneakers, as well as selling lifestyle products. Stop by the **Ikkaku** food court for soba noodles, curries, *domburi* rice bowls and highballs. Taking up space beneath the arches of what used to be Manseibashi Station, **Maach Ecute** is a smart collection of concept stores, bars and cafés on the fringes of Akihabara. A walk through the curved passages leads you past the sweet, hoppy wafts of **Hitachino Brewing Lab**, **Haluta** – specialising in vintage Scandinavian furniture – and Oakland's **Blue Bottle Coffee**. hibiya-central-market.jp, ecute.jp

FASHION

Y&Sons, down the street from Kanda Myojin Shrine, has elevated the men's

kimono into an everyday, smart-casual garment, made-to-measure from fine fabrics. Off-the-rack styles are also available, as well as leather-and-bamboo sandals. In Ginza, **Dover Street Market** does more than stock Comme des Garçons – this is the place to pick up one-off items by Japanese designers that are impossible to find elsewhere. For Tokyo street style, head to the Shinjuku flagship of legendary brand **Beams**, known for its on-the-pulse pieces and vintage boom-boxes. yandsons.com, ginza.doverstreetmarket.com, beams.co.jp

WHERE TO STAY

Hoshinoya Tokyo, in the business hub of Chiyoda, delivers a slick update on the traditional *ryokan*-inn experience. All surfaces – even the lifts – are lined with tatami mats. On each floor, six guestrooms (plush futons, *shoji* paper screens) open onto a communal *ochanoma* sitting room, where staff serve tea and onigiri rice balls. Matcha-making workshops are hosted in the lobby, plus there's an open-air *onsen* hot spring on the top floor. *Doubles from about £760*. hoshinoya.com

LOCAL KNOW-HOW HIDEKI 'HUE' KIMURA

FOUNDER OF STREETWEAR LABEL DELUXE

'Antiques is great for hunting down old-school pieces such as vintage Levi's, Hanes deadstock and furniture from the 1800s.'

'I used to visit Honmura An in New York before it closed – luckily, the Roppongi branch is just as good. The soba noodles and seasonal tasting menus are divine.'

'Shibuya can get crazy. When I need a quiet spot, I go to Trunk, a co-working space with a cocktail bar. It's great for meeting like-minded creatives.'

'On Sundays, the basement of the Mario Botta-designed Watari-um museum, which has works by Yoko Ono and Keith Haring, sells postcards and stationery.'

deluxe.jp



Above, clockwise from left: shop at Maach Ecute; clothing at Graphpaper; chopsticks at Natsuno; through a window at Prada; art installation at Spiral complex