



# pleasure island

BY MATTHEW FORNEY

sanya is emerging as one of asia's top island destinations, thanks to lush rainforests and miles of secluded, unspoiled beaches along the south china sea. discover the hawai'i of the orient — and china's best-kept travel secret

Although the undiscovered natural beauty of Sanya, China, rivals that of anywhere in Asia, its white sands, blue waters and rich culture have managed to stay off of most travelers' radar screens.



Most of Asia's tropical edens were discovered by hippie backpackers — footloose young Americans looking for the perfect beach in Thailand, Australians poking through Hindu temples in Bali, the grandchildren of English colonialists sunburning themselves in Malaysia. Over the years, the \$10 beachfront bungalows favored by these budget travelers gave way to hostels, then hotels, then the luxury resorts of today. By contrast, China's contribution to holiday paradise — the resort city of Sanya — has remained hidden from the world until its recent emergence as a five-star seaside destination.

Sanya sits on the southern tip of lush Hainan Island, which is the size of Belgium and lies on the same latitude as Hawai'i (to which it is often compared). Encircling the city are stands of mangrove trees, rugged karst peaks and virgin rainforests, all of which have recently been protected as national parks.

Although the undiscovered natural beauty of Hainan rivals that of anywhere in Asia, decades of politics and regional poverty conspired to keep the island's white sands and blue waters a secret. Even after economic reforms began in 1978, foreign tourists remained few and far between, and most Chinese couldn't afford a visit. The People's Liberation Army helped keep Sanya off the world's travel itinerary by incorporating beautiful Yalong Bay, a 7.5-kilometer strip of isolated beach lying 25 minutes from the city, into the grounds of a high-security naval base.

Today, the Yalong Bay beaches where soldiers once practiced amphibious landings have been turned over to five-star resorts, including The Ritz-Carlton, Sanya, and guests may still see battleships moored in the distance. Sanya's restaurants range from wharf-front seafood to Italian cuisine; water sports are available up and down the coast; and 18 golf courses, two of which host both European and Asian Tour events, dot the landscape. In the city, discos and inexpensive restaurants serving draft beer and good food, including fare from Russia, Korea and Japan, line the beaches, and the mood is festive without turning into a beachfront rave party. And there's more to come — Sanya's 20-year development plan includes airports, expo centers and 700,000 more hotel beds.

#### EXPLORING THE ISLAND'S PAST

I've lived in China for more than a decade, and when I travel I like to set up a home base and take day trips. There's plenty to see around Sanya, and Hainan Island is easy to navigate. For those who make the effort to leave their resort, Hainan will reward.

I hired a car through The Ritz-Carlton, Sanya and headed to inland mountain villages for a day with my kids, who are 9 and 13. The island is the birthplace of the Li minority, who are related to hill tribes in Southeast Asia

A local vendor sells fresh mangoes, a popular treat for locals and visitors.

For a slice of authentic Sanya, I'd recommend an early morning trip to the fishing wharf to watch the wooden ships arrive after a week at sea laden with swordfish, crab and octopus.



Fishing remains an important part of Hainan Island's economy, and a visit to one of the area's fishing wharves or beaches will not disappoint visitors.

and whose women tattoo their faces; and it's also home to the Miao, who arrived several centuries ago with Chinese settlers and are known in the United States as the Hmong.

The Japanese invaded the island during World War II, and many locals were killed in pitched battles. After the war, the province received little notice until 1988, when Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping named it a "Special Economic Zone" and liberated sectors of its economy from state control.

We visited a Li village on a hill overlooking a plantation of betel nut trees, which produce a nicotine-like fruit that locals chew until it stains their lips red. There we met a barefoot 78-year-old woman named Huang Lianqing who once passed coded messages to Communist Party cells operating behind Japanese lines. Huang showed us the shrine in her home built to worship Chairman Mao — it has the same picture of Mao that hangs over Tiananmen Square — where she makes daily offerings of incense, rice wine and Red Three Ring cigarettes. "I was too young to be afraid," she says of her message-carrying duties. "I went where they told me. What did I know?"

#### FROM THE BEACH TO BUDDHA

The next decade will likely change these villages forever. Many that are now accessible only by dirt paths will find themselves connected to highway networks, and one village chief told me he expects every household in his area to have a car within five years. The good nature of the people, however, seems resistant to change. Everywhere we went, someone shimmied up a tree to hack down coconuts for us so we could drink the milk. (The Sanya area also has several tourist villages that offer reenactments of courtship rituals and end with a line dance.)

An hour from Sanya lies Nanshan City, home to the world's tallest statue of Guanyin, the Buddha of Compassion. The neighborhood around the statue hosts many excellent vegetarian restaurants specializing in tofu that looks and tastes like spare ribs and duck. North



of Sanya are hot springs popular with local people, and aficionados also may enjoy them.

Divers visiting Sanya will find clear waters and some live coral, which occasionally ends up mounted on blocks and sold in souvenir shops around the city. For a slice of authentic Sanya, I'd recommend an early morning trip to the fishing wharf to watch the wooden ships arrive after a week at sea, laden with swordfish, crab and octopus.

**LOCAL FLAVOR**

The best outing my family took was to the Chun Yuan Seafood Square, a bustling collection of 600 tables under a big tarp. It's almost a do-it-yourself place — and very local. Visitors choose one of 90 cooks who operate independently with little more than a gas-fired wok and a card table with jars of spices. Our cook led me to a whole-selling area where sea creatures of every variety, from humble shrimp to magnificent grouper, were sold live in tanks. I picked what

we wanted, the cook prepared it, and we washed it down with beer and coconut milk.

Everybody seemed to know each other, and the cooks, who compete for business, had recently created a fund to cover the medical costs of one of their number who suffered from cancer. It was that kind of place. A seafood feast for three ran \$35.

Afterward, I asked the cook how she had prepared our fish. "Oyster sauce," she said, and "some spices" that she couldn't name. In no way could she explain what she had done to our food. Much of Sanya seemed that way — things just kind of happen, and they happen well. Follow your instincts, and this unexplored niche of southern China will open up to you. ●

paradise found

With a private beach and easy access to lush rainforest-covered mountains, The Ritz-Carlton, Sanya is an ideal destination for travelers looking to escape from the world.

Situated in the secluded Yalong Bay, the resort offers enough amenities to keep you within walking distance of your room or private villa, including eight dining options. Guests looking for a bit of pampering to complement their beach time may visit the resort's spa. The 30,000-square-foot facility, designed and operated by the ESPA, offers relaxing aromatherapy and beauty treatments, a jade steam room, cool mist showers and outdoor vitality pools with jets.

Of course, for those more adventurous souls, Hainan Island's lush landscapes and rich cultural offerings make ideal daytrips for those hoping to experience a bit of the area's indigenous culture.

And while the property (which recently won "Asia's Leading New Hotel" from the World Travel Awards) is sure to be a favorite for honeymooners, the resort offers Sanya's only oceanfront wedding chapel for couples looking for a stunning backdrop to say "I do."



Left: Sand restaurant.  
Right: The front pool at The Ritz-Carlton, Sanya, which features 33 private villas and 17 suites.