



Betel nut trees swaying in the breeze

# Hainan — Hawaii of the East

By Dr Juliana Poh

The tropical island of Hainan lies at the southernmost part of China and is three hours from Singapore by air. It seemed a reasonable destination to bring my elderly parents and my young kids, since the weather wouldn't be too far from ours in December, when we had our annual family getaway. We planned to chill out during the ten days, maybe relax at the beach and take in some sights at our own pace, so we went "free and easy". There were pros and cons, as we found out.

Hainan, the smallest province of China, is still 47 times larger than Singapore. We landed in Haikou Meilan International Airport, in the north, and took a high-speed train to Sanya, in the south, reaching in two hours flat. The RMB100 (S\$20) first-class cabin ride was extremely comfortable and smooth at 250 kilometres per hour. My family's only grouse about the train service was having to lug our luggage up and down the numerous flights of steps in the stations – not elderly-friendly or tourist-friendly at all! Yes, there are lifts, but only for VIPs and staff. Period. We weren't prepared for a horrendous, non-moving taxi queue under the scorching sun at 2 pm, and therefore allowed ourselves to succumb to a tout that offered us a ride to our hotel for RMB80 in his Honda Odyssey. Not expensive, considering the tout didn't know the location



we were describing! Lesson learnt: there aren't enough taxis for the population in Sanya. Even the locals have problems getting from place to place and often fight for taxis, which we did witness for ourselves in the following days.

So we finally found the Serenity Coast Resort, which is "half mountain, half island", in the Xiaodonghai zone. As such, we had magnificent views of the South China Sea on one side of the three-bedroom suite and mountain views on the other. (The sandy feel of the apartment floor reminded us that we were in a beach resort.)

Tourism in Hainan has developed very fast, but I feel the software aspects are still not up to scratch. The check-in took longer than expected, and for the first time in my travelling life, I was asked to place a deposit which exceeded the total room charges, despite having already paid a quarter of it before the trip. We were soon accosted by the hotel concierge to arrange travel and transport for our four-day stay in the resort. Being in a remote location with few taxis, we had to charter a private vehicle to get us where we wanted.

I would strongly recommend a day trip to the Yanoda Rainforest Tourism Zone. Be prepared to walk. A lot. The sprawling reserve boasts ancient banyan trees, waterfalls, caves and the longest zip-line in Asia. A buffet lunch of herbal rainforest cuisine featured dishes with wild mushrooms, herbs and local chicken. It was aimed at regulating body



"To live as long as the evergreen trees on Nanshan Mountain" – words written by Empress Dowager Cixi



Nanwan Monkey Island



The South China Sea Kwan-yin Bodhisattva, towering at 108 metres



A liger – a hybrid cross between a male lion and a tigress



metabolism and promoting better circulation to prevent disease and achieve longevity. I must say the flavours were unique and took some getting used to. But I just had to eat to sustain more walking.

A trip to Hainan would not be complete without visiting Binglanggu, or the Areca Valley of Hainan Ganza Ridge Primitive Culture. It showcases the Li and Miao ethnic minority groups, detailing the livelihoods of the people and their relationship with the betel nut tree, which can be seen all over Hainan. Young lads asking for a hand in marriage are supposed to climb betel nut trees to show their commitment and love. We were intrigued by the few surviving old ladies with facial and limb tattoos, who sit and weave all day. No wonder the soles of their feet were so smooth! My daughter had to buy a hand-woven pouch as a souvenir!

Another full day was spent exploring the Dongtian Park, the oldest scenic spot in Hainan with key protected cultural relics. It is the birthplace of Taoism in Hainan, and situated at the foot of Nanshan Mountain. This area is characterised by the evergreen pines which are said to be at least 6,000 years old. The roots intertwine and resemble many old longevity gods sitting with their legs crossed. Hence the saying, "live as long as the evergreen pines on Nanshan Mountain". I could understand why there was a never-ending queue to take pictures with some words written by Empress Dowager Cixi! Many Buddhists flock to the Nanshan cultural tourism zone to see the South China Sea Kwan-yin Bodhisattva, an awesome sight at 108 metres.

As part of our plan to "chill", after three days of strenuous walking, we took a speedboat to the West



Vanishing limb and facial tattoos of a Li tribeswoman



Wenchang chicken – tougher than it looks



Delicious bamboo rice for RMB2



To die for grilled clams with garlic by the roadside

Island, well known for diving and water sports. The beach was extensive and did not disappoint. Everything you can get in Phuket, you can also find here, including instant diving courses. We were happy to just relax under the coconut trees as the kids enjoyed the sand and sea. One thing though, washing up after the beach activities can be a problem as water is chargeable on the island! Totally money-making.

You must be wondering where the food bit is. Hainan is famous for Wenchang chicken, and their seafood and other dishes are generally less oily than on the mainland. Warning: Wenchang chicken rice is very different from Singapore's version of Hainanese chicken rice. Free-range chicken is used, meaning the meat is much tougher than what we are used to here. I wouldn't recommend those with dentures to eat this too often. Do try the Dongshan lamb, which is usually stir-fried with soya sauce and springy. Hainan is also famous for Jiayi duck and Hele crab, which we did not get to try, as we couldn't find an authentic restaurant. Seafood is very popular in Sanya, and there is a great variety of clams and fish, but prices are generally more expensive than in Singapore. There are many al fresco seafood spots in Dadonghai and downtown, and prices can vary greatly in different districts.

We spent two nights in Wanning town, which is midway between Haikou and Sanya. The Four Points by Sheraton Shenzhou Peninsula Resort was again a tad out of the way and we had to depend on hotel transport. The Xinglong Tropical Botanical Garden was eye-opening and the guide provided lots of information about the common plants in Hainan, namely coconut, cocoa, vanilla and betel nut. What I found even more interesting was their store, where they have coconut in every possible form. There was coconut powder for instant drinks, coconut coffee, coconut pancakes, coconut gum, coconut and cocoa drinks combined, and even coconut bamboo rice! The last is just scrumptious after you've survived the tourist spot.

An hour's drive away from Xinglong is Nanwan Monkey Island, a reserve where 2,000 monkeys are raised and trained. The trip there involves taking the longest over-water cable car ride (2,138 metres) in China, which gives great views of the fishing settlements where "fresh" seafood is derived. It was a manageable and relaxing visit compared to the humongous sites we had visited a few days earlier in Sanya.

We ended our holiday with three nights in Haikou, a busy port city. As with all big cities, there is traffic congestion and pollution. There are a few historical sights which can be covered all in

one morning, as it is easy to get around the city by taxi. These sights include Hairui's Tomb, Five Officials Temple and Qiongtai College. It was interesting that Hainan used to be called the "gate of hell" where disgraced court officials were banished to. The Five Officials Temple gives insight into the history of Hainan in ancient times and even has a well which Su Dongpo (a Song Dynasty official banished to Hainan) dug for his people! That said, the historical sights are not very well maintained and have a deserted feel. We found more life at the Hainan Tropical Zoo and Botanical Garden, which houses a safari. Don't expect to see pandas here, though. We saw a few ligers, which are hybrid crosses between male lions and female tigers. Visitors can pay RMB60 to feed them Wenchang chicken! (My family loves checking out zoos everywhere and this zoo was special with regard to its feeding experience.) Forget the pygmy hippos in the Singapore zoo. See a real hippo up close and throw carrots into its huge mouth with long teeth. And tickle the giraffe's tongue as it licks the yam slices you hold out. The kids were obviously thrilled. ☺

Hainan, the Hawaii of the East, proved to be a memorable adventure of its own kind and as you prepare to walk, be prepared to spend. Admission fees are steep at tourist attractions (about S\$35 per adult) and transportations costs are high. We ran short of cash and many places do not accept credit cards yet. (If you can, arm yourself with a UnionPay card.) Think Hainan, think coconut trees, think cash. **SMA**



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**Children playing at the beach**