

CHINA'S SLICE OF island paradise

GETTING THERE

China Southern Airlines flies from Sydney to Guangzhou five times per week and from Melbourne to Guangzhou three times per week. Connecting flights from Guangzhou to Sanya operate daily until midnight. Australian passport holders can enter Hainan without a pre-booked visa if part of a group of more than five. Others can pick up a landing visa on arrival.



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From beautiful beaches to tropical rainforests and five-star accommodation, its little wonder that Hainan is nicknamed The Hawaii of the Far East. Andrew Starc travelled to the island recently, and came up with FIVE reasons to visit



Pristine beaches and coastline

The first thing that comes to mind when you think of China is probably the Great Wall, the last, beaches. But Hainan is home to some of the world's best beaches, and when I stepped on one for the first time, I could see why the island has been dubbed "The Hawaii of the Far East". Hainan's coastline hugs a stunning turquoise expanse of the South China Sea and features beaches that stretch out for kilometers. But the best thing about swimming on a Hainan beach is that you never have to worry about losing sight of your towel amongst a sea of sunbathers – the relative unknown status of the island means that the beaches are virtually free of tourist crowds.

Tantalising cuisine

Next to secluded beaches, fresh seafood is Hainan's most valuable commodity, served in the distinct flavor of the locals with influences from all regional schools of Chinese cuisine. Almost everywhere you go, local merchants offer their own taste of Hainan's seafood – prawn skewers, oysters, abalone, lobster – accented with the tantalizing spices and flavors of the island. Tropical fruit is also in abundance, with mangoes, coconuts and star fruits almost omnipresent – from street-stalls to your hotel bedside table.

Unique cultural experiences

My most enduring memory of Hainan was of the Nanshan Buddhist Cultural Zone. Located about 40 minutes drive from the southern city of Sanya, it's one of Asia's most important Buddhist sites and provides visitors a rare insight into traditional Buddhist culture. Encompassing more than 50 square kilometers of untouched rainforest, the site features numerous Buddhist temples and gardens back-dropped against a scenic mountain landscape.

But the highlight of the Zone is the impressive 108 meter statue of the Buddhist deity Guan Yin, the fourth largest statue in the world, its distinct form juxtaposed against the gleaming South China Sea vista, casting a truly ethereal, otherworldly sight.

Exotic wildlife

A must see on Hainan is Nanwan Monkey Island. Located about an hours drive from Sanya, the Island serves as a tranquil wildlife sanctuary where hundreds of free-roaming monkey's swing from tree to tree, live to their own set of rules and enjoy a peaceful cohabitation with us human visitors. It's the only ocean-side natural monkey reserve in the country and home to over 1,500 monkey's, living in a vast jungle wilderness, unshackled by the confines of the traditional zoo setting Australian's so usually associate with the species. Walking through this unique jungle habitat, you have to keep a tight grip on your camera, as it's not uncommon for some of the cheekier ones to dart right in front of you and try to wrest it from your hands!

A different side to China

Hainan is a refreshing change from the preconceptions usually associated with the Mainland. While standing astride a busy intersection in Sanya's bustling city centre, you get the feeling it isn't a typical Chinese city. The cacophony of traffic, enterprising locals hawking their wares by the palm-tree lined roadside, the sight of tuk-tuks weaving in and out of the errant flow of island-style traffic paints a scene more akin to somewhere in Vietnam or Thailand, and it's little wonder why the Chinese refer to Hainan as their piece of South-East Asia. Returning home with tales from China that don't involve the Great Wall, but rather lazy day's sun-baking on the beach,

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