

The island of Hainan began the new decade with an omen of an undoubtedly bright future – the Chinese Government announcing their intention to invest heavily in the promotion of the island in their bid to establish Hainan as a major international tourist destination



FEATURED REPORT

Sanya – China's Southern Jewel beckoning Western arrivals



While this may be the first effort by the Chinese to promote Hainan to a Western market, the island itself is already a tourist ready product, having served as the holiday destination of choice for the Chinese for years, and no other place on Hainan is as tourist ready and attractive as the southern city of Sanya.

The landscape of Hainan is painted in completely different strokes to those of the Mainland, the only major similarity – the burgeoning skyline. Like its Mainland counterparts, the resort city of Sanya, is growing rapidly. The landscape has changed dramatically from ten, even five years ago, such is the rate at which tourism is growing here.

Twenty years ago, the sight of a resort tower was as alien as a foreign visitor, even visitors from the Mainland, but now, the skyline presents a far different landscape to what was once a mere collection of fishing villages. Spreading all around the far reaching cape of Yalong Bay – cranes sitting atop scores of half-built resort towers, the signs of a thriving tourist industry with expectations of a wave of future visitors.

Sanya isn't a typical Chinese city. More akin to those

found in Vietnam or Malaysia, the Chinese refer to it as their piece of South-East Asia. The sight of bustling streets lined with palm trees, the cacophony of traffic and enterprising locals hawking their wares by the roadside, the sight of tut-tut's weaving in and out of the errant flow of island-style traffic all lend an image of Sanya as a burgeoning seaside town with aspirations of becoming the next Bangkok.

Sanya is situated on three major coastlines; Yalong Bay, Sanya Bay and Dadonghai Bay, Hainan's most stunning ocean views and pristine beaches the strict monopoly of this triumvirate of coastline marvels. Walking only minutes from the city centre, the full view of the South China Sea vista presents another major departure from the Mainland stereotype – clear blue skies. Hainan's skies are almost permanently blue, nearly 300 days per year are cloudless where the closest hint of pollution was some 400 kilometres north while flying over China's southern Canton region.

The island has been dubbed "China's Hawaii", the mountainous tropical inland rainforests that spill

into the gleaming coastline are some of the major hallmarks warranting this comparison. But there's one major difference between the beaches of Maui and those of Sanya – tourist crowds are almost non-existent.

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. You can't pass two city blocks without seeing local merchants offering their own taste of Hainan seafood – prawn skewers, oysters, abalone, lobster – all accented with the tantalizing spices and flavors of the island.

Most of the tourists here are Chinese, but there's a clear slant in favor of a future of Western arrivals to Hainan's shores. Noticeable are the shop and road signs in both Mandarin and English, local merchants who upon introduction deliver their best rendering of the language and the hospitality of the city's resorts, always spear-headed by an English speaking reception.

For an Australian tourist, one of the most welcoming aspects of Hainan is the lack of jet-lag. The time difference between Sydney

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and Hainan is a body-clock friendly two hours. After a nine-hour flight, it's refreshing to arrive somewhere and not spend the first two days stumbling around in a zombie-like trance.

Another advantage for the Australian traveler is the exchange rate. One Australian dollar buys approximately five and a half Chinese Yuan's, and not only that, the cost of living on the island is comparatively far cheaper than it is in Australia, hence eating out here costs far less than it would back home.

Once you can eventually prize yourself away from Sanya's selection of secluded, white-sand beaches and sumptuous seafood banquets, exploring the numerous cultural and natural attractions within and surrounding the city provides for a series of unique experiences that you truly can't get in any other single destination in the world.

In terms of tourist draw-cards, one of the biggest is the Nanshan Buddhist Cultural Zone. Encompassing more than 50 square kilometers of untouched rainforest, the site features tourist accessible Buddhist temples, gardens and an

impressive 108 Buddhist metre statue, the fourth largest statue in the world. Located about 40 kilometers from Sanya, it's one of Asia's most important Buddhist sites and provides visitors with a rare insight into traditional Buddhist culture.

Even those with little understanding of the religion can enjoy the tranquility of the location, the sampling of vegetarian cuisine and the more than impressive grand statue of Guan Yin, a venerated Buddhist deity, that sits majestically on the coastline, its distinct form juxtaposed against the gleaming South China Sea vista, casting a truly ethereal, otherworldly sight.

Nanwan Monkey Island is another of the unique tourist sites like no other found in China. Located about an hours drive from Sanya, it's a unique jungle habitat unto itself. The only ocean-side natural monkey reserve in the country, it is 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. While the name might be slightly misleading (it's actually a peninsula) it

almost perfectly encapsulates the destination as a whole – a tranquil 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.

Sanya is also known for its golf courses. PGA greats such as Tiger Woods and Colin Montgomerie have played regularly on the island's range of expertly designed courses, with professionals and weekend hackers alike now rapidly flocking to what is becoming an Asian golfing mecca.

With the Chinese now endeavouring to make Hainan their own Hawaii, they already have a firm basis from which to launch such an ambitious campaign. Sanya has all the ingredients to become a world famous holiday destination, and with the Chinese economy soaring to new heights, its potential seems unlimited.