

Andrew Starc observes the beguiling private life of wild monkey's on Nanwan Monkey Island, just off China's hidden tropical island province of Hainan.



## A Monkey's Paradise

FEATURE REPORT



Wild monkeys in a far-flung mysterious hideaway are going to steal my camera. That was my first thought when I was told I'd be travelling to Nanwan Monkey Island.

Whilst my camera didn't get stolen, I soon found out that I wasn't far from the truth.

This tourist friendly wildlife sanctuary sits just off the coast of China's tropical island province, Hainan, located in the heart of the South China Sea. Dubbed by locals as "China's Hawaii," Hainan boasts a mountainous rainforest interior surrounded by some of the bluest waters in the region – its natural wonders far removed from the smog and crowd of the Mainland.

One of these natural wonders is Nanwan Monkey Island, a unique jungle habitat unto itself. It is the only ocean-side natural monkey reserve in China and is home to over 1,500 wild monkeys. 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 human visitors.

Despite needing to drive an hour to get to the island from our hotel in Sanya, Hainan's ritzy resort capital, the journey was one of the best parts. Almost as soon as we abandoned the expressway, rural Hainan sprung to life. Fishing villages, rice fields tended to by farmers wearing iconic straw hats, local children playing outside their mud huts – a simple rural existence deeply contrasting to the bustling metropolis of nearby Sanya.

As we meandered further into the country landscape, our guide explained to us that the small mud houses – seemingly without any electricity of trappings of modern life- are in fact part of a Li village, the native people of Hainan.

"These people still live a traditional life...mainly subsisting on fishing and farming" he says as I wave to local children playing along the road.

I listened with intrigue as he told us that living side by side with the native Li people are the curiously named "Egg People".

When he asked us to guess why they are named so, I refrained from saying "they must have egg-shaped heads" in fear of seeming ignorant. When all the wrong answers were exhausted, he explained that the "Egg People" are a fishing community named for the distinct shape their boats form when viewed from the air. I nodded as if egg-shaped heads never crossed my mind.

We continued to pass an endless numbers of locals, some standing on the roadside hawking their wares – fresh seafood flavoured with local spices, tropical fruits and other local products – and others persistently offering tuk-tuk rides to wearied travellers.

We soon left the quaint setting behind us and arrived at the entrance to Nanwan Monkey Island where we were greeted by Asia's longest cable-car. Stretching some 2138 metres, the cable car presented us with the prospect of an exciting ride over the cavernous tropical valley that separated us from the famous monkey sanctuary.

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Clutching my hat and tightening my grip on the railing, the car whisked us up through the darkness of the embarking station and into the welcoming glare of the daylight. We swooped over the verdant greenery of the hilly island landscape and passed over the scores of fishing vessels holding port at the congested island shoreline, the curious shape of the "Egg People's" fishing vessels now clearly visible.

Stepping back on terra firma, our journey into the unique, surreal world of Nanwan Monkey Island began. Before we could even work out where they were all hiding, a female monkey darted out in front of us, her baby clutching firmly to her underside, before quickly climbing up a loosely hanging vine of a palm tree.

It was the first sign that we had truly left the human world behind us. The experience brought back childhood memories of the zoo, except this time there was one major difference – there were no steel bars, no glass partitions and no insurmountable barriers forcing me to keep my distance from these fascinating relatives of ours.

These wild monkeys all belong to the family known as the Macaque monkey, a native species to the region. Groups of these spritely primates scurried across our path as we advanced further into the wilderness, some stopping to take a closer look at their curious, upright visitors whilst others climbed back up to the sanctuary of the tree tops, away from our inquisitive stares.

Like us humans, playfulness is a quality that monkeys are born with and once you closely observe these beguiling creatures, walk through their habitat and experience their presence within mere touching distance, you can see the mysterious stare of their eyes, the almost imperceptible twitches of their faces and the swift movement of their limbs – all so familiar, yet so intriguing to the human mind.

More evidence of their human like qualities – a swimming pool and an overhanging rock some four meters above – the monkeys perform acrobatic leaps into the gleaming waters below with playful abandon, putting on a show for their fascinated cousins. They take to swimming with as much ease as they climb through the surrounding palm trees,

part of the extensive forest area that sprawls through the island and which our path now leads us into.

Descending deep into the wilderness, we sense movement in the surrounding trees, but before we can even catch sight of these nimble creatures, they've already made their swift movement into the tropical obscurity.

You can hear their screams in the distance, slowly becoming closer, echoing around us, until we spy a group of younger monkeys, having broken off from the colony, presenting themselves in front of us, lending us a friendly stare before casually walking around our feet. Some, in a sight truly fascinating to the human mind, begin to stand upright, walking around the human made paths as if they too were visitors to the island.

With such a curious sight still fresh in our minds, we make our way back off the island with a short ferry ride over the tiny fjord that separates this monkey sanctuary from Hainan proper. The sight of these fascinating creatures, isolated within their own curious domain, send us back into the human world with an intriguing sense of our ancient past.