

The Nanshan Buddhist Cultural Zone on the southern tip of China's tropical island province of Hainan provides a unique spiritual setting far removed from the Himalaya's, writes Andrew Starc.



Enlightenment under a Coconut Tree

FEATURE REPORT



When you think sparkling blue ocean waters hugging a sandy, sun-drenched coastline, back-dropped against a sprawling tropical rainforest, it isn't the typical imagery associated with Buddhist temples.

Hainan Province, a tropical island hideaway just off China's Mainland in the South China Sea, is as far removed from the traditional Tibetan home of Buddhism as the island's luxurious resort life is from a Himalayan lamasery. While the thought of Buddhism would usually evoke images of the lofty peaks of the Himalayas, Hainan's pristine coastline and tropical island scenery provides an unlikely setting for one of Asia's most visited spiritual sites, the Nanshan Buddhist Cultural Zone, about 40 kilometers from the southern resort city of Sanya.

Visited each year by thousands of tourists and pilgrims alike, the site is venerated in Buddhist scriptures and plays a significant role in the religion's more than 2,000 year presence in China. The renowned Tang Dynasty monk, Master Jianzhen, was the first Buddhist pilgrim to land on the shores of Nanshan, its pristine coastline marking the end of a spiritual journey in search of one of Buddha's "Twelve Oaths to Save all Living Beings".

To "dwell permanently in the South Sea" is one of those Oaths, and the Nanshan region, with a natural landscape that could be described as coming close to the idea of Nirvana, was established as the site of this permanent South Sea dwelling.

While the Dalai Lama may have long since crossed over its contentious borders, China still remains a spiritual bastion of Buddhism, and its presence is no more evident than within this tourist friendly exhibition of Buddhist culture.

Making the pilgrimage down the winding path that snakes through the more than 50 square kilometers of sprawling rainforest encompassing the Nanshan Buddhist Cultural Zone, simply observing the names of the countless grand temples, iconic statues, spiritual gardens and deep valleys that side this hallowed pathway are enough to invoke a yearning for Enlightenment.

Sights by the simple yet transcendent names of "Saviour Garden" and "Auspicious Garden", with their intricately trimmed hedges and impossibly green landscape festooned with Lotus flowers, a venerated symbol in Buddhism meaning "virtue" or "purity", serve as examples of traditional Buddhist garden landscapes. The consummately manicured plant-life and vibrant display of natural greenery amongst a pallet of natural colors act as enchanting harbingers of things to come.

Venturing deeper into this spiritual landscape of inspired tranquility, the unique entrance to "Longevity Valley", a vast mountainous forest region dotted with iconic pagoda's and mountaintop temples, lends a beguiling exhibition of photographic evidence supporting the claims of its name. On either side of the pathway, on notice-board style walls, enlarged photos of villagers who have lived their entire lives within the valley are posted, all of them over ninety, some of them even beyond a century, evidence of the surrounding area's vitalizing effect on human life.

At the heart of the valley is the grand Nanshan Temple, its gates flanked by stone figures of Buddha, sitting before this sacred site as if standing sentinel over its imposing, Tang Dynasty style entrance. Once inside, visitors are met with the divine images of the Four Heavenly Kings within the Doushuai Adytum (or Great Hall) amid statues of other deities, enshrined in renderings of stone, gold and jade, incarnations of the religion's most sacred figures and truly a sight to behold, even for those with little knowledge of the religion.

Once past this impressive temple, a sampling of Buddhist vegan cuisine can be had. To those of whom the thought of a diet without any traces of meat, fish or dairy can arouse a feeling of repulsion, it's a welcome surprise that the plentiful sampling of bean curd, tofu, rice, noodles and other choice vegetarian ingredients still provide for a hearty meal, a refreshing taste of a cuisine that amongst its many merits belongs the reason why the residents of nearby "Longevity Valley" live to such grand old ages.

With appetites satiated and feeling a renewed vibrancy that only a strict diet of bean curd and tofu can fuel, the final destination at the end of the tourist path provides the most impressive site of all. Past several grand, temple like facades and a series of ornate columns featuring traditional Buddhist furnishings and Lotus flower motifs, stands the imposing statue of one of Buddhism's most hallowed deity's.

Buddhist scholars traditionally preach the importance of humility, of the understated, but when it comes to honoring their deity's, it seems that the complete opposite is practiced. Standing at an impressive 108 metres, it is the fourth tallest statue in the world and one of the tallest structures on the island. To put it in perspective, New York's statue of Liberty stands only 93 metres tall.

Almost lifelike in appearance, the statue is a stone rendering of the bodhisattva (roughly translated to "Enlightenment-being") Guan Yin, one of the most venerated of Buddhist deities whose name means "Observing the Cries of the World". Sitting atop a tomb-like stone pedestal, featuring a golden hearth forming its base, the statue juts out into the waters of the South China Sea, as if somehow gently floating upon its surface.

When viewed from the edge of the shore, the sight of the gleaming, turquoise ocean blending with the azure sky on a horizon stretching out from both sides of the statue creates an ethereal, almost otherworldly vision of this imposing stone incarnation. It's the crowning glory of the Zone, something like what the Sistine Chapel is to the Vatican, and its no wonder so many thousands of tourists flock to the foot of this colossal structure each year to bear witness to its humbling presence.

The enchanting, pensive face of the statue of the Grand Guan Yin lends a meditative tranquility to the Nanshan Buddhist Cultural Zone, one that bears even more uniqueness in a setting so far from the traditional heartland of Buddhism, here amongst the tropical landscape of Hainan Island.