

## In Search of Paradise

By Francisco Little

**W**hen winter rolls over northern China and endless days of smog have you wandering around in a comatose state, there is only one remedy—and it doesn't come in a bottle.

It's sunshine, blue skies, and beaches. I conducted a survey amongst my friends regarding the best place to catch some waves and the same location kept coming up.

"You have to see Sanya on Hainan Island. It has the best beaches in the world," my friend Zheng Mei told me. Being from Cape Town in South Africa, a beachgoer's paradise, I was immediately skeptical.

I had never considered Sanya as a destination because China and white beaches just don't compute in my consciousness. Admittedly, my outlook was laced with a large shot of prejudice. The beaches I had seen in Qingdao and Dalian left much to be desired in the sense of spectacular scenery and were more functional than glamorous.

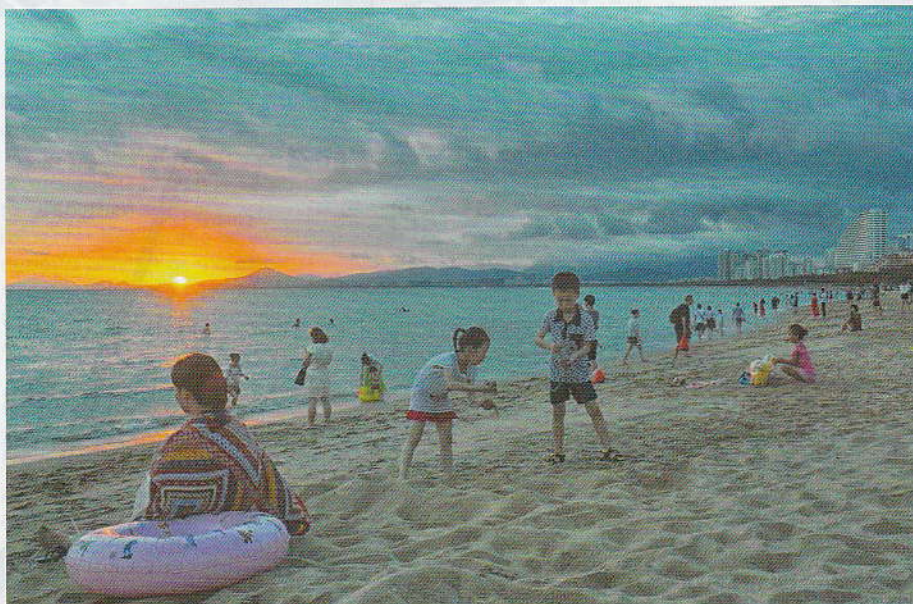
Then there was the cost. At first glance a return trip from Beijing to Sanya was not cheap and I didn't have the deep pockets required for it at the time.

Nonetheless, Zheng reminded me, "When it's winter in the north, nobody from Sanya wants to leave there, so the outbound flights are at bargain basement prices."

My ears pricked up at the mention of a bargain, and a frenetic airfare hunt began. It turned out she was right. Prices to Sanya were on the edge of affordability but the return trip was almost 70 percent discounted. I booked faster than you could say "fasten your seat belts."

Being on an island always has romantic connotations, probably because of the countless photoshopped travel brochures and Hollywood's bikini-clad girls coming-out-of-the-sea shots we've all been fed over the years.

But downtown Sanya is far removed from the idea of romance—it's a fading flower that has clearly not been to the prom in a while. The tired-looking buildings and wilting markets are a dreary canvas for the thousands of electric bikes that buzz about the city streets. And those streets all lead to the source of the city's major revenue stream. Sanya is all about beaches, palm trees, tropical forests and tour buses—all of



Sanya boasts some of the world's best beaches

which were put firmly on the global travel destination map after hosting the Miss World pageant on six different occasions.

According to an official report issued on Sanya's tourism industry in August last year, total tourism revenue reached \$2.1 billion in the first half of 2016, up 15.25 percent year on year. As expected, tourism makes up more than half of Sanya's GDP, which is not surprising considering that the city received 7.8 million tourists in the same period, a year-on-year growth rate of 8.9 percent.

Clearly the city is not resting on its sun-kissed laurels as projections for tourists staying overnight are expected to exceed 20 million in 2020 according to Sanya's 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-20), helped along by its favorable tax policies. That's approaching 2 million visitors a month—both good news for local businesses and a scary thought just considering the sheer volume of people expected to descend on the relatively small location.

Plans are well underway during this 2016-20 period as Sanya continues to spearhead the construction of the "Hainan International Tourism Island" concept and build the city into a holistic tourism resort. That's the blurb

from officialdom, which probably means Hawaiian-shirted tour groups are expected to come in droves.

I found Sanya's many beaches to be right up there with the best in the world and its sunsets are a photographer's dream. But while in the city I heard the word "paradise" bandied about a lot to describe this tropical city from a diverse selection of people. It's a term that worries me.

I have watched the charming village of Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, one of Africa's greatest natural spectacles and where I spent many years, become overrun with tourists after the sleepy hollow recently took possession of an international airport and a growing number of hotels. As more tourists pour in, what was once an unspoiled piece of raw African real estate has now become an overrun choked town of gargantuan proportions.

I really hope Sanya does not go the same route.

It reminds me of a line in a song by the Eagles—"If you call something paradise, kiss it goodbye." ■

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