

Curator Yumiko
Lo in Just Space
gallery.

Tropic of China

The arrival of a stylish seaside resort heralds the beginning of a new era for Sanya, China's favorite island getaway. STORY AND PHOTOS BY DIANA HUBBELL



SOMEONE SHRIEKS. I look up to see a trio of mermaids thrashing their tails in a shallow sea above my head. One waves her hand before slithering down the neon-lit plastic sheet to lavish attention on other audience members. Hundreds of smartphone screens follow her like a school of luminous fish.

The scantily clad ladies are just one element of the show at Sanya Romance Park, a deliriously trippy performance that's part Cirque du Soleil, part Vegas and part bombastic Beijing Olympics. A flying carpet descends from the ceiling with a troupe of bedazzled belly dancers. A love ballad culminates in a cascade of cherry blossoms. Ostensibly, the show tells tales from Hainan province's illustrious past, but as my Mandarin is beyond rusty, I never quite figure out the historical context of the onstage laser battle with a flying actor strapped to a jet pack.

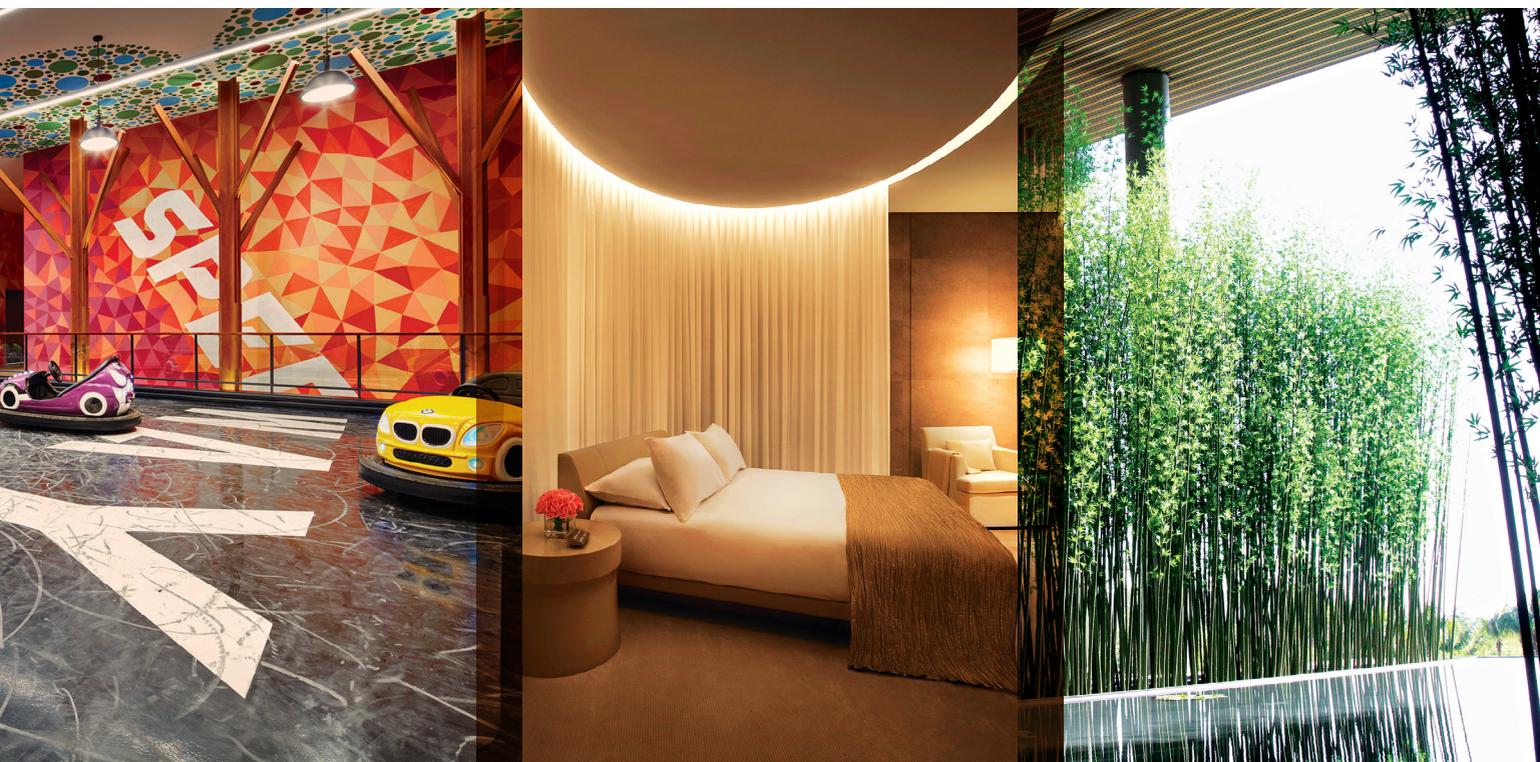
Even if I fail to grasp the subtleties of this Song dynasty-inspired tribute, the tornadoes of glitter and dancing girls seem to scream "vacation" in any language. Hainan Island's southern latitude has earned it the dubious nickname "the Hawaii of China," which manifests in a myriad of signs that read ALOHA en route to Sanya, a sunny coastal city draped along several prime bays that lures burnt-out mainland urbanites hoping to let loose—so much that it received 15 million visitors in 2015, more than 20 times the local population. Maui it is not, but there's a surplus of palm-, coconut- and pineapple trees and an escapist quality that Jimmy Buffet would recognize. I feel out of place in my gray-scale outfit, surrounded by floral shirts and a bring-on-the-tiki-drinks attitude.

Fear of the lei-toting jet-set is precisely what kept me away from

Hainan when I lived in China. As a rule, I'm leery of beach towns with too much bustle, and I never did care for cheeseburgers in paradise. Still, I kept hearing that Sanya was changing its tune. As new international flights from Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Germany and the U.K. pour in, the island is trying to veer away from kitsch in an effort to broaden its appeal beyond the local market. A bevy of five-star hotels is already in the pipeline, including a W, a Rosewood, and a Marriott Autograph Collection within the next year. All that added polish has helped emphasize what made this island so popular in the first place: a raw natural beauty largely spared from the ravages of rapid industrialization. Decades of strict developmental regulation mean you can still find swathes of untamed rainforest and the dreamy, blue skies that are becoming



FROM LEFT: There are no tides to fight while kayaking the clean, clear waters of The Sanya Edition's artificial ocean; executive chef Jordi Villegas puts the finishing touch on a mojito-inspired dessert at The Jade Egret; crystal drops mimic stars in the interior of the Sky Bar.



FROM LEFT: Bumpers cars in Playland bring out the kid in everyone; natural hues set a calming tone in The Sanya Edition's ocean-front lofts; nine-meter-high bamboo greets guests at the entrance to vast property.

As I lounge on the pseudo-shore by the glow of floating lanterns, I'm all too happy to be swept up in this dream world

increasingly scarce on the mainland. If Sanya was growing up, I decided it was time to set aside my cynicism and go get lei'd.

Who better to facilitate that than Ian Schrage, the co-founder and creative force behind New York's swinging seventies club Studio 54? The flair for theatricality that propelled Schrage's younger, wilder works is evident in **The Sanya Edition**, his swish hotel brand's giddy debut in Asia-Pacific. Case in point: it centers around a man-made ocean filled daily with 37,854 liters of saltwater pumped and purified from the bay where guests can swim, paddleboard, kayak, take a yoga class on a buoyant platform, and embark on a circuitous champagne

cruise before dining on a private floating island.

It's no doubt over the top, but the mature edition. "When you have so many international luxury brands coming to Sanya, it's a sign of the market growing more sophisticated," says Xavi Gonzalez, the hotel's general manager. Stepping into this space with its blonde-wood walls, objets d'art and sleek Zen aesthetic feels worlds apart from the gaudy megaresorts of yesteryear. As I check in, I'm greeted by a forest of nine-meter-high bamboo framing a jet-black infinity pool that seems to melt into Haitang Bay. The hotel's crescent shape ensures that each of the 500-plus rooms and suites offers the same

oceanic vista, along with a clear look at the jungle of indigenous flora that covers more than half the grounds.

While the lofty design extends to eateries such as The Jade Egret, a fusion-forward tapas lounge, the presentation belies the down-to-Earth deliciousness of the food. "Cooking is pretty simple. It's not like sending a rocket to the sky," says executive chef Jordi Villegas with a modest grin. He's spent months visiting farms to source the best possible local ingredients, from sustainably raised salmon from Chengdu for house-cured gravlax, to honeycomb from Hainan's only migratory beekeeper. "You need the right products, a certain level of care, and to be honest with the food."

For all the fine-dining flourishes, he's kept the laid-back ethos intact. Barbacoa, a Balinese-style barbecue spot on the sand, feels more like a fuss-free beach party than a fancy resort affair. It helps that the warm,

FROM LEFT: THE SANYA EDITION (2)



personable staff steer clear of the cookie-cutter sort of service still prevalent in many Chinese hotels. They don't wear nametags, but I seem to remember them in part because of their uncanny ability to remember me—and my preferences, right down to my coffee order. "It's not about scripted protocol," Gonzalez says. More than 13,000 applied for these coveted positions, but only a few hundred had the right combination of charisma and attentiveness needed to make the final cut. "It's a people business, not a factory, and we want them to be passionate and have fun."

The irony of the real ocean sitting in the backdrop behind this sanitized, cerulean one is not lost on me, but it's hard to deny its charm as I lounge on its pseudo-shore after dark by the glow of floating lanterns. Even if it sometimes feels detached from its surrounding reality, I'm all too happy to be swept up in this dizzying dream world. I may not be the target age group, but I could easily spend an afternoon in the

kids' area with its surrealist, Dr. Seuss trees, roving train and bumper cars. So I do, and join forces with a bunch of other so-called adults for a bumper-car skirmish that ends in giggles.

Equally whimsical is the resort's gallery, Just Space, a store stocked with covetable pop art décor and coffee table tomes. I meet curator Yumiko Lo, a petite Cantonese veteran of the Beijing art scene, who leads me around the opening exhibition, "New Order," which spotlights some of China's boldest emerging painters. "Most people don't associate Sanya with art, they come here for the beach," she says, a situation she sees as an opportunity. "My hope is to expose people here to something new."

With this in mind, I leave behind the glamorous resort bubble and pursue my own new experience of the region. One lazy afternoon before the mermaid-spangled extravaganza, I head to one of the many mineral-rich hot springs that dot the isle. Pearl River Nantian Hot

Spring offers a particularly serene soak, with 36 natural thermal pools infused with everything from ginger to green tea to coffee to traditional Chinese medicinal herbs. Maybe it's because I've absorbed some of the caffeine by osmosis, but I leave feeling more awake and relaxed than I have in weeks.

By the time I board my return flight, I've got the first blush of a tan, there's a sassy pink flower behind my ear, and I'm dressed in citrus hues that would make Tommy Bahama himself proud. I watch the boarding line dwindle and I'm the last through the gate. What's the hurry? It has only been a few days, but I'm already living on island time ☺

editionhotels.com/sanya; doubles from RMB1,888.



FROM LEFT: Sunrise over The Sanya Edition's man-made saltwater ocean; a carefully curated selection of pop-art and décor is available for sale at the on-site store.