

CP ORCHID ISLAND / LANYU BIRTHDAY JAUNT

A Lanyu Birthday Jaunt by Martine White,

The China Post, 1998 (1100 words)

I spent my 40th birthday freezing on a Steven Seagal movie set in a tiny mining town at the base of the Colorado mountains. Temperatures averaged below zero Celsius and a bitterly cold, damp wind howled through the valley, chilling us to the bone. Surrounded by gruff grips and cranky teamsters, I promised myself a very different 45th – somewhere in the tropics.

Lanyu, or Orchid Island, is about as far removed from Colorado as you can get. Lying 75 km southeast of Taiwan, this wonderfully wild and untamed spot is still relatively untouched by civilization.

Volcanic in origin, emerald-green mountains comprise the center, encircled by a narrow strip of semi-arable land. On the northeast coast, sharp black lava is pounded by blue-white surf, while the quiet western shore offers tiny white sand beaches, turquoise bays and pristine reefs. With 10-30 meter visibility, snorkeling and diving are excellent.

Although only 45 km square, over 800 varieties of plants and insects inhabit the island's tropical rain forest. Hidden within lies Tien Che Lake, a natural wonderland flush with cranes, wild birds and orchids.

It is here that the Yami or Dahwu people make their home. About 1000 years ago, they migrated from the Philippine Isle of Batan, just 80 km south. These seafaring folk live on flying fish, taro roots, yams, and imported vegetables. Their lives are deeply steeped in tradition and respect for the sea, so much so that the Japanese made Lanyu a "living anthropological museum" during their occupation.

As we disembarked at Orchid airport, white cottony clouds billowed across the sky and a refreshing breeze swept away the Taipei dust. I was itching to hit the road. Dropping my bag at the Lanyu Hotel, I hopped on a canary-yellow mountain bike, heading north for Langtao to visit a friend.

What a glorious day! Goats scampered fearlessly along the rocky lava shore, and a family of pigs trotted contentedly down the road. The hills, moist with dew, shone a brilliant luminescent green dappled by feathery white pampas grasses.

Ahead, red and black Yami motifs adorned brightly painted schools and colorful boats. Even the tiny chapels were gaily decorated, for here Christianity must co-exist with "anito," ancient spirits that have threatened the Dahwu for centuries.

As you pass the airport, the road is quiet and unhurried. An old lighthouse overlooks the sleepy harbor and just beyond, wet fields of taro plants parallel the road. There are no homes along this stretch, but here and there an old Yami woman walks, bent over from her load of yams and taro.

Yami custom demands a strict division of labor. Women perform all farming and household chores while men focus on fishing. It takes ten men to row a large boat and pull the nets, so they also share the catch. This is a communal society, sharing food and even power – they have no chief.

While the eldest son usually inherits everything, women have the upper hand in marriage. The bride-to-be moves in with her potential husband – if he is a good provider, she stays and they are considered wed. If not, she simply goes home to her folks.

By mid-afternoon, I was battling strong headwinds on the steep climb to Langtao and the north shore. The west coast view was superb but black clouds loomed ominously. I pedaled madly to the school, barely outpacing the storm, only to learn that my teacher friend had moved on.

I guess I looked pretty down, because one of the teachers finally stepped forward and led me outside. As raindrops began to fall, she pointed to a white-washed dorm and said, "You stay tonight. You sleep my room. You wash. I have clothes. We make dinner. You stay." I hesitated... then bowed gratefully.

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An hour later, I was clean and freshly clothed, (I refused the new “size 4” panties). Meanwhile, Hui-Zhuan, and her Taiwanese colleagues had prepared a veritable feast: fatty pork with yam leaf, beef and squash in brown gravy, soft tofu with soy sauce, fried rice and scrambled eggs, steamed rice, and miso with tiny smelt. It was a wonderful, funny meal interspersed with mime, broken English and my terrible Chinese.

We talked of many things, from friendship and games of soccer, to loneliness (most stay only a year) and funding cuts. Their school workshop sits empty and unused, the crafts teacher long gone - a sad reality in a culture known for fine decorative arts.

Some Yamis, like Pastor Stephen of Tongching, have returned to Lanyu to help revive his culture. He studies wood-working and gives weekly language classes, but, for now, there is no one to teach Yami history, nor is it part of the regular school curriculum.

The next morning brought blue skies and thunderous surf and the gusty ride to Lion’s Rock was exhilarating. There I left the north shore and began coasting southward. Below me, the road snaked down the east coast, revealing the majestic “Battleship Rocks” and beyond, the lovely village of Yehyin.

While modernization has brought paved roads, new schools, and ugly cement homes, Yehyin remains unchanged. Many village elders still live in semi-underground homes - cool in summer, warm in winter, and able to withstand typhoons. Each is built into the hillside (with underground drainage) and surrounded by low walls of flat round stones. As goats cavort along the grassy banks, it has an oddly Irish feel.

My final destination was traditional “boat baptism,” a highly ritual event. A Yami’s boat is his most sacred possession for it represents his ability to make a living. It is taboo for women to even touch it.

I found the new boat sitting on display, covered with yams and taro. One by one, the boat-builder’s relatives arrived, clad in Tingtzu loincloths and silver helmets, uniting to spend the night in prayer.

Then came the thanksgiving feast! At dawn, the men prepared boiling pots of freshly slaughtered pigs and goats as the women cooked the taro and yams.

By noon, everyone was stuffed and singing songs of praise for the woodcarver’s skill. Show time had arrived! Dozens of hands carried the craft high overhead and cast it into the sea. Chanting in unison, the oarsmen rowed furiously, speeding through choppy seas in a final magnificent climax.

As the men returned home spent and exhilarated, I too was elated. I had finally shut the door on the movie biz and was moving on. My “tropical vacation” in Lanyu had inspired hopes for a new career, and a glorious 50th birthday wish. But, for now, my lips are sealed. You’ll just have to wait ‘til 2004!

TRAVEL SIDE-BAR (405 words)

Springtime is a magical time to visit Lanyu. The balmy weather brings forth blue skies and thousands of silvery flying fish. But off-season can be great too – that’s when the locals are at their friendliest.

Do try to catch one of the traditional celebrations: the June Boat Festival, the Millet Festival in May or June, or the Flying Fish Festival, held 13 times between March and May. The Tourism Bureau website provides updates and a good map: <http://www.tbroc.gov.tw>. These festivals offer great photo ops but use discretion - the villagers detest rude snap-happy tourists. Ask first or use a long lens.

There is no local tourist office but Mr. Yin in Yuren’s Lan-An Center is said to have an interesting collection of Yami video and photos. If you need English-speaking assistance, just call on a local church pastor or schoolteacher. Cash may be obtained at the Hongtuo Post Office ATM.

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From Taitung's Fu-Kang Harbor, the ferry is a great way to travel but you'll need a Chinese-speaker to make a reservation. The schedule varies according to weather and passenger demand.

The stately Changan Lun (089-281-047) makes a daily one hour trip to Lanyu, NT\$568 one way. The Lanyu Lun (089-328-015) is a "day trip" tour boat, splitting the day between Green Island and Lanyu, for NT\$400.

From Taitung, it's a short 15 minute hop by Uni Air or Formosa Air, NT\$1,154 one way. Helicopter service (089-352-511) is available anytime for NT\$2,800 one way. Credit cards are accepted.

Wanna go local? Try a guest house at NT\$400 per night. Their English-speaking contacts are: Uren: Mr. Tung (09-33-913-195); Yehyin: Pastor Tsow (089-732-292); Tongching: Pastor Stephen (089-732-885); Langtao: Mr. Shieh (089-732-137). Catered meals are available.

Both hotels provide airport pickup and offer adequate rooms for NT\$1,800 to NT3,000, (20% off if you book directly.) They also rent scooters by the day. Yeyiu's Orchid Island Hotel (089-732-032) has scooters for NT\$700. Hungtao's Lanyu Hotel (089-732-111) rents scooters for NT\$500, bicycles for NT\$200, and can arrange an authentic Yami dance for NT\$7,000.

The most popular restaurants are all in Hungtou: Lanya, Yiliu Seafood, and my favorite, Amay's Yugun, which serves up curry and charm for NT\$100.

There are plenty of water sports. Scuba rates range from NT\$2,000 –3300 for two dives with gear. Contact Naii instructor, Wang Ruei Ching (089-732-410 or Blue Sea Diving Shop (089-333-442). (Caution - tides and currents change seasonally.) Or try deep sea fishing with Lai-Yu (089-732-898 evenings).