

TRAVEL

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Shoot for the sun and hit the moon

Although development proceeds apace, Sun Moon lake still offers views that seem to come directly out of a Chinese ink wash painting

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The tourism destination of Sun Moon Lake is doing a brisk business these days. With the influx of tourists from China and the recent opening of the No. 6 National Highway (六號國道), Tseng Kuo-chi (曾國基), director of the Sun Moon Lake National Scenic Area Administration (日月潭國家風景區管理處), said that this was one of the few domestic tourism destinations that was continuing to see growth despite the economic downturn.

It has been 10 years since Sun Moon Lake and much of the surrounding area was devastated by the 921 earthquake, which apart from destroying numerous hotels and damaging the transport infrastructure, also caused Guanghua Island (光華島), now renamed Lulu Island, a major scenic attraction of the lake, to all but disappear beneath its surface.

The No. 6 National Highway, the Nantou section of which opened in March, has made Sun Moon Lake a viable destination for a day trip from many major west coast towns north of Changhua County, overcoming the problems of the insufficiency and the high cost of hotel or chalet accommodation around the lake. New hotels are coming up apace, not always to the advantage of the area's scenic appeal, but there are still views that seem to come directly out of a classical Chinese ink wash painting.

One of those views is from the veranda of The Lulu hotel, one of the grandest local hotels, located on the site of a villa once much favored by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石). Laying on a daybed looking over an uninterrupted prospect of the lake, the tiny splash of green that is Lulu Island, and the mist-shrouded hills of the opposite shore, I was glad that I had decided to stay spend more than a day at Sun Moon Lake.

Beneath the veranda, hidden away beyond the infinity pool, is a little-frequented stretch of public walkway that is part of a growing network of walking paths, bicycle paths and shuttle bus services that the Scenic Area Administration is working to complete as part of its effort to make Sun Moon Lake both eco- and visitor-friendly.

The Lulu, from its huge and luxuriously appointed rooms to its personalized ayurvedic spa services, offers many of the features you expect from a top-class international hotel. Its historical associations also make it a popular stop for the boats touring the lake, and the guest's relaxation is often interrupted by the sound of tour guides announcing that "This is The Lulu, which was extensively redesigned in 1998 ...," wafting up from the lake.

The remodeled Lulu was designed by Australian architect Kerry Hill, and it fits snugly and remarkably inconspicuously into the hillside on the edge of the lake, in the best traditions of modern, environmentally conscious design. Directly behind it, the Sun Moon Villa Hotel (日月行館), with a design that imitates the billowing sailing-ship shape of the Burj Al Arab hotel in Dubai, clearly wants to be anything but inconspicuous. This blight on the landscape is only one of many glitzy and unimaginative towers that are going up around the lake, aiming to cash in on the market for luxury domestic travel.

Tseng said that efforts were being made to achieve a higher level of regulation for construction, but as the granting of construction permits is not within the remit of the Scenic Area Administration, it remains to be seen how effective these efforts will be. Judging from the construction currently underway, low-profile design does not seem to be a popular choice among the more up-market hotel ventures.

While many are clearly unwilling to be led, clinging firmly to the belief that concrete, glass and steel towers are what tourists want, there are certainly a number of operations such as the Sun Moon Lake Full House Resort (日月潭富豪群度假民宿), a delightful log cabin structure full of idiosyncratic artworks and a lush tropical garden, that are trying for a more laidback and homey ambiance.



A wild miscellany of architectural styles can be seen at Ita Thao, not always to the benefit of Sun Moon Lake's scenic appeal.

PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

» The No. 6 National Highway puts Sun Moon Lake just one hour's drive from Taichung. Visitors from Taipei can take a Taiwan High Speed Rail (台灣高鐵) train and be in Sun Moon Lake in under three hours. An hourly shuttle bus service, which is also equipped to carry bicycles, is available for those without private transport.

WHERE TO STAY

» The Lulu: www.thelulu.com.tw
» Sun Moon Lake Full House Resort: www.fhsmi.lidv.tw
» Sun Moon Lake National Scenic Area Administration: www.sunmoonlake.gov.tw



Left: A log cabin-style interior at the Sun Moon Lake Full House Resort.
Below: Lush gardens and clear pools adorn the exterior of The Lulu.

PHOTOS: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES



Full House is located at Ita Thao, formerly known as Dehua Community (德化社), opposite the town of Shuishhe (水社), where The Lulu is located. The town may be small, only three or four streets, but it is the local center of the souvenir and food specialties trade, and also the departure point for a number of walking trails. The hotel is comfortable and imaginatively designed. The service was friendly, if a bit haphazard given that its weekend room rates start at NT\$3,200 a night. (It should be pointed out that rates at The Lulu start at NT\$15,000.) The food at Full House showed signs that effort had been made to provide a local flavor, with a series of dishes that incorporate local fruit, but these were clearly designed for large parties, and the simpler food was ordinary in the extreme.

Owner Lin Yi-ren (林義人) took the trouble to take guests up the mountain road toward Tannan (潭南) to catch a glimpse of the fireflies that have become a major attraction for April and May. Visiting at the tail end of May, there were only a few spots of light in the darker recesses of the hills, but the lack of people was compensation enough. Lin said that this small mountain road would be lined with parked cars at the height of the season. The firefly season has been heavily promoted by the Scenic Area Administration, and according to Tseng, has proved remarkably successful. Townspeople, many of whom recollect seeing fireflies from their childhood, are eager to share this experience of the rural life with their children, he suggested.

Another successful venture made possible by improved access has been the marketing of Sun Moon Lake as a location for wedding photography.

Tseng emphasized the active part that the Scenic Area Administration is taking in producing marketing synergies, pointing to a new television series, titled *Love in Sun Moon Lake* (月滿水沙連), which premiered on HakkāTV (客家電視) on May 18.

This Romeo and Juliet story involves two tea-growing families and makes extensive use of scenic spots around Nantou County. Tea tourism is a new and seemingly successful draw for tourists and romance never goes out of fashion. Sun Moon Lake's suitability as a destination for romantic getaways was underlined last month by a highly publicized group wedding for 10 couples at the newly refurbished Sun Moon Lake Church of Christ (日月潭耶穌堂), once much used by the Generalissimo when visiting his villa. A whole series of activities, under the title of Love in Sun Moon Lake (愛在日月潭), will take place through to the end of the year (details can be found at www.sunmoonlake.gov.tw/event3/index.html).

Sun Moon Lake is clearly on a roll, but it doesn't take an expert to see that the area is in considerable danger of becoming a victim of its own success. The narrow and winding lakeside road is prone to congestion, and massive structures like the new cable car linking Sun Moon Lake to the Formosan Aboriginal Cultural Village (九族文化村), which is scheduled to open for business in August, cut huge swathes through the lush greenery of the hills. Boats swarm about what is left of Lulu Island like bees around a hive.

Tseng said that his organization is doing what it can to encourage people, especially local business operators, to treat the environment with respect. Tseng said "many people still see tourism as a predatory use of environmental resources. We have to change this so they recognize the advantages of sustainable development." He emphasized incentive programs to get boat operators to convert to solar or electrical power, the construction of two wastewater treatment plants to service the scenic area, the development of an efficient public transport network and environmental education targeting schools and local communities.

In the many facilities available to the tourist, whether it be adequate parking, thoughtfully integrated public transport or clean public lavatories, the agency has achieved much in the last 10 years. The hardest part of the battle remains to be fought: Having achieved some success, will it be able to stop people from grabbing at the short term advantage to the ruination of one of Taiwan's most beautiful scenic spots?

