

FEATURES

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Hualien is often described as Taiwan's last unspoiled frontier. This has not stopped rabid exploitation of its mineral wealth, which has done much to disfigure the area's scenery, nor has it prevented unregulated expansion of tourism, which has also put some notable blots on the landscape. In recent years, efforts have been initiated to reclaim Hualien's environmental heritage, starting with the launch of the non-toxic agriculture (無毒農業) movement in 2004, which is now increasingly visible in the marketplace and is helping to burnish the area's eco-friendly credentials.

Jumping on this bandwagon, the recent reopening of the fully renovated, remodeled and renamed Chateau de Chine, Hualien (花蓮翰品) — it was formerly the China Trust Hotel, Hualien — is pushing an eco-friendly agenda while striving to maintain the style and comfort of a top-class hotel. Chateau de Chine is one of three new brands that has been launched by the L'Hotel de Chine Group (雲朗觀光股份有限公司) over the past two years, and stands between their top-tier Palais de Chine (君品), which opened in Taipei behind Taipei Railway Station in June, and Maison de Chine brand, which now has branches in Miaoli, Chiayi and Taichung. The Hualien hotel's facilities would rank it at around four stars, but the management has been able to draw on the experience and staff of the group's five-star operations to give the hotel a bit of a lift, setting it apart from local competitors.

While Hualien might be notable for its rustic charm, the hotels of Hualien city are not known for their modern styling, and this is something that the management of Chateau de Chine has been at pains to remedy.

It is hard not to notice the hotel's bright and very modern facade, which is in keeping with Hualien's holiday mood.

Beneath the facade lies a more important part of this new venture. Chateau de Chine, Hualien is marketing itself as Hualien's first eco-friendly hotel, and considerable sums have been spent

Renovations of the newly re-opened Chateau de Chine are the latest in a series of efforts to leverage Hualien's environmental heritage and market it for tourism

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



With its facade inspired by the work of Piet Mondrian, Chateau de Chine, Hualien is one of the most distinctive buildings in the area.

PHOTOS: TAIPEI TIMES AND COURTESY OF L'HOTEL DE CHINE GROUP

on achieving the hotel's green makeover. This includes features such as windows equipped with automated adjustable shutters to reduce sunlight and heat, EPS (expanded polystyrene) wall insulation, water recycling facilities and solar panels. There is even an ecological pool, home to local freshwater creatures.

The newest technologies have been deployed, but visitors could remain unaware of all these developments throughout their stay, unless they read the hotel's brochure.

According to CEO Nelson Chang (張安平), further efforts will be made to link up the hotel's green technology with a wider public awareness of green architecture. The hotel has already taken advantage of the upcoming Flora Expo (2010台北國際花卉博覽會) to promote its eco-friendly credentials.

Chang, while unwilling to go into financial specifics of the extensive remodeling, said that in the short term, this kind of work could not be implemented on purely profit-based considerations. "At this point in time, there is no direct return on the outlay," Chang said at an interview earlier this month. "It is about a sense of social responsibility. Financial considerations alone are insufficient to justify this ... But as for the future, if there is an increase in electricity prices, then a cost benefit is possible."

For all its eco-friendly credentials, the customer's comfort comes first, and the hotel's efforts to achieve energy efficiency and an environmentally friendly vibe are never in your face.

The hotel has linked up with a number of local environmental awareness operations such as the CIDAL Hunter School (吉羅獵人學校), which provides various levels of immersion into the lives of Aboriginal hunters. This provides an opportunity to get away from the poolside or the buffet and rough it in the mountains for which Hualien is famous.

For those who would rather remain in the comfort of the hotel, fruit and vegetables from farmers participating in the non-toxic agriculture movement are available in the hotel, so visitors can take a little piece of Hualien's unsullied produce away with them when they leave.

Chang emphasized the huge importance of working with the community to raise awareness across all of Hualien's tourism industry. "We want more people to see this hotel, and perhaps be inspired by our endeavors," he said. "This will raise the overall level of tourism in Hualien."

Chateau de Chine, Hualien (花蓮翰品) is located at 2 Yongsing Rd, Hualien City (花蓮市永興路2號). Call (03) 823-5388 for bookings or visit the hotel's Web site at hualien.chateaudechine.com. More information about the Hualien's non-toxic agriculture movement can be found at www.hoa.tw, and additional information about CIDAL Hunter School can be found at www.cidal.com.tw.

Hualien

hotel goes green



Malaysians use social media to bypass censorship

Following decades of effective censorship policies, Twitter and Facebook are providing journalists access to dissenting voices

BY ROMEN BO
AFP, KUALA LUMPUR

Malaysia bumps along the bottom of international rankings for press freedom, but the explosion of social media like Twitter and Facebook is revolutionizing how journalists work.

Dissenting views, which for decades were screened out of the government-linked mainstream media, are now everywhere, including the blogosphere and mobile SMS messages, making repression extremely difficult.

One veteran reporter with one of the country's leading newspapers said that for most of his career it was virtually impossible to write about the opposition or any issues deemed off-limits by authorities.

"But today, government MPs are forced to engage and debate their counterparts across the aisle in social media like Twitter and Facebook, allowing us to report on the opposition and avoid much censorship," he says.

"Where previously we had to accept at face value a minister's version of events or policies, today their disgruntled aides and opponents are already tweeting or leaking details on Facebook, giving us uncensored access."

"Although the restrictions and controls are still in place,

it's become much harder to censor what the opposition or rights groups say in the media," says the journalist who, due to the sensitivity of the issue, declined to be named.

Malaysia was ranked 131st out of 175 countries in the 2009 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, because of its tight controls on print and broadcast media.

The watchdog says Malaysia prevents journalists from properly covering sensitive subjects such as corruption or human rights abuses, using a publishing permit system that allows it to shut down media outlets at will.

After decades of such policies, self-censorship became rife and political leaders hardly even needed to make the much-feared phone call to the newsroom.

But the seeds of change were sown in 1996 when the government pledged not to censor online content as part of a campaign to promote its information technology sector.

Despite occasional raids, bans and government criticism, the Web and online media remain relatively free.

Today, Facebook fan pages highlighting political rallies and civil society forums, as well as Twitter exchanges with lawmakers, have reshaped the reporting landscape.

"All our reporters have BlackBerrys and use them to follow these tweets. The social media has changed the way journalists work in fundamental ways," says Premesh Chandran, the founder of pioneer online news portal Malaysiakini.

Chandran says the new immediacy hampers government attempts to "spin" or control a story as journalists get real-time reaction from the opposition and experts and use it to seek an immediate response from officials.



Though Malaysia fairs poorly in press freedom assessments, social media are beginning to erode the ability of censors to control the flow of information.

PHOTO: AFP

With the advent of Twitter, politicians from both sides freely disseminate their views, so much so that legislators have been known to take debates out of the chamber and continue them via Twitter.

Social media also have a knack of eliciting more candid commentary than politicians would usually choose to put in a regular press release.

That phenomenon was on display this week when Khairy Jamaluddin, influential leader of the ruling party's youth wing, gave a quick response to a government decision not

to drop a ban on students joining political parties.

"Cabinet decision not allowing university students to be involved in political parties is gutless and indicates outdated thinking," he said in a much-discussed tweet.

Opposition politician Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, 28, tweets daily on his constituency work, lists all his public events on Facebook and even carries out interviews and dialogues online.

"Social media definitely give the opposition and alternative voices a space to express our views without censorship," he says. "The limitation is that we are restricted to 140 characters on Twitter so we can't really flesh out many of the arguments and positions but it at least allows people and the media to read and understand our perspective."

Malaysians have flocked to the Internet for news and views, a phenomenon credited with the opposition's stunning performance in 2008 polls when the government lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time.

Reporters Without Borders' regional correspondent Patrice Victor says the Malaysian experience could be replicated in other countries as they develop a potent combination of repressive governments and reasonable Internet access.

"We are seeing social media free the way journalists report in this region and the trend in Malaysia can also be seen happening in Singapore, Thailand and Burma [Myanmar]," he says. "Governments here are slowly realizing that it is very hard to censor and restrict information once people have access to the Net and this trend of using social media to break down censorship looks like it is here to stay."