

Diverse cultures converge in Zhanjiang

Coastal melting pot features colorful traditions of various ethnic groups

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Zhanjiang is a prefecture-level city in the southwestern part of Guangdong province.

It stretches 12,490 square kilometers to cover the Leizhou Peninsula, forming the southernmost tip of the Chinese mainland. It neighbors Hainan province and the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

Culturally speaking, Zhanjiang's distinctive features set it apart from the dominant Cantonese culture of the province. For one thing, much of its population of more than 7 million are descendants of migrants from Fujian, a province to the far east of Guangdong, and this is borne out by the similarity between the local dialect and Fujian's Minnan dialect.

Here, one can find the same tall palm trees, stretches of sandy beaches and breathtaking ocean views that are commonplace in Hainan. But you will also encounter a French-style mansion that used to be home to a French envoy. Like Guangzhou, it was an open port in the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) that had seen booming trade.

Volcanic eruptions millions of years ago brought with them minerals that turned the earth here red. It is covered with lush greenery and encircled by long coastlines that mark the boundary of a deep blue sea.

Much in the same way that these three contrasting colors

meet here, this place has been the site of the convergence of many ethnic cultures — the Fujianese from the east, the Han from the north and the half-dozen indigenous ethnicities, who were the earliest settlers and now form officially recognized ethnic groups.

This gave rise to a rich diversity rare in other parts of Guangdong. If one were to study some of the vast number of intangible cultural heritage projects from Zhanjiang, one would realize the unique wonders of this place.

Suixi Lion Dance is one of seven State-level heritages. Sure, there are lion dances all across the country, with the northern style more masculine and the southern more adroit.

The Suixi style incorporates martial arts moves from Fujian, with two performers working together. The front man holds the lion's head and the one at the back holds the front performer's waist.

There is a ritual with the lion dance. Performers pray and burn incense before their newly finished lions. A village elder oversees the ceremony, first offering wine as tribute to the lions.

Then, the elder uses a long sleeve or brush to wipe the lions' head and back and ties a red ribbon for decoration before putting a final touch of golden powder on the lion's eyes. The lions assume a life of their own



LI MANQING / FOR CHINA DAILY

The dragon dance, also called the “human dragon”, is a popular cultural tradition from Zhanjiang. Unlike the more commonly known version in which costumed performers hold an elongated prop in the shape of a dragon, the Zhanjiang version does not have a prop dragon but uses young boys to connect each adult.

and can start strutting their furry majesty around.

The most difficult movements for a lion dance are on a three-meter pole. Actually the floor is dotted with 20 such poles and the two performers for each lion have to jump from one to another while keeping the balance and adhering to the pace of the drum.

Other acrobatic elements,

such as jumping through burning rings, have also wowed foreign and domestic audiences, winning many prizes in the process.

Another popular heritage item from Zhanjiang is the dragon dance, called the “human dragon”. Unlike the often seen version with costumed performers holding an elongated prop in the shape of a

dragon, the Zhanjiang version does not have a prop dragon, but uses young boys to connect each adult.

Specifically, a boy places his legs on the shoulders of the adult in front of him, wrapping his legs around the adult's arms, and then he would lie backward and put his head on the right shoulder of the next adult and wrap his hands around

that adult's neck.

The boys must not wear shoes, and practices are usually held in places where an inadvertent fall of a boy would not hurt him, such as a beach. The first adult of the procession has two additional boys attached to him — one sitting on his shoulders and the other strapped to his chest.

Because coordination is

crucial, the performers tend to hail from the same village. In performance, they display a kind of dexterity and nobility only the human body can impart.

The culture of Zhanjiang is multifaceted with many new twists for things one may take for granted. It is a peninsula that may seem familiar, yet it will yield new discoveries.



An enticing view of Techeng Island

Idyllic island provides nice escape

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As one rambles on the jetty that leads to the ferry on Techeng Island, one may notice empty wooden huts on both sides, whose facades are plastered with posters of beautiful young women of many races. They are a reminder of a beauty pageant held here in late 2010.

On the 3.6-square-kilometer islet, one need not look hard for beauty because it abounds in many forms and varieties. On the eastern and northwestern sides are sandy beaches, where the blue sea laps at your feet and small crabs nibble at your toes — before they become food on your table, that is.

On the southern side are strips of mangrove, bending low but holding tenaciously to the gravelly floor, which is flooded when the tide sweeps

in. These plants are more than 1,000 years old, a fitting symbol of the resilience of the local people.

The villages on Techeng Island used to suffer shortages of drinking water and lacked modern amenities, such as paved roads. But the visit by President Hu Jintao in 2003 changed that. The injection of public and private investment has dramatically raised living standards of the locals, yet the idyllic scenes endowed by nature have not been altered.

For one thing, modern medical science cannot take credit for the unusual longevity of the island's senior citizens. Many live to be 100 or older, subsisting off what the sea provides because villagers are all fishermen.

In the archaic language of Yue, the people who used to inhabit southern China, “te” means place, and “cheng”

auspicious. No one doubts the island is blessed by nature and its fecundity.

Visitors can walk around or take a golf cart-like vehicle that runs on batteries rather than fossil fuel. You can sample fresh seafood at a restaurant or roadside stalls. You can even customize a pearl necklace and watch how the pearls are obtained from shelled mollusks and processed into a string of beautiful gems.

For the night, you can stay at the island resort, which offers three dozen thatched-roofed cottages that blend in well with the environment.

All buildings have the exteriors of farmers' or fishermen's humble abodes of a bygone era. A far cry from villages that have architecture full of modern touches, these are littered with fish ponds and rockeries.

The interiors are mostly

wood, and even the furniture is purely hardwood. Most of the five-star facilities complement luxury with traditional décor. You can even smell the wood or the earthy aroma of plants in most rooms.

There is a courtyard with a large pool in the middle. The dozen rooms that surround it are perfect for a group function. If you do not want to share a hot spring with your friends or colleagues, each room is fitted with a private spa on the secluded patio.

But you have to reserve in advance because the resort tends to be booked solid during the travel season.

A weekend getaway on Techeng Island will make you look like a fisherman and live like a king, or in the Chinese folk tradition, a king disguised as a fisherman. And it is only eight minutes away from downtown Zhanjiang by ferry.

Village gives visitors a glimpse of bygone eras

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An ancient village that has fallen by the wayside now waits to be reborn as a tourist destination.

Bangtang Village is only 100 meters from the major road that leads into Leizhou, about 5 kilometers away. It is half that distance to the local railway station and will be even closer to a new bus station.

But Bangtang is separated from the commotion of city life by a stretch of lychee groves and banyan trees so thick you'll have to dodge branches and twigs while walking on a narrow, zigzagging path.

When you emerge from it, you'll be standing in front of a community at the threshold of two eras.

The Li family moved here 500 years ago, spawning 23 generations. The clan thrived in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, producing dozens of minor celebrities who served as local officials.

Li Baowei, 70, did not witness any of that. He was 7 when his family took a nosedive in fortune. Baowei is among 3,000 descendants of the Li clan, and most of them moved out of the old village about a decade ago into a new village adjacent to it. Still, some genial folks hang around, looking after the empty homesteads and greeting the occasional tourist. Some play ping-pong in empty halls.

Most of the buildings are in varying degrees of disrepair, with some outlying ones in ruins. But the overall layout of the architecture is clearly visible. With a little imagination, one can visualize how prosperous the place used to be during its heyday.

Li Baowei's ancestor Li Yunlong had the most typical and also the largest dwelling

— a courtyard within a larger courtyard, connected through many chambers and corridors. Covering 2,000 square meters, this residence has a total of 24 yards and 72 rooms. Some of the yards are overgrown with grass now, and the murals on the wall have fallen prey to the weather or political turmoil.

But if you look closely, however, you can notice the carvings in inconvenient corners that bear witness to the prosperity and stature of the previous owners.

A five-crane mural, partially vanished, has the animal of immortality in five different poses. The inscription of “Five types of bliss come together” above the mural is vague but legible.

The reddish bricks that make up most of the walls have turned greenish with moss. The

narrow lanes that divide the households are clean and well kept. The overall design — with connectivity inside one house and relative inaccess to the outside world — hints at the era of social unrest when the wealthy had to guard against bandits and pirates.

Nowadays, most of the villagers make their living on chicken farming and growing fruit trees. Many of its young people have ventured out of the village and got jobs in construction, transportation, among other businesses.

You can envision this village being fully restored to its former splendor and turning into a tourist enclave. Amidst a maze of brick walls and courtyards, one can relax in the cool shade of a banyan tree and experience what life was like in an early dynasty.



ZOU ZHONGPIN / CHINA DAILY

Li Baowei gives a tour of a typical large dwelling in Bangtang Village. Covering 2,000 square meters, this residence has a total of 24 yards and 72 rooms.