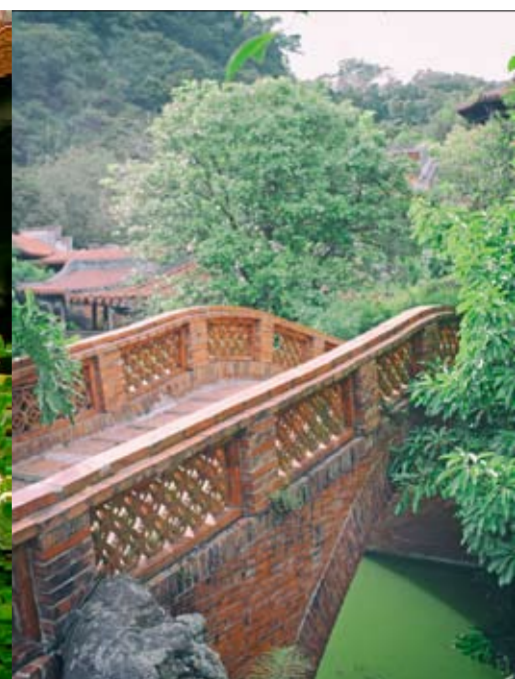


FEATURES

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 31, 2016



A bridge in the landscaped garden in the Nanyuan Land of Retreat and Wellness resort. PHOTO: PAUL COOPER, TAIPEI TIMES

INFO FOR DAY TRIP

GETTING THERE

- **Nanyuan Land of Retreat and Wellness** (南園人文客棧) 405 Bade Road Sec 2, Hukou Village, Hsinchu County (新竹縣湖口鄉八德路二段405號). If you get lost, you can call 03-5890011, ext 3.
- **Day tickets are NT\$1,400**, with two hour (Chinese) tour, lunch and afternoon snacks included. Advance reservations recommended.
- **English group tours** are available at an additional cost of NT\$3,000. Enquire about availability and group size at the time of booking.
- High Speed Rail from Taipei to **Hsinchu Station** (新竹高車站). Frequent trains, around 35 mins.
- **Transfer to taxi** (The One will recommend a driver when you book) from Hsinchu HSR, around NT\$350, roughly 30 mins to resort. Consider arranging a return journey with the driver.

Roofs in the Nanyuan Land of Retreat and Wellness resort in Hsinchu County.

PHOTO: PAUL COOPER, TAIPEI TIMES

Far from the madding crowd — almost

The Nanyuan Land of Retreat and Wellness resort offers a great day away from the bustle of the city, but it could do with relaxing a little itself

BY PAUL COOPER
STAFF REPORTER



An art installation in the grounds of the Nanyuan Land of Retreat and Wellness resort.

PHOTO: PAUL COOPER, TAIPEI TIMES

Wouldn't it have been nice, I was thinking to myself at the end of a day at the Nanyuan Land of Retreat and Wellness (南園人文客棧), if we had been completely free to walk among the traditional southern Chinese Jiangnan-style architecture, roaming at our own leisure through the rooms tastefully decorated with carved scenes of folk tales and auspicious emblems, in buildings constructed of native Taiwan cypress wood.

We could easily have spent a large chunk of the day wandering the 27-hectare site of landscaped gardens, with the arched bridges traversing sculpted ponds, passing the white painted walls punctuated with window openings fashioned in auspicious shapes.



The setting is certainly there in the Nanyuan resort, which is run by "lifestyle brand" The One out in remote Sinpu in Hsinchu County. The kicker is, why couldn't we just be left to it?

To be fair, I should start with what The One gets right, because we really did enjoy the day spent there.

Even before you arrive, The One has sent you messages confirming your booking with detailed directions to get there (if driving), together with a weather report (slight chance of rain) and recommendations on what to wear (sensible shoes).

Should you be coming by train, they have also provided the contact number of a taxi driver who will meet you at the station. We booked him, and found him to be polite, punctual, helpful and well-informed.

It's also worth considering arranging for him to pick you up at the end of the day. The location is quite remote and finding return transportation might be difficult.

When we arrive, we are led into a reception area with the others in our scheduled group, our designated companions for the day, waiting before being treated to an introduction to the tour, with tea and biscuits — which are quite good — and then taken off for a look at the premises.

The tour — also available in English, if booked in advance — is divided into two manageable parts, before and after lunch. The tour through the rooms was well-presented,

informative and engaging: enough that my friend wanted to join the second instalment, which took the group out into the sprawling 27-hectare grounds. We were shown a statue of United Daily News Group founder Wang Ti-wu (王惕吾) and a pleasantly bizarre open-air art installation consisting of free-standing doors placed in seemingly random formation in a field.

At this point we drifted away from the group, and finally managed to spend some time walking around the gardens by ourselves — feeling strangely naughty for doing so, like we were somehow playing truant.

A BIT OF BACKGROUND

The Nanyuan resort, with its landscaped gardens and southern Chinese Jiangnan style architecture, was constructed as a retirement home for Wang. It was overseen by the renowned Shandong-born architect Han Paoteh (漢寶德), who moved to Taiwan in 1952. Construction on the site started in October 1983 and was completed in September 1985.

The resort was officially opened to the public in March 2007, and soon after The One was commissioned to reinvent the area as a leisure retreat. It was officially opened to that purpose in December 2008.

Wang passed away in 1996, but during the time he spent here he received many illustrious guests from overseas, including former UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher in 1992 and former Soviet Union president Mikhail

Gorbachev in 1994.

You can imagine how these guests would have dined in one of the pavilions overlooking the pond with its arched bridge. Not, perhaps, in the school canteen-looking building we were led to for lunch.

This is where we felt that the concept of the tour and the scheduled itinerary stumbles.

The lunch itself was pleasant. It is a set menu, but the food is made from healthy ingredients and presented as Hakka-themed fusion cuisine.

We had Hakka pancakes with fermented tofu, bamboo shoots with pesto, miso vinegar and Iberico de Bellota, followed by tofu and pumpkin and then Hakka chicken rice. You can ask for more helpings if you are not quite satiated. Even the cutlery and crockery, designed in-house (and available for purchase) — enhanced the dining experience.

It's just that the rather prosaic, functional surroundings in which lunch was served felt like a bit of a missed opportunity, given the exquisite architecture and landscaped gardens you had just come from.

And so it was for the whole experience, really. The interiors are wonderful, the gardens and architecture aesthetically pleasing, the schedule well organized, the staff amiable, the tour engaging, the service excellent. But it all feels a little too managed, too regimented. Like being on a school trip. Like not being trusted to touch anything, lest you break it.



Buildings in the traditional southern Chinese Jiangnan style overlook a landscaped garden in the Nanyuan Land of Retreat and Wellness resort in Hsinchu County. PHOTO: PAUL COOPER, TAIPEI TIMES

The Nanyuan resort also offers overnight accommodation, which is presumably a different experience altogether. And don't get me wrong: if you just want to spend an afternoon in a beautiful traditional Jiangnan-style landscaped garden, and to have a tour of the buildings, it is well worth the trip. But we wondered where the repeat business comes from. A few years ago it was possible to pay an entrance fee and just enjoy the gardens. That is no longer on the table, unfortunately: visitors have to sign up for the whole package. It's your call whether you would want to pay the price to do it all again.