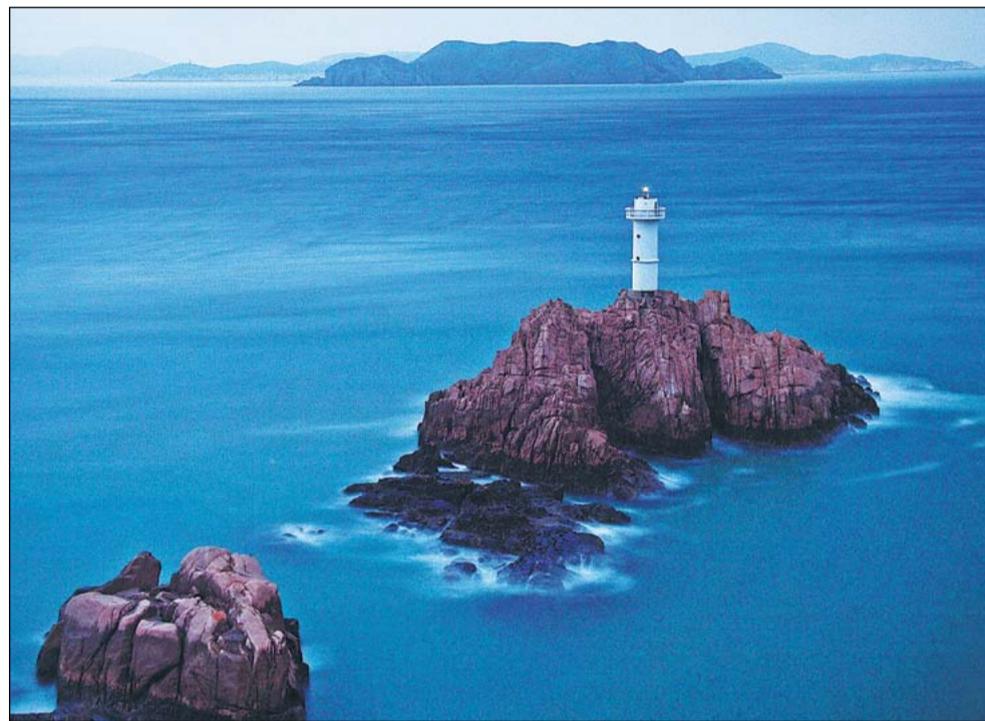


Serenity by the sea

Relaxing environment and spectacular scenery make Dongji islands an ideal getaway destination for city dwellers



From left: Two trawlers in the East China Sea; A small beacon on reefs near Dongfushan, a small island administered by Dongji town in East China's Zhejiang province; Street view of Miaozihu island.
PHOTOS BY ZHANG TIAOYAO AND HUANG DONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

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Standing on the foredeck of the boat, I watched the sunlight shimmer upon the turbid sea. The boat had left Zhoushan's Shenjiamen port an hour or so ago.

I was heading to Dongfushan, a small island under the administration of Dongji town, located to the east of the Zhoushan archipelago, part of East China's Zhejiang province.

Dongji translates to "east pole", which explains why the town is mistaken by some tourists to be China's easternmost island.

As the boat got closer to the town, the secluded island looked like a hill on the sea. There were some islets in view, too.

After a two-and-half-hour cruise, the boat prepared to dock. Rows of dilapidated houses partially covered in moss lined the waterfront.

Several blue-and-red trawlers were anchored to a large platform protruding from the island. The platform is the so-called quay of Dongfushan.

I stepped on land and was followed by a group of elderly passengers from the boat. They told me the island, with a coastline of nearly 10 kilometers, was a wonderful place for hiking. So, after lunch in a village, we set out to explore the area.

We walked along a stone path lined with clusters of Chinese miscanthus flowers swaying in the sea breeze.

Down to the left, waves lashed against the rocky shoreline, sending up fountains of water. By the seashore were pebbles of various sizes and shapes.

To the right were ruins of abandoned dwellings with creepers on the walls, functioning windmills, cacti burgeoning through crevices in rocks, gloomy caves, and goats grazing on the hillside.

A sign along the ascending path read: Xiangbi Peak ("elephant trunk" peak). The stone steps cut through a section of tall grass to the peak that was named for its elephant-trunk-like shape when viewed from one side.

When we arrived at the site, we stood at the top of the peak that looked like the head of an elephant.

The breeze became stronger, whistling in my ears. I ran my eyes over the abrupt slope within a few feet and saw fishing boats floating on the water, a beacon erected on a nearby islet, and the panoramic view of the coastal water.

My heart beat faster. I was afraid I might fall from the narrow path if I did not manage to walk down carefully.

Although it took more than four hours to trek around the island, which was exhausting, I really

"As tourism prospers, the island's infrastructure has improved. I seldom suffer from power cuts any longer."

SHELLY WANG
Co-owner of the youth hostel on Miaozihu island, Zhejiang province

enjoyed nature without distractions.

The island, with only a few hundred residents, is indeed a place far from the madding crowd.

But Dongji town is more than a pack of desolate islands. Lying to the northwest of Dongfushan is Miaozihu island, the seat of the town's government, which is larger and more prosperous than Dongfushan.

A giant statue of a fisherman named Chen Caifu faces the sea, holding a torch in his right hand. It stands on the south of Miaozihu, which serves as a landmark for the island.

According to local folklore, Chen Caifu survived a storm and spent the rest of his life illuminating the sea for passing boats. The statue was built to commemorate his kindness.

Miaozihu island has experienced a surge in tourism in recent years as an ideal weekend destination for urban Chinese to escape their hectic daily routines and relax.

Guesthouses, hostels, cafes, restaurants, fishing clubs and bars have sprung up on the land, meeting various visitor demands.

The youth hostel I booked was a three-story house made of stone and wood on the west coast of the island. Sitting on a balcony that overlooked the quay, I basked in the sun and enjoyed the sea breeze.

The co-owner of the hostel is a woman named Shelly Wang, a native of Hangzhou, the capital of

East China's Zhejiang province, who is in her 40s.

She was attracted by the environment and scenery of the island when she first visited with her husband in 2003. The following year, the couple decided to buy a holiday house on the island.

"I dreamed of living in a house by the sea," she said. "But I couldn't choose a place far away from my home as I needed to take care of my family in Hangzhou. That's why Miaozihu worked for me, an island in the same province as my home."

After renovating the house, she turned it into a youth hostel in 2014 and now spends six months on the island every year.

Over the past 15 years, Shelly has witnessed changes on the land as Dongji becomes more popular with tourists.

She said the young residents of the island used to earn a living in eastern cities like Ningbo and Hangzhou and the elderly went fishing for money. Now, some of the migrant workers have returned home and started their own businesses like restaurants.

"As tourism prospers, the island's infrastructure has improved. I seldom suffer from power cuts any longer," she said.

While the island dwellers are benefiting from tourism, one can only hope the environment will be preserved at the same time.