

At a Buddhist monastery, chimes immemorial

TEMPLE FROM FI

nese tourists tour it every month.

It's the world headquarters for Humanistic Buddhism, a school that practices applying Buddha's core principles to daily life. Humanistic Buddhism's roughly 2 million devotees represent a relatively small fraction of the more than 360 million Buddhists in the world. But Fo Guang Shan's reach stretches far. Its adherents come from 174 countries, and the monastery has 200 branches around the globe and an accredited university in California.

Its founder, Hsing Yun, whom the monastics call Venerable Master, set up shop in Taiwan after fleeing the communists in 1949 at the end of China's civil war. Yun spotted a home for Buddhism in a religious culture that mixed Christianity, from the days of the Dutch colonists, with ancient Chinese Confucian philosophy and a Buddhism steeped more in superstition than in spirituality. He founded Fo Guang Shan in 1967, and except for a brief period in the late 1990s, has made a point of opening its gates to visitors of all backgrounds.

Today, Fo Guang Shan is Taiwan's largest monastery. It houses more than a dozen temples, two Buddhist colleges (one for men and one for women), a children's school, meditation rooms, a Japanese-style calligraphy hall, gardens and a recycling center.

Although it's only a 30-minute drive east of Kaohsiung, Taiwan's second-largest city and the island's southern hub, Fo Guang Shan is psychologically a world away from the densely populated western coast that's home to most of Taiwan's 23 million inhabitants.

My trip to the monastery began on a Friday evening. Volunteers for Fo Guang Shan ferried our group — a mix of Swedes, French, Czechs, Americans, Canadians and Peruvians, all living in Taiwan — from Kaohsiung's train station.

Nighttime is a fantastic time to arrive at the monastery. A 90-foot high golden Buddha crowned with red lights towers over the main entrance. Beneath him flashes a sign for a winding cave that looks like a distant cousin of Disneyland's "It's a Small World" ride. Inside, you walk alongside displays of animatronic monks and rainbow bridges meant to model the Pure Land, a sort of heaven for devoted Buddhists. Yun designed the cave in the 1970s to attract visitors and introduce them to Fo Guang Shan's school of Buddhism.

Under the red glow of the giant Buddha we met Venerable Miao Ming, a Canadian nun with a ginger-brown robe, a shaved head and a Type-A personality. She offered us candy and led a crash course on the fundamentals of Buddhism and the basic rules of monastic life. Our two-day, two-

night stay was to be a swirl of meals, meditation, classes on Buddhism and free time to tour the grounds. We were to live by the monastics' rules: No perfume, no makeup, no smoking or drinking alcohol on temple grounds, and we were to avoid wearing low-cut shirts and short-shorts. And all meals would be vegetarian.

Then it was off to our rooms and lights out by 11 p.m.

We were housed in a modest hotel within the monastery walls, with rooms for two, four and eight (and the unexpected bonus — or curse — of free WiFi in the lobby). Miao Ming and Austrian monk Hue Shou organize most of the trips for foreigners, who are invited to stay as long as they like.

There's no set plan, but guests are encouraged to join in morning prayers (meaning 5 a.m. wake-up calls), mealtimes, evening meditation sessions and help the monastics with daily chores of sweeping the grounds or boiling pots of rice for the 400 monks and nuns who live on its hills.

At 5:30 on Saturday morning, Miao Ming greeted us in the hotel lobby and lined us up double-file. No time for coffee; we were heading to the main temple to observe one of the monastery's most important rituals: the day's first prayers. We flowed alongside at least 100 monastics through heavy wooden doors into a tiled room filled top-to-bottom with miniature golden Buddha statues and a chandelier spilling from the ceiling like a lotus flower out of its pot. The worshippers knelt on fraying red kneepads facing three 10-foot-high golden Buddhas on the far wall and silently waited for the sound of a gong that would begin their day.

As they chanted and twisted and turned, their cadence rising with the sun, their bodies folded over with foreheads kissing the floor, they looked like stones in a river, their billowing ceremonial maroon robes the water washing over them.

After prayers came breakfast. Meals are sacred affairs at the monastery and held in silence as active meditation. By 6 a.m., monastics on kitchen duty had set out food for 200 people in neat rows on long cream-colored tables: a bowl of white or red-bean rice, a steamed bun, a plate of cold seaweed and stewed potatoes and a bowl of warm soy milk to wash it all down.

When everyone had been seated on plastic chairs, the monks and nuns began an incantation that rose and fell in praise of and thanks to Buddha for the food about to nurture their bodies. We read along on English handouts next to our plates.

After breakfast, we drove around the monastery in golf carts as Miao Ming pointed out highlights of our upcoming solo three-



PHOTOS BY RICH J. MATHESON

480 statues of the Awakened One adorn Fu Guang Shan's Great Buddha Land. The compound is the largest monastery in Taiwan.

hour silent tour of the monastery, which was to be the spiritual focus of the trip. Then we were given a map and free rein to wander around the buildings and grounds. We had no objective but simply to be. No to-do list except what our feet and heads decided. (Apparently mine wanted tea.)

Fo Guang Shan is large, weaving up and down several hills, with many hidden nooks to discover. At its core is the Main Shrine, where morning prayers take place, about a 60-step climb up from the main entrance and Pure Land Cave.

On a forested hill above the shrine are two towering dormito-

ries and the women's college. To the left of the shrine are the iconic glowing Buddha and the men's college. To the right and up yet another hill lies the children's school and Great Practice Shrine, where I found my silent friend and tea.

I explored it all during my solitary tour, hours before busloads of mainland Chinese tourists arrive. Monks and nuns tending the grounds greeted each other and us with "Amitofo," a Chinese transcription of Buddha's name, which translates to "infinite life, infinite light." As the sun started to heat up the paved streets, they tipped their hats closer to their heads and con-

tinued their chores.

I sat down beside a small fountain at the base of the Great Practice Shrine, out of breath from climbing a hill, and watched a nun sweeping leaves from the stones. As I wondered what she was thinking about, I realized that I enjoyed being in her presence without having to invade it. Her life was so very different from mine, but for the first time in my eight months in Taiwan, I didn't feel like an outsider.

Twenty minutes later, I climbed more steps to the entrance of the temple. I slipped off my shoes and entered to light incense for the Buddha in the center, an offering of respect, before the wind stirred the chimes outside.

By 11 a.m., our group was breaking the silence over more tea to discuss our experiences. The overall consensus was that it was difficult to maintain a mindful state, even in such serene surroundings. Our thoughts turned too quickly from watching a bird hop along stones in a fountain to our e-mail inboxes. Miao Ming assured us that it was a battle that all but the most enlightened wage.

That evening, after a Chinese calligraphy class and dinner, we observed the day's closing ritual.

Shortly before 10 p.m., two nuns perched on scaffolding on opposite sides of the Great Compassion Shrine, near the forest above the women's college, in preparation for a melodious dance rooted more in Chinese than in Buddhist tradition. One rang a silver gong meant to symbolize rain to cultivate crops. Another glided a log into a large bell, creating a deep vibration that reverberated through the trees, through the monastery's walls and, according to Chinese tradition, into the depths of Hell, where its sound is said to give tortured souls momentary peace.

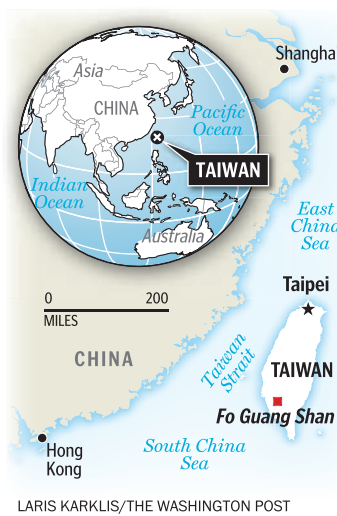
The rest of the weekend was more relaxed. On Sunday morning, before our last scheduled meditation, we ate a buffet breakfast in a less formal dining hall designated for visitors. Our group openly broke our vow of silence and chatted away, mostly in English. Miao Ming joined us, answering all our questions about Fo Guang Shan and monastic life.

She explained that everything the monastery does is designed to propagate Buddhism, but it's all a gentle push. Their method is to simply let people enjoy their stay and hope that for some, a pleasant experience will trigger a deeper need for spirituality. Monastics, she said, understand that Buddhism isn't something that can be forced. Rather, it must be found.

Sort of like a pot of tea beneath some wind chimes.

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LARIS KARKLUS/THE WASHINGTON POST

DETAILS

GETTING THERE

United Airlines offers connecting flights from Washington Dulles to Taipei with fares starting at about \$1,300 round-trip. Once in Taipei, take a high-speed train to Kaohsiung for about \$45 per person.

MONASTERY VISITS

Fo Guang Shan Monastery
Ta Shu Township, Kaohsiung County
011-886-7-656-1921
www.fgs.org.tw/english

Fo Guang Shan is open to visitors from roughly sunrise to sunset. You can either take a self-guided tour or one of the monastery's foreign-born monks will take you around free.

Staying on monastery grounds is the best way to experience monastic life. Prices aren't set but rather based on recommended donations. Rooms from \$6 a night for an eight-person bedroom to about \$35 a night for a queen bed, all including breakfast. Lunch and dinner are provided for a donation. Plan on about \$10 a day.

The monastery also has a couple of Taiwanese restaurants, and various cafes and fruit stands line the gate entrance, with snacks starting at about \$1.

The monastery plans to open a luxury hotel on neighboring grounds by early 2012 as part of an expansion that includes housing one of Buddha's teeth.

For a day trip to the monastery, your best bet for rooms is in Kaohsiung proper:

The Splendor Hotel
No. 1 ZiQiang Third Rd.
011-886-7-566-8000
www.thesplendor-kth.com.tw
Elegant accommodations on the 75th floor of Kaohsiung's iconic skyscraper. Rooms from \$140 a night, including breakfast.

INFORMATION
www.fgs.org.tw/en

A.P.

Have camera, will travel

We're now accepting submissions for our 12th annual photo contest.

As always, we want gritty as well as pretty. The topic of travel is broad, so have some fun with it: Experiment with lighting, angles, subjects and composition. Start shooting... and surprise us.

One photo entry per person. Contestants who submit more than one photo are subject to disqualification. Photo must have been taken after July 31, 2010.

Submit your entries online at wapo.st/yourtravelpics. Approved entries will be visible to other users. Include caption information and when the photo was taken, plus your name, e-mail address and phone number. Personal information will not be published online.

Or, e-mail entries to travelphotos@washpost.com. Photos should be JPEG or TIFF attachments, between 1MB and 5MB in size. Include caption information and when the photo was taken, plus your name, address and phone number, and put the photo to topic (e.g., "Scotland rainbow") in the subject line.

We're looking for amateur shutterbugs only; professional photographers (i.e., anyone earning 50 percent or more of his or her annual income from photography) need not apply.

Entries must be received by July 25. Photos become the property of The Post, which may edit, publish, distribute and republish them in any form. Photographers retain the rights to their images. No purchase necessary.

The winners, to be determined by the Travel staff and photography professionals, will receive



AVRAM WALTERS

prizes that will be announced shortly. Post employees and their immediate families are not eligible. Please do not call to ask whether we have received your entry. The winning photos will be published Aug. 28.

Avram Walts hiked three miles of rocky desert with no marked trail to get his 2010 honorable-mention photo of a rock formation called "The Wave" near Page, Ariz.

CLICK IT

Check the room out before check-in

BY NANCY TREJOS

Room 77 does what most other hotel booking Web sites have failed to do: It takes you inside the hotel room.

At least virtually. Log on to Room77.com and click on a specific room in a specific hotel, and you'll get a sneak peek at the view it offers.

Using Google Earth-enabled technology, the three-month-old Web site maps the altitude, longitude and latitude for every room, whether available or not, to generate simulated views. From Suite 1200 of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, for instance, you can apparently gaze upon the Hollywood Hills.

The Web site also features general hotel information and displays floor maps similar to those you'd find on the back of your hotel room door. You select a room by price range and category (e.g., king suite, three dollar signs), then by preferences (how high up, view, distance from the elevator and whether it's a connecting room). The system ranks each room according to how strongly it matches your preferences.

Once you've selected a room, you can click on a box with tips on how to secure it. (If you click to go to the hotel Web site to book, you lose the ability to request that particular room.) One major tip: Call the hotel, but ask to speak with a front desk agent, not the main reservations line.

Room 77 has property and room data in 24 markets, mostly U.S. cities but also some major international destinations such as London. So far, the system has

indexed more than 500,000 rooms in three- to five-star properties and continues to add more. To get the information, Room 77 staffers visit the hotels but are also working directly with chains such as Starwood and Kimpton to get hotel room data and verify accuracy. The Web site also asks travelers to e-mail pictures of the rooms they stay in.

"The first generation of hotel search focused on bringing hotels from offline to online," said founder Brad Gerstner. "Our aim is to take hotel search to the next level by including more information and transparency to help consumers find the right hotel and the best room."

It's a noble goal. I thought about the many times I've picked a hotel based on how lovely the rooms looked in the pictures on the Web site, only to be disappointed when I could barely stretch out my arms or had to stare at the back of a building or an alley filled with dumpsters.

To test out the site, I looked up some rooms I'd already stayed in. First, I tried Room 1203 at the Hotel Palomar in Philadelphia. The description — 300 square feet, 12 feet from the elevator, one king bed — sounded about right. But the simulated view of nearby buildings was very fuzzy. The view from the room I once stayed in at the Donovan House in the District was much clearer. It looked exactly as I remembered it — and it was so nice that I remembered it well — with the National City Christian Church standing tall over

The Room 77 iPhone app lets users see the view from more than 500,000 hotel rooms.

Thomas Circle, directly beneath my window.

Room 77 officials acknowledge that there are mapping limitations that have made some of the simulations fuzzy or, in some cases, simply unavailable. They promise that this will improve over time.

But even the simulated images of the views left me wanting more: I wanted to see pictures of the interiors. Thankfully, travelers are increasingly sending in photos of rooms they've stayed in. When an interior photo is available, there's a "Look Inside" icon you can click on.

There's also an iPhone app that works on an iPad and iPod touch. At check-in, you can enter the number of the room you've been offered and the app will ask you to take it or leave it.

Room 77 still has some kinks, but so far I say take it.

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