

Mystical Mt Emei



Clockwise from left: The new gilded statue of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, the Gold Palace and visitors being carried down the mountain in open sedan chairs.

BY CHRISTINA KOH

FOUR in the morning seemed like an unholy hour to get up for a mountain, but Mt Emei in China's Sichuan province, is well-worth the trouble.

The whole idea was to catch the sunrise, and this entailed a two-hour bus trip from the hotel to the cable-car station, where we would ride all the way up to the Golden Summit of Mt Emei.

The 3,099m mountain, declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1996, has long been revered as one of China's four holy mountains sacred to the Buddhists. For 2,000 years, Buddhist pilgrims have been making the journey to Mt Emei, the misty and mystical home of a hundred temples, monasteries and pavilions. Few would have failed to notice the view along the way.

The name Emei literally means "delicate eyebrow", and the name came about supposedly because locals believed the peaks of the mountains here resemble the eyebrows of a beautiful woman. It was only in recent years that the provincial government started to heavily promote certain areas of the mountain as tourist attractions.

I was there to cover the recent opening of the Golden Summit's new statue of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra (Puxian). At 48m high, the gilded, 660-tonne statue is the tallest of its kind in the world and has 10



faces which symbolise the 10 Vows of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra (a Buddhist deity). Built at a cost of \$2bil renminbi (RM920mil), it took 17 months and over 1,000 craftsmen toiling through bad weather to build.

The simple opening ceremony also marked the restoration of the Huazang Temple, made up of three buildings popularly known as Gold Palace, Silver Palace and Bronze Palace. My favourite has to be the Silver Palace, which looks particularly striking with its sleek roof and carvings of dragons and sacred elephants.

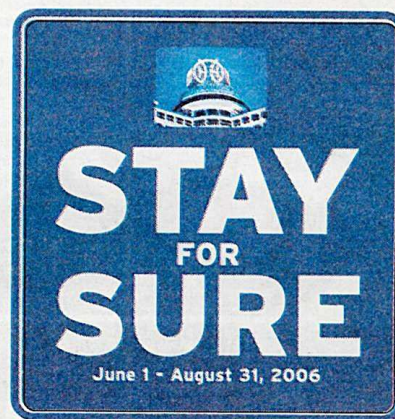
The statue and temple restoration, costing altogether \$14bil renminbi (RM6.4bil) over three years, marks one of Mt Emei's first projects to promote the mountains for tourism purposes.

At the Golden Summit itself, there is a hotel with nifty facilities, and, all along the stairway leading to the temple, there are plenty of snack and souvenir stalls. There are many decent washrooms here, although

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Crowd puller

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there was one whose cubicles did not have doors. This is China, after all, and tourists must always come prepared. A warm coat is a must, perhaps even an umbrella, to fashion a makeshift door.

The weather here can be unpredictable. One moment your teeth are chattering from the cold; the next, it is blazing hot as the clouds drift away and you may end up getting sunburnt.

During the opening ceremony, hundreds of people flocked to the summit to pray and take photos. Despite the crowds, it's not too difficult to feel as if you're on your own if you walk a little distance out and take a cliff-side path here, or a lonely balcony there.

The morning we were there, the view was almost surreal, with mist blanketing the valleys as if the mountain was drifting into a land of fairies. Maybe there is a reason Mt Emei is considered sacred, after all.

When the time came to leave, we discovered that the place actually has two cable-car systems — one is a two-seater carriage system, the other a large one that can comfortably accommodate 20 people at one time. The problem, though, was that the queue was insanely long.

While we deliberated on where to queue, a few men sidled up with colourful bamboo-like sedan chairs. Perhaps we felt like travelling down the mountain in the style of old? For a price, these "human taxis" will bundle you into the chair like a maharaja, prop you up on their shoulders and carry you down the thousand-or-so steps.

"How much?"
"Only 180 yuan (RM82)! You wait here, it will take one hour. We get you down in 40 minutes."

"Er, no thanks."
As we finally managed to squeeze into a cable car, my only regret was not hanging around long enough to get a bird's eye view of the famed Sea of Clouds,



(Above) A Emei wushu demonstration.

one of the four scenic wonders of Mt Emei. But at least we managed

to catch one of the other wonders: sunrise over the mountains, with the sky in a riot of colours: gold, mauve, red, yellow and orange.

Now that was an eye-opener. **W**

□ The trip was by invitation of Reliance Pacific Bhd.

CHINA may be the land of the Great Wall, the Forbidden Palace and the Terracotta Warriors, but holidaymakers might also want to check out lesser-known attractions like Mt Emei.

The 3,099m mountain, one of China's four sacred mountains, is a place for Buddhists and nature-lovers alike. Apart from its many temples, Mt Emei has the Lingxiu Hot Springs, the Xiujiu Waterfall, the Golden Summit and the Lei Dong Ping skiing resort.

According to Du Hui, deputy general manager of the Mt Emei Scenic Spot Administration, the mountain range has 20 "must-see" attractions, with more being identified and developed all the time.

"Mt Emei is such a huge place at 640sq km and we have only opened up five per cent of it for tourism, so the potential is enormous. For backpackers, for instance, we have built over 60km worth of track for them to hike through the mountains," he said.

Mt Emei also happens to be the birthplace of Emei Wushu, one of the three Chinese martial arts besides Shaolin and Wutang Wushu. Naturally, visitors here get a chance to catch a demonstration of the rare art.

A hot destination here is the Lingxiu Hot Springs, touted as China's largest outdoor radon hot spring. The place boasts nearly 100 springs of different sizes, levels and temperatures. Take note, however, that there are no doors in the changing rooms, so bring a towel or be prepared to be traumatised.

Qingyin Pavilion is a welcome stop after a pleasant walk around the cliffs, lakes and lovely bamboo forests. Legend has it that during a drought, an ox had been employed to help the people when they cried out for water. With its two horns, the animal pierced the ground and brought forth two streams named the White Water Spring and the Black Water Spring. The area, known as the Double-Bridge Spray, has a pagoda



A pagoda near the Double-Bridge Spray acts as a meeting point and overlooks the 'cattle heart' rock (right) where the Black Water and White Water springs meet. — Pictures by CHRISTINA KOH

overlooking a 4m-high "cattle-heart" rock where the two springs meet.

To keep the streams flowing, the ox was said to have given its own heart. Fancy seeing a dinosaur? The modest Mt Emei Museum has the complete skeleton of an *Omeisaurus tianfuensis*, a late Jurassic sauropod whose name comes from Mt Emei, the place it was found at. Reliance Pacific Bhd (travel division)

A mountain of potential

executive director Tan Sin Chong said Mt Emei has great potential as a destination for Malaysian tourists.

"Besides the Golden Summit, there are historic temples and a skiing resort that is neither too cold nor too dangerous.

"The next decade will be an exciting time for tourism, especially when Mt Emei becomes well-known to visitors," said Tan, after signing a memorandum of understanding with the Mt Emei Scenic Spot Administration to promote the area.

Reliance has added Mt Emei to its Sichuan packages which include the capital Chengdu and Leshan, both located 121km and 52km from Mt Emei respectively.

Highlights

- The Sichuan Province is the Land of the Pandas. Ninety percent of the world's Giant Panda breeding takes place at the Chengdu Panda Breeding and Research Centre.

- Chengdu's Ming and Qing Street offer local hawker stalls, souvenir shops and more interestingly, the 8pm Sichuan Opera performance with Face-Changing Masters, comedy sketches and fire-breathing acrobatics.

- The Luodai Old Town, in nearby Longquan, is a 1,000-year-old Hakka town.

- If you have seen *The Storm Riders*, you will have noticed the huge Buddha statue featured in the movie. At Leshan, you can see the famous Giant Buddha where scenes from the movie were filmed and marvel at the world's largest Buddha at 71m. — By CHRISTINA KOH

□ Malaysia Airlines flies to Chengdu twice a week on Wednesday and Saturday, both at 9.20am. It is a four-hour flight. For more information, visit http://www.reliancestravel.com/tourworld_chinaothers.html or call (03) 2162 8181.