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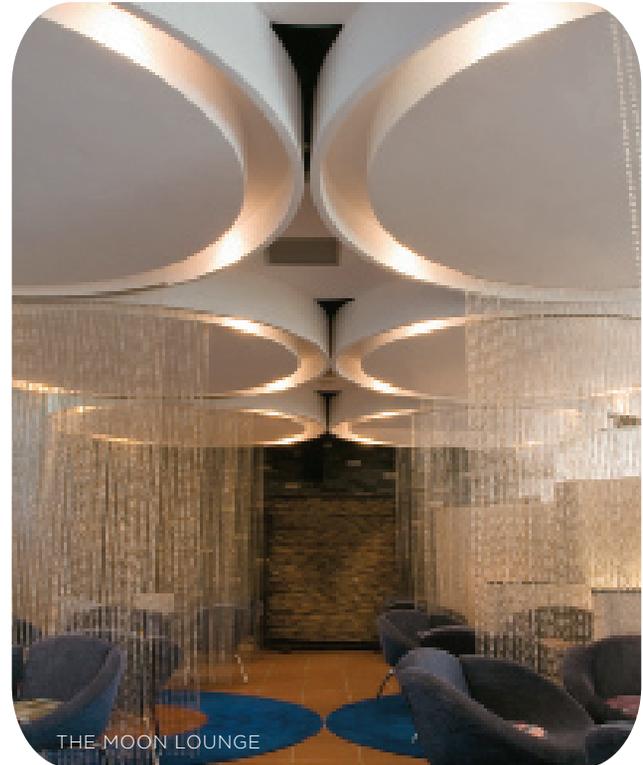


TEXT KRISTINA PÉREZ

Discover China's first Relais & Châteaux property.

When your 4x4 reaches a sign that reads Yüzi Paradise, your own personal English-speaking concierge who has escorted you from the airport, announces that you have almost arrived, as you turn off the highway onto a dirt road. After a few minutes drive through the rice paddies of Dabu village, the HOMA Libre suddenly appears like a mirage. *Yüzi*, which means fool in Mandarin, was originally created by Taiwanese tycoon Tsao Rhy-Chang (who made his fortune in cemeteries

to be his personal art utopia. Tsao's friends all told him he was a fool when he built it because he would never recover his investment and so far they have been right, although that may all be about to change. First opened as a private artists' colony in 1995, Yüzi boasts the largest atelier in Asia, including facilities for sculpture (wood, stone, metal, and bronze-work), print-making, glass blowing and the largest pottery kiln in the continent. Since then Tsao has invited over 140 notable artists



to create monumental sculptures, more than 200 of which are now scattered throughout the 150 acre art park. The 'Strange Loops' by renowned German sculpture Eberhard Eckerle and pop art stylings of Allen Jones can be seen set against the dramatic skyline of limestone peaks. In 2005, Tsao decided to open parts of the park to the public and the original hotel, HOMA Sutra, while still hosting rotating artists-in-residence and receiving commissions from clients across Asia at the Atelier, provides tours and art workshops.

The pyramid-shaped HOMA Libre, which resembles two colliding grass-covered see-saws, at once blends seamlessly into and juts out against the landscape. Designed in 2002 by the notable Taiwanese architect Hsiao Jon-jen, the 46-room boutique hotel raises the bar for elegance and service in the Chinese hotel industry, with the lavish renovation of this former artists' residence, overseen by the French hoteliers. There are suites, duplexes and family suites available, all with outstanding views of the mountains or the art park, and each has been uniquely designed in contemporary Chinese style featuring furniture and objets d'art created by Yuzi's artists-in-residence. Well-known Taiwanese artist Kan Hsing-yi worked intimately with designer Tracy Wén, to create pieces which are both futuristic and draw on the natural elements, while many of the rooms pay tribute to the karst landscape with cave-like features.

In addition to creating an hotel that feels like an amazing contemporary art installation, the HOMA Libre lives up to the standards of luxury that discerning patrons of Relais & Châteaux have come to expect. Despite being quite literally in the middle of nowhere, there is free

WIFI throughout the hotel and you are provided with a complimentary cell phone so that you can reach your personal concierge, who is at your beck and call, at any time. It goes without saying that there are flat-screen TVs and DVD players; some suites have surround sound and even wine fridges which can be filled from their impressive wine list. For a little bit of whimsy, stationed outside are two Rolls Royce-inspired golf carts which will whisk you around Yuzi with your concierge in tow.

It's *de rigueur* these days for a boutique hotel to have a plush spa and the HOMA Libre does not disappoint. Open until 1am, the two spa suites (big enough for two) have individual saunas, steam rooms and steaming tubs, as well as opulent opium beds. A range of services including reflexology, body scrubs, facials, balneotherapy, body wraps and a whole range of massages, from traditional Chinese or Thai to aromatherapy, are available. Guests may also request treatments in the privacy of their rooms or outside *au naturel*.

When it comes to tempting your palate, the HOMA Libre has several offerings including fine dining at Lotus, a sleekly designed Asian-fusion restaurant that promises to bring new sophistication to the region's culinary offerings when it opens in May. The ritzy Moon Lounge is the night-owls' domain with an extensive wine and cocktail list; while the terrace of the Woods Café is where breakfast is served *en plein air* every morning. If you're looking for something a little different, let your concierge arrange a private dinner in a cave nearby with stalagmites and stalactites beautifully glistening in the candlelight and musicians playing beside a manmade waterfall. Or perhaps you prefer the great outdoors? The hotel chefs will be happy to prepare a family picnic, hotpot, or romantic tête-à-tête underneath the stars. Whatever your whim, the HOMA Libre will make sure it is catered to with that certain *je ne sais quoi*.

Hotel of Modern Art (HOMA) Libre, Yuzi Paradise, Dabu Town, Yanshan District, Guilin, China. Tel. +86 773 3868 7888. www.homarc.com
Double Rooms from RMB 2080 (incl. American breakfast) (approx. Rs 11,923).