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Secret Treasures of Yunnan

Words and photos by Dave Stamboulis

China's wild economic growth has been well noted by media all over the world, but along with this has come a huge boom in provincial tourist infrastructure. Access roads have been built, hotels sprung up and it is no longer necessary to get permits to travel off the beaten path.

Yunnan, which means 'land below the clouds,' lies just north of the Lao and Burmese borders and is China's most varied province, with terrain featuring snow capped mountain peaks as well as steaming tropical jungles. Yunnan is also home to more than one third of all China's indigenous minorities, not to mention the site of more than half of all the country's entire plant and animal species.



Kunming, the modern, bustling capital of Yunnan, has all the amenities of any modern metropolis, but if you wander over to the lush confines of Green Lake Park, you will find hundreds of locals playing traditional music, performing Chinese opera and vaudeville, socialising together and keeping age-old traditions alive.

A day's bus ride from Kunming is Yuanyang, the site of some of the most spectacular vertical rice terraces in the whole world. Hani and Yi ethnic minority farmers have been performing intensive labour for hundreds of years, sculpting the mountainous terrain into arable artwork. The rice terraces near the village of Mongpin are so extensive it looks as though you are standing in the Grand Canyon of rice terraces.

Colourful hill tribes, selling produce and drinking rice wine while mingling with each other, throng daily local markets. Tourists, especially foreigners, are virtually unknown here and for locals, seeing their images on a digital camera brings huge crowds around, plus lots of joking and laughter.

Heading north from Yuanyang are the well known Yunnanese cities of Dali and Lijiang, famed for their quaint cobbled streets, romantic canals and Bai and Naxi minority groups. The Naxi are one of the few

remaining matriarchal societies left in the world and the Naxi women, in their colourful blue blouses, aprons and trousers, still run most of the show in picturesque Lijiang.

While Lijiang has suffered a bit of Chinese 'disneyfication' with lots of schlock tourist creations and one souvenir shop after the other, it still has its charms. Venture into the back alleys to find scenes from centuries ago, like old men sitting on benches under red paper lanterns which line the canals, or Naxi women performing traditional dances in quiet plazas.

The city of Zhongdian, 3,000 metres above on the Tibetan plateau, has been renamed Shangri La, after the celebrated book of the same name by James Hilton. The Chinese claim they have proof that the descriptions by Hilton of a magical nirvana match certain places in the region so closely that they surely must be Shanga lu li la, as the Chinese pronunciation comes out. Regardless



of whether or not this is true, the area around Zhongdian is certainly a natural paradise.

The Mei Li Xue Shan Snow Mountains National Park is one of the most magnificent natural scenic spots on earth. Known to the Tibetans as Kawa Karpo, the huge range of Himalayan peaks that mark the entry to Tibet are considered the second holiest mountain pilgrimage site after Mount Kailash (in western Tibet). Hundreds of Tibetan pilgrims make their way from Lhasa and elsewhere to walk a kora, or circumnavigation, on the mountain in order to purify themselves for future incarnations.

Colourful prayer flags adorn all mountain trails and it is common to see Tibetan families, including 80 and 90-year-old grandparents striding briskly over high passes, wishing everyone tashi delay (good day) as they saunter past. Sunrises over the towering Kawa Karpo are truly as close to Shangri La as one can get these days.

The topography in this region is staggering. Mountain peaks rise up to almost 7,000 metres, while canyons, cut narrow and deep, are home to several of the biggest rivers in Asia. The mighty Mekong flows through here much wilder and faster than the languid river further south, while one valley over, the Nujiang, or Salween, is making its turbulent journey to Burma and the Andaman Sea.

A day's drive northeast from Zhongdian is the provincial border, where Yunnan and Szechuan meet amidst endless mountain passes and peaks, in a landscape guaranteed to make any traveler feel very humble and minute. On the Szechuan side, near the town of Daocheng, is the newly opened Yading National Park, also the site of Tibetan holy mountains and famed for its larch covered hillsides, which turn into a sea of amber and yellow come autumn.

Tibetans, the ethnic minority of the region, crowd around tourists on arrival, all clamoring to be of service, using their horses for a small fee to carry equipment up to the high meadows. During the warmer months, Tibetans stop their barley cultivation to bring their horses and travelers into the high country, where alpine lakes, jagged peaks, spring flowers and divine fall colours await the intrepid traveler.

Travel Tips



Yunnan's capital, Kunming, receives international flights from throughout Asia. Thai Airways, China Eastern and Silk Air are some of the many carriers serving Kunming. Flights also go to Zhongdian (Shangri La) and Lijiang. Excellent bus service is available through the region. Overnight sleepers and day buses ply the expressways between Kunming, Dali and Lijiang. Local buses take longer and travel to the more remote spots like Yuanyang, Dequin (Mei Li Snow Mountains) and

Daocheng (Yading).

Hotels and guesthouses to suit every budget can be found everywhere. Simple hotel rooms, with hot water and colour televisions run about US\$13-20. In Kunming, the Camellia Hotel has long been a travelers staging and information post, with a variety of services and price options. Camellia Hotel: 154 Dongfeng Donglu (86) 0871 3163000

In Zhongdian (Shangri-La), Kevin's Trekker Inn is an excellent source of information and can help with tours, Tibetan travel, jeep rentals and anything else. Kevin's Trekker Inn: Tuanjie Road, Shangri La, (86) 0887 8228178

Cold weather gear is necessary for visiting the higher regions and trekking in places like Yading National Park and Mei Li Snow Mountains National Park. Autumn is the optimal time for viewing the colours and mountains of northern Lijiang, while winter is the best time for seeing the rice terraces in Yuanyang, but any time of year will offer something of interest. Southern Yunnan has a subtropical climate, closer to that of Thailand, northern Yunnan is continental, with freezing winters. Kunming is almost always pleasant, but have a jacket on hand as it gets cold when the sun disappears.
