

In search of  
Shangri-la

Lijiang, in China's Yunnan province, claims to be the inspiration for the mysterious utopia of James Hilton's novel. Its Himalayan situation has long attracted botanists, backpackers and miracle-cure seekers, but these days a more grounded breed of visitor is discovering its charms. Amar Grover follows the quest

Photographer Amar Grover

THE NAXI VILLAGE OF SHIFUZHONGBING, PERCHED HIGH ABOVE THE YANGTZE RIVER, IT IS SAID THAT KUBLA KHAN CROSSED THE YANGTZE RIVER ON INFLATED SHEEPskins

Shangri-la is alive and well. I have been there, stood in a cultural museum in Yunnan, southwest China, with old pictures of streets and streams and valleys alongside earnest captions informing me this was, indeed, the long-lost utopia. Novelist James Hilton clearly had Yunnan-Tibet in mind for the Shangri-la of his 1933 bestseller *Lost Horizon*. Like other local authorities in Yunnan, the tourism officials of the town of Lijiang have adopted the classic – while conveniently ignoring its metaphorical message. Hilton's Shangri-la was a mystical mountain paradise, but a vaguely sinister one, too.

Lijiang's horizons are as tantalising as they are mountainous. Burma lies just 145km west and Tibet around double that. In February 1996, however, its more immediate horizons must have appeared doomed. Chunks of the town were destroyed by a powerful earthquake and there were fears that it would never recover. Yet millions were spent not just on rebuilding but on restoring, too – the traditional architecture had withstood the quake better. What used to be – as one guidebook neatly puts it – the preserve of hardy backpackers, became a major World Heritage-listed destination. For good or ill, Lijiang is now more accessible, very popular and fun.

Lijiang's appeal lies in the pretty tangle of lanes and water channels that comprise the Old Town (divided from the dull new quarter by Shizi Shan, or Lion Hill), in the indigenous Naxi (descendants of Tibetan nomads and one of China's 55 officially recognised 'minority nationalities'), and in the encircling hills and mountains – in particular the 5,596m Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. Although there's been a sizable town here for at least 800 years, Lijiang might still be an obscure place were it not for the exploits of Joseph Rock. An eccentric Austro-American botanist-explorer, Rock lived nearby from 1922 to 1949 and, as a Naxi expert, wrote several books and colourful, esoteric articles for *National Geographic* which may have inspired Hilton. Bruce Chatwin came in 1985 and met one Dr Ho, whose folk medicine and quaint status still thrive. The backpackers were not far behind.

It's said that all streets lead to Sifang, the old marketplace whose irregular shape reputedly echoes the official seal of the Mu (the Naxi clan that dominated the town until around 1723, when the Qing Emperor in Beijing decided it was time to assert his authority). Certainly most of the commercial ones do – cobbled alleys of timbered houses with dark pantiled roofs, latticed windows, sloping eaves and souvenir shops. Willow-shaded canals lend Lijiang a distinctive whimsical air – it is like a dainty oriental Venice fused with an ornamental garden. With water comes tiny bridges, hundreds of them, some wider than they are long, others with names, such as Duck-Egg Selling Bridge, reflecting their mercantile purpose. There are discreet wells, too, with three sections to separate water for drinking, vegetable washing and laundry.

Naxi society has traditionally been matriarchal: women took – and cast off – lovers; daughters inherited over sons. In becoming mostly idlers, men were to a degree emasculated. But while women ruled the roost, they seem not to have ruled the town. The male Naxi *tusi*, or chieftain, held sway from a long-ruined mansion complex (recently rebuilt with funds from the World Bank) with scarlet pillars and exuberant eaves. I wandered through six lofty halls and pavilions resting on stepped plinths and perused a variety of treasures and relics – paintings, scrolls, literature and ceremonial paraphernalia. The overall effect recalls the Forbidden City and reflects the *tusi's* flattery of the Emperor in Beijing. It culminates in the San Qing hall, an elevated Taoist shrine built on the shoulders of Lion Hill.

Topped with a modern pagoda (said to be China's tallest wooden building), Lion Hill affords the best lookout over both Old and New Towns. It is also where I caught my first glimpse of

## faraway places



Don't miss

### IN LIJIANG

The **Naxi Orchestra**, led by Xuan Ke, with its repertoire of ancient music played on rare instruments by wizened musicians, and the fascinating **Museum of Naxi Dongba Culture** – where I read how the myth of Shangri-la has been harnessed by tourism officials – focuses on the arcane spiritual life of the Naxi. One of its stranger aspects is a pictographic script – reputedly the world's only surviving hieroglyphic language – which was introduced to the West by Joseph Rock.

### BEYOND LIJIANG

Day trips – many with rewarding journeys – could include **Shigu**, the celebrated 'first-bend' of the Yangtze, and **Shibao Shan**, or Stone Bell Mountain, little-visited temple grottoes in lovely scenery. **Jade Dragon Snow Mountain** has several chairlifts (including Asia's highest, reaching 4,500m). Note that the peak is cloud-bound and in summer the 'yak meadows' are like a theme park. Further afield, improved roads now make tranquil **Lugu Lake** (straddling the Yunnan/Sichuan border) more accessible. This exquisite place is home to the Mosu minority nationality, and rowing boats link little island monasteries. The Yangtze's **Tiger Leaping Gorge** has a two-day hiking trail with a few inns but an environmentally dubious road is being blasted through. Hardy backpackers should aim for **Shitoucheng**, a Naxi village (with basic accommodation) perched high above the Yangtze with superb walking. Finally, **Zhongdian** marks the start of the high road to Tibet.



Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, a snow-clad massif of 13 peaks that is often shrouded in cloud. On the lowest slopes, around 15km north of Lijiang, several villages and a taste of rural China beckoned.

Baisha village, one-time Naxi capital, draws the lion's share of visitors on account of its 15th-century frescoes, housed in three separate halls. Those at Dabaoji Gong are among the most prized. Darkened by the patina of age, this fusion of Tibetan, Naxi and Han styles depicts Buddhist and Taoist themes. While their sepia tones remain eerily beautiful, they are also largely meaningless to most Westerners and, I decided, as much an excuse for visiting the village as a reason.

Earlier than Lijiang, with men loading and strapping mules, and women returning from fields with baskets of fodder, Baisha feels closer to the traditional Naxi way of life. Rice and mustard seeds lay drying in its lanes on reed trays. Old folk lounged in the shade of an ancient gate-tower by the main square. The venerable Dr Ho also lives here and, like thousands before me, I paused at his herbal-medicine clinic.

He emerged in a white coat, holding a teapot and cup. I dutifully sipped his thick 'healthy tea' (comprising six distinct herbs) and heard how an illness in youth brought him back here, home, and into the mountains to perfect remedies. Inside I noted buckets of powders, leaves and sprigs, and a huge collection of visiting cards and bookfuls of testimonials. Dr Ho offers palliatives if not cures for many conditions and has moving letters from, for example, relieved leukaemia patients.

He showed me black-and-white prints, too, taken by Chatwin – of himself holding a hypodermic, and a mother cradling her broadcawdled infant. 'They're here,' he announced, and seconds later I saw the woman measuring herbs, the son helping package them. Remarkably, packets of 'healthy tea' and assorted remedies are sent around the world every week.

I made off along the back paths towards Yufeng Si, or Jade Summit Temple, one of several small Tibetan monasteries that thrived until the Cultural Revolution and which have now been lamely resurrected. An old man leading an albino horse sauntered by, and later I dawdled at the heels – or rather hooves – of home-coming cows, the cowherd occasionally thwacking his stick on the slow ones' rumps. Yufeng Si is undeservedly popular, in part because it is convenient and in part for its centuries-old camellia tree which, in spring (as you'll be told endlessly), blooms with thousands of flowers.

Wenbi Si, on a hillside about eight kilometres south of Lijiang, is by far a lovelier, more spiritual place. White prayer scarves lie draped among the trees at its entrance and clumps of smouldering juniper billow aromatic smoke from a handsome incense burner. The neat prayer hall is pungent with butter-lamps and pilgrims striving for nirvana turn its creaking little prayer wheels clockwise.

A few kilometres beyond Yufeng Si is Yuhu village, which I was keen to visit. The muddled sign – 'Follow Rocker's Step to Shangri-la' – was an added bonus. Rock lived here for more than two decades and his home, now owned by the grandson of his muleteer, has been formally opened after years of casual try-their-luck visitors. Loomed over by Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, Yuhu feels even more rural than Baisha and more detached from Lijiang, with houses of mostly undressed stone. A newly cobbled track leads up towards Rock's house.

The grandson found me and together we entered its courtyard. Two ground-floor rooms contain exhibits – photographs, copied articles, Rock's rifle, saddle and cloak – while upstairs is his mostly empty bedroom. Only a wooden bedstead, shelves and a brazier remain along with a partly collapsed folding table – as though no one dare touch the relics of a strange, remote life. Shangri-la? No, not even Rock painted a rural idyll. But northern Yunnan is definitely seductive. □



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OPPOSITE: VIEW OF A CANAL FROM BIG STONE BRIDGE, LIJIANG, THIS PAGE. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: YUHU VILLAGE; A NAKI MAN SMOKING A PIPE IN LIJIANG; INCENSE STICKS AT WENBI SI MONASTERY; MOSU FISHERMEN ON LOGU LAKE; A NAKI WOMAN IN FIELDS NEAR BAISHA; THE MAIN PRAYER HALL AT WENBI SI

