

Shanghai Journal: Yunnan Trip
11-28-17

问候朋友 (Dear Friends),

On Sunday we got back from a six-day trip to Yunnan Province during the NYUSH Thanksgiving break. Yunnan is in the far southwest of China and borders Tibet, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. While China as a whole is over 90% Han, in Yunnan a little under half the population is from one of the twenty-five other ethnic groups (there are 56 recognized ethnic groups in China – and many others who don't fit the criteria for government recognition, but they exist!). Yunnan has a very different feel from other parts of China and is really a fascinating place culturally and politically. It is also quite geographically diverse with spectacular natural beauty.

Kunming: On Tuesday Nov. 21, we flew into Kunming, the capital of Yunnan and stayed there the first night. That evening we had our first adventure looking for a restaurant that served vegetarian food. My Happy Cow app wasn't working. The bellboy walked with us to a busy street behind the hotel to find a cab, but it was rush hour and there were none to be found. Also confusing is that the green light on cabs indicates they are in use, not free as we wrongly assumed. Then the woman from the reception desk joined us and she tried to call a cab with no result. Finally, she noticed a cab stopping to let off passengers and ran to get it. The driver told her he knew a vegetarian restaurant so off we went. He drove for about 15 minutes and then turned down a small alleyway and pointed to a place on the left. It turned out to be a completely vegetarian Buddhist run place and the food was good once we were able to communicate. After an unsuccessful start, they called upstairs and a young woman came down who spoke English. She explained the buffet options and how to order and we ended up having quite a nice conversation with her. I wish I had taken a photo.

November 22: The next day our guide "Mike" picked us up and took us to a Starbucks, which Chinese call Xing Ba Ke. While sitting there we noticed a group getting fire training in the square – apparently quite common throughout China and not a bad idea. Firemen light a small fire and pairs of people run to put it out. They also have everyone walk through a smoky tent to learn to cover their faces properly. Ravi said they did this for faculty, staff and students at NYUSH last year.

Next we walked through the old part of Kunming. Below is an apothecary that has been there for hundreds of years. The stitching in my knee brace was coming undone so when I saw a row of women sewing on the street, I asked one if she could fix it, and she did for 5 kwai (less than \$1). It fit much better after that!



The main focus of the day was a trip to the Stone Forest about an hour and a half outside of Kunming. Stone Forest (Shilin), is a set of limestone formations that are over 270 million years old and now a UNESCO World Heritage site. We spent a misty afternoon walking through these strange and beautiful stone formations. Luckily, as it was near the end of tourist season, it was not too crowded. Mike told us they had 30 million visitors last year!





As we walked, Mike related legends from the local Sani Yi people, including one about the formation called “Ashima” (bottom right above). According to legend, the forest is the birthplace of Ashima, a beautiful girl of the Yi people. After falling in love she was forbidden to marry her chosen and turned into a stone. Many Yi people celebrate the Torch Festival in honor of Ashima, with folk dances and wrestling competitions. The government pays them to play music and dance in the park and it was interesting to see the traditional instruments and clothing. There are also places where tourists can rent traditional clothing and pose for photos as these young women below. The Yi people, however, are not “dressing up”. This is clothing they wear, as we saw walking around Kunming and other places. I found the instruments really beautiful in form and sound.





After driving back to Kunming, Mike took us to a Tea Board place to sample the Pu'er tea of the region. The young Naxi woman who worked there showed us several types of Pu'er tea, from young green leaves to some fermented for 15 years that came from a tree that is four hundred years old. We truly could taste the difference among them and enjoyed the ritual of measuring and pouring the tea.



After dinner at a delicious Buddhist restaurant Mike dropped us at the train station for our overnight trip to Lijiang. Up to that point, we had been quite satisfied with the tour. But after entering the station and discovering there was no heat for our two and half hour wait in 30-degree temperature, we were not happy campers. Once we finally got on the train, we shared a sleeper with two other people for the ten-hour trip to Lijiang, and could finally get warm.



Lijiang:

November 23: The next morning, our new guide picked us up at the train station and took us to the hotel where we were able to get into our room, take a shower and rest for an hour before heading out for the day. The hotel was in the old part of Lijiang and very picturesque and our room was small but lovely. A welcome change from Kunming! We ate breakfast and felt mostly revived. Our guide, Stephen Guo, was more personable than the previous guide and we enjoyed getting to know him. He is from two minority groups – his father is Naxi and his mother is Dai. He explained that his father’s group has a written language but not his mother’s. He speaks both of their languages and is clearly proud of his heritage and strongly identifies with his culture and their closeness to nature and the land. Our driver was also Naxi but did not speak English, so we couldn’t communicate much with him. He was Buddhist, but Stephen had converted from Buddhism to Christianity.

We drove about an hour to Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, a series of peaks that is holy to the Naxi people. It is also a sanctuary for rare animals and plants. We read that one fourth of all plant species in China can be found there! Twenty primeval forest communities host 400 types of trees and 30 kinds of protected animals. The thirteen peaks form the shape of a dragon, are over 4000 meters high and snow covered year round. Rivers and pools formed by thawed snow water run along the valley. The crystal clear streams have a beautiful green color as you can see below.

Once we got to the park, we had to take a bus up to a ski lift that took us to a higher point on the mountain. We walked around one of the mountain meadows, Spruce Plateau, with yaks, sheep and goats grazing in the distance and the mountains towering overhead. The Naxi regard it as “the entrance to heaven that is rooted in their hearts.”



Stephen (I wish I had written down his real Naxi name) pointed out all kinds of plants and animals along the way and talked about his family and community. It seemed like all the workers in the park were Naxi and he said they were glad to have the work, though it seemed hard to us to be out in the cold all the time. In the valley below we stood in an amazing spot called Blue Moon Valley, with the mountains behind and river flowing over a crescent shaped terrace. One source I read said that photos taken by an American

botanist who wrote about this place in the 1800s inspired the writer of Lost Horizon to create the fictional Eden of Shangri-la. Tourists could take a yak ride into the river, but we declined that opportunity. The two young women below are dressed in Naxi clothing but said they were from the Miao ethnic group.



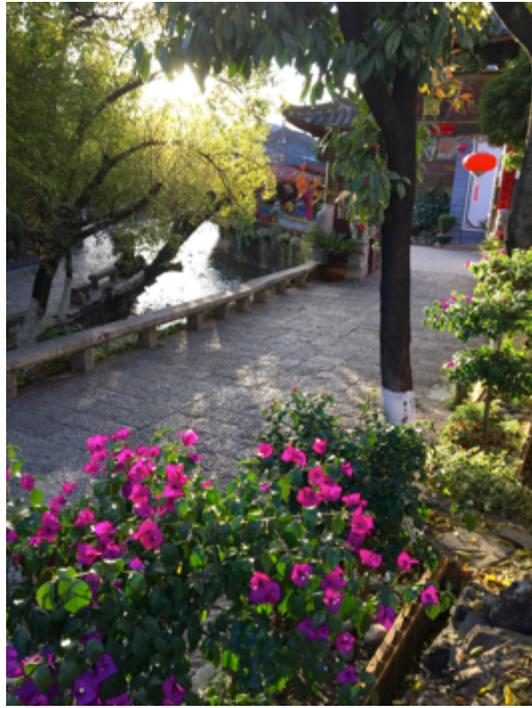
Our next stop was Baisha village, a Naxi settlement that was once the political, economic and cultural center of Lijiang, prior to the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644). We had lunch at a tiny local restaurant, really the front porch of someone's house. We walked around the town and stopped at a small Embroidery School that trains locals in the preservation of the traditional embroidery of the area. Then went to nearby Dabaoji Palace, a temple built in 1562, with murals whose creation took about three hundred years, from the early Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1911). Many of the murals were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution but you can see that this was once a grand place and it is still quite beautiful with huge old trees and beautiful plants everywhere. At this point though, my energy was flagging so I sat under a tree while Ravi went back to the village to get a doorknocker we liked for our front door. We'll see if it works.



Luckily that little rest renewed me for Jade Spring Park. The park was built in 1737 during the Qing dynasty. Stephen said it is the only park in Lijiang and locals get in free. It was clear they use the park a lot and I enjoyed walking along seeing moms, dads, grandparents - sitting with their children doing homework, taking photos, playing – a well used park. Black Dragon Pool in the center of the park reflects the mountains around it and is a popular place for photos.



After leaving the park, we walked through the winding cobblestone streets of Lijiang Old Town where every corner offers a perfect photo opportunity, but by then we were eager to get back to the hotel and rest.



I wish we could have had another day in Lijiang, just to walk around the old town, but we had an early start for the drive to Shangri-la the next morning, so we had a noodle/dumpling dinner in a small shop near the hotel and went to bed early.

Next installment to follow shortly!

Zaijian, Lee