

Yunnan Trip Part 2  
November 29, 2017

Ni Hao,

Part 2 of our Yunnan trip over the Thanksgiving break begins the morning we left Lijiang.

**Tiger Leaping Gorge and Shangri-la:**

November 24: In the morning, we said goodbye to guide Stephen and headed to Shangri-la, pronounced here as Shangri-la with the accent on the middle syllable. The same driver who took us around Lijiang drove us, about 110 miles of winding mountain road. On the way we met our next guide, Rinchen, who took us to Tiger Leaping Gorge, one of the deepest canyons in the world, located on a tributary of the Yangtze River, the Jinsha River. The river was low because the rainy season had ended, but we could hear and feel the power of the rapids and could only imagine what it is like when the river is at its height.





The climb to the bottom and then back up was strenuous but we did it! At the bottom is this map of the Yangtze River that shows how it flows from the mountains of Tibet in the west all the way to Shanghai in the east. It is the third longest river in the world (Amazon and Nile are # 1 and #2, Mississippi River #4). Good knowledge for Trivia or Jeopardy!



There are porters who will carry people up and down. Imagine that workout! About two thirds of the way up we stopped to rest by this rock and had a long conversation about the Sanskrit mantra signified by these letters: “Om mani padme hum”, a mantra that is central in Tibetan Buddhism. Rinchen is a serious Buddhist and once he realized we were interested, he talked a lot both about the religion and the situation of the Tibetan people.



After a delicious vegetarian lunch (in a Muslim beef restaurant!), we continued the drive north through wide-open skies and valleys all the way.



When Rinchen realized our political sympathies with Tibet, he opened up and told us about his own story that included living for two years at Dharamsala, India where the Dalai Lama is in exile, and traveling around India before returning to his village near Shangri-la. He also taught himself English and French along the way and now teaches these languages to the children in his village when he goes home to take care of his parents in the off-season. He is really a bright guy and explained Buddhist principles and Tibetan politics in very thoughtful ways.

Shangri-la was formerly called Zhongdian (Chinese) and Gyaitiang (Tibetan) and the name was only changed to Shangri-la in 2001 to promote tourism. It is pronounced

Xiang-ge-lila in Chinese. The region borders Tibet and half of the population is Tibetan (as well as the majority that remains when tourist season ends). The city feels more Tibetan than Chinese, with buildings painted in the traditional Tibetan colors of gold and maroon, and many signs in Tibetan. The Ganden Sumtseling Monastery is the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Yunnan and is referred to as “Little Potala Palace” after the main monastery in Lhasa, Tibet.

We arrived at our hotel in Old Town Shangri-la in the late afternoon, and had a short rest before meeting Rinchen for dinner and to attend a performance about Tibetan culture. We had a nice big room, fortunately with an electric blanket. The temperature dropped from about 50 degrees during the sunny daytime to below 30 by the time we got back from the performance! A wood stove heated the main room in the hotel, and hot tea was always available, but the cold was still quite a shock, and we had to wear several layers to stay as warm as possible. Below Ravi and Rinchen walk through Old Town; and Rinchen warms himself by the fire in the lobby. He was wearing only a t-shirt under his parka!



The performance was held at the Tibetan Cultural Center and involved a three-act dance performance that dramatized the story of the Tibetan people, from early animism to their embrace of Buddhism up to daily life today. The dancers were excellent. I didn't get very good photos but here are a few that give a flavor of the performance. The pink and blue dresses are the traditional dress from Rinchen's village.



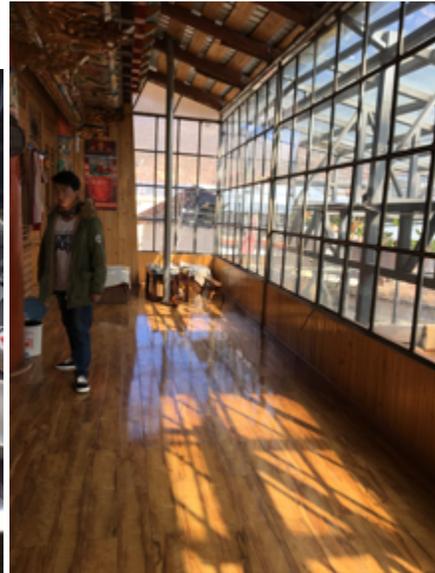
November 25: After a cozy sleep under our electric blanket we had to brave the cold to get up for breakfast and head out for the day. A French couple got up before us so the wood stove was already heating up the place by the time we got there. Luckily it was sunny and the temperature outside warmed up quickly. We started by driving around an enormous lake called Napahai. It is a seasonal highland lake formed by runoff from the surrounding mountains that is full in summer and fall, then recedes

at summer's end and becomes an ideal place for birds and herdsmen who use these (now submerged) houses for their animals in the winter and spring when the water recedes. The lake had already started receding when we were there. It would be great to see in summer when the lake is full and the mountainsides are covered with wild flowers. However, there would also be hoards of tourists!



After the lake, we had lunch at the home of a Tibetan family. It included all things yak: yak milk tea sprinkled with barley powder, yak milk yogurt, and yak milk cheese in yak butter, served with a kind of coiled, white bread and peanuts. The yak

milk tea was much better than what we tasted in Lhasa. Rinchen said the tea here has less butter and I think that made a difference. Lunch also included two green vegetable dishes ( a cucumber dish and snow peas), a potato dish, and a mushroom dish served with rice – all very tasty. Also, there were two meat dishes for Rinchen and the driver. After lunch, Rinchen showed me the rest of the house and said I could take photos so I took some of the little alcove where we ate, and the living room. There was also a beautiful prayer room.



After lunch we went to the monastery I mentioned above. It does look like a smaller version of Potala Palace. As we strolled around the grounds, Ravi enjoyed discussing Buddhist philosophy with Rinchen, who is well versed in it, but a bit intolerant of Chinese people who are rushing to embrace Buddhism now. In fact, he always referred to himself and his people as Tibetan, not Chinese. Politically, he said it would be ok to remain part of China, but wanted the same independence as Hong Kong – a very unlikely scenario. On one of the altars in the temple was a photograph of four men: Chairman Mao, Zhou En Lai, the Panchen Lama (second in spiritual authority after the Dalai Lama), and a very young Dalai Lama. This was interesting to us since in Tibet the Dalai Lama has been completely erased from the temples. In every temple we saw photos and statues of all the lamas but him. We commented, that this seemed a clever way to be able to show his face by seating him with Mao, but Rinchen had another take, seeing it as sacrilegious to have a photo of Mao, an anti-religious man, in a temple.





Our next stop was a walk through a local market where farmers from all over the area bring their vegetables and meat to sell. There are also stalls selling fresh rice noodles that are special to this area. We had (wheat) noodle soup and dumplings before the performance, so delicious. The restaurant was full of Tibetan families eating huge plates of dumplings and bowls of noodle soup. We were the only outsiders and got a lot of curious stares. At the back table three women were peeling hot chilies. All I could think about was how it would feel if they had to rub their eyes!



Our driver dropped us off at the bottom of the hill for Baiji Temple and headed for the long drive back to Lijiang. We thanked him for being such a careful driver and

began our long climb on a rough dirt trail to the temple. The temple is also referred to as 100 Chicken Temple because people leave chickens as offerings that cannot be killed, so they roam around the temple until they die naturally. It is a very old temple that dates back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) and is still actively used, though it was empty when we were there. It provides a bird's eye view of the old town and surrounding developments. The government is building a new highway and railroad, so it is likely that development will change things very fast once they open, and Shangri-la will be a paradise no more. I'm glad we got to see it when we did.

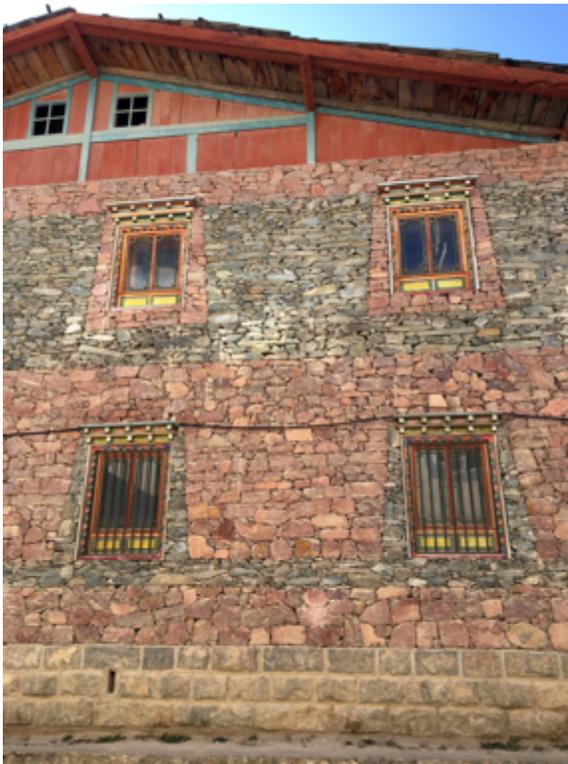




We had one last walk around Old Town before the temperature plummeted, and stopped at a shop that sold traditional Tibetan paintings. The artist was there at work and his paintings were truly gorgeous (clearly superior to paintings we saw in other stores). The colors are all made from local plants and minerals and the artist gave us a magnifying glass to look at the amazing intricate work of the painting.



I should mention that most of the wooden buildings in Old Town burned down in a fire a few years ago and are now being rebuilt as close to the originals as possible. These two beautiful, stone buildings may have survived, I'm not sure. The third is the entrance to our hotel, behind which is being built a bunch of new hotels and condos that have absolutely no character and could be anywhere in the world. Progress!!





We were relieved to get back and have hot tea by the wood stove. We stayed in for dinner, just a simple noodle soup made by the woman who runs the hotel (whose Anglicized name was Elvis!)

November 26: The plan was to have breakfast at 7:30 the next morning before heading to the airport. When we got up there was no hot water for showers, the wood stove downstairs was cold, and there was no sign of Elvis. So we waited in our warm room until Rinchen came. Elvis was up by then and made some toast for a quick breakfast and we headed out for our flight to Kunming and then Shanghai. This turned out to be a memorable trip with vistas of unforgettable beauty, cultural experiences we'll never forget, and even glitches like the freezing train station in Kunming and no shower before we left Shangri-la that make for good stories. I feel so fortunate to have had this incredible journey.

Zaijian,

Lee