

Trip Review

Three Parallel Rivers Trekking

Yunnan, China

An account of JOURNEYS first Great Gorges and Sacred Peaks Trip

By Will Weber

JOURNEYS Director

May-June 2005

This trip offers a surprising, stereotype-breaking, view of the New China blooming from spectacular scenic landscapes.

Accessible Wilderness in China



The Three Parallel Rivers World Heritage Area lies beyond the frantic urbanization of south China, but through improved roads and better communication, this area is now accessible to travelers with enough time to reach the area and a certain tolerance for the rigors of travel at

high altitudes. Our trip was planned as a two-part trek exploring the ridges between the Salween, Mekong and Yangtze River gorges. This area constitutes some of the most rugged terrain in China outside of Tibet, which was just a few kilometers from our northernmost hiking trail. Due to heavy snows of the previous winter, we were often surrounded by snowy peaks, some reaching over 7,000 meters. This area is, culturally, predominantly Tibetan. Despite the steepness and remoteness of the villages, most had electricity and the traditional-style buildings were large, ornate and impressive. Yunnan has always been one of our favorite areas of China. This trip extends a visit to the delightful sites of Lijang, Dali and Shangrila (Zhongdian) to include a more active and less-touristed exploration of some of China's most beautiful and ecologically-rich natural areas.

Falling and Following Rock

Our trip was an exploratory, first time JOURNEYS visit to this area. The first Westerner in the area was Joseph Rock, a botanist and anthropologist who traveled our trail in 1924. It probably has changed very little since. Our group consisted of 9 Americans and a Canadian ages 46-69 with extensive previous travel experience. Our local guide, Tony, and cook, Jack, had been over some of the trails in the past two years.

During our own travel in May 2005, we did not see any other Western groups on the hiking trails and encountered only a few foreign travelers in the road-accessible villages and towns. Access is limited by winter snows and summer monsoon rains which create avalanches and mudslides that block the roads. The terrain in these valleys is so steep that falling rock or snow is an ongoing hazard year around. Both, while hiking and driving the narrow, but well-defined roads, we had to be vigilant for falling rocks which littered the roads. These valleys are as steep as physics and gravity will permit. Add a little wind, precipitation, goat grazing or even thermal expansion and the mountains accelerate their slow crumble into the sea. With the serpentine rivers scouring deeper into the bedrock at the bottom of the gorges we gained a direct sense of geological evolution in action. This is a nature trip, deep down.

China is Well Stocked

Our group met in Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan. Our good fortune included clear, dry weather throughout the trip. Kunming seemed clean, spacious and inviting, especially the preserved old town area and the central city plaza from which motor vehicles are excluded. We visited the excellent Nationality Museum.

We flew to Dali for a look at the local "Old City", famous Three Pagodas, Erhai Lake and the Cangshan Mountains. All warranted more than the cursory visit we afforded them. Travelers who have never been to China or have not been there in several years, might be surprised by what is available. I was able to purchase Compact Flash memory for my digital camera for less than the cost in the USA. Consumer goods are abundant and inexpensive, especially if smaller sizes fit. Many US manufacturers of outdoor clothing and

equipment contract for their products in China. It was explained to me that the Chinese contractors fill the orders, but over-produce on the contracts and wholesale the extra into the Chinese market. I visited several outdoor stores well-stocked with Northface, Mountain Hardware, Marmot, Kelty and other expensive brands at a 40-60% discount to US prices and open to further bargaining.

Getting Down in the Gorges

We traveled overland from Dali deeper into the Salween Gorge. We had a special coach able to handle the increasingly steep grades and challenging roads. We were gradually pushing north toward Tibet and west toward Burma against the resistance of ever steeper terrain. We spent the night in Liuku, on the banks of the river. Our policy was to stay in the best available hotels when we were not in tents or guesthouses. In past trips to China, we might have preferred the comfort and amenities of tents to the non-functioning pretenses of Chinese hotels. On this trip, however, most of us were impressed by how well even modest hotels in remote places fulfilled our expectations of comfort. Virtually, every night we had hot water, clean linens, satellite TV (though seldom non-Chinese stations), shampoo, combs, shower caps, tooth brushes and paste, a reasonable expectation of a quiet night and a reliable wake-up call.

Criss-crossing the Salween heading generally upstream, the scenery was ever more spectacular. Rice-planting on terraced and irrigated hillsides was in full progress and we stopped several times for pictures and contemplation.



Eventually we simply came to the end of the road at a place called Demalo. A group of Tibetan porters were waiting for us. We explored the community, including a small Catholic church that had escaped the Cultural Revolution, and began trekking up the gradual valley of the Demalo River, a tributary of the Salween. Tony described our route as “level”. In his parlance, level meant gradually up, rather than up and down or steep. It really was relatively easy hiking on good trails at modest temperatures. With the opportunities of photography, birding and wildflower appreciation we took a little longer than Tony predicted to get to our campsite at Tong Dang at around 7,500 ft. Some of us slept in local shelters, others tried out the tents pitched on a basketball court. The centerpiece of the town was a Catholic church which held services that night providing a unique context in which to view of a familiar religion in this remote place.

The Real (tough) Trekking Begins

The next day, we headed into the wilderness. While the trail was only slightly steeper, we could see the snowy slope high above us with no easy path evident to reach it from the deep canyon up which we hiked. As we went through forests of blooming rhododendron and fields of wild iris it became clear that this was a serious hike.

We continued to hike the ever steeper trail into a beautiful meadow campsite at 8,700 ft. By this point we were the only travelers on the trail. We ate lunch



in a bamboo forest overlooking blooming rhododendrons emerging from deep snow. Spectacular mountainscape views unfolded before us as we neared the ridgeline and the 13,000 ft. Peacock Mountain Pass. This was the hardest day of the trip for everyone. The porters cleared the pass and then came back to help those of us needing assistance on the slippery slope. Had this not been a year of deep and lingering winter snows, it would have been an easier hike, but probably not as beautiful. Tony told us hikers seldom encounter snow in October. The summer season (June-September), however, could be rainy. Because there are so many tall mountains and ranges in this area, snowy peaks were visible in every direction. I was quite amazed at the amount of frozen landscape sprawling beneath a vast sub-tropical sky.

Trail to the Mekong

Descending to the Mekong River, we stayed at a guest house in a prosperous Tibetan village, Londjre, offering a glimpse of Buddhism, family life, agriculture and education. While the trail was now wider and more heavily traveled, we still had a sense of ever-surprising natural beauty in the gorge and the broad panoramic view of the Mekong.

We traveled by road to Dechen, but first visited a famous Catholic church. The Jesuits who founded the church also introduced grapes to the area and now this seems to be the preferred crop. We had the opportunity to sample the local wine of the region and all agreed that in this particular product, China has a long way to go to catch better known wine countries. The Catholic heritage of the area seemed to be more fascinating to our Chinese guides and to local people, than to our participants. This seemed to be more a matter of historical value and curiosity of viewing and understanding an institution which survived the destruction of the Cultural Revolution. We had a feeling that now people feel a great regret for the loss of

the national patrimony during the turbulent times of the Sixties. Institutions that can trace their origins and achievements to earlier times seem to engender a kind of secular reverence by virtue of their endurance. Neither Christianity nor Buddhism are thriving in China, but rather than expressing agnostic indifference, local residents and Chinese tourists see churches, temples or monasteries as living museums that deserve respect because they survived an ill-conceived popular war designed to obliterate them.

Not far from Dechen we encountered an amazing site. As the road rounded a bend, the entire mountain range of which sacred Kawagebo is the crowning monument, came into view. The view and the mountain are sanctified by thousands of colorful prayer flag banners, a temple, large incense burners and white Buddhist stupas. We had great weather for praying, picture taking or contemplation as the mountain moved us. Kawagebo and the surrounding peaks shaped our perspective and our path for the next four days. We hiked along the glaciers at the base and explored sacred waterfalls, the amazing Taizi Monastery, avalanche meadows, glacial streams and hemlock forests that cloak the slopes of the range. Many travelers to China may have the impression that the forests are all gone and the rivers are merely vehicles for transporting eroded soil and debris. The ecosystem around Kawagebo needs more protection and appreciation to endure, but there is much to enjoy. The area has a strong flavor of real wilderness .



The Sacred Mountain

There are many hikes of varying difficulty from a few hours to a few days, and on some trails you can

rent a horse for the steepest uphill parts of the climb. Even though our trip was quite long, I wished we had taken more time to enjoy the vehicle excursion which took us up over the mountain pass from Dechen and the Mekong Valley down into the Yangtze Valley. This is an area where the Nature Conservancy is actively expanding the protection of the high mountain meadows and forests which are part of the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas project. Again, we had fantastic weather for our trip over the 14,000 ft. pass. We all would have liked to hike in those high meadows, but our road journey was first to Zhongdian to meet the non-trekking part of our group and then to Lijang a fabled city of the Bai and Naxi minorities.

Lijang Surprises

The old city of Lijang was my biggest surprise of the trip. When I visited seven years ago, it really was an apparently old city that had barely survived a big earthquake and was being repaired to the architectural traditions of the past. People wore traditional clothing, spoke their own language and ate traditional foods. As foreign tourists we were conspicuous and welcomed, but not catered to. You could just walk around and observe everyday life. Now, in 2005, the local people were hardly evident at all. The old city was about three times as large and developed as kind of a cultural carnival. The architecture was right, but the activities and the spirit were much different. Our guide told us that there is a saying in China, "you can't claim to have reached Middle Class unless you have been to Lijang." The Chinese tourists were as interesting as the city itself as they shopped for souvenir herbal remedies, green tea gift packages, kitsch art, jade jewelry, children's toys, Tibetan artifacts and finger food. There was a very positive spirit, but rather than claim this as an authentic, traditional Naxi community, you might better visit it as an entertaining parade of contemporary Han Chinese affluence, fashion and conspicuous consumption.

Not for Everyone, But Maybe for You

Our trip was almost over. We had another wonderful dinner in Kunming, though our numbers were diminished by the participants who were planning various extensions to see more of Yunnan, Beijing or Xian. All of the connections and reservations fit flawlessly together for the trip home. Of course, I could not fault our operator for a lack of drama or uncertainty. The very fact that we had no worries about transfers, reservations, translation or wayfinding allowed us to gain a deeper insight and appreciation for the things we chose to experience whether that was the bird life, the wild flowers, the art, music or shopping. I finished the trip feeling very positive about China looking for a fresh and inspiring view of the world. One test of a trip is how soon you want to go back. A good share of our group is already making plans to return to the area, beginning at the Yunnan border with Tibet, continuing on to Lhasa and then to Kathmandu. The possibilities are as vast as the Tibetan Plateau and the great rivers of Asia.

Note: Special thanks to all the crew of our trek and participants, Jeffrey Nystuen, Paula Gravatt, Elke Guenter, Sue Besley, Marilyn Hansen, Jane Vincent-Havelka, Barbara Jo Bailey, Michael and Kathleen Timmerman all of whom contributed immeasurably to the success of the trip with their good humor, sharp wit and imperturbable tolerance of unexpected events.

Contact us about future group or private travel to this area of China.