

Trip Review



China: Jade Dragon Journey

Yunnan nature and culture exploration

Trip Review By Will and Joan Weber (JOURNEYS Directors)

On the *Jade Dragon Journey*, Yunnan unfolded for us with a sequence of delightful surprises. We had heard that this is the region of China with the most stunning scenery and the most ethnically diverse population, but we were charmed beyond all expectation.

More than we expected

This is a trip we will remember in vivid color. We were followed all along the way by the sharp white peaks of the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain against a deep blue sky. Villages were nestled in fields of bright green and sun yellow, and houses all had pink ceramic tiled roofs that turned up at the ends. The people were every bit as colorful as their surroundings, dressed with brightly embroidered or applied headware or aprons or capes that marked their various ethnic identities -- Dai, Naxi, Xi, Tibetan.

In this picturesque corner of China, far from Beijing and Shanghai, we learned a tremendous amount about this complex country. We engaged in very rich conversations continually -- with our articulate guide as well as with householders, musicians, monks, and Communist Party members -- about government and politics, trade and free enterprise, recent and ancient history, religion and medicine, expectations and dreams.



Yunnan is visited by very few Americans, but it really isn't difficult to get here or to cope here. Communications, transportation, and accommodations are very good. The food is superb and the physical demands of the itinerary are only as rigorous as participants want them to be. We believe the *Jade Dragon Journey* claims a special place on our menu of adventures for the ease and accessibility it offers while ranking as one of our most exotic trips.

China is vast, changing, varied and challenging to explore, understand and appreciate. We have designed this trip as an active experience of southern China's best natural and cultural history. This review is based upon the experiences from the JOURNEYS Yunnan Jade Dragon journey, explored during the months of February and March. While the itinerary and accommodations may vary with future trips the major destinations of Kunming, Dali, Lijiang and Zhongdian are favorite areas included on most private and group itineraries. The impressions and descriptions in this review represent reactions of Will and Joan Weber, directors of JOURNEYS, and their children Robin and Noah, who accompanied them on the trip with three other client travelers: Marguerite Longtin, and Steven and Jenay Katkowsky, all from California.

Beginning the journey

Most people will begin this trip with a flight to Kunming. We arrived in Kunming by train, in pouring rain, at an hour early of 6 am on February 22nd. We were the last people off the Hanoi/Kunming Express. We had slept right to the stop and the conductor had to awaken us.

Our guide

We were met by "Frank", the representative of our local operator. (*People working with Western tourists often take English nicknames because we have so much trouble remembering their Chinese names.*) A native of the region, in his early 30s, Frank was cheerful, spoke excellent English and was infinitely more awake than we were. He was to be our guide for two weeks.

Frank has a credibility that many guides do not. While he had worked as a guide for only 2 years, he had a degree in English from Yunnan University and extensive personal travel experiences in China, especially in Yunnan province that really support his job. Frank was at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, during the student protests of 1989. He told us he went with 100 other students from Yunnan University, two of whom were killed.

We asked him about the consequences, personal and professional, of having made the trip to join the protest. "I know they [the government] have information in my file that will prevent me from ever rising in a state-run enterprise," he explained. "I would only have a dark future working for the state." This fact, along with a personal desire to break out of the system that does not reward initiative or ability, makes Frank a real proponent of capitalism and market economics. We were very impressed with his candor. When asked directly about his views on politics, he declared, "I have no interests in politics." But, it is clear he cares about his country and does not project a tone of either apology or resentment about the current situation.

He is an optimist about the future of his country, but regretful that with respect to freedom, information and foreign contacts, the country has not made up the ground lost after the Tiananmen Square massacre. He seemed to enjoy being with Americans and was genuinely eager to answer all questions candidly.

He led us through a damp and spartan, but clean train station to a service van driven by "Jack", a partner in leading adventures. Soon we were at the immense and expansive Green Lake Hotel. This is at once the best-known, most scenically-located, and one of the most expensive hotels in Kunming. In fact, nice hotels and modern amenities now characterize Chinese cities.

We liked the Green Lake Hotel because it was an exception to this rule, but in general, we learned that we were better off utilizing smaller hotels with resident management.

We arose early the next morning and transferred to the Kunming Airport to meet a full flight to Dali, seat of the ancient Namzha Dynasty from the 9th-11th Centuries. Frank said that most flights are fully-booked and, indeed, there were many would-be passengers in the airport arguing to obtain seats that were simply not available.

Dali, Cangshan mountain hike

If you want an active experience in Dali, hike to the Seven Dragon Ponds high up in the mountains. The hike begins with a chair lift. A sign assures passengers it is built from a “complete set of American parts”. It is the same as a double ski lift, but it is constructed just for access to the high Bai Temples and the hiking trail. It costs about \$5.00 for foreigners, less for Chinese.

After about half an hour of a silent, slightly-swinging ascent, we were delivered into a beautiful pine forest at about 9,000' elevation. The trails and chair lift are just two years old. The forest on these remote slopes were remarkably intact. The trail to Seven Dragon Ponds is quite level, though it follows a route deep into sheer canyons and along near-vertical mountain slopes. We were among the first to hit the trail in the morning and the experience in the warm morning sunshine was rich with views across Dali and Erhai Lake. We had glimpses of the snow fields a few hundred meters above us, though we were never cold. The total hike was about 12 Km.

We got back in late afternoon and went into the old town for a meal on Foreigner Street. Frank always took ordering meals very seriously. While the kids have their established favorites, the rest of us delighted in the culinary surprises Frank ordered up. Usually, there were eight or ten dishes on the table by the time the final soup course arrived. We all vowed we would eat less at the next meal, but the next meal came and the temptation to eat a little more of the great food overwhelmed us all. I don't think we hiked off the extra calories from even one meal that day. Throughout the trip meals were extraordinarily varied and satisfying. In fact, eating was an adventure of the most positive kind.

The following day we drove about five hours to Lijiang. As we neared, the enormous Jade Dragon Snow Mountain grew in towering magnificence above the city. We checked into the comfortable and well-managed Grand Lijiang Hotel and attended one of the nightly concerts of Naxi musicians. The Naxi culture give males lots of leisure time. For hundreds of years (excepting the period of the Cultural Revolution) male groups such as this one have been playing music together in Lijiang. But now the ancient music is in danger of dying out. Indeed, three of the musicians are 85 years old and one is 88. They are not an animated group. The oldest men all wear dark glasses and black and gold robes. Most of them have white hair with ample whiskers. There were a few women in the ensemble, who also double as the sound technicians, waitresses and singers. The music they play has changed little in the past two thousand years.

Jade Dragon Snow Mountain

We visited several sites near Jade Dragon Snow Mountain on the day when we had the very clearest weather of the trip. The mountain, snowy for the upper five thousand feet, fully dominates the western horizon from Lijiang, though it is perhaps 20 miles away. On the way to the mountain we stopped at the village of Baisha and the clinic of the famous Dr. Ho.

Dr. Ho, now assisted by his son, has an international reputation as an herbalist healer. He greeted us warmly and had us sit in his small dark waiting room. As we drank a minty health tea, he and his son presented his credentials to us establishing his abilities. He asked if anyone was sick. Noah, our son, volunteered that he has asthma. The good doctor, assisted by his son, felt Noah's hand and pulse. He prescribed a particular herbal remedy to be taken as a tea and suggested that massage of key pressure points would be helpful. I got a bit of the impression that after curing many people of cancer, hepatitis and bronchitis, this was a simple matter.



While our group was divided about effectiveness of the man, we were all won over by his warmth and the apparent tenacity and fame of his practice. We all kicked in donations to his clinic and in exchange received a complimentary packet of health tea. In all, it was a good cultural experience.

Our next stop was the Yufengsi, or Jade Summit Monastery. This Tibetan Buddhist monastery is most famous for a 600-year-old red camellia tree which blossoms faithfully and profusely each spring. It had just started to bloom this week and we were among several dozen local people who had driven up to see it. The monastery itself was an impressive place on the lower slope of Jade Dragon Mountain and criss-crossed by cold clear streams used to irrigate nearby orchards and wheat fields. In the mid morning sunshine and spring-like breeze our visit here was very pleasant. Our major destination of the day was another 20 km by twisting road to a resort and holiday site near the base of the mountain. There were perhaps 150 Chinese tourists already here to utilize the modern chair lift to a high meadow offering a splendid view of the entire Jade Dragon massif. With much less trepidation than we experienced on the chair lift in Dali, we rode the lift up through mature pine forests to the terminus and then hiked about one kilometer to the viewing meadow. The view was gorgeous.

On future trips we can offer a more vigorous hike that bypasses the other tourists, and goes through a little visited Yi village and up to Yak Meadow for the stunning mountain view.

Tiger Leaping Gorge and Tibet

Our first stop after leaving Lijiang was Tiger Leaping Gorge. The roads were surprisingly good. The gorge is quite spectacular. While reputedly the deepest gorge in the world at 10,000', the sides are not as sheer as the Grand Canyon. The skies did clear to give us some sense of the towering mountains on either side. Some of us hiked down the very new, steep cement steps to the river's edge. Even this high and early in its course, the river has a huge volume of water and here it is squeezed into a very narrow channel. The water is an attractive blue green color, though Frank says that in June the river rises and is yellow in color. The access to the gorge is really quite easy.

After the gorge, the road narrowed and climbed up through the forest and onto the Tibetan Plateau. We had to pause a moment for Tibetan herdsman with ponies in the road. A bit farther we stopped and Jack led some of the group to a traditional Tibetan sky burial site. We paused at several other places for photos of daily life among the Tibetans. The nicely-paved road attained the edge of the Tibetan Plateau and the landscape broadened into brown fields awaiting barley planting in a few weeks. Just a few hundred feet higher and within the shadows of pine-clad hill sides the winter snow still chilled the ground. We seemed close to the sky. The sunshine descended on yellow shafts for fleeting moments.

After being almost alone on the road and driving much of the way through un-populated countryside, our sudden arrival in Zhongdian was a surprise and we found ourselves holding our breath as we tolerated the traffic of the "new city". We knew that just beyond the city lie the features or the culture that embody the idealized traditions or experiences we had come all this way to enjoy.

Sacred Crane Sanctuary

We visited a 1500 acre provincial waterfowl sanctuary about 4 km from Zhongdian. It is a beautiful ride to the partially flooded plain, though the pavement runs out and we got a feeling for the character of the road on towards Tibet.

At this time of year the major attraction for visitors is the population of Black Necked Cranes, held to be sacred birds by local people. We saw about 100 although, we believe there are many more that feed in the surrounding areas. There are also geese and many species of other water birds. We listed Ruddy Shelduck, Eurasian Teal, Eurasian Widgeon, Pintail, Mallard, Pochard, egret, lapwing, Himalayan Griffon Vulture, and Red-billed Chough. With more time and a better pair of binoculars or scope, we would have listed more. We spent about two hours and walked about 4 km. It was quite cold and windy, although it would be much colder in December and January. The site was very scenic. Forested and snow-capped peaks surrounded the basin and often the flying waterfowl would be silhouetted against glaciated peaks.



We recommend that future visitors with birding interests consider getting a very early start from Zhongdian and spend at least four hours exploring the area.

Tibetan villages and monasteries

Dawn, always late by the clock in this part of China, revealed a light blanket of snow across the landscape. It is like part of the low sky rubbed off on the earth overnight. We really were in Tibet, but this part of cultural Tibet is much more prosperous than the areas around Lhasa and farther west. Tibetans in Yunnan seem to have pretty much accepted Chinese government as a permanent reality and here there seemed to be little or no tension between Tibetans and Han people.

In Zhongdian we visited two monasteries and a number of Tibetan homes. The experience gave us a rich taste of life for everyday people in this part of Yunnan. All the Tibetan homes in this area were large and typically had two stories and an attic for storage. They are sturdy, made of heavy timbers and mud brick with wooden shingle roofs. Inside they are uncluttered and airy, though there is always a fire. The home usually has an enclosed courtyard, typically guarded by one or more fierce mastiffs. The man inside felt he was poor though he owned quite few head of livestock including pigs, yak and horses.

We meet a living Buddha

Noah and I got up early to visit the Tibetan Buddhist monks at the Songzhalin Monastery. We were there when the door opened. It is a spectacular place. The morning light enhanced by the snow cover on surrounding slopes really illuminated the gold spires and colorful lattice work designs.

Inside we observed about 100 monks chanting from an interior balcony. The highlight of the experience was a visit to the chamber of the living Buddha. He is 60 years old and speaks only Tibetan. He is a *tulku* or re-incarnated lama holding the highest degree of Buddhism after studying with the Dalai Lama in India. He was quite serene and far away and little affected by our presence. He gave us each a red thread for good luck. His assistant also poured a bit of holy water in our hands for sipping or putting on our heads. The whole process took place very quickly His personal chamber was quite warm with both a charcoal fire and an electric heater. The room smelled of butter lamps.

The ride back

We left Zhongdian with regrets. There was so much more here to explore than we had time for. Hiking opportunities lie everywhere and you have the feeling any trail you might choose is likely to have never been walked by a Westerner.

We drove back to Lijiang with a stop at Stone drum on the First Great Bend of the Yangtse River. This site marks many epic events both historic and geological. Here the river changes course from southward to northward. Kublai Khan reportedly crossed the river here. In 1548 local people defeated invading Tibetans. Finally, in 1934, local people aided 18,000 troops of the Red Guard on the Long March to cross the river. We returned to Lijiang and then to Kunming by air.

At the conclusion of the trip we felt we had completed an exceptional experience of China. In most of the areas we visited there simply were no other Western travelers. The leadership, roads, food and accommodations were better than we had expected. Foreigners, particularly Americans, are welcome and it seems the local government is pursuing policies that will soon make it possible to connect from Yunnan directly to Burma or Laos either overland or by air. Yunnan is ready for visitors. It seems only a matter of time before more people discover the joys of travel in this unique part of China.

To find out more about future JOURNEYS group trips or private arrangements with the same guides, sites and services described in this review, please contact us anytime.

