

Yunnan - South (nan) of the Clouds (yun)

Yunnan province, in the south west of China, is perhaps the most diverse and definitely one of the most interesting among China's provinces. One could spend here months. Alas, with our fast "China-in-one-month" trip of highlights, we had to limit our stay here for just under 10 days.

We flew from Guilin to Jinghong, a city on the shores of the Mekong river, near the borders with Burma (Myanmar) and Laos. The region is called Xishuangbanna (see what we have to deal with!?), or, in short "banna", and we flew in for a taste of Southeast Asia. The thing to do here is to trek in the subtropical rain forests and to stay in the villages of the minority people. The Chinese people is composed of many tribes. The vast majority of the Chinese (around 93%) are "Han", but the remaining 7% - the minorities - are composed of 55 tribes, many of which live in Yunnan. The trek took us through the lush rain forests that distinguished themselves from their central or south American counterparts by the many rice and corn fields, and tea trees, bamboo trees, tic trees (the ones that make good furniture) and rubber trees. The large planted forests of rubber trees can be easily identified from the airplane since they are planted in beautiful curvy geometrical patterns (I have no idea why). Entering such a forest you can see that part of the outer layer of each tree is peeled off and a small bucket is attached to it in order to collect the liquid white rubber. Another distinction from the Spanish speaking rain forests is the lack of "major" animals; all the bears, wolfs, tigers, monkeys, deers, wild pigs and anteaters that used to call this place "home" until 15-20 years, were killed or chased away to Burma (the vistas of which accompanied us throughout the first two days of the trek when we were walking only few kilometers north of the border). As for the minorities, we visited villages of Dai, Hakka and Pulan people. They are all farmers basically. The Dai people live in lower lands; the somewhat poorer Hakka and Pulan prefer the mountains. All the villages that we went through or stayed at looked very similar: wooden houses that are standing on poles; a very wide living area inside the house with high ceiling, like a barn; the ceiling is always covered with hundreds of bouquets of yellow corn, like stalactites (or stalagmites) in a cave; there's no kitchen, just a stove area for fire on the floor (yes, they light fire on the wooden floor of a wooden house :-); there are no closets - everything hangs on hooks; and there's no shower or toilet: for a shower you can use the hose in the "veranda" that extends from the living space that I just described (those verandas were not designed to people of my mass) and for your private stuff, just go outside. We slept on blankets on the floor and ate all of our meals with those families. As much as I liked this close interaction, the language barrier was hard. Whenever I tried to ask them a question through our guide, the jerk answered me himself, instead of translating my question in order to create a conversation. Even when the questions were personal, the idiot answered me and didn't involve the hosts to whom the question was addressed, unless I made it clear that it's not him I would like to hear. The people themselves were very nice and warm and always made sure that our rice bowl, or tea or rice wine cups are full. Regarding the food: it was very basic, and at times simply uneatable (besides the ever-present boring rice). As it was Yom Kippur, I figured that it might have been a divine message from above.

After banna came Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan. Even though we had a great time there, I will have to fast forward through this: Swiss-fully clean and modern city, clear blue sky(!), great sites, a culinary must (something called "Across-the-bridge noodles") and the lovely Miranda (NZ) and Graham (UK).

OK, back to normal speed: Lijiang! A town in west Yunnan, close to the Tibetan border. The beauty of Lijiang's old town is unparalleled! Absolutely stunning! It is gorgeous in daytime, but when the evening falls its beauty intensifies by the minute! And when the sun rises again, you discover other amazing facets to this pearl-of-a-town. I realize that these last lines may sound a bit of overkill. But I stand behind every word. The old town that survived over 200 years is a picturesque maze of cobbled streets, exquisite old wooden houses, charming canals, a lively market place and a vital blend of Han, Nakhi (the local minority) and tourists. Indeed, the place is heavily commercialized. So what. Going away from the center and wandering through the maze of allies, you get to the parts where the locals actually live and tourists are scarce. And there you see that the exotic beauty of the center pre-existed the tourists.

We arrived there in the evening of Sukkot - full moon. The skies were cloudy and the colors were strong. And then, when we stood in the market place, the sun set. The colors of the place gradually changed. The sky turned deep blue with paler shades of clouds. The lights began to turn on. And then it was a festival of colors: deep blue sky (never black, because of the bright full moon), dark pagoda-shaped roofs, the red Chinese lamps and the yellow-orange patches of light on the houses from the more modern lamps. The big pagoda high on the hill above the square was illuminated by a genius so it looked as though it hovers in the sky! Add to the picture the so many people in the streets, the so many cafes and restaurants along the canals and the general joie-de-vivre and you start getting the feel of this place.

One morning, waking up very early, I went to the main street looking for something to eat. I saw few people standing with cameras and tripods and aiming at something. I looked back and nearly fell! The sky was crystal clear. At the end of the street, few kilometers in the distance, where I saw the day before only clouds, I saw the amazing Yulong Xueshan - a 5500m snow-covered mountain, towering like an Everest that dominates the town. I elect to omit the fact that the full moon was still high in the sky because then you'd say that I simply exaggerate.

In the first night, we walked intoxicated in the little streets. Suddenly, I heard music coming through one courtyard. I entered. 9 old men, most of them looked like Confucius, were rehearsing a concert of Nakhi music. They were playing their authentic instruments (mostly string) and looked very calm and even listless, as though they took a serious dose of some good stuff earlier. I sat there with them for something like 20 magical minutes in which their somewhat hypnotic music filtrated through me. The next evening we went to a full concert of Nakhi music. It was an unforgettable experience and it reminded me a bit of the Buena Vista Social Club concert that I saw in Tel Aviv with Avital about 5-6 years ago. Then, we had no idea who Buena Vista were and didn't understand why everyone around is so ecstatic because of that geriatric bunch. Same here. The group that we heard is world-renowned and appeared all over the world and was even invited to Israel (but didn't go yet). Their leader is a most famous musician, friend of Ravii Shenkar and King Ulaf the 5th, among many others. He is a very educated man who fascinated us with explanations in Chinese and in English about each piece. He

sat in jail for 21 years during the infamous Cultural Revolution for playing Schubert's Marche Militaire to welcome the Red Army in Kunming in 1949 (the official crime was his devotion to western culture). Today, he's a celebrity that the communist party embraces, as the many pictures on the wall showed.

Shall I tell you how I met in Lijiang someone that I haven't seen in 20 years? Shall I tell you of the wonders of the Tiger Leaping gorge of the Yangtze river? Or shall I go to sleep?

Ummm...

zzzz....

Tamir