

# Footloose In Yunnan

Southwest China is home to Yunnan province, remarkable for its flora, landscapes, and year-round temperate climate. The capital, Kunming, located at a height of 5,000 feet, is barely two hours flying time from Kolkata. Indians are now beginning to discover this region and its multiple charms.

Kunming is replete with historical sights and monuments. It is also a garden city, with a profusion of parks and flowers. In 1999 it hosted the World Horticulture Expo, an event held every two years in different parts of the world – one of the traditions of this Expo, customarily spread over 50 hectares, is that the site becomes a permanent park, carrying over the collection of flowers, plants and the garden styles from all over the world.

Yunnan and Kunming were the anchor points of the Southern Silk Route that stretched from the great Buddhist sites of Bihar to China,

via what is today Myanmar. Sinologist Tansen Sen presents well this little known historical chapter in *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (2004). Today, in central Kunming one can find the statue of Emperor Ashok's horse Ashwamegha, who according to Chinese legend, had traversed vast distances to reach Yunnan.

Kunming is replete with parks and old temples, many of the latter thronged with worshippers, like the Vajra Pagoda and the



**Kishan S Rana takes us on a journey to Southwest China, along the Southern Silk Route, from flower-filled Kunming and ancient Lijian, to the mysterious Shangri-La.**



Clockwise from top left: The main square at Shangri-La; A woman belonging to one of Yunnan's many national minorities; A view of Po Da Tso National Park, just outside Shangri-La.

photographs by Kishan S Rana

## Yunnan's tea trees

Unlike the short tea bushes that we know in Darjeeling or elsewhere, China's tea trees grow to 20 metres and more. They typically live over 100 years, though it's said that the oldest in Yunnan is 1,000 years old. Traditionally, women have been the main source of labour for tea, being light and nimble to climb these for harvesting tea leaves.

Tea provided the foundation to this region's economy for over 700 years. The very best tea is grown in the Pu Er County (producing among the most exclusive of Chinese teas, some of which are matured for hundreds of years, a few worth their weight in gold!). This led to what was called the Tea Route, which involved Yunnan traders travelling on horseback with pack horses to Tibet with tea, compressed in round cakes, and then going on to India with animal skins, and coming back with Indian artefacts, on year-long journeys.

Fishermen use trained cormorants to fish at Erhai lake in Dali.



Miaoxian Temple (a Shaolin temple), in the city centre, close to Cuihu (Green Lake Park). Some 70 km from the city is Shilin, the Stone Forest, a world heritage site, where the natural limestone rock formations that jut out from the clay soil, weather-worn into unusual shapes, are endowed with imaginative names drawn from Chinese legends. This sprawling site is packed with tourists, who are also drawn to the day-long performances of dance and music by different ethnic communities, called 'national minorities' in China's political lexicon, that are part of the Yunnan heritage.

Travelling out of Kunming, the major attractions include Dali, located on a scenic lake, and two other heavily visited towns, Lijiang and Shangri-La. Lijiang is another world heritage site, a 1,000-year-old scenic village, roughly oval in shape with a diameter of about one km, with small canals and water channels traversing it. Apart from mopeds and scooters, no vehicles are allowed,

Lijiang is a world heritage site, a 1,000-year-old scenic village, with small canals and water channels. No vehicles are allowed, and it remains as in the olden times.

and in external visage Lijiang is as it might have been in the old times. But tourism and commerce reign supreme – every other cottage is an inn or a restaurant or a shop selling souvenirs. All the village inhabitants have moved out to the new township of modern houses that virtually encircles this village, having made way to some 6,000 modest and upmarket hotels, lodgings and shops, all discreetly signposted, preserving an old-world charm. Close to Lijiang are two other villages, not quite as quaintly charming, but there too, a process of commercial transformation is underway, under the relentless tourism pressure, mainly from domestic tourists who cover vast distances in their ubiquitous luxury buses.

Another major attraction is the town of Shangri-La, at the eastern edge of the province, forming part of the Tibetan plateau. Located at about 9,000 feet, with its major attractions at higher elevations, this demands from its tourist visitors a degree of fitness, an ability to adjust to low-oxygen conditions. What one encounters there is Tibetan culture, in the monasteries, the architecture of the houses, and the attire of the inhabitants, a sizeable proportion among them Tibetans.

The original name of this town was Zhongdian; in 2001 it was renamed after the mythical city in James Hutton's book *Lost Horizons*, a clever marketing ploy, since Shangri-La is associated with happiness and contentment. It provides a jump point to several sightseeing excursions in the high mountains, and is thronged with Chinese tourists. ■



Above: Jade Dragon Snow Mountain resort, outside Lijiang, with an artificial waterfall, under the lofty mountains. Right: A view of one of the many scenic lanes in Lijiang village.

