

## IN THE DEPTHS OF RURAL YUNNAN

December 1990

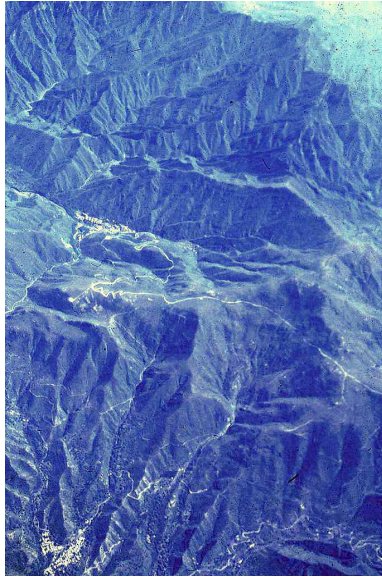


Text and Images: John Biggs © 2009

[www.johnbiggs.com.au](http://www.johnbiggs.com.au)

## IN THE DEPTHS OF RURAL YUNNAN

It's the 20<sup>th</sup> December, 1990. Catherine and I are in a hellish chaos, surrounded by thousands of heavily smoking, spitting, shrieking creatures. It is Guangzhou Airport. We are here to catch a



Yunnan Air flight to Kunming, and we have just heard the news that internal Chinese flights managed to kill 230 people last year, mostly through poorly maintained aircraft. The only way of knowing when our flight is ready is when our flight number flicks into view for a critical minute or so on the mechanical Departures board, as it chatters at high speed every few seconds. Miraculously, our flight is only an hour late; even more miraculously our tour guide, Gloria, spots it before a new bunch of flight details chatters over the old. We are pleased to see the plane is a brand new Boeing, hopefully not yet in need of much maintenance. We board hand carrying all our luggage, which is stacked anywhere it can fit: the overhead lockers fill with in seconds, so knees, aisles, floor cope with the rest. The pilot seems to think he is operating a helicopter: he takes off as near to

vertical as aerodynamics allows, the cabin suddenly full of flying objects. But we stay in the air and admire the rugged country below.

We are going on an eight day bus tour of the highlands on the Tibetan plateau, Yunnan Province. This is where the Minorities live, such as the Yi and Bai ethnic groups. Our tour guide, Gloria, has basic English but excellent Putonghua. Once in China, all the guides and arrangements have to be local, leaving Gloria's job to translate and, much more important, conduct damage control. The languages on the trip are Cantonese from Gloria, and Putonghua from the numerous Mainland guides. Of the fourteen in the group, I am the only nonChinese; Catherine is my translator.



Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, is 'Spring City', so called because it is subtropical and 1,500 high: spring all the year round. Western Mountain, overlooking the city, is a huge, precipitous rock leaping out of one end of the Lake. The hotel is good, dinner an interesting mixture of Cantonese style stir-fried

veg and Szechuan, the province with the fiery cuisine on the northern boundary of Yunnan. Breakfast is congee with preserved vegetables, a boiled egg, fluffy buns, fried wheatcakes, a huge bowl of spicy-hot Szechuan dan-dan noodles, which I like very much but not for breakfast, a glass of sweet powdered milk, and tea – frightening, to an orange-juice-and-muesli man. I am to discover that lunches are to be eight courses, usually, and dinners ten – and in one memorable case, thirty-two.

Next day, we board our minibus to Dali, 400 km and seven major accidents up the track. Trucks in ditches, wounded men lying on the road, are cheerful reminders that on Chinese roads one's grip on life is tenuous.



Most traffic is heavy trucks, bearing large logs from the rapidly diminishing forests of the interior, or military trucks carrying cheerful soldiers of the Peoples' Liberation Army. The roads are lined each side with Australian eucalypts, their lower trunks daubed with whitewash, acting as guideposts.

Toilet stops are as life threatening as the roads.

The standard village toilet is an open bricked-off area, designed as a long drop, but prolonged use over the centuries has shifted the faecal axis 90°, so that shit stacks horizontally not vertically. My technique for urination is to hyperventilate outside, rush inside, spray as forcefully as a prostate-strangled urethra can, and rush out to gulp something less polluted. But at 2,500m up, I can't hold my breath long enough. On one occasion I am forced to inhale the poisoned atmosphere inside; I feel something hard the size of a cockroach clawing my throat. A virus. Within hours I have a raging sore throat, running cold, chest congestion and cough. Fortunately, Yunnanese Shit Flu is a concentrate of ordinary flu: instead of a week or two, I run the cycle in four days, from start to finish.

Outside the terrible toilet, a hawker does a roaring trade selling oranges and other edible goodies. As we board the bus, a group gather around to watch these strangers with close attention. One young man strolls up, his trousers around his knees, his dick aswing – what a photo-op, but my innate discretion prevails. He sits down beside the bus, gaping. I hadn't realized that China and Australia had a similar policy with regard to people with mental disorder: integration into the community.



The road gradually climbs uphill towards the Tibetan plateau. We pass through more villages; the industrial focus of which seems to be a large kiln, producing a blanket of smoke and the all purpose ceramics for which China is famous: vases, cups, bowls, spoons. Our guide from Kunming, Xiao An – at that stage a seemingly nice little fellow – entertains us with stories and songs of the minority people. One story tells of the last time there was snow in Kunming – 400 years ago, during the Ming Dynasty. The teacher told his class they were to compose poems about this unusual snow. When asked what they might write, he gave an example:

When the snow falls it hits the ground and turns to water.  
Why doesn't it just rain in the first place?

One student wrote:

When my teacher eats his food it turns to shit.  
Why doesn't he just eat shit in the first place?

Which brings me to my next story. We were advised before we set out to bring our own toilet paper because you couldn't rely on the hotels supplying it. After being allocated our rooms at our Dali hotel, Billy, a retired cop with an extraordinary trombone of a voice, marches back to reception braying in Putonghua: 'There's no toilet paper in my room!'



'You'll have to wait until morning. The manager is the only one with the keys to the store and she's gone home. If you need it, you go out and buy it!'

Billy has the authority befitting one of Asia's Finest. 'Then the manager had better return!' he orders splendidly.

Amazingly, the manager does, with a plastic bag full of toilet rolls. Through Catherine, I say we need some too, as our room is running low.

The manager looks suspicious. She strides off to check our room. She quickly returns, fixing me with a terrible glare. 'You have enough.' The impudent greed of this Long Nose! We don't have enough as it turns out. We have to broach our emergency supply; worrying, so early in the trip.

Breakfast in the Dali hotel is typically enormous, with large sweet cakes in addition to everything else. Unfinished food from previous diners ends up on the dining room floor: eggshells, half-chewed buns and cakes. I see a mouse scurry from table droppings to table droppings.

Yet another guide, Xiao Li, a tall Bai woman joins our tour. The Bais are one of the 52 minority ethnic groups in China, most living in the Yunnan. Bai (meaning 'white') houses are beautiful, with at least one white wall with dark blue trimmings; the people wear white headgear. The lake people are light in skin colour and attractive, while the mountain Bais are sunburned and wizened. But both are colourful and cheery, in sharp contrast to the Han Chinese, that is the dominant ethnic group in China, who in areas with minority populations, try to maintain their superiority with astonishing displays of rudeness.



We are piped aboard a boat run by the Bais for a lunch cruise on the Li Hai Lake, at one end of which is Dali, and over the mountain to the west



is Tibet. On the boat are several Han Chinese cadres. The Bais give a concert of their music and dancing; the cadres push their way to the front to watch but smoke and chatter loudly throughout. During the show a Bai girl serves them a ceremonial bowl of tea. At the end of the show, the cadres refuse to clap. We only applaud equals or superiors: you can see it written on their scornful



faces.

I see many examples of such Han arrogance. Billy is having his photo taken in front of a pagoda, when two locals deliberately stand in front of him. He asks them to move, they won't. He puts an enormous arm around each, drawing them beside him, braying, 'Okay, we all get our photo taken!' It is a brilliant nonviolent deprivation of face.

At Lijiang we pick up yet another guide to join our team of guides: Xiao Hoa. He translates his spiel into English, ostensibly for my sole benefit, but the way he does says it is really to show what a clever fellow Xiao Hoa is.

He guides us to the Jade Dragon Mountains, which should have been spectacular but this afternoon they are shrouded in mist; it is snowing and it is bloody cold. But the driver and the other guides have never been here before. Excited, they stop the bus and the three guides and the driver jump out to throw snowballs at each other and take photos. They stop, stand in a line, and invite us to come out and join them.



‘No,’ we say. ‘We’re cold. We want to go back.’ They laugh and continue snowballing while we huddle in the bus and freeze. We might have been paying these pipers but we are calling no tunes.

Lijiang main town seems mainly to be a PLA army depot; certainly it is as interesting as one. The taxi is an ex PLA motorbike – the Chinese filched a 1930s BMW blueprint and churned out these two-wheeled tanks that are now collectors’ pieces. The Old Town is a very different matter. The main square is covered in market stalls with all sorts of food and animals for sale, while around are pretty streams overhung by attractive houses in which attractive women do their chores, on balconies or in the streams, banging the clothes with rocks in the ancient way.



The Na Xi minority live in an old, old village nearby. We enter through a gateway decorated with Na Xi pictographs. Pictographs, like hieroglyphics, are the earliest forms of writing using stylized pictures, long before the Chinese invented characters. The Na Xi also have their own

musical style – but they won't have it for much longer. They give us a concert but almost all the players are very old men; all the young have fled to the cities of Dali and beyond. They aren't interested in learning their grandfathers' music. Another contribution to civilization by the Na Xi is that it was a fully matriarchal society – there was no marriage, therefore no husbands and no fathers. With no husbandly or fatherly duties to attend to, the men had plenty of time to play in their orchestra. Brothers and sisters lived together for life, raising the children the females bore. Girls selected the men they wished to sleep with and by prearranged signal, a man would visit his woman in her bedroom for the night and leave next morning. Attractive women could have several lovers a week. The system broke down about two generations ago when opportunistic outsiders, including Westerners, came along for the ride, so to speak.



and leave next morning. Attractive women could have several lovers a week. The system broke down about two generations ago when opportunistic outsiders, including Westerners, came along for the ride, so to speak.

After the concert we have our thirty-two course Na Xi banquet. It comes in four waves. They start with the sweets: cakes, crystallized fruits, very sweet glutinous rice wine. The next wave is all deep fried, but also sweet; next, fish dishes, augmented with congealed blood, grass jelly and what look and taste awfully like fries; finally, meat, vegetables and a big hot-pot to finish. It works. Maybe the sweet, powerful rice wine catalyses that miracle. The picture shows Course 23 about to be appear.



works. Maybe the sweet, powerful rice wine catalyses that miracle. The picture shows Course 23 about to be appear.



We board the bus to leave Lijiang. As the door closes, the manageress rushes out of the hotel, shouting, banging on the bus door. The driver opens it. She loudly accuses Billy of owing 150 yuan for damage to the TV set in his room. He refuses, not unreasonably on the ground that it was damaged when he got there. An ex-cop, he pulls authority and she backs off. We work out what that was all about. As a State hotel, the manager is held responsible for damage. This manager decided she had more chance of getting compensation from rich Hong Kongers who

didn't cause the damage than from the cadres or PLA soldiers who did. But in this case she was wrong.

We return to Dali 200 km and four accidents down the track, staying this time in Dali Old Town, which is very picturesque, similar to Lijiang Old Town, with central market and streams through the village. I buy a striped waistcoat tailor-made for 40 yuan (\$A6). When we tell the little Chinese seamstress we are leaving next morning, she stops reading her Balzac<sup>1</sup> and stays up till 1am on Christmas Eve to finish it. I still wear it.



Christmas Day is back to Kunming, 400 km and  $x$  accidents later, but  $x$  remains unknown, because we return to Kunming in darkness, arriving after midnight. We had run out of petrol. Our driver was operating some scam by fiddling petrol prices and accounts; he bought petrol in dribs and drabs from PLA sources at grossly inflated prices. On Christmas morning on the way to Kunming, the depot had no petrol; stock-taking they say, and certainly their stock appeared to have been taken and hadn't been replaced. The driver takes us back 100km back from whence we had come. We spend a whole morning wandering around to kill time.



Xiao An has arranged for some dancers to entertain us when we arrive in Kunming. Gloria asks him to phone ahead and let the waiting dancers know we won't arrive in time. He is dismissive.

'Why bother? They'll wait until about 9 p.m. and then go home.'

Next morning, we sit down to breakfast when Xiao An rushes into the room. 'Stop eating!' he orders. 'We have to go somewhere else for breakfast.'

Why didn't he tell us that before we sat down? Is it arrogance, ideology or incompetence that prevents PRC officials from telling people what they need to know to

<sup>1</sup> A reference to Dai Sijie's autobiographical novel, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (Vintage Books, 2002). He also directed a film of the same name.

make life simple?

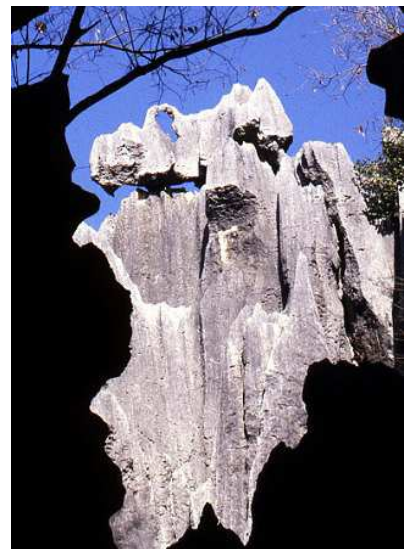
Western Mountain is dramatic, misty and splendid, with brilliantly painted Dao temples carved into the side of the Mountain. The locals get up early and put a string across all the lookout points. On payment of 40c, they take the strings down, so that we tourists can see the view and take photos.

The bus driver had promised he could get some of the famous Yunnan ham, rather like *prosciutto*. Gloria had explained it would be only \$HK60 per catty (600 gm), very cheap by Hong Kong standards. The ham finally arrives at our last dinner. Quick whisperings between Gloria and the driver; an embarrassed Gloria announces: 'Special price is \$65, \$60 not possible.' Those who had ordered – which was almost everyone else except us – do the expedient thing and cough up the extra. They should have left the bastard with 20 catties of unsold ham.

The Petrified Forest south of Kunming is a spectacular area of jagged, strangely shaped monoliths, with names like 'Two Phoenixes Kissing', 'The Dragon Fights Two Bears'. Here I take one of my favourite photographs: a minority girl is dressed in her ethnic costume and just stands there. She is used as a decoration. She is gazing into the distance, wondering: 'What's a girl like me doing



in a place like this?' As we walk back to the entrance, we hear infant screams of terror and yells of adult laughter. A gardener, watering a large circular flowerbed, has turned his hose onto a passing toddler. She is cringing into a soaked, screaming ball; he is slapping his thighs with delight at his clever joke.



In the tourist shop, you can buy skins of mountain cats – animals that are heading towards extinction. At less than \$10 US a pelt, they are a real bargain.

