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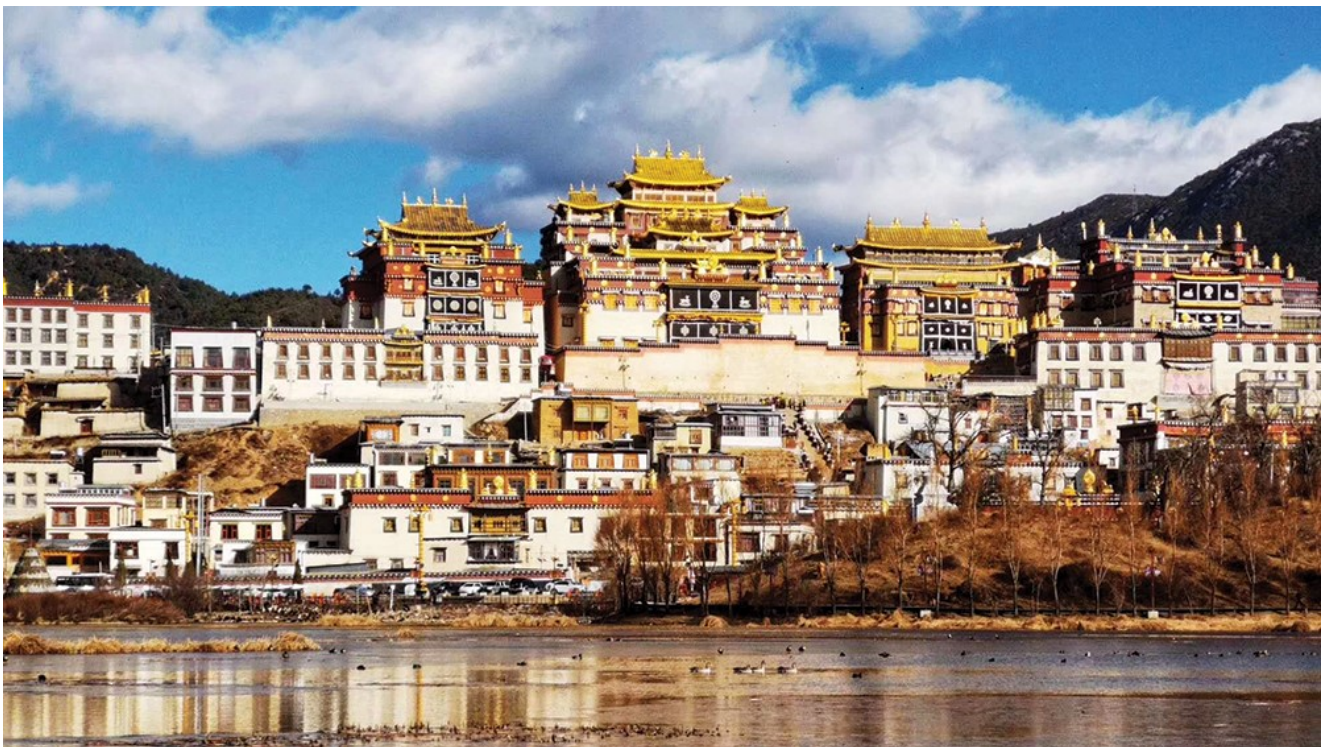
Road To Shangri-La

For decades, Yunnan has fascinated many a curious traveller with its rolling landscapes, ethnic melting pot and conviviality at every turn. From the jewel that is Shangri-La to Kunming and Dali, we embark on a voyage through one of China's most mystical regions.

By Mark Andrews

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Shangri-La in James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* might have been fictional, but that hasn't stopped many places from claiming to be its inspiration. None have gone quite as far as Zhongdian, however. Perched on the northwestern edge of China's Yunnan Province and hugged by some of the country's most splendid scenery, it boldly renamed itself Shangri-La in 2001.



The lives of ethnic minority Naxi women in the village and peach orchards in Lijiang; a stone's throw away is the Songtsam Lin Monastery | Photo: The LUX Collective

For a language that values literature, province names in China tend to be pretty staid.

more a region than a road.



Photo: The LUX Collective

It's here that one begins their journey, but not before a restful evening at one of the many unique boutique hotels dotted around the area. Hospitality group The LUX Collective has a series of quaint, characterful hotels at various stops along the Tea Horse Road, ranging in size from a handful of rooms to a few dozen. Currently open in Lijiang and with locations soon to open in Dali and Shangri-La, they all blend historic aesthetics with modern amenities.

In the morning, step outside and you'll discover find scenes that enthrall in their raw, authentic beauty. An elderly man leisurely passes a bow over the two strings of his erhu, which emits a melancholic melody; nearby, a group of ladies with oil-painted parasols twirl as they practise a dance. Kunming, nicknamed the "Spring City" thanks to its mild climate, has a laid-back vibe and this provincial capital is your gateway into



Lion Hill with Wangu Tower, the old town of Dayan, Lijiang, Yunnan, China

Unsurprisingly, with all the ethnic groups, food in Yunnan is among the most diverse in China. Kunming's 1910 La Gare du Sud, in the old French railway station, is a great introduction to the region's cuisine. Additionally, Yunnan and Sichuan are the cradles of tea drinking. Pu-erh comes from Yunnan and the Tea Horse Road gets its name from the trade in tea bricks for Tibetan ponies from areas to the west. However, trade wasn't just about tea and horses, with salt also being one of the prized commodities traversing the trails.

To the northwest of Kunming, Heijing was once one of the richest towns in Yunnan precisely thanks to its salt production. Abandoned salt wells line the Longchuan River and cobbled streets rise up, flanked by Qing Dynasty-era buildings in varying states of disrepair. At night you might hear the faint sounds of opera emanating from buildings, heralding the ghosts of the town's artistic past. Once home to one of the town's wealthiest families, the Wu Family Mansion, with its hundred-odd rooms arranged in



Three pagodas with the mountains reflecting in the lake in front is almost synonymous with Dali. Down the slope from town is Erhai Lake. Cyclists will find plenty of old villages to explore around the shore, while boats can ferry you to some of the islands on the lake. The mountains above the town offer plenty of hiking opportunities. For those wanting something more challenging, the Climb Dali club offers climbing and other adventurous activities. Cheese is common in the region, so while you're in Dali, try rushan – a Bai speciality that features stretched cheese, eaten fried or wrapped around a stick, with rose jam.





Photo: The LUX Collective

The route from Dali to Lijiang veers to the north and takes you up around 400 metres in elevation. Old Lijiang, sitting in the shadow of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, is home to the largely matriarchal Naxi ethnic minority group, whose culture remains intact. Naxi pictographs are like hieroglyphics and you'll find them adorning trinkets, ranging from art to clothing. You can also get a taste of culture through the nightly orchestra performances. Outside of town, Baisha and Shuhe offer a less touristy introduction to the culture. Shuhe also houses a museum about the Tea Horse Road.

In Lijiang, try your hand at cooking Naxi cuisine through food tour operator Lost

to take the high path on a two-to-three-day trek. High above you, the mountains push their snow-capped peaks into the crisp air, while the wild river crashes its way through the landscape far below. This is one of the deepest canyons in the world, with 3,900 metres separating the peaks from the valley floor.



PHOTO: SHANGRI-LA HOTELS AND RESORTS

Across the region, it seems that for every 200 metres you gain in elevation, there's a change in ethnic minority group – and that's perhaps the soul of its ever-captivating allure. As you go from Tiger Leaping Gorge to Shangri-La, the Naxi give way to the Tibetans, who favour the higher altitudes. While the town is mainly split between the Tibetans and the Han (China's dominant ethnic group), along with a few other

