

Shangri-La: Take 3

The hidden paradise

> By Dominick A. Merle

LJIANG, China--Is this the mythical Shangri-La come true? You might have a hard time convincing the old farmer hoeing his field for 12 hours a day, but city officials have been bold enough to rename the main thoroughfare Shangri-La Road. And the upscale Shangri-La hotel chain is eyeing property in the area, something it does not do unless it can spot well-heeled travelers on the horizon. I came here to find out what all the fuss was about and left with the conclusion that if this is not the elusive La-La land...well, we'll get to that later.

First, a little geography. Lijiang is well off the usual tourist route, situated in Yunnan Province in southwest China. A day's drive to the south is the Golden Triangle of Burma, Laos and Thailand. Drive north for a day and you enter Tibet. Few North Americans are heading here for

the moment, opting instead for the big-three glamour spots in China's booming tourism industry--Shanghai, Beijing and Xian, home of the magnificent terracotta army. Lijiang wants to be number four on that select list, and work up from there. Webster defines Shangri-La as "any

imaginary idyllic utopia or hidden paradise." Translation: It doesn't really exist. Even British author James Hilton, whose novel "Lost Horizon" first described a place called Shangri-La, said you would not find it on any map. But he went on to say that it was located near "the loveliest mountain on ▶



Heirongtan

هيرونغتان



Local girl

فتاة من الأهالي



Tourist boat

قارب سياحي

earth" where people of many ethnic backgrounds live in perfect harmony. He didn't know it at the time (or did he?), and there are no records of him ever visiting here, but he pretty much painted a picture of Lijiang. This ancient city lies in the shadow of the 18,300-foot-tall Jade Dragon Snow Mountain in the lower Himalayas, and it is truly one of the most beautiful mountains you will see anywhere. Its 13 jagged peaks are snow-capped year around and resemble a dragon's teeth.

Lijiang is also home to many ethnic minorities--Naxi, Yi, Pumi, Lisu, Tibetan and Bai--who believe in many religions--Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, Dongbaism and Hanguism--all of whom seem to live in "perfect harmony," just like in the book.

But if author Hilton never set eyes on the place, then how could this be his Shangri-La? Enter American botanist and writer Joseph F. Rock, and this is where the plot thickens, bordering on (yikes!) even hints of plagiarism.

Rock made his headquarters in this area as leader of the National Geographic Society's

Yunnan Province Expeditions. He published a series of articles with scores of photographs between 1924 and 1935, many of them describing the history, culture, landscape and religions of the Lijiang area. Hilton's book was published in 1933. You do the maths, the locals are quick to say. Circumstantial and close, but still no cigar. The verdict to come.

Lijiang's Old Town dates back 1,300 years to the Song and Yuan dynasties. It is canal-laced and has often been described as a mini-Venice. Houses have earthen walls and tile roofs, courtyards are filled with flowers and trees are in bloom year around. Although there is snow on the peaks of the nearby Jade Dragon Mountain year round, you can still stroll through Old Town in T-shirts in late fall and early winter.

The narrow winding streets are cobbled, bridges are everywhere and the town is crisscrossed by rivulets and alleyways. Wooden planks lead from the streets--where no cars are allowed, only bicycles and carts--into the quaint shops and restaurants. The food is good, the atmosphere is intoxicating and the service is warm and friendly.

But fear not. If this sounds a bit too much like Shangri-La or perhaps Camelot, you're quickly jolted back to reality by the scores of street vendors hawking knock-off Rolexes, Gucci bags and the like. I bought a phony watch and got back some phony Chinese money in change. Hilton never described anything like that in Lost Horizon.

I spent a memorable evening in the Old Town at a concert of ancient music performed by members of the Naxi ethnic group. Wearing colorful robes and sporting Confucius-like beards, the 30-odd musicians, average age perhaps close to 70, played a type of music called Dongjing that was popular among the elite during the 16th century.

The instruments were strange and colorful, parts of them made from animals and reptiles. While the ancient music was literally foreign to my untrained ear, the sight of these seniors carrying on the tradition was both uplifting and entertaining. One member of the group, a man who looked to be well into his 70s, prefaced each segment with a strange chant. Each time he opened his mouth I ▶



Lanterns

فوانيس

counted no more than three teeth. The group was established in 1987 to preserve Dongjing music and has performed throughout Europe. But its aim may be a lost cause. There were only four members of the group under age 50 and it has become increasingly difficult to attract new members. It is sad to think that this delightful group will one day never again be a part of Lijiang's Old Town. To get to Lijiang, one must fly from either Beijing or one of the other major cities in China to Kunming, the mile-high capital of Yunnan Province. Kunming is known as the "City of Eternal Spring." The climate is mild, the skies are clear and flowers bloom year-around.

Historically, Kunming was a gateway to the famed Silk Road. Today, it is a clean, uncluttered city of some 800,000 residents that represent 26 ethnic nationalities. The Chinese have a flair for colorful names and a mountain on the outskirts of Kunming is called Sleeping Beauty Mountain. But this is more than colorful; the peak actually looks like a sleeping beauty, as though it was carved to fit the description. Lijiang is 40 minutes by air northwest of Kunming. In addition to its charming Old Town and cable-car ride to the top of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, Lijiang can also be a base to view the Tiger Leaping Gorge, the first gorge of the Yangtze River system.

The gorge has a drop of several thousand meters and the waters of the Jungshajiang River roll forward thunderously. Legend has it that a tiger, aided by a large rock in the center of the turbulent river, leaped from one side of the gorge to the other. One of Yunnan Province's other major attractions is the Stone Forest east of Kunming, a 200-acre site of limestone peaks ranging in height from about 10 to 100 feet. They are packed closely together and some of the shapes of the peaks have strong resemblances to a baby elephant, two birds kissing...whatever your mind wants to see. You thread through the peaks along ▶

winding paths and bridges over pools and lakes. The Stone Forest was formed by sea sediment that was uplifted about 200 million years ago, and eroded into the limestone forest seen today. It's a geological wonderland that fits in easily with this mystical province.

But while the Tiger Leaping Gorge and the Stone Forest are bonafide attractions in their own rights, officials are banking on Lijiang to lure the tourists of the 21st Century.

So now the answer. Is this the place? Is this what Hilton was talking about in Lost Horizon, whether or not he (yikes!) lifted the description? Maybe. Okay, that may sound like a cop-out. But a few other spots in the world like to call themselves the one and only Shangri-La. Both Pakistan and Tibet have their candidates, and there's another claim being made right here in Yunnan Province, from the small city of Diqing a few hours north of here.

Let's give Webster the last word. He called Shangri-La "any hidden paradise." That doesn't sound like you could find it on a map. That sounds to me more like a place in the heart. ■

(Dominick Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)



Old town gate

بوابة في المدينة القديمة

IF YOU GO:

Passports and visas are required for entry to China. Contact your nearest Chinese Consulate or travel agent.

We flew Air China nonstop from Vancouver to Beijing, then changed to Yunnan Airways for the flight to Kunming.

Pack light. There are fantastic bargains throughout China. Buy a second suitcase after you arrive and stuff it with anything else you need.

Negotiate everywhere for the best prices, even in large department stores in big cities like Shanghai or Beijing. Section managers are authorized to cut prices.

For further information, contact the China National Tourist Office at 480 University Ave., Suite 806, Toronto, Ontario M5G 1V2, email cnto@tourismchina-ca.com or go to the website www.cnto.org



Tiger Leaping Gorge

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