

A blend in the river

Luxury Chinese resort features region's rich ethnic heritage with a Thai touch, writes **Penny Watson**

If taste were of no concern, the new Anantara Xishuangbanna Resort and Spa might have been named to reflect its Chinese and Thai influences. "Thaina" perhaps. Or "Chi-land".

Thankfully, taste does come into play. And some would argue that Xishuangbanna, a spectacularly cultural region tucked in the southern part of Yunnan province, bordering Laos and Myanmar, is only Chinese by name, not nature.

They'd be half right.

Xishuangbanna is a semi-autonomous region with 12 recognised ethnic minorities, including the Hani, Aizu and Dai people, plus Han Chinese, making up the population. The Dai people are the most populous and recognisable here, and it's their unique ethnic aesthetic that has inspired the region's first five-star resort.

The open-air lobby is impressive. Its palatial, peaked teak ceiling, towering columns with hand-painted gold motifs and trickling green pond water feature are all informed - on a grander scale - by the traditional Dai home. Cushioned couches in myriad patterns and delicately crafted "anteak" chairs where cold towels and welcome tea are served, all hint at

what's to come - luxury comforts and service Southeast Asia-style.

The resort didn't stray far from its Thai roots when it chose the locale, which has a very Southeast Asian feel and climate. Eighty deluxe guest rooms and 23 pool villas are spread throughout a luscious tropical garden dotted with pagodas and waterfalls, along with statues of peacocks and elephants (China's last Asian elephant herd can be found in the region).

Elsewhere, market umbrellas and palm trees shade deck chairs beside a pool where frangipani trees send a whiff of would-be expensive perfume through the air and pool boys stand at the ready with icy water, fluffy towels and a cocktail list.

Guests have a stone's-throw view of the Luosuo river, which becomes the mighty Mekong further downstream. The overall effect is pure Thai holiday with just the Chinese staff hinting at our locale.

We spend the first night in the Deluxe Riverview Terrace Suite, a spacious bedroom decked out in creature comforts (deep bath, iPod dock, walk-in wardrobe, feather duvets) and Asian decor (crafted teak furnishings, ethnic fabrics). Outdoors,



The open-air lobby (left); a River Pool Villa; misty mountains surround the resort (below).

the terrace has a pergola, sun loungers and a river view.

The following night, we are upgraded to a two-bedroom River Pool Villa. Walk-in wardrobes lead into bathrooms, which lead into bedrooms, which lead into rooms that seemingly serve only to separate one room from the other. With a butler service, daily high tea offerings and the option of a poolside barbecue for dinner, the effect is privileged and princely, and it takes effort to venture out again.

But we manage. The region is known for its pu'er tea, so we take a day trip to Yiwu Mountain where we walk through the old town and are shown how the tea is made. Back at the resort, we have a tasting hosted by a Dai lady in the resort's tea lounge.

On another day we take the short walk from the resort to Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden, one of the largest in the world, with 35 different garden habitats featuring more than 10,000 species of tropical plants.

Many of these plants feature on the menus. The Mekong restaurant dishes up cuisine from the lands the river runs through: we have Thai one night and Sichuan the next, but my favourite is Dai, a cuisine heavy on fresh local herbs, and roasted chilli and garlic.

Maybe this place should be called "Dai-land".

Anantara Xishuangbanna Resort and Spa

Menglun town, Mengla county, Xishuangbanna, Yunnan province
anantara.com

Getting there

Several carriers fly from Hong Kong to Kunming International Airport. From Kunming, carriers including China Eastern and Sichuan Airlines connect to Jinghong where you'll be collected for the 45-minute drive to the resort. Allow two hours' transfer time at Kunming.

Staying there

Entry-level Deluxe Garden View suites cost from 1,800 yuan (HK\$2,276) per night, or 2,035 yuan, including breakfast. Pool villas cost from 3,600 yuan.

