

## Sharing the dragon's treasure

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A member of the Yi ethnic minority offers prayers to the god of the earth with chicken blood. **Photo: The Nature Conservancy**

### Ute Junker

The star-gazing trees jut upwards straight as a sword, 40 metres and more into the sky. It's not just their height that's extraordinary, however: it's the fact that, until four decades ago, no one knew they existed.

*Parashorea chinensis*, to give the species its more prosaic Latin name, can reach up to 70 metres in height and was discovered by scientists in 1975. Until then, these trees had remained hidden in the thick forests of Yunnan province, on China's southwest frontier. Five hours' flight from the eastern hubs of Beijing and China, Yunnan's jungles still hold plenty of surprises.

More than half of China's 30,000 plant species are found here, along with half its bird and mammal species. Living among the dense trees are bison, monkeys and perhaps even the Indochinese tiger (the last known example was killed and eaten by villagers in 2009, but scientists hope some of its kin may still roam the forest). Southern Yunnan is also home to China's last wild elephants – 300 specimens that criss-cross the borders to neighbouring Myanmar, Laos and Thailand.

With its sub-tropical climate and mountains that roll towards you like waves, Yunnan is unlike anywhere else in China. Even the people are different. Here, the Han Chinese are the minority. The largest local tribe is the Dai, but 12 other hill tribes also live here, including the Hani, the Yi and the Jinuo. Wandering through the area's small villages, we learn to distinguish the tribes by their clothing: colourful Dai shirts worn with long skirts, Hani hats heavy with silver bells and coloured pompoms, or striped Jinuo tops.

Yunnan doesn't feel like China. The local Buddhist temples resemble the Lanna temples of northern Thailand, with gilded peaks and intricate latticework. Dai is the area's official language, and street signs are written in curling Dai script as well as the more angular Chinese characters. There's none of the staring that greets Westerners in many parts of China; just a relaxed welcome that is extended to all visitors.

### Need to know

- **Getting there** China Southern flies from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth to Guangzhou with connections to Xishuangbanna. Tel: 1300 889 628.
- **Staying there** Deluxe rooms start at RMB 2000 (about \$350), pool villas start at RMB 4000. [anantara.com](http://anantara.com)

## Tea for tourists

Yunnan was able to preserve its distinctiveness for centuries thanks to the rugged landscape – all mountain peaks, deep valleys and plunging rivers – that isolated much of the province. However, booming prices for local exports such as rubber, tea and minerals have led to significant investment in Yunnan over the past five years. New roads and bridges make it easier to travel around the province, particularly the scenic southern areas surrounding Xishuangbanna.

Large numbers of Chinese tourists visit Yunnan every year, drawn not just by its beauty, but also by its mystique as the birthplace of tea. In these fertile lands – Xishuangbanna is an adaptation of the Dai name, Sipsongpanna, meaning land of 12,000 rice paddies – wild tea trees were first cultivated over 4000 years ago. The region is known for its pu'er tea, a rare variety that, like wine, can be aged to improve flavour.

Connoisseurs bypass the tea plantations – considered to produce inferior-quality tea – and head instead to the mist-wrapped mountain-top villages where tea-growing is a family affair. Each family has the right to harvest leaves from specific trees, the oldest of which – more than 1000 years old – are gnarled but still strong, towering over our heads.

A local who invites us to sample his teas tells us that his family has been harvesting tea for six generations. He breaks open a fresh brick of tea – unlike other teas, pu'er is usually compressed into round cakes or solid bricks – and steeps a small amount in hot water for around 10 seconds before pouring it into tiny cups for us to sample.

Pu'er is very concentrated – 5mg yields 30 to 40 cups of tea. It's not a cheap pleasure, however. Prices are determined by a range of factors, including the specific mountain on which the tea is grown, the age of the tree, the season in which it is harvested (of the three yearly harvests, the spring harvest commands the highest price), and how long the tea has been matured. The cheapest tea I find is about RMB 300 (\$50) for 357 grams; in one store, a cake of tea from 1989 is for sale for RMB 6200 (more than \$1000).

## Bamboo worm, anyone?

Another local attraction is the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden, the largest in the world. It covers 1100 hectares and contains 13,000 species, so serious plant-lovers will want to dedicate a couple of days to exploring this extraordinary series of gardens, which is also one of China's key scientific institutes. Even on a casual visit, you'll need a couple of hours to see some highlights.

The 38 separate collections – linked by regular shuttles – include gardens devoted to bamboo, aquatic plants, aromatic plants and strangling plants. The poetic Chinese plant names add to the experience. We are introduced to "dancing grass", which moves when music is played; the "shy tree", which curls up its leaves when touched; and the "single man tree", which has no fruit or flowers – legend has it that anyone who touches it will remain single forever.

Adjoining the botanic garden is the area's only five-star resort, the newly opened Anantara Xishuangbanna. The riverside resort, which has a range of pool villas as well as deluxe rooms, offers luxurious surrounds and a wide range of activities that introduce guests to local culture, including home visits to local tribes. Dining options include fabulous Dai meals, fragrant with fresh herbs and the smell of barbecue.

The local restaurants – simple roofed structures by the side of the road – also serve delicious meals, but you'll need either a guide or reasonably fluent Chinese to order a meal. An easy alternative is to head to a local village in the evenings, when food stalls spring up along the streets, and simply point at what you want.

You can play it safe with fried pork, sweet corn and freshwater prawns, or get stuck into the chicken's feet and bamboo worms. Either way, be prepared to have your meal interrupted by friendly locals who want to come and drink a toast to you. They give a warm welcome in Yunnan.

The writer was a guest of China Southern and Anantara Xishuangbanna

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