



## ABOUT THE WRITER

Keith Austin has been a journalist more than 35 years. He is passionate about food, drink, travel, writing, photography, humour and soccer.



# Far horizons

In China's remote Yunnan Province, **Keith Austin** finds high-end seclusion in an unspoilt landscape.

**X**ishuangbanna is a prefecture in Yunnan Province. This, in turn, is in far south-western China, not far from northern Laos or the wilds of Burma. But please don't get the idea that it's in the middle of nowhere. No, it's way past that.

First, you take a 10-hour flight from Sydney to Guangzhou, where a mini stopover is strongly advised, then there's a short hop to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, followed by a change of planes and another quick jaunt down to the Xishuangbanna International Airport in Jinghong, where you

jump into a car for one final hour of travel to Menglun town.

It seems daunting but the destination, the luxurious and freshly minted Anantara Resort & Spa, makes it all worthwhile, especially when you're greeted with icy hand towels, deliciously cold Yunnan tea and a 90-minute lavender and bergamot oil massage.

After which, Jukky, my masseuse, a young woman whose disposition had me reaching for the thesaurus because, really, "cheery" just doesn't cut it, slipped me under the door of my private pool villa. (Of course she didn't, but

she could have, given I was as malleable as a yoga mat.)

There are about 45 million people in Yunnan province's 394,000 square kilometres, mostly in the east. Here, in the wilder western mountains, where tropical rainforests and river valleys hold sway, the population is sparse and rural and made up of ethnic groups such as the Yi, Bai, Hani, Zhuang, Dai and Miao people.

It's far off the beaten track for most Western tourists but is proving a bit of a mecca for wealthy Chinese, who are flocking to the area, looking to explore an unspoilt, hot, tropical part of their

own country. Hence the arrival of Anantara, the Thai-owned deluxe hotel, resort and spa chain.

The resort itself is magnificent, with an elegant, soaring entrance that takes away the breath and a killer position on a tranquil curve of the Luosuo River (a tributary of the Mekong), where locals wearing the evocative conical bamboo hats of Asia fish with hand-thrown nets.

We were there just six months after it opened and it was, the manager said, operating at 70 per cent occupancy. So where was everybody? Well, it seems many guests just stay in their rooms, coming out only occasionally for

food and drink. And, really, you can't blame them, for this is the sort of polished luxury that makes it almost a sin to leave the private plunge pool, the licentious loungers around it, the deep, stand-alone bath, the sleep-inducing bed, those cloud-like pillows, and the exotic fruit/sweets plate with macarons that would make Adriano Zumbo blush with embarrassment.

It's odd how quickly you can change from being so chilled out that Jukky could pour you through the keyhole to becoming an immovable object that has to have its fingers pried off the villa doorframe while screaming, "Don't make me leave - there's a macaron left!"

But this was a media travel trip and they make you do stuff, even if you do all smell strongly of lavender and bergamot.

Yunnan province is the epitome of the word "untouched" and yet the main roads here, some of them



**A little bit country: (From far left) the Anantara Xishuangbanna Resort & Spa; the resort's interior; villagers en route to town; a tea picker; a rope-bridge walk through jungle treetops. Photos: Alamy, Getty Images**

built only in the past few years, are excellent. The highway which brings guests into the area from the airport and then heads deeper into the region is a sleek river of tarmac that tunnels through mountain after mountain, more often than not emerging onto sweeping bridges that curve over the valleys on either side. Imagine Switzerland but with kids selling live turtles at the side of the road.

Much of the countryside here is covered in rubber trees, row after row after row of a tropical crop that has taken over from more traditional forms of agriculture, such as rice, because it is so profitable. Environmentalists bemoan the monocrop nature of the rubber and the amount of pesticide needed to maintain it, but the locals just keep planting.

Over the next few days, when I could be prised out of my villa, we visited a Dai village, took a vertigo-inducing rope-bridge walk through a tropical rainforest canopy and went to Puer, a small mountaintop town famous for its tea, which comes both loose and in hand-compressed, fermented tea cakes.

Puer is 90 minutes away from the resort, a trip which, after leaving the impressive highway, turns into a sinuous, bone-rattling drive along the side of dizzying drops and terraced hillsides. Eventually, though, the rubber trees and their bizarre "taps" like so much black plastic fungi, give way to the neatly packaged green of tea plantations.

Last year in Sri Lanka a trip to a tea region meant visits to tea factories with tea rooms and restaurants attached. In Puer there is no factory, no visitors' centre and no attached restaurants (at least not yet). We just walked around the village and, with help from our guide, wandered into a couple of local tea producers' homes.

Puer tea is picked four times a year, with the local population swelling from 11,000 to 10 times that at harvest time. Most of it ends up going to the rest of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan, with a little making its way to France and Sweden.

In one traditional house where tea was scattered about the small

inner courtyard to dry, the elderly patriarch and his son – the family has been in the business for 180 years – insisted we take time to taste their tea. Served with great ceremony in small glass cups in the main living area, the tea took on a golden glow in the shadowy interior and tasted marvellous, each cup changing markedly as the tea brewed in the pot.

## Wealthy Chinese are flocking to the area.

Yunnan is also one of China's most biologically diverse provinces. It might make up less than four per cent of China's land mass but its diverse geography means it contains about half the country's bird and mammal species.

Among these is the wild Asian elephant, 100 or so of which roam the forests around the area, tearing up crops, occasionally

killing people and generally being hideously cute (from afar).

The staff at Anantara are trying to work with the local tribes to create an economic model that will compensate farmers for lost crops and encourage elephant tourism in the area. Nobody, though, has told the elephants who, despite being massive, are like big grey Houdinis and remain stubbornly resistant to tourism encounters.

We spent one afternoon driving around the backblocks of the area, questioning locals and chasing sightings of peripatetic pachyderms with Anantara's resident elephant whisperer, John Roberts, who is usually based at the company's resort and elephant camp in Chiang Rai, northern Thailand.

There are times when an efficacy with the native language isn't needed and this was one of those times: you don't need to speak fluent Chinese to know when someone's saying, "You should've been here yesterday, mate; the place was swarming with 'em".

As an exercise in seeing such beautiful, unspoilt countryside and interacting with the locals, it was a huge success. But when your elephant whisperer tells you there's a one per cent chance of a wild elephant sighting but a 100 per cent chance of seeing old elephant poo, it's time to head for home. As someone said later: "Been there, dung that." **T**

*The writer travelled courtesy of Anantara Hotels & Spas and China Southern Airlines.*

### FIVE MORE

## THINGS TO DO IN YUNNAN

### TAKE A WALK

Stroll into the local town, Menglun, where most nights the main drag turns into a fairy-light-strung, buzzy eat street where you can sit out on the pavement scoffing from hole-in-the-wall restaurants and food stalls.

### TAKE A CLASS

Take the Dai cooking class at the Anantara resort – it's great fun and it will give you a whole new appreciation for the eggplant.

### GO TO MARKET

Visit the local food market in the morning. We went with hotel chef Andy Yuan but a wander around on your own wouldn't be out of the question.

### CROSS THE RIVER

Across the Luosuo River is the amazing botanical garden, opened in 1959. Here you will find plants that close when touched (the shy little mimosa pudica) and others that respond to singing by dancing.

### EAT EVERYTHING

From Chinese-made jamon to deep-fried bamboo worms, river snails, pig-ball skewers and fried wild bees, this is a place to experiment.

## TRIP NOTES

### MORE INFORMATION

anantara.com  
flychinasouthern.com  
csair.com/en

### GETTING THERE

China Southern has a fare to Amsterdam for about \$860 low-season return from Sydney and Melbourne including tax. It is a non-stop 9-hour 40-minute flight from Melbourne and 9hr 15min from Sydney, see csair.com/en. Australians require a

visa for a stay of up to 30 days.

### STAYING THERE

Anantara Xishuangbanna Resort and Spa has special longer-stay bed-and-breakfast rates that start at \$243 a room a night, subject to a 15 per cent service charge a person a stay.