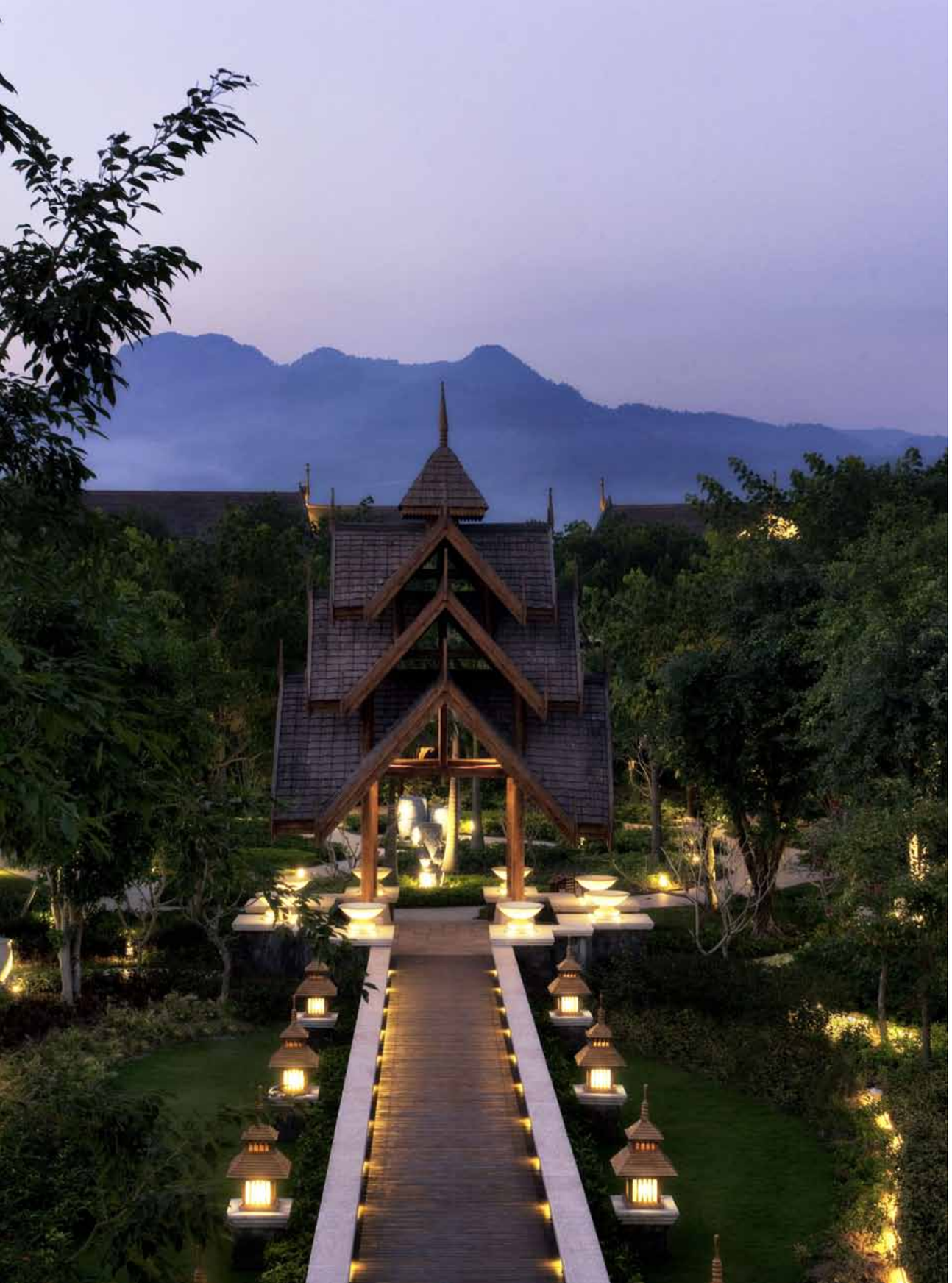
XISHUANG BANNA

WORDS
TERESA LEVONIAN COLE

IMAGES
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
ANANTARA



XISHUANGBANNA

Her name is Ko Hai Ding. She sits in the internal courtyard of an ancient house which bears the mark of an Imperial Warrant, sifting through dark shrivelled leaves in a broad flat bamboo basket. Her fingers, stained by tannin, are black from her efforts. Red lanterns hang from the rickety wooden upstairs balconies that frame the space. In the background, an old television blares and a cock, that stands watching her, shrieks lustily, its circadian rhythm severely out of synch at High Noon. "Had I picked these leaves myself," tuts Ko Hai Ding, "I would not have needed to spend so long picking out the inferior ones." But for the flickering cathode tube, the scene enacted in this house has not changed for several hundred years.

A four-hour flight transported me from Shanghai, where the sun was losing its battle for visibility through a smog-white sky, to a blazing, pristine landscape of rainforest, fruit plantations and that most prized of commodities — tea. I am in a remote corner of south-west China's Yunnan Province, in the Autonomous Prefecture of Xishuangbanna. A place as unpronounceable as it is inaccessible, this X-place offers up a very different perspective on China which has, in fact, more in common with its south-east Asian neighbours, Burma, Laos and nearby Thailand. In the 19,700 square kilometres of this steamy, tropical zone, 13 ethnic minorities thrive in a climate of positive discrimination by the Chinese government, with all signs written both in Mandarin and in the script of the area's dominant Dai people. That's the first surprise. The second — given China's poor record in conservation — is that efforts are being made to protect this environment, with the creation of Nature Reserves, and to safeguard the last herd of wild Asian elephants, that roam the forests hereabouts.

Once across the Mekong and past the construction sites of Jinghong — the Prefecture's capital, grown fat and unattractive with the proceeds of rubber and domestic tourism over the last decade — the hour-long drive from the airport leads through a landscape of rice paddies (Xishuangbanna, in the local Dai tongue, means 12,000 Rice Fields), banana trees, feathery bamboos and mountains cloaked in lush green velvety livery. Only the vast swathes of rubber plantations, introduced in 1940, betray man's intrusion and threaten the rainforests. Local women sit by the roadside, selling mounds of mangoes, papayas, lychees and pineapples, while men in camouflage outfits display enormous gnarled fungi, just unearthed from the forests. Other roadside fare consists of turtles, brandished like shotputs aimed at passing motorists. "We eat turtles here," explains my guide, Ainipa, a member of the ancient Bulang tribe. "And peacocks, too."

Food is one of the joys of this part of China — though neither turtle nor peacock was allowed to pass my lips, my hotel being steeped in the conservation ethos. Anantara has opened the first luxury resort in Xishuangbanna, in a middle-of-nowhere on the banks of the Luosuo, a tributary of the Mekong. In an upgraded version of local Dai architecture, using teak and polished stone, soaring ceilings and open salas provide a welcome sanctuary from the pervasive heat, while cool water features vanish into the river below. In these cosseted surroundings, and with French chef Christophe Wehrung supervising his Dai cooks, I was able to feast on local fare without fear of gastric consequences: pork rib soup with winter melon and basil; tilapia fish pulled from the river and steamed in fresh bamboo stems, five-inches thick; rice cooked inside succulent pineapple, infused with its juices; unimagined herbs and vegetables which prickled, stung and stimulated the senses with their pungent flavours; barbecued aubergine mashed with the staples of Dai cooking: garlic, chilli, lime, broad leaf coriander and mint; the list went on and on in a sumptuous Grande Bouffe. "Dai cooking is a cross between Chinese, with its use of garlic, and Thai, with its flavour of lemongrass," said Chef. "But, unlike Chinese, Dai cooking does not use fermented foods such as soy and, unlike Thai, avoids coconut. Ingredients are always fresh, so it is very healthy — and oil or vinegar is rarely used." An exception, perhaps, was my initiation dish on the first night: bee larvae and bamboo worms, stir-fried with salt and chilli. They go very well with baijiu, the local hooch made of corn.

At the local market next day, among the buckets of croaking frogs and wriggling 'rice-paddy eels', and next to a stand selling pigs' tongues that looked like models for a Rolling Stones album, were some vendors of 'natural Viagra'. Pride of place, here, went to an evil-looking blue-and brown reptile that hissed ferociously from his cage. "What's that for?" I asked the old stall-owner. He pointed at a vat of baijiu. "Put lizard in bottle. Makes man strong!" he said, with a gesture and a toothless leer. The crowd that had gathered around this foreign ingénue laughed good-naturedly. Baijiu, I decided, was best tried in a controlled environment.

Bees would become something of an obsession — not least, because the language problem in provincial China makes the acquisition of information a rather hit and miss affair, involving exhaustive paraphrasing of questions and cryptological analysis of replies. From Ainipa, I eventually ascertained that you are supposed to eat only the bee larvae — although, now and then, a full-grown specimen, complete with wings, finds its way into the frying pan. That can be a little disconcerting when it lands, lightly charred but anatomically intact, on your plate. "You burn the bees out of the hives or branches were they live," Ainipa explained. "So you are just left with the larvae. There are five varieties of edible bee here, of which the biggest and best are called dai hi fong. These bees dig enormous holes for themselves, shifting about ton of earth, to build their hives underground." I suspect something might have been lost in translation. I can, however, confirm that honey bees are not consumed: their thick, golden wild nectar — sold by the roadside, and among the best I have ever tasted — renders them immune from sacrifice.

That Xishuangbanna hosts the richest biodiversity in all China, provides not only a treat for the stomach and the senses, but also many treasured medicinal plants, currently the subject of international research under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. And one of the highlights of any visit is the 1,100-hectare island, in the middle of the Luosuo River (fortuitously, located opposite the hotel), which harbours more than 13,000 species of tropical and subtropical plants, arranged in 38 magnificent collections: the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden (XTBG), founded in 1959 — and home to around 1,000 gardeners and scientists.

Even someone with little interest in botany (me, for example) could not fail to be enthralled. I could have spent days wandering through collections of aromatic plants, cycads, dipterocarps (400 species), palms, vines, bamboos ... (and that's just the western sector; the untamed eastern confines consist of virgin tropical rainforest and eerie 'forests of stone'). All around exotic butterflies flit, birds tweet and cicadas scream like electric saws. Hopping on and off extended golf buggies to cover the enormous expanse, I joined a small crowd gathered around codariocalyx motorius, said to respond to sounds, and known familiarly as 'dancing grass'. Surrounded by people playing James Blunt at it from their iPhones, the poor plant wriggled and shrank away in distaste — the music critic of the Plant Kingdom. I craned to see the lofty crowns of 'sky trees', parashorea chinensis, whose sap is burned by Buddhist monks to aid concentration, and bowed to an 800-year-old cyas pectinata. I marvelled at the brilliant, orange flowers of the sterculia, whose shiny black seeds exude a chemical collected by a certain male bug, and whose protective qualities prove irresistible to the females of the species, resulting in fevered copulation on the fleshy leaves. I was introduced to antiaris toxicaria, a tree whose poisonous sap is used for hunting; and kept my distance from dendrocnide amplissima whose bark will burn your skin.

But for all the malevolent flora, some 400 beneficent species are represented in the medicinal garden, providing everything from a 2,000-year-old anaesthetic (daturae stramonium) to cures for malaria (artemisia lactiflora), and even plants being investigated for their use in the treatment of cancer (catharanthus roseus). Along with the Tibetan, Mongolian and Uygur traditions, I learnt, 2,500-year-old Dai medicine is one of the four major 'minority medicines' in China, based on the theory of the Four Elements and the Five Skandhas: matter, sensation, perception, volition and consciousness. A visit to the museum of the South Medicine Garden in Jinghong further elucidates the 1,776 raw materials to which this arcane medicine has recourse, while, upstairs, visitors may consult a practitioner. I wouldn't recommend it to those of nervous disposition. Having had my pulse taken and my tongue examined, the good doctor shook his head gravely and predicted dire consequences. Unless, of course, I invested in some very expensive natural remedies, in the form of pills. "A real doctor in a Dai hospital would diagnose you then go out and pick the relevant plants himself," sniffed Ainipa. "And it would cost a fraction of the price."

The same cannot be said of the most revered plant of the Xishuangbanna region, camellia sinensis assamica, whose produce can cost hundreds of pounds for as many grams. From this broad-leaf variety comes a product whose name is as unattractive as its appearance, yet which revels in the title of King of Teas: the famed Pu'er of Yunnan. Rich in theanine, tannins and antioxidants, and capable of bearing multiple infusions without losing its flavour, Pu'er was not only a valued commodity since at least the sixth century, traded into South-East Asia, Tibet and beyond; teas from the famous Six Mountains of Xishuangbanna also served as tribute for the Emperor, produced under Imperial licence. It was the search for these, some of the world's oldest native trees, that led me to Yiwu mountain — destination of tea connoisseurs in search of something special — and, eventually, to the home of Ko Hai Ding.

We climbed through twisting mountain roads to a height of 1,500 metres, into the mists beloved of tea trees, passing villages, every one of which has been involved on tea cultivation for centuries, and skirting terraces of young plantations growing on the hillsides. But these were not what I sought. Only when we reached a primary forest did we alight, to mince along a narrow path, through dense vegetation. And then I saw them: huge tea trees, unpruned and unshaped, boasting leaves five inches long; trees whose apparently haphazard growth have nothing in common with the familiar neat terraces of Darjeeling. They grew, here and there, in the protective shade of larger trees. "Some of these tea trees are said to be over 800 years old," said Ainipa. "They are grown entirely naturally, and leaves from these ancient tea plants are used to make the best quality unfermented green Pu'er tea — sheng cha." Among the foliage below, I could make out the local Yi tea-pickers in their brightly coloured dress, balancing on branches to snip the delicate buds between their fingernails, mindful not to bruise the leaves.

In Yiwu village, traditional old houses, dating from the Qing Dynasty, line a section of uneven paving stones. This is all that remains hereabouts of the ancient Yunnan–Tibet Tea Horse Road, along which caravans passed carrying teas, pressed into bricks or cakes and bound in waterproof bamboo skins, on their long journey into the Himalayas. "The green teas fermented along the route, to reach Tibet as black tea," said Ainipa. "Nowadays, teas are also fermented artificially, by soaking the leaves in water." It is a practice frowned upon by traditionalists.

The process for making green tea has remained unchanged since time immemorial and, here, is still done entirely by hand. Leaves from the ancient trees are picked from around 20 March to October , with ten days' respite between each week of harvesting. As soon as possible after the leaves are picked, they are 'cooked' to prevent natural oxidation — a process which was under way in the house of Li Hai Yin, a ruddy-cheeked Yi lady, who was tossing the fresh leaves in a large, heavy wok, over a wood stove. The leaves are then rolled by hand, before being left to dry further, in the sun, for a few hours. The final stage involves steaming the tea leaves, and pressing them into bricks or cakes, which in ancient times would be bound in bamboo in packs of seven, to be hung on the mules for easier transportation.

Li Hai Yin leads us into the small tea shop adjoining her house, where her six different types of tea cake were laid out. Old saddles adorned the walls. "My family did not have a licence to make tea during the Qing Dynasty," she tells me, "but we have been working in the tea plantations for generations. Now we produce a small quantity of high quality teas." Using an implement akin to a hat pin, she breaks off a chunk from a 2012 cake of green Pu'er, its long leaves still intact. "The tea from the second harvest, in April, is generally considered to be the best," she says. I am about to witness a traditional tea ritual — and it is not something to be hurried.

First, the clay tea-pot is doused in boiling water, to open its 'pores', the water draining into a tray below. The tea is then placed inside, and the pot filled with water and left for a few seconds, before it is poured into our thimble-sized cups. My attempt to sip it is forestalled. "That is simply to awaken the leaves and eliminate impurities," says Li Hai Yin, tipping it away with a deft movement. More water is added to the pot and, this time, left to infuse for a little longer. "Now", she says, pouring a Chardonnay-hued liquid into my cup, "you can drink."

The taste was smooth, delicate, fragrant. It demanded further investigation. Comparisons. Further cups were poured, then still more. I could see that I might be here for a while ... Where tea is concerned, the X-place certainly marks the spot!

Teresa Levonian Cole flew on British Airways (ba.com) via Shanghai, and stayed at the Anantara Xishuangbanna Resort & Spa (anantara.com)