

Discovering China 2016

Diary — Xian to Kunming

Journal by John Sinclair



- Over 18 days 14 Australians visited 9 World Heritage sites 5 natural, 3 cultural and 1 mixed site.
Cultural Sites: Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor (1987) Mount Qingcheng and the Dujiangyan Irrigation System (2000), Old Town of Lijiang (1997)
Natural Sites: Jiuzhaigou Valley Scenic and Historic Interest Area (1992), Huanglong Scenic and Historic Interest Area (1992), Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries (2006), South China Karst (2007), Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas (2003),
Mixed Sites: Mount Emei Scenic Area, including Leshan Giant Buddha Scenic Area (1996)
- Travelled over 5,500 kms from Xian to Kunming by bus, train, 3 flights and many cars through western China always at least 1500 kilometre from the sea and near Tibetan plateau.
- Stayed in 12 places over 18 nights staying in hotels, homes and guesthouses in Xian (2) Jaizhaigou (2) Jaoping (2) Qingcheng (1) Chendu (1) Wulong (2) Lijiang (2) Baoshan (1) Baihualing (2) Tengchong (1) Kunming (1). Every accommodation had free wifi access.
- Crossed the path of the Red Army's Long March 80 years after this epic trek followed and similarly the Tea and Horse Trail (the Southern Silk Route) through Yunnan Province for a week

Prior to the beginning of this diary six of our Australian group had arrived in China a few days earlier to visit three World Heritage sites not on our itinerary. This small add-on was also coordinated by the Natural Focus team led by Poo, facilitated by Ing and local Chinese guide, Leo. They visited the remote Jiankou Section of The Great Wall (1987), Xizhazi hamlet, the Temple of Heaven: an Imperial Sacrificial Altar in Beijing (1998) and the Summer Palace, an Imperial Garden in Beijing (1998). Also they visited the Lama Temple, walked around Hutong, saw the Drum and Bell Towers Tainment square and the Forbidden City.

11th October Brisbane to Xian

After boarding our Cathay Pacific flights just after midnight we barely saw the ground on our long flights. It was dark between Brisbane and Hong Kong where it was covered in low clouds with a slight drizzle. The flight to Xian we saw only glimpses of the land below in a few places where the cloud opened up. That was fascinating but it didn't show a land seething with human population. At one place we could see a new road constructed along the top of a very long mountain ridge evident because of the amount of fresh earthworks. A close look revealed that it was constructed to allow the recent erection of huge wind turbines. However at Xian the smog generated by 8.5 million people and their cars dramatically reduced visibility.

Poo was delayed on his way to the airport and so we found our own way by bus for 30 yuan to the Vienna Hotel which was quite an adventure. The "we" above were Dianne, Brian, Barbara, Peter, Su and me. Eventually we were settled into our hotel just after Poo arrived back from his futile trip to the Airport.



A sigh of relief reaching Xian's Hotel Vienna

We had an interesting dinner in a restaurant with a rowdy party at the next table playing a guessing game that required the loser to quaff a glass of beer

Day 1 Wednesday 12th October Xian and Terracotta Warriors

Our proposed setting off at 8.30 am didn't eventuate. Breakfast took longer than anticipated in a small restaurant over the road from the Vienna hotel and then someone misheard the start time as 9.15 instead of 8.45. Plan B called for us to explore the Xian Museum first.

This is the second largest Museum in China and exists at the crossroads of many cultures and civilizations as well as near the entry point for many foreign influences. Both the Buddhist and Islamic religions found their way into China along the Silk Road that had Xian as one of its terminuses. Marco Polo came this way. Xian was the first capital of a united China and as such is associated with many emperors from many eras who have left their legacies behind for better or for worse.



Xian's Museum is the second largest in China

The biggest legacy in imperial Xian are the terracotta warriors which are individual life-sized replicas of the 6,000 warriors which along with the sculptors who made them were massacred on the death of the Emperor.

Xian also has other legacies from some of the earliest known humans on the planet and together all of these have contributed to a great museum. We effectively had less than two hours there which seemed to be the standard time allowed and it was crowded but it is a museum worth spending more time in.

It was a relatively smooth run of less than 30 minutes out to the Terracotta Warriors but our calculations of a similar time to return to the city were thrown into chaos and out of schedule because our arrival coincided with bumper to bumper traffic jams. More on that later

We had no chance of avoiding crowds at the Terracotta Warriors by getting there early. The

Terracotta Warriors last year attracted 7 million visitors. This year it is running at 30,000 to 40,000 per day every day. There are 2000 guides employed seven days a week. 20 speak English and 20 speak Japanese and there are other language interpreters. Our guide, Sally works every day of the week and gave us a great tour starting with the grand pit and proceeding through this vast site. Greg said that he and Tony's hairs rose on their necks at the sight.

The Terracotta Warriors tombs were only discovered in 1976. Since then a whole city has sprung up around it employing security personnel (police) administrators, maintenance and cleaners, transport drivers and their support, builders and the multiple and ubiquitous vendors. All of this activity has transformed what was a rural setting not so long ago into a multi-billion dollar employment generator.

We ended the day at a tea tasting which led to some buying some tea for which some amazing claims were made.

The traffic chaos returning back to Xian in peak hour so delayed us that our plans to wrestle with the traffic to go on to the scheduled Muslim Markets were shelved. Instead we were dropped at our hotel for a brief return to our rooms prior to dinner after which the visit to the Muslim Markets was optional.

Our dinner was yet another restaurant near the Vienna hotel. It was clean, efficient and some of the most delicious Chinese food we had tasted. It was over dinner that the SS name was adopted by six of the group that had shared the flight from Brisbane, the same guide at the Terra cotta warriors and this fabulous feast. The S.S. could be the six seniors, the scintillating six or the special six. Following this five women and Ing went off to explore the Muslim markets. They went off though without any of the SS group and the two male Orrs who may have been overawed by all that they had already seen that day.



The Terracotta Warriors in situ caused some goose-bumps



Part of the 30,000 crowd making a day-visit to Jiuzhaigou

Day 2 Thursday 13th October Jiuzhaigou National Park

It was a very early start to catch the flight from Xian to Jiuzhai Huanglong. Although the flight didn't leave until 8.30 am we had to be packed and at the bus station to go to the airport at 6.00 am. We needed all of that time to get through the surprisingly rigid security at the Xian airport. It even screened the baggage and discovered a mobile phone in Peter's suitcase that had to be removed. Finally we boarded the China Eastern Airbus that was crowded with no vacant seats. It is a Spartan budget airline that served for breakfast a cold Chinese sausage roll (tasty but not so filling) and a bottle of water. Flight attendants then didn't waste any effort in collecting the packaging that we had to stuff into the seat pocket for landing.

The landing amongst the snow-capped peaks should have warned us that it would be chilly when we left the aircraft. It wasn't only the cold but the altitude of 3,440 metres that made us all feel weak, woozy and a little nauseous when we got off at Jiuzhai Huanglong Airport. The temperature at 10.00 am was just 2°C.

It was easier for the Chinese to create this international airport by cutting the top off some mountain rather than create such a large flat area down in the valley. We equipped ourselves with jackets to ward off the cold before stepping into a series of taxis driven by men who were training to be Grand Prix drivers. Even so it took almost two hours to reach our hotel.

It was a long and winding road, all downhill, from the elevated airport to our accommodation. The elevation at the hotel was 1,900 meters. We had descended over 1,200 metres from an area above the tree-line where yaks were grazing. We drove through a mix of deciduous and pine trees to the

valley where rivers roared, Tibetans led horse rides and there were peat mires.

The autumn tone of the deciduous trees was nearing its peak but the snow dusted pine forest was equally attractive. In Xian we only once saw the sun vaguely through the dense smog. It was a contrast to see the sun here when the clouds opened up to a brilliant blue sky. Then there were the towering snow capped mountains and in some places Karst outcrops protruding from the forest to enhance the beauty. It was a truly spectacular drive and almost entirely downhill. One taxi driver urgently questioned passengers in Chinese and eventually through his iPhone translator he asked Which Hotel? Rhonda, Tony and Diane were relieved when finally he got a call from the other taxi and we found the hotel. After that they made sure everyone knew the hotel name in advance of travelling!! The thought of being lost in China on our second day was terrifying.



One of the many beautiful waterfalls in Jiuzhaigou

Once settled into the hotel we were famished and eager to eat. Poo found a restaurant nearby where we were sated with an interesting array of food. After this we went for a walk along the river swollen with snow melt that roared along at the bottom of the valley with pretty male and female Redstarts darting in and out of the stream on one side of the ribbon-development. "Development" was the word because everywhere there was construction of hotel accommodation to accommodate the hordes drawn to this beautiful National Park. Poo said that the park attracts 30,000 visitors per day and the numbers of buses we saw in the many parking lots was testimony to that. However it seemed as if there may be some overkill because 30,000 tourists already have beds and the supply may well outstrip the demand.

Our hotel was small and obscurely located but nicely finished with a marble staircase. We didn't

appreciate the 57 steps up to our fourth floor room in the thin air, but it was otherwise very pleasant.

After a short rest we went out to dinner at a Tibetan restaurant. This valley was settled by Tibetan people before its attraction was known to the outer world and the Tibetans retain their culture despite the migration of many ethnic Han Chinese who seek to capitalize on the economic potential. It was a Tibetan hotpot dinner with lots of entertainment singing and dancing but shared with busloads of other (Chinese) tourists.



Over 100 shuttle buses were used in Jiuzhaigou National Park to allow people to hop on and hop off to explore the attractions of the park as far as 30 kilometres up each of the two valleys. Pedestrian overpasses in safety interests have recently replaced zebra crossings. There is a toilet at every bus station.

Day 3 Friday 14th October Jiuzhaigou National Park

Poo had warned us of the crowds and devised a clever plan to beat the crowds by having an early start. Breakfast was at 7.00 pm. Due to our being so far west in the time-zone the sun was just emerging.. Many of us lightened up at the welcome sight of Sami. It was a good breakfast during which time Poo and his crew put together a wonderful packed lunch.

At 8.00 am we were all waiting obediently and patiently. Poo had organized vehicles to take us to the National Park but the drivers were not so organized with punctuality and drop-off points. As a consequence it was 9.00 am when we arrived at the National Park entrance station and Peter, Barb, Diane and Brian got dropped at an alternative location ... but were later reunited with the group. However the stream of people we saw walking to the National Park had become a torrent and were joined by others dropped at the gate. It took a contingent of well organized Red Army soldiers to control the massive crowd that surged towards the gates. Diane G said that there were more people queuing up than the entire population of several

Pacific Island nations. It was an experience of what national parks may have to face. As we walked around there were several devices to control crowd behaviour including razor wire in one place and barbed wire in others.



Inside crowds are quickly dispersed by the shuttle buses

Inside the crowding was just as tight as people shuffled to get a place on one of the hundreds of shuttle buses that ply the park, taking people up both valleys. They operate on a hop on hop off basis and they and park management vehicles were the only ones allowed inside the park itself. They were extremely well organized and there was great planning to separate pedestrians from being confronted by a bus using pedestrian overpasses and underpasses and ensuring that buses could do a 180 degree turn without endangering pedestrians

Our tickets cost \$AU40 each for seniors and full adult price was \$AU80.00. Based on the average daily attendance, that produces an income of \$2AU million per day for at least 8 months of the year. In addition there was the other income generated by the businesses that capitalize on the tourist industry drawn to the park. This has grown from 5,000 in 1984 to 170,000 in 1991 just before World Heritage listing. Numbers increased to 1,190,000 in 2002. There was a proposal to enforce a maximum daily quota of 12,000. Instead the numbers are expected to balloon even more when the new railway from Chengdu targeted at Jiuzhaigou is completed in two years time.

The popularity of this park seems to be derived from the presence of some wild Pandas and its World Heritage status. The Panda population suffered a huge set back about eight years ago after the bamboo flowered. As happens with all bamboo it then dies and regrows. However as the regrowth was underway, a record cold snap as the regrowth was underway killed all of the young bamboo shoots. The bamboo which is small seems to have

recovered now but the Panda population hasn't but that hasn't stopped the ever increasing flow of tourists.

The park is incredibly beautiful with its main attractions being the series of turquoise coloured lakes and marshes and waterfalls resulting from the tufa weirs formed over eons by the limestone saturated water flowing over them. At 72,000 hectares the Park is just under half the size of the Fraser Island World Heritage area. Imagine 30,000 a day visiting ... they they'd really need a light rail!!

The remote region was inhabited by various Tibetan and Qiang peoples for centuries. Until 1975 this inaccessible area was little known but it was opened up for logging. The National Park gets its name Jiuzhaigou (meaning literally "Nine Village Valley") from the nine Tibetan villages along its length.

It is over 30 km from the entrance to the top of the park and it is therefore necessary to catch buses to see much of the park. The price of the shuttle bus is included in the price of the ticket making it one of the most expensive national parks to visit anywhere.

We alighted from the bus at Buffalo Lake and then we shuffled and were jostled by the endless stream of people to the next lake and bus stop. All the way (in fact all day) we walked only on wide boardwalks that seem to run the length of the park. However it would be impossible to reach the extremities of the park in a day's walk, which is why the fleet of buses offers an alternative.

One of the biggest difficulties in moving through the crowd was that there were the constant stops along the way while people took selfies or posed while others took group photos. The scenery was secondary and only a background to the endless selfies. It is small wonder that selfies are banned in some national parks elsewhere.



The beauty of Jiuzhaigou in autumn is breathtaking

Despite some of the obstructive behaviour of the self-obsessed we negotiated the seething boardwalk to Arrow Lake and enjoyed some amazing mountain scenery and autumn coloured leaves along the way. We then boarded the bus and went to another bus station where we changed to a bus that took us to the far end of the second most scenic valley. Here we walked through a primeval forest and then proceeded around a lake and a waterfall before arriving back at a bus station and going up the other valley to the glacier filled Long Lake and finally the magnificent 320 metre wide Nourilang Waterfall that dropped 23 metres.

It was a wonderful exhilarating and very satisfying day accomplished while sharing this park with tens of thousands of other tourists.



The beauty of Juizhaigou in autumn is breathtaking

Day 4 Saturday 15th October Hung Long World Heritage

It started very pleasantly on a crisp clear day. After breakfast in a nearby small restaurant we finally descended the 57 steps between our room and the ground floor with our bags and boarded the bus at 9.00 am.

The first part of the route retraced our journey down from the mountain top airport but this time in bright sunshine and blue skies. With a bit more familiarity of the environment we were able to see so much more. The autumn tones seemed richer, the mountains more visible and the road more winding, busier.

At some point we swung south and then as we climbed to the top of this mountain range we left the trees behind and further on were surrounded by snow drifts remaining after yesterday's fall. It was really rugged and grand scenery and then we descended down the valley to Hung Long National Park, another World Heritage area this one a little

less than the size of Fraser Island and also the alleged site for wild Pandas.

We bought the tickets and had lunch and then had at first a fraught time being directed to the cable car because all instructions were in Chinese. The Cable Car was a few kilometres down the valley but we didn't know how far. Some walked while those who were lucky caught the shuttle bus.

We had expected less crowding at Huang Long National Park but instead found ourselves jammed in a queue to take the cable car to the top to see the series of beautiful lakes. We were jostled in the queue for over an hour just to get to the cable-car and that left us relatively little time to explore the park that was traversed by Mao Zedong in the Red Army 1934-35 retreat to escape the Kuomintang of Chiang Kai Chek. The poet in Mao eulogized the beauty of the mountains, *"I am overjoyed by the vast snow stretch of Mt Minshan."*



Mt Minshan and its glaciers inspired Mao Tse Tung

The National Park in north-west of Sichuan Province in the Huanglong valley features a series of travertine lakes, waterfalls, forests and mountain scenery. It rises from a base of 1,700 m up to a permanently snow-capped peak of 5,588 m and includes the easternmost glacier in China. The water flowing from these in limestone formations creates spectacular pools. There are also hot springs. We saw only a small part. It has diverse forest ecosystems providing habitat for the giant panda and Sichuan golden snub-nosed monkey but due to the time lost in the queues we saw relatively little of this park.

We were able to catch the cable-car and be down by 4.00 pm

It was then a five-hour drive to our next destination Taoping village. Along the way we swapped buses and moved from the winding mountain road to a major road following the Min River. Although it was

dark for the latter part we could see various stages of the construction work on the new railway through newly constructed settlements, largely unlit and presumably unoccupied...yet!.

We stopped for dinner along the way before reaching our destination at about 11.00 pm. Leaving heavy suitcases on the bus, we hiked up gabled stone streets stumbling in the dark to our accommodation in the ancient town of Taoping



Some stone buildings of Taoping village are over 1,000 old

Day 5 Sunday 16th October Taoping and Dujiangyan

We woke early as a light shower of rain fell but passed and allowed a preliminary exploration of this amazing village. This village stands head and shoulders above another Chinese World Heritage site Kaiping Diaolou and Villages near Guangzhou for authenticity.

Taoping is a 2000 year old village that demonstrated its durability and authenticity by surviving intact from one of the worst earthquakes to hit China. The 2008 7.9 Mw earthquake killed over 70,000 made at least 4.8 million (and possibly 11 million) homeless and cost the Chinese Government \$Au 200 Billion over three years to rebuild. . We later drove through this valley which now shows little evidence of such a tragedy so recently.

Taoping Village has incredibly well-preserved architecture. The outer walls are made of native rock that has mortar. The beams are logs and in former times they were crisscrossed in layers for fortifications. The village houses were mutually supporting the defenses as a self-contained fort. Traditional fortifications were evident throughout the village — watch-towers, narrow tunnels, special wooden key door locks, the underground water supplies that provided an emergency escape route and narrow winding single file alleyways.

The Qiang is a minority ethnic group of China based on the eastern end of the Tibetan Plateau. One of our delights was an explanation by our Qiang guide of the traditional Qiang-style embroidery of her costume that she had hand sewn.

Leaving the village was more than the predicted 1.5 hours to our next destination, Dujiangyan. We followed the Min River downstream that was also the course of the new railway being constructed through mountains and on high pylons above the river from Chengdu to Jiuzhaigou.

Along the way we passed through the area that was devastated by the 2008 earthquake. That was one of the worst earthquakes to hit China. It killed over 70,000 made at least 4.8 million (and possibly 11 million) homeless and cost the Chinese Government \$Au 200 Billion over three years to rebuild. We paused in Wenchuan the worst hit city in the valley where there was a large monument.

We arrived at Dujiangyan for lunch and after lunch Poo gave us a diagrammatic explanation of our next highlight the Dujiangyan Irrigation System which is a World Heritage cultural site. He was aided by a great enlarged sketch prepared by Ing (copied from the Handbook prepared and circulated by Poo for the trip).



Poo described the 2,000 year old Irrigation system using Ing's chart in a local café

The first Emperor of China (now entombed near the Terracotta Warriors) had decreed that the islands and diversion weirs be created on the Min River to at this place to divert water to a larger section of the Chengdu flatlands. It is an ecological and engineering feat originally constructed around 256 BC. Modified and enlarged during the Tang, Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties, it uses natural topographic and hydrological features to solve problems of diverting water for irrigation, draining sediment, flood control, and flow control without the use of dams.

This site is inscribed on the World Heritage List because it meets three of the six cultural criteria. It is a major landmark in the development of water management and technology, and is still discharging its functions perfectly. The immense advances in science and technology achieved in ancient China are graphically illustrated by the Dujiangyan Irrigation System. The temples of Mount Qingcheng are closely associated with the foundation of Taoism, one of the most influential religions of East Asia over a long period of history.

Unfortunately much of the irrigable land is now covered by urban development and this was evident as we strolled through the attractive malls on a Sunday afternoon

We then proceeded to our hotel in Qingcheng. Our access to the hotel was blocked by a large wedding party that had taken up the street. It was an interesting diversion but it was to become more interesting later as we sat down to our own dinner and the fireworks started. By our calculations there were 875 rockets launched only 20 metres from where we sat and it took almost half an hour to reach its climax.



It would have been a tragedy to miss seeing China's pandas

Day 6

Monday 16th October

Pandas, Mt Qingcheng, Chinese Opera

There had been doubts about whether we could fit in our planned visit to the Panda centre. However with good organizing and cooperation we had an early breakfast and were amongst the first at the Dujiangyan Panda Base. This 51ha reserve was conveniently located on Qingcheng Mountain adjacent to our next destination. It enjoys a favourable climate and natural environment with vast bamboo forest coverage and lovely scenic surroundings. However the settings were only secondary to seeing these giant pandas in the flesh. The panda rescue and quarantine focuses on pandas

rescued from the wild that are sick or injured so they can receive medical care and rehabilitation. Everyone clicked many photos (up to 90) during this two plus hour visit. Almost all were of pandas posing or pandas eating bamboo or asleep. There were some taken though of the Red Panda, or "firefox." These critters are often referred to as the "lesser panda" in deference to the better-known giant panda.

Red pandas were described 50 years earlier than the giant panda, which was how the panda name came to be shared. Both have habitats virtually restricted to the Sichuan province. Red pandas averages 56 to 63 cm in body length with tails about 45. Unlike the Giant pandas they were difficult to photograph as they were obscured by the leaves of the trees they were sleeping in.

The next highlight of the day was a visit to the main part of Mount Qingcheng, which is part of the Mt Emei World Heritage. It has a strong atmosphere of Taoism.

Taoism is a religious, philosophical and ritual tradition of Chinese origin which emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao (literally "Way"). The Tao is a fundamental idea in Chinese philosophies and religions other than Taoism. Taoism differs specifically from Confucian traditions by not emphasizing rigid rituals and social order. However it isn't easy to understand as there are many schools of Taoism. *The Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu is available in English and only takes a couple of hours to read.



Ferry across the lake on Mt Qingcheng was just one of the commercial activities in this World Heritage site

Our group took the shuttle bus to the main entry station and then walked up to the cable-car through a very attractive forest. Then it was an ascent to a lake and then a walk to a temple where one of the monks was meditating with an i-Phone.

It was a steep mountain with many steps to challenge all but the two who opted to return by the cable-car. Once regrouped at the base we left Qingcheng and headed for Chengdu.



A part of a great Chinese opera — Sichuan style

We had just time to get to our rooms and deposit gear before heading off to the Chinese opera through the mad, milling traffic of Chengdu that had no respect for Centre (or any other) lines on the road.

Chinese opera incorporates various art forms, such as music, song and dance, martial arts, acrobatics. We got to see a Sichuanese Opera with more of the Sichuan traditional arts such as playing charumera, shadowgraph and acrobatic turning barrel and mask changing. Sadly my camera failed to capture any of this wonderful performance. Su succeeded where I failed.

It was a great finale to a very full and satisfying day.



A 93 yo is carried down into the Wulong Karst WH site

Day 7 Tuesday 18th October Chengdu to Wulong

Two years ago I arrived in Chongqing by train and left on a boat travelling down the Yangste. This time arrived in nearby Chengdu by bus and left on a train that operates between Chengdu and Guanzhou. Unfortunately or fortunately I saw little of the scenery as I had a stomach upset and for most of the journey I confined myself to the upper bunk.

After breakfast, take a day train to Wulong County. I can report that we left Chengdu at a bit past 9.00 am for the 590 kilometre journey and arrived at Wulong

at almost 5.00 pm. The journey traversed the picturesque scenery of Yangste River, mountains, local life and lush forest. Everyone enjoyed this restful day after the 15,000 steps down Mt Qingcheng.

At Wulong we transferred to our hotel with the best wifi and that is as much as I can report of the day.



The Post Office on valley floor of the Wulong Karst

Day 8 Wednesday 19th October Wulong Karst National Geo Park.

After breakfast at the hotel we were dutifully waiting in the lobby at 8.00am (or a bit past) before taking a small bus on a 25 kilometre ride up a mountain.

We arrived at the very impressive modern design Pyramid shaped World Heritage Visitor Centre where we purchased the first of a series of shuttle bus tickets. By the use of park operated shuttle buses this park is able to manage anon-compulsory one way flow of pedestrian traffic through this amazingly steep and difficult terrain. It was a system to be admired because, while we walked over 15,000 steps for the day, we weren't sore or fatigued by the end because almost all of the steps were downhill.

South China Karst is one of the world's most spectacular examples of humid tropical to

subtropical karst landscapes. We had previously explored some of it at Guilin. The dispersed components of the serial World Heritage property all have within their boundaries all the necessary elements to demonstrate the natural beauty of karst landscapes. They also contain the scientific evidence required to reconstruct the geomorphic evolution of the diverse landforms and landscapes involved.

Wulong Karst is a cluster of several karst landscapes, consisting of gorges, natural bridges, caves, eroded dolines, shafts and underground streams. These karst landforms developed in the limestone rocks, vividly recording the development and evolution of karst terrain in the Three Gorges area since Pleistocene Era. Furong Cave, Three Natural Bridges and Houping Giant Doline are the three representative karst landforms, developing under the condition of intermittent uplifting movement of the earth. They are part of the South China Karst World Heritage site that also includes Guilin which some had previously visited.

The karst systems lie in the bank, interfluvium and headstream of Wujiang River, one of big tributaries of Yangtze River. The tributaries have incised deeply into the landscape creating huge natural bridges and narrow fissures.



**A Transformer relic of a film in Wulong Karst WH site
Similar junk sculptures were located throughout the site**

We started the day with the Three Natural Bridges that span a 1.2 km long gorge. They evolved due to tectonic uplift and the erosion by underground water. Some parts uplifted forming the bridges, and others collapsed to form karst pits. To get to the start of the walk we descended a vertical rock wall in an elevator. Then there were many downward steps. We managed easily but saw a 93-year-old man carried down in a sedan chair by two porters. Looking down the gorge we saw an ancient building, the oldest “(information transfer post) in China built 609 A.D. and rebuilt 2005 following war damage. Several of us mailed post cards from this building. At the bottom it was a pleasant stroll admiring the

amazing chasm we were in but with some distraction for one of the relics of a “Transformer” movie that had been made here. It was an impressive bit of junk sculpture made up almost entirely of bits from an auto wrecking place. Carrying on, we enjoyed our packed lunch on rock tablets beside a water pool. Interpretive signs pointed out ape faces and silhouettes of fish. With narrow pathways jutting out from the perpendicular rock-face, it's a wonder that its strong enough to support the hundreds of people tramping through.

It wasn't just the geology and the management that was impressive. The area was reported to have 1,058 species of plants belonging to 164 families and 326 animal species from 84 families. While the plant list is much greater than Fraser Island (and probably includes Easter Cassia) the animal list if it includes birds is very light. The biodiversity isn't surprising. The rainfall is about 1,250 mm (50" p.a.). If the map of China overlaid the map of Australia our location would be somewhere at the back of Bourke in arid to semi-arid country.



At the end of the stroll and after lunch we caught another shuttle and took another elevator down the Longshuixia Fissure Gorge associated with orogenic movement. This gorge was 5 kilometers length and 500 meters depth make it a magnificent and fantastic valley, which has steep cliff, original vegetation and stream waterfalls etc. In places the fissure was only 1.3 metres wide and it was reminiscent of the experience going down the Wollongambe gorge near Mt Wilson except walking instead of liloing.

We walked out and then took the shuttle bus up the mountain and back to the Visitor centre before changing buses yet again and travelling down the mountain to Wulong.

Our dinner was a memorable feast of Peking duck around a hot pot.

Day 9 Thursday 20th October Furong Cave and Flight to Lijiang

We woke up to a grey sky and drizzly rain. It was to continue throughout the morning and up to the time we reached Chongqing to catch our flight.

We were ready to move on time and boarded the larger Chongqing bus that took us out to the Furong Cave. Furong Cave is located in Jiangkou Town some 20 km (12 mi) from Wulong County town. The cave is 2,846 m long. We were there by 9.00 am but due to some misunderstandings we walked a long but pleasant walk to Furong Cave only to arrive to find a slightly injured Simon had already been there for 45 minutes after taking the cable-car. We rushed through this stunning cave where only the coloured lighting marred the magnificent and grand adornments.



Furong Caves deserves its accolades for grandeur

Furong Cave is China's only World Heritage cave. It has received many accolades has been named one of 'The Three Greatest Caves in the World' along with Mammoth Cave in the US, and Graemes Cave in France. We were allowed 40 minutes and it would have been nice to have a less frantic experience in the cave. The caves were huge, well lit and featured beautiful features of stalactites and stalagmites as well as some unusual signs: *"do not surpass site-seeing itinerary"*, *"Do not throw benches"* *"Downhill slide, attention"* *"origin of life"* *"cable outlet. Prohibition of retrograde"* However there was a time when we doubted if there would be any time to enter the cave given our scheduled flight that afternoon and the travel time. However we negotiated the many steps within the cave and by

the time we re-boarded the bus we had logged up about 7,500 steps which many devices are recording.

Then it was a drive to the dense mega city of Chongqing which we mercifully saw only through the bus windows as we sped to the airport where we went through the most rigid security check I have yet experienced. Any metal at all was detected even the metal lugs on my boots. It was in contrast to some of our other security checks.

The plane was packed and we saw little of the landscape due to cloud and smog until we arrived in Lijiang where the air was clear and crisp and the sky blue. The Lijian Airport was some distance from the old town. It was the cleanest and smartest airport we have yet experienced. It was a nice experience to start our visit to this World Heritage town. It was 7.30 when we finally reached our hotel and then we dashed out to dinner.

We had gasped our way up to the 3rd and 4th floors carrying our luggage and it prompted us to inquire about the elevation. The hotel was at 2500 metres.



In Lijiang the villagers spontaneously and regularly burst into dancing circles

Day 10 Thursday 20th October Lijiang Ancient Town

The World Heritage listed Old Lijiang has a history going back more than 1,000 years. It was once a confluence for trade along the "Old Tea and Horse Caravan Trail". The Dayan Old town is famous for its orderly system of waterways and bridges, a system fast becoming but a memory as the underground water table drops, probably due to over-building in the suburban areas.

We noted on our exploration the ancient water-supply system of great complexity and ingenuity. It was reminiscent of the water system that gravitated through Taoping the Qing village we had explored that still functions effectively today. The architecture blends elements from several cultures that have come together over many centuries.

Lijiang's culture combines traditional Nakhi culture and incongruous elements learned from Ming dynasty Han Chinese traders who settled in the region centuries ago. Nakhi people have kept alive a timber and mud brick housing style which they learned from Nanjing traders. Local carpenters still build elaborately constructed timber house frames from memory without blueprints or other diagrams. These houses are often enhanced by detailed flower and bird carvings on the windows. The carvings are now made by ethnic Bai artisans, but attention is given to depicting the flora and fauna of the four seasons in the traditional Han Chinese manner. Even impoverished farming families gather their resources to install carved windows, and seem to consider them more important than furniture for the house. The Dongba's (priests of the Nakhi culture) continued use of the 1,400 picture-like character and symbols was accepted as a written world heritage language by UNESCO in 2003. It's the only living hieroglyphic in the world.

We were free to do our own thing on our "day off" from an organized activity. After a delightful experience of seeing our breakfast pastry so deftly prepared we opted to tag along with the Toongabbie mob and Inge and meander through the old cobbled streets, laneways and alleys and eventually found our way to Lion Rock Park and climbed to the summit where a magnificent wooden Mu Palace (first built in 1382 during the Ming Dynasty) was located. Trish couldn't resist the temptation of ringing the giant bell and beating the drums which echoed throughout. I have now seen many palaces but this one had a finish and completeness that was really superb and it wasn't built for royalty but obviously somebody of great influence and wealth.

We felt privileged to stumble across a gathering of local Tibetans circle dancing outside a Tibetan temple. Others couldn't resist purchasing cashmere, cotton and silk scarves. Close by was a huge waterwheel and everywhere were colourful flower displays and for those that found the Five Arch Bridge with the snow-capped mountain in the background, they wholeheartedly endorsed the garden sign: *"Your civilized behaviour will help make the grass greener and the flowers more colourful"*

Five women headed off for an hour-long foot and back massage after their massive shopping and site-seeing efforts.



Jinsha (Yangtze) River forces through Tiger Leaping Gorge

Day 11

Saturday 22nd October

Exploring the Middle Yangtze

There had been a tragedy discovered when the photos of Lijiang were sought to be downloaded from the camera card. No photographs for the day including all of the emphasis on World Heritage badging and the palace were there. So we were packed early and went to recapture at least some images. We got some replacement shots before breakfast but it wasn't the same. The bustling market of Friday had been reduced by a Saturday market elsewhere.

After a disappointing breakfast 19 people and all our luggage crammed into four small vehicles, we took off for the hills. Heading out of Lijiang we climbed a mountainous and curving rural road and passed by a large lake. A little further on at a vantage point we stopped to admire the view that included a few snow-capped mountains. The red soil had been worked into terraces, but not to grow paddy rice but rather corn.

We then descended down into the valley and headed upstream along the side of the mighty Yangtze River as it emerged from the Tibetan mountains. This was the first bend of Yangtze River and part of the 3 Parallel Rivers of Yunnan World Heritage site. We were scheduled to take a boat ride but the water

was too shallow for the big boat and too rough for older people to be taken in the elongated rubber duckies. Thus we found ourselves wandering beside a tributary discharging clean water into the mainstream where it was rapidly diluted.

Then we discovered Shigu a village that held a lot of history. It was herein 1934 during the Long March that the Red Army and entourage of 100,000 people had to cross the river. It took ten days of ferrying and this was remembered in some beautiful sculptures and a museum. We were involuntarily drawn towards this feature and were enchanted to hear some traditional Chinese music. The leader of the small orchestra was 83 years old and his fellow musicians not much younger. It was a most memorable interlude, and ranked with a later encounter with two old women aged 82 and 83 playing an unknown gambling game while tending a stall.

We discovered that there are no aged pensions in China. However old people can receive a stipend by collecting trash, especially plastic bottles and cleaning up the environment. That helped explain our sighting of so many old women collecting trash. Some looked very old and weathered but they had meaningful lives.

After lunch at Shigu and an interlude in a supermarket during which we lost track of Barbara we headed off following around the first big bend of the River heading for Tiger Leaping Gorge. This is one of the narrowest canyons in the world. Here the *Jinsha* River flows 5596 metres below the summit of the adjacent Jade Dragon Snow Mountain Peak and the 5396 metre high Zhongdian Snow Mountain. The *Jinsha* is the local name for the Yangste. It was a very dramatic sight with wild boiling water that has swallowed up humans who attempted to travel down it. Luckily we all walked the 2.4 kilometre through tunnels and fairly flat surfaces to the vantage point overlooking the wildest water.

We afterwards journeyed on to Shaxi Village, a cultural treasure of the Tea Horse Road in Yunnan where we booked into a guesthouse of the local people of Bai. Getting to the guesthouse though was a bit of a challenge as the road was blocked while reconstruction is underway. However a tuk-tuk equivalent transported our luggage as we walked to the guesthouse. The elevation was similar to Lijiang.



A 400 y.o. bridge at an entrance to 2000 y.o Shaxi village

Day 12

Sunday 23rd October
Shaxi

It was a relaxing start to wake up on a Sunday morning to an English breakfast even if it was well after 8. Our guest house is like so much of this village reminiscent in style to Japanese. It could be seen in the gardens, architecture and décor.

The village had its origins almost 2,000 years ago and has been a main trading town along the Tea and Horse Trail used by caravans of traders exchanging tea that originated in Yunnan for salt, opium, silk and other items over more than 1,000 years. It was opened up in the early Tang Dynasty (628 -907).

The introduction of other transport resulted in the Tea and Horse Trail and the trading towns along the route such as Shaxi being left behind. Now the Chinese Government is making a big push to bring economic benefits to the people of Yunnan, China's poorest province where 2.86 million live in absolute poverty and 7.65 million have low incomes. The issue is compounded by the fact that the province is home to 25 ethnic minorities.

We were to see evidence of the very detailed planning and purpose to remedy these when we went to the temple and saw the plans for the restoration and development of Shaxi on display. The aim is to ensure that the Bai people are the main beneficiaries of the work and on evidence that is on track. Almost all of the Chinese tuk-tuks and motor cycles we saw were new and the main vendors we saw seemed to be Bai.

Our tour of the village began and ended in the main town square. We headed down from there through the 4000 year old North Gate to the river noting the rendered construction material of mud brick and rammed earth as we went. The building material mixes selected clay from the mountain, with rocks and straw. At the bottom of the town we walked

beside the Hehui River, a tributary of the Mekong to a 400 year old bridge guarded by the remnants of fictitious guardians a mix of a dog and a dragon. It was a calm rural scene. Everyone's attention was drawn to the colourful and unusual markings of the Hoopoe. It was a scene later returned to by our birds.

We returned to the village in the state of being re-developed via the West Gate where we posed for some group photos before getting the insights to the detailed planning for the village that has already won several international accolades and awards.

Like Lijiang the main purpose of the bulk of the buildings inside the wall is now accommodation, restaurants and shops.

Plans to go the school library were abandoned because it was Sunday so alternative plans evolved for a cooking class that most attended and the children's book presentation was delayed for a few days. ~~to a library was put on hold for a few more days.~~

The cooking class was attended by all but five of the group (although one of the five sneaked in to sample the end products) and they had a very satisfying time preparing and sampling dishes.

Our stay in Shaxi made for a very pleasant and relaxing weekend and we regathered strength (and did our washing) after a very frantic and busy first ten days of this tour. Some of us wondered what other unique experiences could possibly be in store for us!!



Our Australian group and Thai guides at Shaxi's North Gate

Day 13 Monday 24th October To Baoshan via Dali

After breakfast at our guesthouse we set off to board four vans for our 7-hour journey to Baoshan in perfect weather. It was clear and the morning was crisp.

The cars were a little larger and we had local Bai

drivers. That was good because we passed through mainly Bai area. Bai houses were distinctive by their white exterior walls and a few other characteristics such as black trims and etchings. They were not made of mud brick as in Shaxi and most had solar heaters on the roof.

We passed through fascinating rural scenery and were kept busy identifying the crops and trees. And admiring the mountainous terrain above the quite well populated and cultivated valleys.

An inescapable feature of the drive was Erhai Lake which is one of the seven biggest freshwater lakes in China and the second largest highland lake. The lake covers an area of 250 square kilometers and is about 40 kilometre long and 8 kilometre wide and is almost 2,000 metres above sea level. Erhai Lake is home to a diversity of carp fish including endemic species.

We stopped for an hour and a half in Dali city for lunch and a brisk shop. It was hard to know where the city began and finished because of the urban blur. It seemed huge but the official population of the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture (including Shaxi) is 652,000. The Yi though is another ethnic population of this region.



Dali is a major University town and tourist destination

Dali is one of Yunnan's most popular tourist destinations. We focused though on the old town that was the medieval capital of two Bai kingdoms. The city was razed and its records burnt during its conquest by the Mongols during the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty when the area became significantly Muslim. Much of the local economy now centers around tourism and services catering to travelers. In the past Dali was able to control some of the trade between India and China. It is famed for the woodworkers of *Xīzhōu* and for its high-quality marble.

We arrived in Baoshan at about 4.40 pm. Baoshan was a surprise. Its population in 2010 was 2.5 million (the size of Brisbane) but as we approached

it we passed two groups of cranes working on new high rise buildings on the outskirts. One group had 24 cranes and the other a similar number. By a crude calculation if each of these buildings rise 25 stories each complex could house up to 50,000 people if there are an average of 10 people residing on each level.



The Salween one of the world's largest rivers near Baihualing

Day 14 **Tuesday 25th October** **Baihualing —Goalingong Park**

At 9.00 am we were all ready and so were four little vehicles that had come down the mountain to collect us. It was the most seamless boarding to date — just as the trip is nearing its finale.

We exited the metropolis the size of Brisbane and shrouded in smog and travelled at first on a toll-way. Our driver paid 25 Yuan for the privilege. However even some non-toll-ways are magnificently built dual carriageways that negotiated the challenging mountainous topography with efficiency. As we went further from the main drag the roads narrowed. It was a surprise to emerge from a long tunnel straight on to the bridge across the mighty Salawin (Salween) River. It becomes Burma's largest and longest river and it boiled in whirlpools and rapids under the bridge. Alas though the bulk of the debris along the banks of the river were plastic shopping bags.

The small Bai village we headed for is called Baihualing. It is famous for its many varieties of plants and birds. It's located at the eastern slope of Gaolingong Mountain which we were later to ascend in these same 1.2 litre conventional drive vehicles.

The drive up from Baoshan revealed an increased array of more tropical crops including coffee, bananas and sugar-cane but there was stunningly steep mountain scenery that made everyone gasp.

We settled in the Bai guesthouse of our hostess who

had accompanied us all the way from Baoshan. Here we had a long break for lunch.

At 1.45 we headed a short way down the mountain to visit the local Baihualing school. There was huge excitement at the school when we arrived. We were the first Westerners ever to visit that school and the kids were wary and shy at first and then eager to press the flesh and interact and finally it was hard to escape as the kids individually sought us out to write down our names. We were greeted by the Principal. After the formalities that included a full school parade and the kids had returned to class, the Principal answered a plethora of questions from us about the school and the education system. This was followed by classroom visits/ talks and presentation of school materials to the Principal.



The first Westerners to Baihualing school addressed assembly

The school has 280 pupils and 11 teachers. Each teacher is required to have a Bachelor degree and a year of teacher training as a prerequisite qualification. Schooling is free and compulsory and the Principal is responsible for getting all eligible kids to attend. There is also a merit system to encourage good student behavior. The school year starts in March through to July with a one month summer break before the second semester from September to the end of January. School days are longer than ours — 7.30am to 4.30 pm.

The facilities were free for students with books and writing material provided although we didn't note any electronic devices such as computers or iPads in the school during our brief visit. Nonetheless, China has amongst the highest rates of literacy in the world. I was impressed by the fact that there was ample recreation equipment, table tennis tables, soccer/basket balls etc. I then remembered the dearth of even one most craved for ball in some schools in PNG.

We then ascended the mountain on a very rough trail to the National Park to see some birds. The

road was rough and under reconstruction in some parts. However the road was clear evidence that this had been part of the Tea and Horse Trail initiated about 2,000 years ago about 1.5-2 metres wide with stone blocks laid in the 4th century A.D. At the top there were relics of a small bustling settlement that had once been located there to service the passing trade en route to Burma, India and Afghanistan. This one time village was at 1900 metres and 300 metres above our guest-house. This area is now a National Park. Some unattended vehicles parked beside the road as testimony to the birdos who were there in quests to see the avian fauna of the mountain. A sign indicated there are 525 or one third of the total bird species found in China found in Gaoligong National Park.

Despite it being a National Park the locals weren't allowing the squirrels to have free reign. The wild walnuts that seem to be endemic to the area were clad around the trunks to prevent the squirrels helping themselves to a potential harvest.

Most people walked down the mountain with the birdo's taking the longest and using up the last of the daylight. The day concluded with a Happy Hour of walnuts followed by a wonderful dinner.



Day 15 Wednesday 26th October Birdwatching and exploring

It had rained overnight and the early morning mists and wet courtyard was a forewarning of more to come. Nonetheless the Birdos set off early for a day of exciting bird-watching with some great sightings albeit a little later than the scheduled 7.00 am start.

For those who had aspired to a more relaxing day by a waterfall and a hot pool, there were diabolical plans. After a wonderful breakfast we set out in the cars at 9.00 am. It wasn't raining. It wasn't raining as we left the vehicles and headed down a rocky and slippery path towards the waterfalls. However the Fearless Leader did remark that he hoped that it wouldn't rain before they returned. But it did.

Every footstep down had to be negotiated with caution and it was worse after the rain.

The first waterfall was impressive but we weren't to know that it was only the first in the series of waterfalls we would hear and see in this steep valley. The walk was supposed to be 3.5 kilometre each way but the degree of difficulty rated it an 8 out of 10.



*The water in the stream sprayed and displayed;
Tumbled and rumbled; roared and thundered;
Splashed and crashed; churned and turned;
As it descended the steep jungle-clad terrain.*

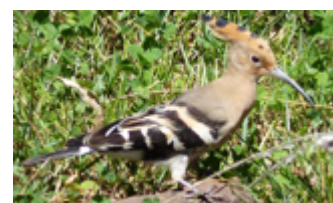
However there was little opportunity to see the grandeur of the scene because as we departed the hot pool the light drizzle became progressively heavier making most rain protection in this humid and sweaty environment ineffective.

This was a walk with a high degree of difficulty. The irony was that Poo hadn't been able to check out this walk on his scout trip because it was the rainy season when he was last in Baihualing. In the higher altitude the Fearless Leader struggled back and was the great follower.

A hot shower and dry clothes followed by a lovely lunch of fried rice was most welcome. Doing nothing but recover for the rest of the afternoon was even more welcome.

The birders were taken by the guide to view another waterfall, birding along the way, viewing a landslip and repair work being undertaken.

Our dinner tonight ranked amongst the superlatives, including the head and legs of the chicken killed and plucked for our meal. The meals here have been splendid.



Day 16 Thursday 27th October To Tengchong

It had rained heavily overnight but the morning was clear. After a wonderful breakfast we said farewell to our hosts at the guesthouse and boarded a 20 seat bus for Tengchong with Simon accompanying the gear in another vehicle.

The first part of the journey followed down the Salawin River. There was intense and diverse agriculture utilizing a very high proportion of the potentially arable land. The crops had a more tropical flavour: sugarcane, mangoes, paw-paws and dragon fruit. We stopped at some roadside stalls that were selling some of these products including Queensland nuts. The vendors belonged to an ethnic Thai minority in China which Poo and staff could understand.

We passed a number of Chinese family grave vaults. These had no particular orientation other than to have their back to the mountain and facing a valley or river.

The mountains seemed to get steeper as we got closer to Tengchong but it was grand scenery and in places the road was supported by 100 metre tall staunchions to bridge the steep ravines between tunnels.



The Salwrecently opened Long River suspension bridge

The main span of the Long River suspension bridge is 1,196 m (3,924 ft) making it one of the longest

ever built. It is also one of the highest bridges in the world sitting 280 m (920 ft) above the river below. The bridge was only opened to the public in May, 2016. It is part of Baoteng Expressway, going straight to Myanmar where the Long River Valley was previously the largest natural obstacle. The trip is now much faster and 2.5 kilometres shorter.

We were surprised by the size of Tengchong and especially of our accommodation in a gated community. It is a highland sub-tropical city of 620,000 only 140 kilometres from the Burma border famous for its jade. It was here during the Second World War that the combined Nationalist and Communist forces assisted by American fighter aircraft defeated the Japanese who were attempting to invade China from occupied Burma.

There were several crises that raised questions about time management in Tengchong. There were some frustrations. However eventually we were aboard some cars that took us to the thermal hot springs. Tengchong is in a very active geothermal area. These are attractions to the millions of Chinese domestic tourists who flock here annually. The other attraction is based on the historical significance of the town that once saw more trade than Shanghai.



We returned from the Hot Springs (viewed only which disappointed the togs carrying majority) while Poo and his team organized our farewell dinner because Poo will remain in Tengchong when we fly to Kunming.

It turned out to be a real banquet but also a celebration of Poo's 48th Birthday. We made a farewells because from here on the group would slowly break up.

John and Su gave Poo a beautiful Aboriginal dot painting and we all thanked Poo and special thanks to Min, Ing, Sami and Da for their tireless help, good humour and translations in difficult circumstances.

Day 17
Friday 28th October
Tengchong to Kunming

As we walked home from the restaurant last night it had begun to rain. Some people got quite wet but during the night the rainfall intensified. Thus our last day in China was marred by the first rain we had experienced in 14 days. It was mainly an inconvenient drizzle that cleared up in the afternoon.



Having been to the hot springs Volcanic Park yesterday it was decided that our sightseeing would include a trip to Heshun Ancient town. Alas there was again a problem with time management however we eventually arrived at the town that included a library and something of a museum of Chinese printing.

However it was the next part that captured the most interest. It was a museum of the Tea and Horse Trail. For the last week at Lijiang, Shaxi and Baihualing we had been criss-crossing this ancient trail of horse caravans that travelled from China into South East Asia along this route to trade. Prior to the opening of ports along the East Coast this was the richest and busiest trade route. The Museum told the story of the physical difficulties but more importantly the story of the traders who made fortunes through this trade.



While waiting in the Kunming Airport I was luckily able to pick up the book, *"Forgotten Kingdom"* relating experiences of the caravan trade based on the experiences of a Westerner who lived in Lijiang for many years during the 1940s who described his

experience being on one of the caravans as well as describing several places that I could relate to having been there 70 years later.



By the end of the tour we were all wishing for a cup of tea or a cup of coffee. We went searching in vain. There were countless shops and stalls prepared to sell jade but not one offering a cup of coffee even for an exorbitant price.

So jaded out and caffeine deprived we returned to the accommodation to the news that we would need to abandon the accommodation immediately. Another hiccup was that we could not all be accommodated on the one flight so the first five took off after lunch for a 3.00 pm flight whilst the rest sat around or went shopping to fill in the time before their 7.00 pm flight to Kunming.

For both groups travelling to Kunming was the most chaotic part of the whole journey. The airport security at the Tengchong airport was even more stringent than in Chongqing and items in luggage that had passed previous inspections raised alarms with much rummaging through the luggage resulting from the X-ray scrutiny. Surprisingly they let my full water bottle pass without examination. Chinese whispers indicated that the extra security was due to recent bomb scares in Kunming.

The chaos continued with delayed flights, and then landing in the rain in Kunming where despite having the second largest airport terminal building in China we were forced to disembark on the tarmac a long way from the terminal and then fit every passenger from the plane into just one bus. Our journey to the hotel didn't take as long as the earlier arrivals who were caught in a traffic jam and had to walk the last kilometre or so to the hotel dragging their luggage in the rain.

We arrived at 11.00 pm just as the shops and stall were closing so it was a scant improvised and belated and less than fully enjoyable dinner.

Day 18



barb's Post card photo from Lijiang

Saturday 29th October Departing Kunming

Kunming is the 15th largest city in China with a population of 6.5 million and the capital of Yunnan. Unfortunately it was raining and we saw little more of this bustling and booming city bigger than Sydney apart from what we could see from our airport bus windows. Although some last minute shopping was squeezed into the morning and Julie is now cash poor but jade rich! Most shops were selling jade but one mother's centre or crèche fascinated us with toddlers suspended in water tanks, happily floating with air sacks...in the front window. Wikipedia filled us in on Kunming. Like most of Yunnan it had been an economic backwater in China but it has boomed over the last two decades. The economy has benefitted from its mineral resources, sub-tropical horticultural industries, and a booming market in cut flowers where over \$1M is sold daily in the special flower market.

We said our farewells at the hotel and headed to various destinations: Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia. But they are adventures for another report.



Despite its huge population China still contains areas of great natural beauty such as this cascade at Buffalo Lake



Our team of 19 in Shaxi Village

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On his 48th Birthday Poo receives a gift from Australia

Epilogue

Two and a half years had elapsed since Discovering China Episode 1 in April 2014. The advancements made in China during that period are visible everywhere. The wealth is now more evident. The government is more open. There is little doubt that China will outgrow America in global significance probably within the next decade.



China's engineering skills and capacity are awesome. The rail line of this along the Min valley is evidence

