



NEAR DALI, YUNNAN PROVINCE, CHINA

CHINA & SOUTH KOREA

Tom Weston, China and South Korea Specialist, travels the region to refresh and update his knowledge of its places, excursions and accommodation.

In November I had the opportunity to travel around China and South Korea, revisiting some of our favourite locations, but also breaking new ground and seeking new and exciting destinations.

Since my last visit, many aspects of Yunnan province in southern China have changed beyond recognition, with huge improvements in accommodation and transport standards, but the magical beauty and atmosphere of this diverse and mountainous region remains undiminished. The ancient water town of Lijiang, lying in the shadow of the Tibetan plateau and featured in the BBC documentary 'Beyond the Clouds', continues to enchant all comers.

Moving east, I joined one of the popular cruises on the Yangtse River, sailing upstream from Wuhan through the spectacular Three Gorges to the misty city of Chongqing. Enroute I had the chance to inspect all the major cruise companies sailing the river, and am very happy to reconfirm our endorsement of the Victoria Cruise company for its excellent levels of service and comfort, and the character and atmosphere of its ships. The imminent

flooding of the gorges has created an enormous surge of interest, and sailings in 2002 are rapidly booking up. Though the gorges will remain in some form after 2003, the character of the river will be changed forever, and many of the fascinating archaeological and cultural relics that cling to the cliffs will be submerged. For me the beautiful Lesser Three Gorges excursion was the highlight of the 5 day trip, travelling by sampan up narrow, lush gorges, alive with birds and monkeys, deep into the surrounding mountains.

Leaving China, I also made my first visit to the oft-overlooked South Korea, and was pleasantly surprised by the mix of stunning natural scenery and cultural heritage. The ongoing impact of the sad division of South and North is clearly visible, and a visit to the De-Militarised Zone is a must as a day trip for visitors to Seoul. A 4-hour drive from west to east coast brought me to the stunning mountain resorts of Soraksan National Park. The hotel we recommend is located at the very entrance to the park, and is the perfect base for some wonderful easy to mid level hiking on the park's many trails through the pines and granite peaks. Though I was a few weeks late to witness the



LESSER GORGES, YANGTSE RIVER

autumn riot of colour in the mountains, further south in the cultural centre of Kyongju, a 6 hour drive down the spectacular Sea of Japan coast, the crimson and yellow maples were easily a match for those of Kyoto in Japan. The town itself is rightly known as the museum without walls, home as it is to an incredible range of cultural relics from the unifying Shilla Dynasty, from ancient burial mounds to beautiful secluded temples and palaces. Distinct culturally and ethnically from both of its powerful neighbours, I would confidently recommend South Korea as a destination in its own right, or as part of an interesting two-centre tour including either China or Japan.



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