



# China favourites

With China firmly back on the travel map following the SARS outbreak of 2003, and with the classic sights of Beijing, Xian and Shanghai bustling with the usual tourist crowds, our China specialists pick some of their favourite destinations a little removed from the standard tourist trail. With the exception of Kashgar in the far west of the country, all the other destinations are within easy reach of some of China's most popular highlights, and can be easily included as interesting side-trips on a first visit to China.



## *Kashgar* Huw Owen

To the east, the Taklamakan Desert. To the north and west the world's mightiest peaks. And to the south the great plateau of Tibet. Welcome to Kashgar. This ancient frontier town is a relic of the Middle Ages, when the Arab armies swept eastwards from Mecca. They left behind a lasting legacy, exemplified by the Id Kah mosque, standing since 1442. Once a week, on a Sunday, a cross-section of the entire region's ethnic groups descends on the town for the Yekshemba bazaar. Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Mongols, Afghans, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Uighurs, in their thousands, come down from the mountains to sell their wares. I could hardly believe my eyes when I first saw it. But don't take my word for it.....

## *Pingyao* Tom Weston

Pingyao was a last-minute addition to a recent inspection tour, and ended up as one of my favourite spots in all of China. Almost uniquely amongst Chinese towns, the traditional walled city of Pingyao has escaped the ravages of modern development largely unscathed. Within the city walls is a wonderful collection of traditional Ming and Qing dynasty courtyard architecture, with many buildings converted into beautiful guesthouses and restaurants. The town has recently been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and so the first trappings of tourism have begun to appear, but this is a magical location well worth a visit before the masses arrive.





**Longji** *Maeve Macrory*

The province of Guangxi is renowned for its fantastic scenery and colourful minorities, and Longji has both of these in spades. Tucked away in the hills a few hours north of Guilin,

this area, known as the 'Dragon's Backbone', is home to some of the world's most spectacular rice terraces. Zhuang and Yao minority villages dot the hillsides and make for fascinating breaks

in a day's exploring. If time allows I recommend an overnight stay in one of the local guesthouses: facilities may be basic but the views and the traditional rural cuisine are unmissable!

**Zhongdian** *Isabel Smith*

North of the popular Naxi town of Lijiang in Yunnan province is the frontier town of Zhongdian. The scenic drive from Lijiang takes you past the stunning Tiger Leaping Gorge to the very edges of the high Tibetan plateau. Known as Gyeltang or Gyalthan in Tibetan, the town is a mixture of modern Han Chinese construction and traditional Tibetan

architecture. The Tibetan Lamaist Songzanlin Monastery on the edge of town is the real draw, giving the visitor a chance to get a taste of Tibetan culture if time doesn't allow a visit to the real thing. The town is also surrounded by a number of beautiful scenic spots, including the fantastic limestone terraces at BitaHai Lake and the mighty glaciers of Deqin.



**Tianshui** *Tom Weston*

China is home to a wonderful selection of religious grottoes and ancient Buddhist sites, scattered from Beijing in the east to the far west of the Silk Route. One of my personal favourites is the 'Haystack Mountain' Maiji Shan caves for their combination of stunning setting and beautiful religious art. Set in a lush valley an hour's drive from the town of Tianshui, the red sandstone cliffs rear up out of the surrounding greenery, and with a history of almost 1,500 years the grottoes contain a wonderful variety of carvings, sculptures and frescoes from across the dynasties.



**Travel file**

Our China specialists will be delighted to discuss and arrange any aspect of travel to China, please call them on 01869 276 217. A 14-night tailor-made individual tours to China start from £2,000 per person based on two people sharing a twin room.