

An Echo of China's Past

Huw Owen takes a journey into the past in Guizhou, a rural and ethnically diverse region of southern China far removed from the country's frenetic modern cities.



View from Lian Lodge, Longji



Miao children, Kaili

There is an ancient Chinese proverb which states that “if you have money you can make the ghosts and devils turn your grindstone.” There is not a lot of wealth of the conventional kind in Guizhou so the farmers must turn their grindstones themselves, as they have here for a thousand years. In terms of culture, however, this is one of China’s richest regions, full of ethnic minorities, possessing a unique architectural heritage and a quintessential Chinese landscape of terraced hillsides and isolated wooden villages.

Guizhou only acquired an infrastructure of note during the war with Japan in the 1930s. The Kuomintang, under Chiang Kai-Shek, had their headquarters in nearby Chongqing and used the opportunity to build Guizhou’s first roads and railways. Unlike eastern China, Guizhou remained a backwater, ignored by the Politburo in Beijing and, until very recently, was ignored by visitors both domestic and international. Perhaps, as a result, the degree of preservation here is remarkable.

Driving north from the relative modernity of Guilin – a famed haunt of scroll painters in previous centuries – the scenery slowly changes,

from karst limestone pinnacles to low alpine forest and the unmistakable contoured curves of terraced rice fields. Longji, a small village high up in the hills, acts as a staging post for travellers to points north, as well as being a side-trip from Guilin in its own right. A new hotel in the village, the Lian Lodge, enjoys a commanding location with sweeping views of the Sang River Valley, and a design in keeping with the landscape. This stretch of northern Guangxi province gives a powerful sense of what lies ahead in southern Guizhou: mile upon mile of unbroken rural scenery, Miao and Dong minority villages, and the ubiquitous farmer harnessing his buffalo to the plough.

After Longji the route into southern Guizhou takes in the heartland of the Dong people, centred on the small town of Sanjiang and nearby Chengyang. The latter village contains a marvellous example of local architecture – the “Wind and Rain” bridge. These structures, built according to the principles of feng shui, act as a focal point for local communities and are regarded with reverence by the Dong people. There are hundreds of similar bridges across this region of China, many with elaborate designs and decorations.

Half a day’s drive away is Zhaoxing, a highlight of any trip to southern China. Tiled roofs sit tightly together, eaves overlapping, with the occasional drum tower imposing itself above the homes below. Surrounded by terraced fields, this community of 4,000 leads a life wedded to the land, growing vegetables, rape seed and, of course, rice. They have a tradition of planting an “18-year fir tree” when a child is born. When that child reaches the age of 18 he can use the lumber from the tree to build a home for his new family. Perhaps the greatest pleasure in Zhaoxing is to walk around the village, soaking up the atmosphere of an older China, untouched by the “gold rush” happening in the east of the country, and meeting the locals and understanding their traditions.

Rongjiang, to the northwest, is a convenient base for exploring the nearby Miao villages of Basha and Yintan. The Miao are sometimes known as Hmong (the name used in northern Vietnam, where they are also found), and in Basha it seems time has stood still. Men in the village carry swords and tie their hair in top knots, and traditional dress can be seen everywhere. Even young boys, who elsewhere in China might be the first generation to don t-shirts and baseball caps, carry daggers and tie their hair up.



Road to Rongjiang



Road to Kaili



Yi locals, Guizhou

Kaili, Guizhou's entrepot, where the various ethnic minorities of the province congregate to trade, is a day's drive north of Rongjiang. Whilst the city is pleasant, the real attractions are the nearby villages, particularly Shiqiao – famous for paper-making, and Xijiang, an atmospheric Miao village situated amongst lush hillsides and rice terraces.

China can feel familiar to the well-travelled, its main sights to be found on everyone's unwritten

"list" of must-sees. But this country is like a continent, with the extraordinary variety and sweep that that implies. Visiting Guizhou is a form of time travel - the futuristic towers of Hong Kong or Shanghai and the bucolic rural scenery of Guizhou are worlds, and centuries, apart.

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FACT FILE

A 15-day trip starting in Guilin and ending in Guiyang costs from £2,600 per person, including return flights, four-star accommodation in Guilin and Longji and the best available accommodation elsewhere. For details please contact our China specialists on 01993 838 220.



Wind and Rain Bridge, Chengyang

