

The Tea Horse Trail and the minorities of southwest China



by **Ben Colbridge** China specialist

THE VERDANT SLOPES of China's mountainous southwest have for centuries boasted some of the country's most productive tea growing areas. Tea plants thrive in a hot, moist climate and grow best at heights of between 600 and 2000 metres – terrain that southwest China offers in abundance. Temperatures in the tea-growing region rarely drop into single figures and, with good rainfall for all but the mild winter months, tea production exists here on a grand scale.

It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that tea formed the basis of an important and complex series of trading routes that criss-crossed southwest China, connecting it to Tibet, Nepal, Burma and India. Crossing some of the highest terrain in the world, these routes were collectively known as the Tea Horse Trail.

Of all goods traded along the Tea Horse Trail, which included both tea and horses, the most common was a type of black tea from the border region with Burma, Vietnam and Laos known as pu'er tea. Like wine in the west, pu'er was valued according to its vintage (generally the older the better) and the region from which it came, with tea from certain mountainsides rated more highly than that from others. Amongst connoisseurs, good quality pu'er can still attract a hefty price tag and the Tea Horse Trail makes a great foundation on which to explore this part of the world today.





Pumi ladies on market day



Black Dragon Pond, Lijiang



Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, Lijiang



Two old gentlemen, Lijiang



The Three Pagodas, Dali

Xishuangbanna region

Starting in the south of Yunnan province, Xishuangbanna is the home of pu'er tea and some of the best comes from a region known as 'Six Famous Mountains'. It has been grown here since at least the Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 25 – 220). It is from Xishuangbanna that pu'er began its often long journey to the rest of the world increasing in quality, taste and value as it travelled.

An abundance of colourful minority communities make their home in this area including the Dai, Yao, Hani and Lisu as well as numerous hill tribes such as the Bulang, Jinuo and Aini. The region's proximity to Southeast Asia means that much of the culture here has migrated north from the neighbouring countries over the centuries. In addition to seeing these minority communities, the region offers some great jungle walking and stunning rice terraces.

Dali

Roughly following the Mekong River (Lancang Jiang in Chinese) north, one of the first major stopping-off places the tea traders would have encountered is the walled city of Dali. Marco Polo made it this far in 1287 and commented on the vibrancy of Dali as a trading hub and its importance as a regional centre. Although the goods on offer have changed dramatically over the years, Dali maintains its lively buzz and there are numerous tea shops in its busy cobbled streets.

Dali is capital of the Bai minority and is set at the foot of Cangshan Mountain (4122 metres) and on the edge of Erhai Lake. The most famous sight in Dali is the striking Three Pagodas. The oldest and tallest pagoda was built in the mid-9th century, stands 70 metres high and is constructed of 16 tiers. On either side are two smaller pagodas, each 42 metres and the pagodas have famously withstood earthquakes, invasion and the Cultural Revolution. A couple of days in Dali gives enough time to see the main sights and soak up the age-old atmosphere here.

The Tiger Leaping Gorge Trek

Squeezed in between the massive Jade Dragon Snow Mountain on one side and Haba Mountain on the other, the trek through Tiger Leaping Gorge – one of the world's deepest – is amongst China's most spectacular. This two-day trek, with one night in the aptly named village of Halfway, takes you the entire length of the gorge with incredible scenery for the entire duration. A reasonable level of fitness is required as you navigate the narrow paths high above the raging Jinsha river – the upper reaches of the mighty Yangtze.



Boats moored on Lake Lu Gu, Yunnan province



Naxi lady, Lijiang



Lijiang Old Town

Lijiang

Venturing further north, the scenery changes and enters the Hengduan mountain region. At its southern edge, the impressive Jade Dragon Snow Mountain forms a rugged backdrop to the captivating city of Lijiang.

Home of the Naxi (pronounced Nah-shi) minority with their traditional culture and architecture, Lijiang's well-preserved streets are protected as a Unesco World Heritage Site. The cobbled lanes of the old town are dissected by small canals criss-crossed by basic bridges, some are nothing more than a couple of planks and overhung by weeping willows. After dark, red lanterns light the streets giving the city an authentic atmosphere long lost in other parts of China.

It's easy to spend three or four days exploring the old town and heading out to some of the surrounding villages, to Jade Dragon Snow Mountain and the famous Tiger Leaping Gorge.

Lugu Lake

Straddling the border of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, Lugu Lake is pristinely beautiful and well off the beaten track. At 2,685 metres, the air and water up here are crystal clear and views across the lake are breathtaking.

The villages that dot the shores are home to the Mosu, one of the most traditional minorities anywhere in China. The Mosu are the last practising matriarchal society in the world. It is the women who lead the families, villages and communities, and it is through the female side of the family that social ranking, property and money are passed down.

Lugu is an oasis of tranquillity and well worth the long drive to get here – the same long drive that keeps the hordes away. The area was the gateway into Sichuan and the rest of China for the pu'er tea traders who would have arrived here on horseback. As it was back then, accommodation is in simple guesthouses which blend perfectly with the serene surroundings. This is rural China at its most beautiful and rarely seen and a minimum of two nights is required to make the most of it.



Monks at the Dhondrupling Monastery, near Zhongdian

Zhongdian

Further north in Yunnan province and about a three-hour drive from Lijiang is the Tibetan town of Zhongdian – also known as Gyalthang in Tibetan, but most famously as Shangri-la. The traditional architecture in this region is Tibetan in style and much of the indigenous population is of Tibetan descent. Songzanlin, one of the largest monasteries outside of Tibet, sits on the edge of town. If you can't make it into Tibet itself, a visit here will bring you pretty close, both in terms of geography and culture. Three nights is ideal to give you a good taste of this remote corner of the country.

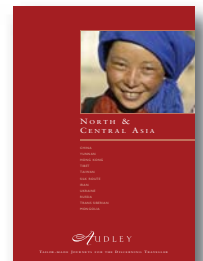
Zhongdian would have been the last major trading post on the Tea Horse Trail before traders crossed the dangerous high passes into Tibet, Nepal and India. En route, they would have passed from the tropical south to the high and inhospitable north and encountered a lifetime's worth of different cultures on the way. A journey through Yunnan today is not that dissimilar and lets you discover what has to be one of the most beautiful and diverse parts of the world.

Yuanyang rice terraces

While not on the Tea Horse Trail but well worth the effort to visit, the stunning rice terraces at Yuanyang have been cut into the hillsides by the minority Hani people for over a millennium, turning otherwise unusable slopes into productive farmland. Get the conditions right at certain times of the year and the photographic rewards here can be unforgettable.



NEW China, Russia and Central Asia brochure



Aside from researching new experiences in Yunnan, the North Asia team have been working hard on updating the new China, Russia and Central Asia brochure. It will be available from mid October, but to pre-order please call 01993 838 200 or visit www.audleytravel.com/brochures

FACTfile

A 15 day trip through this part of the world including time in Dali, Lijiang, Zhongdian would cost from £2,220 per person. For more information please call Ben on 01993 838 217.

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