

Introduction



Visiting Yunnan, a southern province of China along with three festivals with Explore Worldwide was a good experience — a fine combination of a well-designed itinerary, 15 friendly travelers, two excellent guides, interesting sites and a big, comfortable bus.

I had been to China in 1985 with my cousin Betsy, and returned in the mid-1990's to tour Yunnan, and again in 2000 to do the Silk Road, and finally to Beijing in 2002 to begin a trip on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. But 2002 was a long time ago and I have been looking for an unusual itinerary to take me back.

Explore Worldwide had it — a nice itinerary which, in addition to sightseeing in a minority-rich province, also visited three festivals including the Yunnan Fire Sacrifice Festival, The Taizhi Festival in Shaxi and the Jiejingu Festival in Weishan. These festivals are so local that we often were just about the only foreign tourists.



Our group rendezvoused in Kunming. As usual, if there is a long flight, I arrive a few days early to get a head start over jetlag. I was also fortunate enough to meet our Explore guide, Mandy my first morning and accompanied her on a recce of the old town. As luck would have

it, on the second day, John and Billin who had also arrived early, invited me to visit temples with them. This was the best beginning to any trip I've ever had and am forever grateful to these three for saving me from just walking around aimlessly and probably doing too much shopping!



Photo by John

Our first stop was Kunming's Golden Temple which is a huge property with numerous pagodas, temples, scenic trails and picturesque water features.

Who can resist dressing up as a Chinese Princess at the Golden Temple - no one! Each of us - Billin, John and me had a fun time getting into costume and posing for photos.

Soon, our party is complete and we meet Neddy - our Chinese National Guide. When he is not guiding, he manages an organic Tea Plantation. It was the first time for this itinerary and there were some hiccups - but nothing major. In every sense of the word, it was an "exploratory" tour!





Yunnan Province has a large number of minority people who are holding fast to their customs. Some wear their traditional clothing all the time, others only at festival time. And, the best part, they love having their photos taken!

I have to admit it might be true that “blondes have more fun” in that the fair-haired members of our group seemed to be the more popular.

Even the young monk at the Tibetan Monastery in Puji village wanted a selfie with our lovely, well-organized, conscientious and blonde guide Mandy.



But pictures of just about every one of us now reside in a Chinese person’s photo album.

While waiting for my group at the entrance to a temple, this batch of friendly girls spent time with me and even shared their stash of candy!

Some Favorites

Favorite Festival: Taizhi Festival in Shaxi Village

This centuries-old festival takes place in a small village on the historic Tea and Horse Trail, a network of caravan paths winding thru southern China and extending to eastern India, Burma and Tibet. This trail was an important trade link for a thousand years and Shaxi reigned as one of the principal market towns.

Most Fun Festival: Yunnan Fire Festival in Hongwa Village. The festival was very well organized. We even had All-Access passes for lunch, the seating areas and the outdoor performance!



Girls of the Yi Ethnic group performed during the festival

Favorite Hotel: Aoxiu Zige Hotel in Shaxi's Old Town. Beautiful traditional-style hotel just a stone's throw from festival activities. Rooms are small but comfortable, and furnished with 1920's style Chinese furniture along with handwoven carpets. Probably the best designed room of the trip and certainly the most charming hotel I stayed in during the two weeks in Yunnan.

Favorite Museum: Museum of Dr. Rock in Yuhu Village. He lived here in the 1930's and studied and wrote about the Naxi people. National Geographic sponsored much of his research. His former home is now the museum.



It is thanks to Dr. Rock's work that we know that the seven medallions Naxi women wear at the back of their wrap represent the seven layers of the universe. The Naxi people are animistic and practice a form of shamanism.

Best Exploring on my Own: I could hardly wait to return to Lijiang. I remembered a beautiful little town (and UNESCO site) with a warren of narrow cobblestone streets flanked by wooden frame homes, many belonging to artisans. I knew it had changed as it suffered a devastating earthquake in 1996 (6.6 in intensity). Some of the rebuilding is a bit Disney-esque; but I looked and looked and finally found two of the original, narrow streets that were just as I recalled. I walked through this area several times and it was a delight to "remember."



Best Shopping: Two places are my favorites:

1. Xizhou Village - we had gone to visit their food market, but just behind is a long street with amazing stores, including an antique store as well as a “sidewalk dentist.” Yes, I bought a set of teeth— just in case!



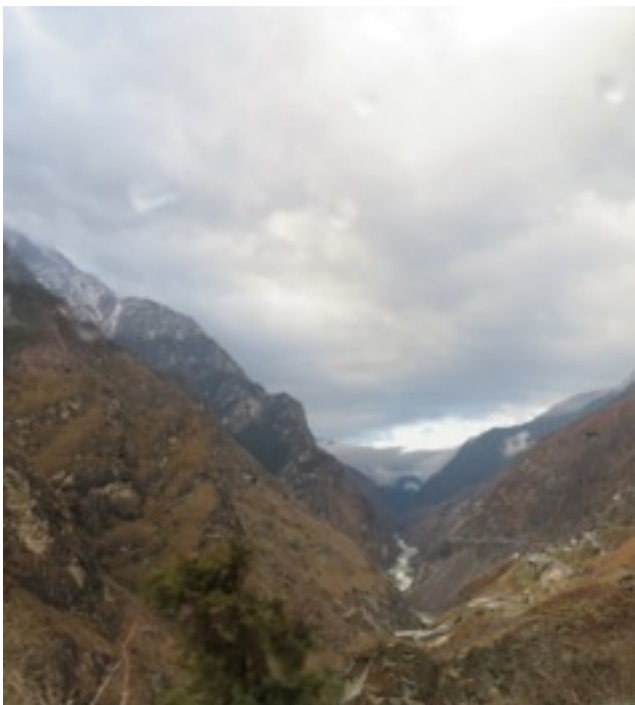
No need to subject yourself to expensive dental work - just visit the local market and find the sidewalk dentist. Here he shows his wares and you can see on the right that he is just finishing a set of dentures.

2. Lijiang — after the earthquake, central Lijiang was resurrected with large plazas, food courts, and wide paved streets lined with stores and outdoor cafes. This is what most tourists see. As much as I felt sorry how it has been re-developed, there were lots of nice stores and my favorite purchases were jadeite pendants right from the man caving them.



You rarely see a sign like this in China. Here you bargain to the death for everything, especially in local markets. This sign was in a tribal and antique jewelry shop.

Best Nostalgic Moment: Tiger Leaping Gorge: I trekked here in the mid-1990's and remember workers excavating for a road. Our bus now took this road to visit the Gorge, but if I looked hard enough, I could just make out the original narrow trail. Back then, I stayed at "Woody's Guesthouse" a very basic affair, with about 8 rooms with plain furniture and no heating. This has morphed into "Woody's Chateau" complete with wine cellar, coffee bar and restaurant with outdoor terrace seating.



Tiger Leaping Gorge is one of the deepest gorges on the planet with a maximum depth of about 13,000 feet. It is still (after all these years!) considered the best hike in China. You can just make out the original trail on the mountain on the right right side of this photo. In the mid 1990's I spent three days hiking and exploring on these trails.

Best Money Spent: The 5 yuan shuttle bus (about \$.75) at Jingpings Smiling Buddha so I didn't have to trudge up the 1999 steps to the top.

Best Toilets: At Chong Sheng Temple, home to the Three Pagodas. These are truly 5-star "rest rooms" in the truest sense of the word and the Chinese people know it. There is a full time attendant, piped in music, fragrant aroma sticks, a lounging area and various commodes suitable for children, setters and squatters. (sorry about TMI here!). The best comfort spot of the trip!

Best Guided Walk: Kunming's Stone Forest. Pure delight, not only for walking, but for seeing and interacting with locals. Those of us 70 and older had to be vetted at the entrance to make sure we were up to all the walking.

So please enjoy the following "vignettes" and the little glimpses of golden moments along the trip.



A mother and daughter in traditional Bai dress pose for us at the Yunnan Ethnic Village.