

Destination Southwest China

A siesta from China's instinct to put in the overtime, a holiday from the national overdrive and an unspoiled getaway from China's ever more waterless north, China's Southwest is a lush and invigorating region of the Middle Kingdom. This is remote China at its most diverse and exotic.

China's Southwest is an essential counterbalance to the nation's impatient and shrill powerhouses. If you want your China the Gucci way – go to Shànghǎi, Hong Kong or Běijīng; and stay put. If however, you're angling for astonishing scenic beauty, wild mountainous treks, riveting displays of ethnic culture and the irresistible allure of the immense outdoors, China's Southwest is a fascinating and rewarding destination.

Everything you expect a China trip to be is here: there's history, mouth-watering cuisine, astonishing landscapes, off-the-beaten track getaways, modern cityscapes and a rich and abundant ethnic backdrop. Unlike the dusty northern Chinese heartland, where the minority presence is often sparse and intangible, China's Southwest is richly peopled by ethnic tribes who bring a unique dimension to China travel. With much of the region refreshingly hedging up against non-Han Chinese civilisations, from the mountains of Tibet through Burma and Laos to Vietnam, the Chinese stamp is rapidly diffused by a minority-rich presence.

Fabled topography ranges from the heavenly landscapes around Yángshuò to the wild mountain scenery of Western Sīchuān and Northern Yúnnán. Celebrated cuisine spans the culinary encyclopedia from the blistering flavours of Húnán through the numbing aromas of Sīchuān, the sweltering hotpots of Chóngqīng to the minority dishes of Guìzhōu and the diverse menus of Yúnnán.

Western journalistic commentary paints a China irrepressibly on the move, striding into an opulent future: a country where staggering GDP figures share the tabloid limelight with stylish models and swanky brand names. You would be forgiven for thinking that Shànghǎi's dazzling renaissance or Běijīng's Olympic buzz somehow summed up China.

China is indeed going places. In 2006, the Three Gorges Dam – the world's largest – was in place three years ahead of schedule. China shot a man into space in 2003, repeated the feat in 2005 and reportedly aims to get a man to the moon by 2024. Currently the world's fourth largest economy, pundits constantly tip China to overtake the US economy within the next few decades. Despite downsizing, the country has the world's largest standing army (which could sponge up the world's largest number of permanent bachelors, a by-product of the one-child policy). China also finds itself at the heart of a potential shift of world power from the West to the East.

While these are all facts of modern China, it can seem like a fantasy to those wandering in off-the-beaten-track minority villages in north Guǎngxī or rural Guìzhōu. Travelling the Southwest is a sheer lesson in scale and a primer in diversity: China is so vast and disparate, it soon becomes clear that the huge progress of the past decades is either concentrated elsewhere or spread very thin.

Like much of the rest of China, the Southwest indeed finds itself pinched between the poverty and powerlessness of the past and the affluence and growing self-confidence of an uncertain future. For some, the fruits of the economic

FAST FACTS: CHINA

Population: 1.3 billion
 Life expectancy male/
 female: 70.4/73.7 years
 GDP growth: 10.5%
 (2006)
 GDP per capita: US\$7600
 (PPP), US\$2001 (nominal)
 Population below poverty
 line: 10% (2004 estimate)
 Adult literacy: 86%
 Internet users:
 137 million
 Major exports: textiles,
 clothing, footwear, toys
 and machinery
 Religions: Buddhism,
 Taoism, Islam, Christianity
 Number of Chinese
 characters: over 56,000

boom are tangible and easy to assess, but on other development indicators – democracy, human rights, adequate rural education and healthcare, the rule of law, intellectual property rights and environmental degradation, to name a few – China is either making negligible progress or is indeed stationary (or moving backwards).

The immediate ills of economic restructuring are the stresses and strains of readjustment. China is a work – the biggest on the planet – in progress, with the *lǎobáixìng* (common folk) frequently voicing discomfort about the direction of economic growth, especially when corruption, land confiscation and pollution remain rampant. Perhaps more than in any other country in the world, wealth is power in China; and the Chinese aspire to wealth to obtain certainty in an often capricious and unpredictable state.

The dismal certainties of the socialist era may have been depressingly familiar, but they were rock-solid. Today's riotous economy is a sink-or-swim set-up with few welfare nets to protect the impoverished or disadvantaged. Affluent pockets such as Liūzhōu (p189) in Guǎngxī and Xīngyì (p121) in Guìzhōu hedge up against numbing, miserable poverty.

Despite its relative economic isolation and the large disparities between the Southwest and the eastern seaboard, the Southwest remains resiliently conservative. He may be long forgotten in the boardrooms of east China, but Mao's portrait still hangs stubbornly in Dong drum towers in Guǎngxī. Yet China's vast economic potential is making serious inroads. According to some reports Chóngqīng is the world's largest metropolitan area, and money is being shovelled into transport infrastructure throughout the Southwest in a bid to ignite economic potential.

Unlike north and east China, where Godzilla-sized carbon footprints carpet the land, the denizens of lush Southwest China are cleaner and greener. Travellers to Běijīng and Shànghǎi moan perennially about pollution, but – with perhaps the exception of Chéngdū and Chóngqīng – there are fewer surgical masks on the streets of the Southwest, while the rustbelt of the northeast is little more than hearsay.

Despite the rebellious paroxysms of the 20th century, the Chinese are a deeply pragmatic people. The Chinese are respectful and fearful of authority, so you won't see any antigovernment graffiti in China. You won't hear speakers standing on soap boxes to vent their political views (unless they chime with government opinion). Indoctrination, propaganda and censorship are rife, from school textbooks to the broadsheets that are pinned up in public or published on line. Political debate is stifled and most Chinese keep their heads down and work hard for a living. All of this creates a perhaps misleading impression of placidity, but as the Chinese say: 人不可貌相, 海不可斗量; *rén bùkě mào xiàng, hǎi bùkě dòu liáng* – you can't judge a book by its cover.

Getting Started

From low-cost DIY independent adventuring to luxury tours, China's Southwest is accessible to literally any budget. Getting around much of the region is straightforward as flights, trains and buses link the major destinations although travellers to remoter regions such as the mountainous wilds of west Sichuān will need to prepare for some heavy-duty bus rides and a flexible itinerary. The Itineraries chapter (p16) can provide you with ideas for planning your route through the Southwest.

WHEN TO GO

The optimum seasons to visit the Southwest are spring (March to May) and autumn (September to October), when average temperatures are either warming up or tapering off, although the region can realistically be visited any time of the year (p467). It all depends on which area you wish to visit. Altitude is largely the deciding factor in frequently dramatic temperature variations within and between provinces. Summer is largely very hot, but the climate of Yúnnán alone ranges from the muggy subtropics of Xīshuāngbǎnnà to the chill north climbing into Tibet, with considerable disparity in between. Chóngqīng famously simmers like one of its notorious hotpots in July, while altitudinous Western Sichuān is much, much cooler in the depths of summer.

Winter visits are not ideal although not impossible. Some parts of the Southwest, such as southern Guǎngxī province and Xīshuāngbǎnnà, may enjoy temperate winter months but much – although not all – of the rest of the Southwest is miserable, damp or downright frozen. Western Sichuān and northern Yúnnán are snowbound and glacial in winter, and tourist drawcards such as Guílín and Yǎngshuò are bleak and disappointing, although Kūnmíng and Dàlì are generally pleasant. See the Climate sections in each destination chapter for details on prevailing weather conditions by province.

Minority festivals can be the best time to see villages and destinations; consult the destination chapters for the lowdown on these and also see the boxed text p14 for the top 10 festivals in the region.

Major public holidays can make travel difficult, and sights can be crammed with holidaying Chinese. Manoeuvring around China with 1.3 billion others at the Chinese New Year (p470) can be daunting, but you also get to see China at its most colourful and entertaining. Hotel room prices (see the boxed text, opposite) become very expensive during the May Day holiday (a week-long holiday for many from 1 May) and National Day on 1 October (also week-long), and train tickets can be difficult to procure.

See Climate Charts (p467) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking the visa situation (p476)
- Checking travel advisory bureaus
- Checking on your recommended vaccinations (p494) and travel medications
- A copy of your travel insurance policy details (p493)
- Good deodorant – sometimes hard to find
- Reading matter for those unremitting bus trips
- A sense of adventure

HOTEL ROOMS

Rack rates are quoted for hotels in this book, although generally the only time you will pay the full rate is during the major holiday periods, namely the first week of May, the first week of October and the Chinese New Year. At other times you can expect to receive discounts ranging between 10% and 50%. This does not apply to youth hostels or budget guesthouses, which tend to have set rates and are often much less busy during the holiday period, when the Chinese enjoy splashing out.

COSTS & MONEY

China is an increasingly expensive travel destination. The good news is that, unless you default to staying at tourist hotels, eating at tourist restaurants and shopping in tourist zones, the Southwest remains highly affordable and accessible to cheap exploration. Whereas China's more affluent and booming regions such as Běijīng, Shànghǎi and Hong Kong can be prohibitively pricey, the Southwest remains full of surprising travel bargains. As the Southwest is less wealthy than more developed parts of China, this also means that even if you want to spend your money, there are limits to how much you can realistically spend.

Accommodation will be your principal day-to-day expense. In this department, travellers in every budget bracket should find what they want, although the luxury end of the hotel market is not well represented outside of the really big urban destinations such as Chóngqīng. This book covers all budgets. Beds can be found from as little as Y8 a night at Chinese guesthouses, or from around Y20 for a dorm bed at a youth hostel, but can soar to as much as US\$300 a night at a five-star hotel in Běijīng.

It depends where you go and where you stay, but the ultra cost-conscious can theoretically survive on as little as Y50 a day, although this precludes long-distance journeys, taxi trips, shopping or buying entrance tickets, and requires finding the cheapest beds in town and dining at low-cost restaurants or street stalls. On average, however, most budget travellers can bank on living on between Y60 and Y250 a day.

Those on midrange budgets can live quite comfortably for between Y250 and Y500 per day, while travellers aiming to maximise their comforts can easily spend upwards of Y500, depending on where they travel to. Spikes in all of the above accompany air travel, long-distance train travel and expensive entrance tickets to top sights where daily budgets can be blown in one go.

Food is reasonably priced throughout China's Southwest, and the frugal can eat for as little as Y25 a day, but expect a very simple diet. Transport costs can be kept to a minimum by travelling by bus or hard-seat on the train. Train travel is reasonable, and is generally about half the price of air travel. Flying in China is expensive, but discounting is the norm and those with less time will find it indispensable for covering vast distances or getting somewhere in a hurry.

Everything in China has its price and if anyone has worked out a way to charge someone else for something, it will be done. The principle of making a sight free in order to lure travellers in huge quantities to spend money on the local service industry does not exist in China, where short-term gain is typically the only economic principle at work.

Consequently, entrance tickets to sights in China's Southwest are virtually unavoidable and can be a major expense. A typical day of sightseeing in a large city can mean having to buy half-a-dozen entry tickets, and drawcard sights, such as Èméi Shān (Y120; p378) and Emerald Pagoda Lake (Y190; p292) are costly. Other sights have a general admission fee for access to the

HOW MUCH?

Cigarettes: from Y3.5

International Herald Tribune from a five-star hotel: Y23

City bus ticket: Y1

Hour in an internet café: Y1.5-Y3

City map: Y5

TOP 10



CHINA'S SOUTHWEST

TREKS

- 1 Tackle Tiger Leaping Gorge (p281), the granddaddy of all Yúnnán treks – and still full of beans
- 2 Village-hop among the drum towers and wind and rain bridges of Sānjiāng (p184)
- 3 Walk the demanding Kawa Karpo Trek (p296) – but don't forget your Tibet permit
- 4 Ramble through the awe-inspiring scenery of the Nujiang Valley (p297)
- 5 Take in some serious trekking from Shítóuchéng (p278) to Lugu Lake (p285)
- 6 Trek the karst valley panoramas around stunning Déhāng (p214) in western Húnán
- 7 Clamber to the sacred summit of Éméi Shān (p378), possibly China's most famous holy Buddhist peak
- 8 Trek among the gorgeous Tibetan villages around Dānbā (p396)
- 9 Explore gob-smacking scenery at Yading Nature Reserve (p407), on foot or horseback
- 10 Visit breathtaking Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve (p415), one of China's scenic marvels

SINGULAR SPOTS

Think you've seen it all before? The Southwest is bursting with unexpected surprises and side-trips.

- 1 Get the proper perspective on the bizarre Yin-Yang diagram of Tàijítǔ (p257)
- 2 Opt for a beancurd blast in Shíping (p315)
- 3 Sidestep the prehistoric ferns of Chishui (p149)
- 4 Discover the magnificent Qiang watchtowers (p396) of Suōpō (p397)
- 5 Wonder at the startling ethnology of Xīngmèng's (p309) Mongolian ancestry
- 6 Breeze over to Weizhou Island (p204) – China's largest volcanic island and haven for a remote pair of Catholic churches
- 7 Wander the flagstones of the ancient fortified town of Láitān (p456) in Chóngqīng
- 8 Submit to the authentic village charms of historic Nuòdèng (p248)
- 9 Bask in the yellow spring glow of Luóping's (p302) monochromatic rapeseed fields
- 10 Delve into one of Yúnnán's old salt capitals at ancient Hējīng (p241)

FESTIVALS

The following festivals are recommended events taking place every year across the Southwest.

- 1 Spring Festival, 1st day of the first lunar month (usually late January or February) – Chinese New Year mayhem in the Southwest (p470)
- 2 Water-Splashing Festival, Xīshuāngbǎnà (p326), 13 to 15 April
- 3 Litáng Horse Festival, usually over 10 days from 1 August, Litáng (p402)
- 4 Third Moon Fair, 15th day of the third lunar month (usually April), Dàlǐ (p259)
- 5 Dragon Boat Festival (p471), 5th day of the fifth lunar month (usually late May or June): Guilín (p160), Nǎnníng (p192), Chóngqīng (p447), Shìdòng (p132), Chóng'ān (p133), Zhènyuǎn (p141), Lèshān (p383)
- 6 Lusheng Festival, first lunar month (usually February), Guìzhōu (p101)
- 7 Walking Around the Mountain Festival, 8th day of the fourth lunar month, Kāngdīng (p388)
- 8 Three Temples Festival, 23rd to 25th days of the fourth lunar month (usually May), Dàlǐ (p259)
- 9 Mid-Autumn Festival, 15th day of the eighth lunar month (usually September or October), throughout the Southwest (p471)
- 10 Festival of Songs, a three-day festival usually in July, August or September, Shíbǎoshān (p276)

area or complex, but then individual sights within charge their own admission fees or you are required to buy a more expensive through ticket (通票; *tōngpiào*) that should allow access across the board. It can all get costly and sometimes frustrating as ticket prices routinely outstrip inflation.

Whatever your budget, learn to haggle. Since you're using a new currency, take your time to accurately convert prices and see what locals are paying for the same goods.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Also see the Yúnnán chapter (p216) for a list of recommended Yúnnán-specific titles.

River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze (2001), by Peter Hessler, is full of poignant and telling episodes during the author's posting as an English teacher in the town of Fúling on the Yangzi River. Hessler perfectly captures the experience of being a foreigner in today's China in his observations of the local people.

A vivid and gritty account of his penniless three-year meandering around China in the 1980s, *Red Dust*, by Ma Jian, traces the author's flight from the authorities in Běijīng to the remotest corners of the land.

An occasionally hilarious account of travel around this huge country, *Fried Eggs with Chopsticks* (2005), by Polly Evans, is perhaps the perfect partner to pack for those long bus journeys.

Soul Mountain (2001), by Gāo Xíngjiàn (高行健), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000, tells the story of a voyage through the wilds of Sichuān and Yúnnán in search of Líng Shān (Soul Mountain).

Yak Butter and Black Tea: A Journey Into Tibet (1998), by Wade Brackenbury, is an account of the author's two-year adventure with a French photographer trying to hike into the Drung Valley in northwestern Yúnnán.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Chinese Culture Club (www.chinesecultureclub.org) Resourceful and popular Běijīng-based cultural organisation with a catalogue of trips to the Southwest. Office in Shànghǎi.

Ecotourism in Northwest Yúnnán (www.northwestyunnan.com) Ecotourism tours around the Lǐjiāng region.

Nature Conservancy (www.nature.org/wherewework/asiapacific/china) Environmental protection organisation with several projects in China's Southwest including protection of the Yúnnán Golden Monkey.

WWFChina (www.wwfchina.org/english/) Website covering the World Wildlife Fund for Nature's activities and programs in China.

YunnanExplorer.com (www.yunnanexplorer.com) Handy information on Yúnnán province, including a selection of absorbing features on local history.

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- 2 Village-hop among the drum towers and wind and rain bridges of Sānjiāng (p184)
- 3 Walk the demanding Kawa Karpo Trek (p296) – but don't forget your Tibet permit
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- 5 Take in some serious trekking from Shítóuchéng (p278) to Lugu Lake (p285)
- 6 Trek the karst valley panoramas around stunning Déhāng (p214) in western Húnán

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Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE LONG SOUTHWEST LOOP

Five to Six Weeks/
Chéngdū to Kūnmíng

Spend several days in **Chéngdū** (p358) exploring the sights and surrounding diversions (including **Éméi Shān**, p378, and **Lèshān**, p383) before heading to the stunning **Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve** (p415), **Huanglong National Park** (p414) and **Sōngpān** (p411) in the north of Sichuān for a week's exploration. From Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve, fly to **Chóngqing** (p436) for a few days, visiting **Dàzú** (p453), exploring the trekking and climbing possibilities of **Wúlóng County** (p455) and the magnificent village of **Láitān** (p456). From Chóngqing, consider drifting through the **Three Gorges** (p458) before journeying to **Guiyáng** (p101) in Guizhōu, possibly via **Chishui** (p147). Visit the dramatic **Huangguoshu Falls** (p115) and **Maling Gorge** (p124) before pressing on to **Kūnmíng** (p220). Returning to Guiyáng, continue east to **Kǎilǐ** (p126) and the fascinating minority villages of eastern Guizhōu; take a week or so to explore the region before continuing southeast to **Sānjiāng** (p184) and **Lóngshèng** (p180). Spend four days visiting **Guilín** (p154) and **Yángshuò** (p166) before travelling from Guilín to Kūnmíng in Yúnnán to tour the province's highlights, including **Dàlì** (p257), **Lǐjiāng** (p265) and **Xīshuāngbǎnnà** (p324).

This comprehensive journey takes you through all of the drawcard destinations in the Southwest, from Sichuān province to Yúnnán. You will experience the thrilling diversity of scenic Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve, the minority villages of Guizhōu, the mind-boggling landscape of Yángshuò and the beauty of Yúnnán.



THE SHORTER SOUTHWEST LOOP

Three to Four Weeks/
Guilín to Chéngdū

Using **Guilín** (p154) as a scenic base, pop down to **Yángshuò** (p166) by bus or boat for several days' exploration of its outstanding karst landscapes. Trek the sights of **Lóngshèng** (p180) and **Sānjiāng** (p184), from where side trips into Guizhōu and the minority regions of Húnán offer tantalising tasters of the provinces. Take the train or plane from Guilín to **Kūnmíng** (p220) in Yúnnán for several days and visit the surrounding sights. Hop on a bus, train or plane to **Xiàguān** (p242) and bus it to **Dàlì** (p257) for several days exploring the sights in this fantastic region. Linked to Xiàguān by bus, the Naxi town of **Lǐjiāng** (p265) is the classic gateway to breathtaking treks along **Tiger Leaping Gorge** (p281). Consider a journey to **Lugu Lake** (p285) on the border with Sichuān, or travel to **Shangri-la** (p287) in northern Yúnnán for several days. Adventurous travellers may opt for the rigorous and adventurous overland route to Chéngdū in Sichuān by bus via **Xiāngchéng**, **Lítáng** and **Kāngdìng** (p19). Overland journeys to Lhasa in Tibet from Shangri-la (p291) are also an option, but you will need to arrange a tour and a Tibet permit. From Shangri-la you can fly back to Kūnmíng and either continue south to explore **Xīshuāngbǎnnà** (p324) in the deep south of Yúnnán or fly from Kūnmíng to **Chéngdū** (p358). From Chéngdū journey to the Big Buddha at **Lèshān** (p383) and conclude your adventure by climbing the sacred Buddhist mountain of **Éméi Shān** (p378) before returning to Chéngdū for transport links to the rest of the Southwest and China.



This extensive route embraces many of the Southwest's highlights, while allowing for a wide-ranging tour of magnificent Yúnnán province and providing options for adventurous detours. The journey could be done in three weeks, but a month would allow more time to explore the region.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

WESTERN SICHUĀN & THE TIBETAN BORDERLANDS

Two to Three Weeks/
Chéngdū to Dégé or Sèrxu (Shíqú)

Due to altitude, this trip through the west and northwest of Sichuān should not be attempted during the big freeze from November to March and April, only during the warmer months of late spring or summer (and even then be fully prepared for sudden temperature drops). From **Chéngdū** (p358) take a bus to **Kāngding** (p387) in western Sichuān and consider expeditions to its surrounding sights, such as the monastery of **Gōnggā Gōmpa** (p390), but note that trekking around and climbing Gongga Mountain (Gōnggā Shān) is strictly for experienced hikers and climbers; travelling in groups is also highly advised. Return to Kāngding and journey north to **Dānbā** (p395) to spend as long as you require discovering the landscape, strewn with Tibetan villages, including **Zhōng Lù Zàngzhài Diàoqún Gǔyīzhǐ** (p396), **Shuǐqǐzǐ Cūn** (p397) and the **Qiang Watchtowers of Suōpō** (p397). From Dānbā, you could hop on a bus via the back route to the Tibetan villages around **Mǎ'èrkāng** (p409) to open up the wonders of northern Sichuān (p409), or get a long-distance bus to **Gānzǐ** (p393) along the Sichuān–Tibet Hwy (northern route) and explore the monasteries in the area. From Gānzǐ, you can reach the cusp of Tibet at **Dégé** (p400) via **Manigango** (p399), or journey up to **Sèrxu** (Shíqú; p401) in the northwest on the road to Qīnghǎi beyond.

Traversing the wilds of western Sichuān, this spectacular route transports you through astonishing mountain scenery to the edges of Tibet and north towards Qīnghǎi. A two-week tour is possible, but try to allow more time to savour the landscape and its sheer potential for adventure.



WESTERN SICHUĀN TO YÚNNÁN

Two to Three or Four Weeks/
Kāngding to Dégqīn

This magnificent route also begins in **Kāngding** (p390) in western Sichuān, but leads onto the southern arm of the Sichuān–Tibet Hwy. Spend several days sightseeing around Kāngding before the eight-hour bus trip to the Tibetan town of **Lítáng** (p402). Spend several days here trekking in the hills and see the Lítáng section (p402) and the Health chapter (p499) for details about altitude sickness. From Lítáng, either take a long, long bus journey to **Bātáng** (p405) on the edges of western Sichuān and Tibet, or head south towards **Shangri-la** (p287) in Yúnnán via **Xiāngchéng** (p406). For some excellent trekking in the magnificent **Yading Nature Reserve** (p407), go via **Dàoichéng** (p407). Continue south from Xiāngchéng to Shangri-la to spend several days exploring the sights. You can delve south to **Jiànchuān** (p274) from **Lǐjiāng** (p265) to jump on the bus to the time-locked caravan-route village of **Shāxī** (p277) and explore little-visited **Nuòdèng** (p248), or journey to **Bàoshān** (p278) from Lǐjiāng to explore the village of **Shítóuchéng** (p278), and even weigh up the exhilarating three- or seven-day trek to **Lugu Lake** (p285). Alternatively, head north by bus to **Dégqīn** (p294) and the truly wild north of Yúnnán or consider the overland journey to Lhasa in Tibet from Shangri-la (p291), but you will need to arrange a tour and a permit for this. Flights also link Shangri-la and Lhasa.



This rugged journey from western Sichuān to the north of Yúnnán, with a diversion to the fringes of Tibet, is one of China's most exhilarating adventures. It can be done in two weeks, but three weeks to a month would allow a more thorough expedition.

TAILORED TRIPS

THE TRADITIONAL VILLAGE & TOWN TOUR

From **Guilin** (p154) visit **Jiāngtóuzhōu** (p164) in beautiful karst surroundings and take a bus to **Dàxū** (p165) on the Li River. Overnight amid the historic architecture of **Huángyáo** (p179), then explore Zhuang and Yao villages around **Lóngshèng** (p180), Dong villages near **Sānjiāng** (p184), the lovely panorama around **Déhāng** (p214) and the ancient river town of **Fēnghuáng** (p212). From Fēnghuáng backtrack to Huáihuà and take the train west to **Kǎilì** (p126) in Guizhōu province, via **Zhènyuǎn's** (p140) historic old town. From here explore the region's minority villages – Xijiāng (p130), Lángdè (p130), Shíqiáo (p131), the villages around Tǎijiāng (p132) and the ancient village of Lónglǐ (p133). Take the train to **Guiyáng** (p101) to visit the Ming town of **Qīngyán** (p108) before continuing north to **Chóngqing** (p436) where you can admire **Ciqikou Ancient Town** (p443) and journey to the historic walled village of **Láitān** (p456). From Chóngqing head northwest to Chéngdū (p358) in Sichuān and daytrip to the Hakka village of **Luódài** (p371), or riverside town of **Huánglóng Xī** (p372). Travel to **Làngzhōng** (p376), northeast of Chéngdū, to explore its old town. From Chéngdū, tackle the Sichuān–Tibet Hwy (p387) west of **Kāngdìng** (p387) – scenically littered with Tibetan villages and stupendous scenery.



SCENIC SENSATION ROUTE

From **Guilin** (p154) journey to **Lóngshèng** (p180) and **Yángshuò** (p166), and stay several days amid the stupendous karst setting. From Nǎnníng travel to **Detian Waterfall** (p208), close to the Vietnam border. Backtrack to Nǎnníng and fly or take the train to **Guiyáng** (p101) before busing over to the breathtaking **Huangguoshu Falls** (p115) and continuing on to Xingyì and **Maling Gorge** (p124). If it's spring, make a beeline for **Luóping** (p302) in Yúnnán, a short journey from Xingyì's never-ending bright yellow fields. Continue to Kūnmíng and down the southeast to the spectacular **Yuanyang Rice Terraces** (p323). Return to Kūnmíng and journey to **Xiàguān** (p242) and on to **Liùkù** (p297) for treks along the **Nujiang Valley** (p297) or continue to Lǐjiāng (p265) for a trek through **Tiger Leaping Gorge** (p281), with views of **Yùlóng Xuěshān** (p274). Near Lǐjiāng is **Lugu Lake** (p285) and the stunning sights around **Shangri-la** (p287). **Déqín** (p294), **Kawa Karpo Mountain** (p296) and **Mingyong Glacier** (p295) lie further north still towards Tibet. Bus travel to **Yading Nature Reserve** (p407) via **Dàochéng** (p407) in Sichuān is possible from Shangri-la, as are buses to **Chéngdū** (p358) via Kāngdìng and **Hailuoguo Glacier Park** (p392) and the options along the Sichuān–Tibet Hwy. Alternatively, from Kūnmíng fly to Chéngdū to take a trip to **Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve** (p415), then sail through the magnificent **Three Gorges** (p458) from Chóngqing to Yíchāng; here flights, buses and planes connect with the rest of China.



On the Road



DAMIAN HARPER

Coordinating Author

January at the Dragon's Backbone Rice Terraces outside Lóngshèng frequently sees the fantastic landscape swathed in copious mists. The winter views may be a bit touch and go, but the cloud cover has a silver lining: there's hardly anyone else about.

EILÍS QUINN

Dozens of bags and a half dozen mangy, sheep-sized dogs crowded the aisles of the Litáng-Bátáng bus. Tibetan villagers hoisted a decapitated yak on the roof, carried the head inside and dropped it in the only clear space – between my feet. To their amusement, I spent the rest of the trip battling all six dogs for their dinner. When we finally arrived in Bátáng at 10pm that night it was one of the happiest days of my entire trip.



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TIENLON HO

Flying about 30 stories above the surface of the Wu River in Wúlóng is wildly exhilarating, especially when you're zipping along cables that are squeaking like a baby elephant. Immediately after this photo was taken, I gracelessly crash-landed into a pile of mattresses.

THOMAS HUHTI

Stop number one, legs aren't ready for the up-and-down of mountain walking with even a day pack, so this is the typical pose: exhausted-but-don't-sit-on-the-pig-poop. Bāoshān is such an extraordinary place. I could have sat there all day, but then a pony train came along and made me move.

KORINA MILLER

I'm in the remote and very frozen town of Tónggrén, Guizhōu and have just rounded a bend in a lane to run headlong into a parade in full swing, complete with a 20-person dragon. I'm instantly plied with sweets, hello-hello-hellos and big grins – it's not hard to get into that festive spirit in Southwest China.

