



*It's a long name and it's a long way away. The English version on the Kunming airport signage conveniently shortens it, so it fits. The abbreviated version has a hip sort of ring to it. So, one could say, with a certain air of self-satisfaction and strategically-deployed obnoxiousness – perhaps while covertly razzing a couple of young and laboriously tattooed EU backpackers – ‘Yeah, I’m Banna bound, baby.’*

# Southern Yunnan through a Western Lens Basically Banna

◆ Text and photographs by Lowell Bennett

Outside the small city of Jinghong, southernmost Yunnan Province, near the Lao border, gorgeous garb and graceful gals at a festival gathering members of the Hani, Aini, and Akha ethnic groups.

These gentlemen make you wonder if their particular ethnic group maintains their own security force. Either way, cool cats.



*Photographer Armed – Used only for hunting ... I think, this real, working and loaded single-shot antique flintlock was momentarily borrowed from a local along a high-mountain and very remote trail near the Myanmar border.*

Xishuangbanna (like, *she-shuang-ban-naa*), the more common designation for an area that includes the small city of Jinghong, southernmost Yunnan Province, on the border with Laos and Myanmar, is not the easiest place to get to. Whether flying, or (way less recommended) traveling by car or bus, Kunming is the transit point. A few carriers fly the 740-km hop, so after perhaps overnighing in Kunming, grab a mid-morning flight and about 90 minutes later you climb out of the taxi into a place like no other in China.

You sense it immediately. It's in the air – literally. No other town in this nation smells like it, in my experience. Wafting from the open-air restaurants, small cafes and food stalls is that distinctly commingled Southeast Asian blend of galangal root, curry, coriander, chili, cumin, lemon grass, turmeric, ginger, and what those spices go into – simmering dishes commonly encountered in places further south, like Chiang Rai, Luang Prabang, Bangkok and Hanoi. If your mouth waters just thinking about peppery som tom (spicy green papaya salad), satisfyingly-



Landscape: Banna high country.



*Glamour Guys* – During a gathering of Hani, Aini and Akha people, Banna backcountry.

chewy pan-fried phad thai noodles, tangy coconut chicken soup and open-flame satay served with sweet chili and peanut sauce, along the streets of Jinghong you are always just a few steps away from complete gastronomic gratification.

And in the backcountry, too; eat your fill of homegrown foods offered up by accommodating villagers far from gas stoves and electric ovens. Banna is known for its diverse cuisine and for its world-class trekking. So after hiking tropically-inclined forested mountain trails, crossing flowered high-altitude plains, passing through cool green corridors of bamboo, you'll drop into a remote and hyper-bucolic village to dine and doze.

### Banna Backwoods

If you are strictly accustomed to four and five-star accommodations and don't like the idea of sleeping in the open air on a mat spread across a rough wood deck, stay in town. Similarly, if you tire easily or if your feet are not capable of treading narrow, rocky, very steep and sometimes precarious mountain trails, do yourself and those who may otherwise accompany you a favor: Take a vehicle-based day tour to the nature reserve, have a look at the elephants, visit a local spa, get a massage, sip a few cold beers poolside back at the hotel.

The Banna style of trekking is no walk in the park. Hikes between village stops are measured in the tens of kilometers, and level strolling is the exception. Having reasonably good stamina, I reached more than one peak at high altitude, only to be maxed out; my lungs heaving for oxygen.

That warning issued – Getting all the

way to Banna and not trekking would be like boating to the Great Barrier Reef and passing on the scuba diving. Following a qualified, multi-dialect local guide, you can trial-run the backcountry for an overnigher, or wander more remote areas for several days. During that time, expect no conveniences other than what you pack on your back. And don't make the mistake (like I did) of assuming plenty of bottled water will be had in the villages along the way. Stock up; carry all the H2O you can.

Food, on the other hand, you don't have to worry about. Lunch and dinner will be waiting in villages along the way, as cooked over an open fire within a local's above-ground hut. The raw product, of course, will be completely fresh and organic, grown and raised in the immediate forested vicinity.

### Ethnic Ethics

If you are an enthusiastic eater of pork, like roasted and added to fresh greens, you'll get a bonus on this trek. While it lasts, around here that particular

raw product lives a pretty good life. Snoozing, slopping, snorting and generally messing around, the pigs happily wander free throughout the mountainous forest – on rare occasions perhaps pausing in their meandering patrol of the trail to sniff at the air and examine the odd smelling foreign human. Seemingly okay with their deal in and of life, at the end of the day they return home to flop beneath their owner's hut. There must be a certain ethnic ethic among the varying villages here, for none seem concerned that their particular swine may anonymously end up on a neighbor's dinner plate at the end of the day.

Xishuangbanna is also well known for its many and diverse ethnic groups. Besides the majority Dai, at about 30 percent of the population, there are more than 43 other unique peoples here, including the Hani, Yi, Lahu, Blang, Jino, Yao, Miao, Bai, Hui, Wa, and Zhuang. Most maintain their own customs, dialect, and colorful traditional garb and adornments. Besides visiting with them in the course of trekking, ethnic tours are easily booked, or, if you are more



*Gracious Greeting* – High mountain village.

independent-minded and reasonably fit, grab a map, rent a mountain bike and hit the trail by the river, the Mekong. ■

Later rebuilt – as evidenced by the brick columns – near a remote high-altitude village, this modest centuries-old temple of the Theravada brand of Buddhism was mostly destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.



### A River Runs to It

Passing through Xishuangbanna, the massive flow that is known as the Lancang River in China and the Mekong beyond is also an officially-sanctioned international transit route. Want to grab breakfast in China, dinner in Thailand and never see an airport? Grab the boat. Out-processing at the dock in Jinghong is handled before you board for the 9-hour run downstream to the riverine port town of Chiang Saen, where visas are granted on the Thai side of the Golden Triangle. En route, the onboard fried fish is tasty, but ...

**Riverine Travel Tip:** Bring your own beer.