

To Dally in Dali

■ *Text and photographs by Lowell Bennett*

Back around the time of the Tang and Song Dynasties (618-1279), for about a half century Dali was a power center, a place of culture and commerce. It had its ups and downs, including an overlong visit from Kublai Khan and Company. Then, not so long ago, while still largely unknown to the traveling public, Dali gained some discreet fame as an out-of-the-way rough-and-ready spot for trekking Western backpackers to put in some hanging-around time.

Today, along the bar and restaurant-lined pedestrian streets at the center of things, food and drink varies from the local Bai cuisine, to burgers, pizza, full-blown continental and (remarkably) perhaps the most delicious tacos this California expat has ever sampled (at Café de Jack near “Foreigners’ Street” on Boai Road). A modern mountaintop airport services the area, as do nonstop air-conditioned buses and trains. The mercantile center of Ancient Town, with its streetside aqueduct, stone walkways and festive lighting, to a pleasant extent has taken on a Disney-like quality.

Today, welcomed by the exceedingly friendly locals, Chinese and Western tourists pile into Dali. Like Disney World, the main pedestrian boulevards pack up at peak times. And, like so many other places in China and beyond, the roaming peddlers are plentiful and persistent. The crowds can become something of a hindrance, and the peddlers may try the patience of a non-customer to the point of loss.

Still, the town is a pleasure and if one gets enough of the center of things, nearby touring opportunities await.



The World-Class Walk

Overlooking Dali, its Ancient City Wall, the historic Three Pagodas and the adjacent Erhai Lake is Cangshan Mountain. Ranging more than 50 kilometers, and with an average elevation of about 3,500 meters, the highest of Cangshan's 19 peaks reaches 4,122 meters (13,397 feet). Gracefully threaded along sheer cliffs and swooping hills is an extraordinary sidewalk of remarkable engineering.

The "Jade Belt" (Yudai Lu) is about 18 kilometers in length, eight feet wide, and the carefully crafted granite promenade meanders below the misty ridgeline thousands of meters above Dali. The slate-like walk remains pool-table level as it winds in and out of the canyons, past waterfalls, monasteries, pagodas, and over some of the 18 rivers that carve through the mountain. Near the north is a humble but apparently safe chairlift that



Dali Ancient City, downtown.

Dali and Erhai Lake viewed from Jade Belt, the 18-kilometer granite sidewalk affixed to Cangshan Mountain.



Lovely locals, Nanzhao Island.

cables passengers about 25 minutes up and into the mist above. At the south side is a state-of-the-art Austrian-made gondola gracefully lacing ground to sky, peak to peak.

Way up there on the granite Jade Belt, on an otherwise clear day with the peaks shrouded in mist, among lush rainforest-like foliage, with waterfalls splashing past pagodas and white-water rivers flowing thousands of feet below, perhaps with no other person within miles, and no sound of civilization, a stroll along this marvelous walk may bring one to a near mystical experience (or at least to a great view).

The Languid Lake

Shaped something like an ear, and with a Pinyin name that perhaps coincidentally infers the shape, Erhai Lake is at the center of things. The placid body of water extends 41.5 kilometers south to north with a shoreline circumference of 116 kilometers. From the surface area of 250 square kilometers the waters drop to an average depth of about 11 meters. Besides the city of Dali near the southern shore, villages, temples and rice fields reach to touch the calm shoreline. Dur-

ing the rice harvest, the glowing golden fields stretching from lake to misty mountain present perhaps that most Chinese of rural images.

And so while well-fed slow-moving Westerners and Chinese tour groups lounge and roam the nearby stone streets of Dali, local farmers toil in the fields for a daily fraction of what a Western writer shells out for a decent cup of strong coffee.

To the north, at the farthest point across the lake from Dali, nestled just offshore from the humble "Double Corridor Village," is Nanzhao Island. While certainly cultivated with the tourist set in mind, the place is worth a visit. Tranquil, lush, a beach, and not crowded on the beautiful day that this writer visited. From Dali a roundtrip taxi was negotiated for 100 yuan, but some make that trip by three-wheel taxi, and some cycle. The five-minute boat ride to and from the shoreline nearest the island runs 10 yuan, roundtrip. One could choose to stay at the single four-star hotel on Nanzhao, overlooking the lake and valley, but that 'one' had best bring company and plenty of taxi cash. Diversions and culinary excursions are few to none in the immediate vicinity.

The Helpful Hotel

Hotels in Dali run the gamut from backpacker hostels at about 50 yuan a night to five-star full-service resorts offering large luxurious rooms, huge swimming pools and onsite spas for nightly rates running into the hundreds of dollars (prices sometimes negotiable). Internet service is on the menu at most accommodations, no matter how humble.

Of course, service does vary. The small, not cheap and not entirely as advertised foreigner-owned "Tibetan-style" place I first landed in began to rub me the wrong way soon after arrival.

Nevertheless, this small setback was acceptable as a standard travel inconvenience and did nothing to change my opinion of Dali. A nice place of ease to visit for a few days, then springboard out to more distant locales.

And so after relocating for a couple very pleasant days at the Asia Star, the exceedingly helpful staff set me up with a 60-yuan ticket for the two-hour VIP bus to Lijiang, and another small and historic city of charm was on the agenda for a future writing. 🇨🇳