

To Live Light in Lijiang

■ *Text and photographs
by Lowell Bennett*



Morning in Lijiang Old Town.

The two-hour bus from Dali crossed the arid mountain range, dropped to rolling green hills and leveled out into a heartbreakingly lush and beautiful valley glowing in warm late-afternoon sunlight. We rolled past pristine picturesque villages and schoolchildren strolling hand-in-hand, running, cycling and laughing their way home. About 20 minutes down the highway from this idyllic intro, we pulled into Lijiang.

Harmonizing in History

Built upon a plateau 2,600 meters above sea level, Lijiang dates back (at least) to the Southern Song period (1127-1279). In 1253, on his way to put the hurt on the State of Dali, Kublai Khan stopped off at this isolated place, floating his troops across the Jinsha River with inflated animal hides. About a half-century ago, Lijiang was described by the Russian author Peter Goullart in his thematically named *Forgotten Kingdom*.

But the venerable city is no longer so isolated, and this region is no longer so “forgotten.” Lijiang was inscribed to the UNESCO List of World Cultural Heritages in 1997. Modern air-conditioned buses now roll in day and night, and a new airport facilitates many domestic routes.

In Old Town, the winding interlaced pedestrian streets branching from the central Sifang Street are lined with shops, bars and restaurants serving pretty much every West-

ern cuisine, in addition to the local fare — which in a given place would likely be cooked up by a member of the region’s several ethnic groups: The Naxi, Bai, Dai, Miao, Yi, Lisu, Pumi, Zhuang, Tibetan, and Hui. At peak times the main drags get crowded, and on the narrower paths avoiding the back-end of a slow-moving tour group can at times be a hopeless objective.

At night along the busiest of the nightlife



Dr. Ho consults with a Russian client.

boulevards, Xing Hua Street, the seemingly always smiling and exuberant village girls who make up the staff of the restaurants and bars compete in song for customers. A group will assemble and lay musical siege to an adjacent establishment, singing out boastfully in loud and high-pitch perfect Naxi harmony. Then the opposing group will fire back with a blasting and good-natured vocal barrage. Often customers of both the Western and Chinese variety will join in.

It all gets pretty noisy. And the far less talented boozed-up vocalizing of *laowais* and out-of-town Chinese can be a little painful to the ears. But there are plenty of more sedate options. Many restaurants and cafés of all types overlook the willow-lined streams that snake through town — a part of an ancient, intricate, and still very successful municipal water system.

Leisurely at Lashihai

Old Town is the place to dally and dine, but the countryside is the place to go. Lijiang is surrounded by a diverse and beautiful landscape, including the imposing Jade Dragon Mountain and the Hengduan Mountain Range.

The first full day in town, after an extraordinarily patient 40-minute assist from the friendly staff of the Zen Garden Hotel, I located a quality mountain bike. Owned by a smiling teenager, it was new, set up with

decent components and a seat post that extended to the required height, and he billed me 50 yuan for the day. It was this vehicle — and a substantial volume of sweat — that first got me lost in the hills, then up into the Hengduan Mountains, then down to the shores of the Lashihai Wetlands three hours later.

Set aside for official protection in 1998, ranging from 2,440 to 3,100 meters above sea level, the Lijiang Lashihai Plateau Wetland Nature Reserve spans 65 square kilometers in central Lijiang City. Included in the greater reserve are not only Lashihai Lake, but also Wenhai Lake, Jizi Reservoir and Wenbi Reservoir. In winter about 10,000 varying water fowl fly in to take up temporary residence.

Besides bird watching, visitors to the Wetlands can hire a boatman for a row on the clear waters, ride a horse along the tranquil shoreline, or just enjoy the serene set-

ting and mountain views.

Browsing in Baisha

About 10 kilometers north of Lijiang Old Town is Baisha Village, a quaint example of Naxi Dongba culture (Dongba meaning “the intelligent”). Besides the usual hand-woven textiles, handicrafts and local cuisine, operating out of his Baisha-based office crammed with printed PR materials and a haphazard lab full-up with exotic local medicinal herbs is The Famous Dr. Ho.

I am not the first to discover him — nor the 10,000th, it would seem. The silver bearded Dr. Ho is, in fact, pretty well-known in the world of TCM (traditional Chinese medicine). He’s been covered by state publications in China, and by at least a few foreign magazines and newspapers. And one might guess that thousands of Doc Ho photos have been plastered on the Web by travelers.



Venerable mother of Baisha.

Just as I was about to depart The Doc’s Global Headquarters, preceded by two assistants a beautiful young Russian woman entered. She appeared very (very) healthy, and I could not guess and did not intrude to query as to what ailed her, if anything. But I shot a few photos and — though the remarkable Russian cast a few perhaps suspicious glances at the average American — none present seemed to mind. Especially not The Doc and his publicity-prone son and assistant, the energetic, gregarious and determined Ho Shulong.

Meandering on Mountains

Sustaining home and business, the waters which for centuries have flowed through Old Town’s open aqueducts source from Black Dragon Pool at the base of Elephant Mountain, which rises steeply within Black Dragon Park. The gate to this serene scene is about a 20-minute stroll from the Old Town section.

This is a world-class and very Chinese setting, and if your cardiovascular system and leg muscles are up to the challenge, two sets of stone steps steeply traverse each side to the top of Elephant Mountain. There, after a 45 or 60-minute hike up, one can enjoy a 360-degree panoramic view of the park, all Lijiang, the valley and surrounding mountains. 🇨🇳



Evening in Lijiang Old Town.

