

EXITING XANADU

—On the Road to Daxu

Travelogue and photos
by Lowell Bennett

First of a Two-Part Report

That Other World —

Eight years of age, sitting with his mother in a Chinese restaurant in Washington D.C., the boy could not take his eyes off that enormous mural on the wall. There were crystalline blue serpentine rivers, vast green plains, impossibly-shaped trees, clear azure skies, a settled mist and, scattered to the horizon, those supernatural mountains.

According to that mural, somewhere there was a fantastic fairytale kingdom of strange and incredible natural beauty. And, as he sat there surrounded by the man-made hardness of a North American city, the boy longed to enter that pristine scene, set foot upon that land, and explore that wondrous world.

Though he did not know it then, on that wall was interpreted the supremely graceful landscape and the clean sustaining

waters of a very special part of China.

The world has changed a lot since as a daydreaming boy I ate a ridiculous Americanized version of Chinese food and lost my thoughts within the fanciful hues and textures of that mural.

Sadly (but not irreversibly), the skies above Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region are now not always so blue. And the plains, mountains and rivers around Guilin and Yangshuo are now plentiful with the more recently introduced exotica of plastic bags, aluminum cans and food-stained polystyrene containers.

But, for now, the mountains are still green and the water is still clear. The towns and their still motherly countryside remain full of provincial charm, kindness and natural beauty. And there is still time.





Dusk falls on West Street.

The blood-infused liquor was bright crimson; sort of festive in appearance. But it was the other beverage that really had me concerned. Held in that cup was a clear solution seemingly there to disinfect the fleshy tumor-like object settled at the bottom. I was at a loss, but I would soon learn exactly what service that organ delivered to its past client—a five-foot long viper just recently demised by decapitation, reluctantly offering up his life for our varied consumption.

Reading the above introduction to what was for the writer a somewhat unexpected culinary prelude, one could be forgiven for presuming that I am recalling some open-fire village scenario—perhaps a back-to-the-basics bizarre booze fest with pauses to savagely feast on a few just-snatched backwoods varmints. But we were a reasonably civil, somewhat educated group. And we sat in a chic private banquet room in a dazzling clean and trendy dinner house in yet another one of those Chinese cities that manages to both boom and be beautiful.

That snake-based dining came days into an otherwise not so adventurous southerly expedition. First, I would drop into a wired little town that is situated at the crux of two rivers and surrounded by those most Chinese of mountains. Then, a few days later, I would seemingly step through a time portal—into an ancient riverside village that was once the home of wealthy merchants. And is no more.

A Yank in Yang Town

The typical recommended tourist itinerary calls for heading to downtown Guilin from that city's airport. Then, after a day or two among bright lights and busy boulevards, down to Yangshuo via a one-hour bus ride. In my case, I reversed that plan and executed a not so leisurely agenda: A 04:30 rise from bed in Beijing, a 45-minute cab ride, a 2.5-hour delay getting off the ground, a 3-hour flight and a 1.25-hour trip by car direct to Yangshuo. But I made it with plenty of daylight remaining to browse the town's pedestrian-friendly streets.

Yangshuo is known as a place of ease for westerners. Most of the merchants speak some English or are fluent, and the menus are likewise. The first hotel at which I stayed, the Magnolia, is one of several smaller boutique-style establishments in town. Cleanly melding continental modern with traditional Chinese design elements, all wrapped around an open-space atrium, the place is at the heart

of things and pleasant—very clean, and very well appointed. And they throw in wireless Internet access.

In fact, the entire area surrounding the pedestrian-only West Street, the main drag, seems to be wired and wireless. If the cafe at which you are grabbing a morning coffee does not provide a LAN line, chances are you can mooch wireless service from the place next door. And it's fast—approaching the speed of my service in the US and (unfortunately) faster than my DSL line in Beijing.

Communication and Cuisine

At this small networked oasis in the countryside of China, sitting at a table upon which sat my laptop and a coffee, a meal or a cocktail, that ease of Internet access would allow me to keep up with business, message around the world, download stateside news programs and upload digital photos to my US-hosted website—a few times literally minutes after I snagged the images.

On that first morning in town, rising far earlier than I would have preferred, I trudged down to the riverfront a couple of blocks away. Dutifully, I shot a few photos of the misty muted landscape. Then I went in search of strong coffee.

Surprisingly, I found a café open at that early hour. While unslinging my gear I ordered a blue mountain brew from the smiling waitress, then looked for a good spot to set my tripod. That turned out to be a few feet away, low on the ancient stones of the nearly deserted early-morning West Street. Resituating a few times to get that mountain peak in the background, I shot a few, then returned the four or five steps to my now-served (and good) coffee.

The sidewalk seating proved ideal, allowing me to cleanly commandeer the wireless signal from the still-closed bar across the narrow street. I popped the camera's flash card into my laptop, uploaded the images and 10 minutes later a sister in the US was on my website. Just after her sun slipped below the Gulf of Mexico off Florida, she was looking at large images of new daylight flowing around the humpbacked mountains, across the flowing waters and down the ancient stone streets of southern China.

As for the many cafes on and around Yangshuo's West Street, within a couple of blocks, visitors can sample the typically spicy local chow, or walk a few steps to dine on



The clear waters of the Yulong River.

cuisines ranging from American and Italian to French and, yes, Mexican. All that I tried was good; the places were clean, the staffs friendly, and the food fresh and well-present-ed.

Yangshuo is supposedly known for something called “beer fish.” Sounds like a dish dreamed up by a Brit expat who maybe hit town in the 80’s. But I am sure I’m wrong and I’m sure the dish is great. I did not try it.

However, following up on an earlier email contact, the proprietors of the Morning Sun Hotel invited me to dinner and plate after plate of fresh raw fish sliced razor thin were delivered to the table for hot pot cooking. Fondue style, in the seasoned boiling water, bite-by-bite the fish is dunked and done in about 20 seconds. Add to the cooked slices the native fresh peppers, garlic, cilantro, oils and soy mixture—outstanding. I have enjoyed several hot pot-style dishes in Beijing, but none were based on fresh clean fish



sliced transparently thin and dabbed with those particularly wonderful organic condiments.

Tracking the Trails

While it’s relaxing just to lounge around the narrow stone boulevards of Yangshuo (and many do), the countryside is there, dragging you away from food, beverage, entertainment and laptop.

The first morning I did what many do; hired a guide for mountain biking. But those peaks that are at all scalable are the domain of rock climbers and none would accommodate a cyclist. Otherwise, surprisingly, most of the trails around the countryside are primarily flat and can be easily managed by the leisure-level cyclist.

My bilingual guide, “Daphne,” was a young and fit local—and married, so I left her in the dust. After explaining that I was out for a little exercise and she need not try to maintain my pace—that I would wait at forks in the trail—I took off. For about four hours, those trails led us through villages, across terraced rice paddies, over rivers and, of course, between those graceful bosom-like hills.

My racing around, however, later backfired when I reentered town ahead of Daphne and managed to get lost. About 15 minutes of aimless peddling around town finally brought me back to the hotel. That was when my mobile rang. The guide was circuiting the streets attempting to locate me. I nonchalantly explained that I was at the hotel. A few minutes later Daphne arrived and I was able to declare to the hotel staff that my guide got

lost—before confessing that actually I blew by the required right turn coming back into town.

The next day I went in search of a good-sized rentable motorcycle, but instead ended up with a junior-sized bright yellow electric scooter. Being a 200-pound man of more than six feet in height, I presumed I looked pretty ridiculous on the thing. This theory was reinforced, somewhat, when a couple hours later I barged up a dirt trail and into a bamboo raft checkpoint along the Yalong River. I bumped the little scooter onto the scene to the laughter of at least one pointing Chinese gentleman in a business suit.

“Yeah, pretty small, isn’t it,” I agreed. Then I throttled the little thing, ripped across the foot bridge and up into the trails—while the laughter and his business-suit-clad associates boarded their assigned bamboo boat for a nice float on the placid river.

It was not far from there that I found some of the most remarkable scenery at the upper reaches of the Yalong. The water was clear, the trees were full green and the surrounding mountains, of course, were impressive. And it was silent.

But just another couple of kilometers down the trail, for some inhabitants all was not scenic and tranquil.

I arrived at the gate of an ancient-looking village seemingly propped up by the mountain it hugged. Bowing slightly each time I tossed out another *ni hao* (hello), I paid my respects to the villagers and their oxen as they filed through the gate, the latter residents heading out to graze and water on the surrounding fields. After they passed I walked into the tiny stone community.

Halfway in, the silence obliterated with a horrible non-human shrieking. Inside a darkened hut just ahead, I presumed pigs were having a portion of their anatomy removed or were being slaughtered in total. As I neared, just outside the hut of horrors, I took note of two adult hogs dozing in their pen, oblivious to the hideous howls of their brothers.

The Beleaguered Bike

The next day I rented a higher-grade mountain bike from Yangshuo-based Bike Asia and headed out through the mountains south of town.

For a while all went well.

After a few kilometers on the paved road, I successfully found the off-road trail. About 10 kilometers later I had passed through many forested villages, by several mountains and around some scenic riverfront turns. The slumbering trailside dogs I rudely disturbed were too lethargic to attack and I only had to outrun a couple of enthusiastic little girls.

Then I got pretty lost.

Three hours of steady riding had passed. I had transited maybe 15 villages, responded to about a hundred “hellos,” as called out by impoverished but smiling residents, and I was saddle sore—very saddle sore. I was out of water, the tourist map on hand was not cutting it, and I was looking for a route back to a paved road. I instinctively took a fork in the trail, and that turned out to be a right turn. I hit pavement about 20 minutes later and 30 minutes after that, heading in the general direction of Yangshuo, I came across a roadside metropolis.

I spotted an ice box, wheeled over to that dusty little establishment and created something of a stir in the neighborhood. Trying to

stay inconspicuous, I settled onto a bench, indulged in a beer, lit a small cigar and watched the world go by. A few residents passed with their oxen on a leash.

I pulled the digital camera from my backpack, but did not stand and begin gawking around the street. I stayed seated, kept the camera low on the bench, and swiveled up the LCD viewfinder. A few people dropped by to say (of course) “hello,” and the grandmother who ran the store could not seem to stop laughing. But, overall, I managed to subtly sink in and get a few decent photos.

Then, after recording those semi-intrusive observations, as I neared the last swallow of my beer, I cast a grim stare at my rented mountain bike. And I said to myself, “How the hell can I catch a cab out of here?”

(Next issue: Guilin, Daxu, and the drinkable snake.)



New visitors stroll the ancient stones of West Street.

Subtle Suggestions

In Yangshuo—

From experience I can recommend two hotels. The Magnolia, an upscale boutique-style establishment with pleasant and good-sized rooms set out around a sunny atrium, with added bonus of wireless Internet access for packers of laptops. Also the Morning Sun, perhaps slightly less expensive than the Magnolia and very nice. The managers and staff of both hotels are friendly, attentive, helpful, and equipped with English skills ranging from fair to excellent.

Bikes are available for rent all over town. A better grade of bike, drawn from a fleet of pretty well-tuned Specialized Hardrocks, can be had at Yangshuo-based Bike Asia, an outfit that does tours all over China.

If you need a guide for a leisurely ride, drop by the Magnolia Hotel and ask to be put in touch with Daphne. For more challenging spins, see Jamie at Bike Asia.