



A US writer and photographer based in Beijing since 2005, here laden with camera, tripod and pack, to get a clear shot at a far peak, Lowell Bennett executes an ill-advised climb up a rockslide area at 4,000 meters, Hailuogou Glacier, Sichuan Province. (By the time he got to the top, the subject peak was shrouded beneath the clouds.)
Photo by Lv Haixia

The Laowai Eye Sichuan through a Western Lens Around Ya'an

◆Text and photographs by Lowell Bennett

Besides a few of the roads in more remote areas, and contrary to what some may presume, less than a year after last May's devastating quake, the network of roads connecting Sichuan's capital of Chengdu with outlying areas is well developed, modern, and in very good repair. Heading west, for instance, a super-smooth expressway will take you to Ya'an – fast. And from that hospitable city of mountain and river, you can venture out across the high-country byways to more remote places of great history and spectacular natural beauty.

Not long after a wrong turn departing Chengdu, the car rental agent called to say that we were on the city's outlying ring road, and we were, essentially, driving in circles. He had his GPS people give us a second call when they saw us nearing the correct exit. I guessed that he was monitoring the location of his vehicle via



Not your typical tourist temple. To reach this spot, in the hills of Western Sichuan, a deep gorge was first traversed, than a steep series of ancient stone steps was scaled for about 30 minutes. The corn crop, to the left, is out of season, but several other plots of vegetables here were green and producing, as tended by a middle-aged woman. I guessed she was the caretaker. I further presumed, based on the two chairs I noted outside a closed door, that two monks were in attendance.



Ancient ice flow at Hailuogou Glacier, about 290 km from Chengdu. A low altitude glacier, the formation stretches for 14.7 km, is 2,850 meters in altitude at its lowest point, and the range, if you count the Gongga Shan peak, is 7,500 meters at the high point. This was shot at about 3,600 meters.



China's other panda, the Red Panda – in contention for being awarded the title as cutest animal on the face of the earth – is actually more closely related to the raccoon, rather than the bear. Sadly, as gentle as their more rotund namesake cousin, the species is thought to be extinct in the wild, due primarily to loss of habitat and, no doubt, because of their lustrous pelts. This was shot at the Panda Research Base, Chengdu.

his laptop, and that was okay with me. Soon we successfully connected to the pristine G318, and that highway facilitated a smooth, clear and rapid 130-km run to Ya'an.

But not all the roads on this motor-driven trek were quite so accommodating. Several days later, after an exhausting high-altitude hike shooting the otherworldly terrain of the Hailuogou Glacier mountain range, it was going to be a long drive back to Ya'an. About 30 minutes into the four-hour run, mostly along winding unlit mountain roads, the drizzling rain and fog conspired with the setting sun to drain away the visibility, transforming the narrow road and cliff-side terrain ahead into a washed-out muddy gray sepia – as if an unfinished Chinese landscape painting was left out in the rain, and the colors seeped into a single indistinguishable shape.

That was about when I began to note, with a certain level of concern reaching

alarm as the sun slipped further away and that Chinese painting became charcoal gray in both back and foreground, the headlight situation – the lack thereof.

On the twisting-turning narrow mountain road, separated only by an invisible non-reflective center line, with no reflective markings on outer or inner edges of the asphalt, oncoming cars passed trucks, trucks passed cars, trucks and cars passed scooters, trucks passed trucks, scooters passed motorized carts, and all passed the darkly-dressed pedestrians who suddenly appeared at blind corners ... and many of these daring participants chose not to switch on their headlights.

Oh, and then it began to really rain.

About five white-knuckled hours later, we were back at the very comfortable quasi-five-star hotel in Ya'an. The next day, returning the car to the agent in Chengdu, after he noted that the aforementioned road was, in fact, known to be dangerous,

I asked about the aversion to headlights at night.

"Oh," he said, "Those are the locals. They know the road really well. They don't need lights."

Western Sichuan: Tranquil and tectonic terrain; delectable and divine dining; venerable and vivacious villages; precious and pampered pandas ... and the locals know the roads really well.

Tucked into a valley alongside the Qingyi River, Ya'an is a welcoming place, with smiling citizens and great food, but perhaps its greatest asset is the hub-like location. From here you can do day trips to ancient mountain villages, trek deep pristine gorges, visit panda sanctuaries, cross vast plains, traverse mountains and, in our case, via that aforementioned cliff-side road, hike Hailuogou Glacier. Of this particular part of Western Sichuan, here I offer a few images with narrative captions. C



Village vittles, Sichuan cuisine of a bucolic sort.



A market place in Ya'an, and right, a merchant street in Shangli Ancient Town. The former (note the scooters and bike) actually stretches over a bridge crossing the Ya'an branch of the Qingyi River, so this doubles as a pedestrian and small vehicle thoroughfare.



In a mountain village, Western Sichuan, a foreigner with camera distracts from study time.