Guǎngxī 广西

Vastly outshone in GDP rankings and cosmopolitan kudos by neighbouring Guǎngdōng – from where most global Chinatowns draw their migrants and Cantonese cuisine – Guǎngxī is hands down the superior travel experience. Money-spinning Guǎngdōng to the east may bask in the lucrative glow of Hong Kong and Shēnzhèn, but in terms of sheer good looks, Guǎngxī’s astonishing landscape effortlessly puts its famous neighbour in the shade.

The province conveniently bundles its must-see sights in the northeast, so travellers can breeze from one destination to the next with minimum effort. Famed throughout China and beyond, Guìlín perhaps needs little introduction, but it’s nearby Yángshuò that could have you writing a flurry of postcards. Fugitives from China’s countless quirks are rapidly won over by the village’s folksy charms: a cappuccino or two later and they’re ready to admire the out-of-this-world karst scenery, take up kung fu, learn Mandarin, chinwag with the locals, recharge their batteries and prepare to plunge once more into the ‘real China’. The Dong villages of Sànjiāng and the rice terraces of Lóngshèng need to be earmarked for earnest exploration, but make sure you also find time to be overwhelmed by the magnificent Detian Waterfall on the Vietnamese border.

Linguists will enjoy being tongue-tied. The lingua franca may be Mandarin, but the wooden northern dialect runs into stiff resistance from the sing-song melodies of Cantonese, the patois of choice for many Guǎngxī locals. Off-the-beaten-track forays can result in unforgettable encounters with folk who have never clapped eyes on foreigners, so be on your best behaviour!

HIGHLIGHTS

- Warm to archetypal backpacker culture and China’s most dreamlike scenery at Yángshuò (p166)
- Get a rush (and bars of Vietnamese coconut candy) alongside the crashing green waters and stupefying scenery of the Detian Waterfall (p208)
- Village hop above one of China’s most photogenic vistas at Lóngshèng’s Dragon’s Backbone Rice Terraces (p181)
- Trek through a string of Dong villages north of Sànjiāng (p184) and swoon before the region’s fabulous wind-and-rain bridges
- Dine on Guilin Rice Noodles in Guìlín (p154), possibly China’s most celebrated tourist city

POPULATION: 44.19 MILLION  AREA: 236,300 SQ KM
HISTORY
Guǎngxī first came under Chinese sovereignty when a Qin dynasty army conquered what is now Guǎngdōng province and eastern Guǎngxī. Like the rest of the Southwest, the region had never been firmly under Chinese control; the eastern and southern parts of Guǎngxī were occupied by the Chinese, while a system of indirect rule through chieftains of the aboriginal Zhuang prevailed in the west.

The situation was complicated in the northern regions by the Yao (Mien) and Miao (Hmong) tribespeople, who had been driven there from their homelands in Húnán and Jiāngxī by the advance of Han Chinese settlers. Unlike the Zhuang, who easily assimilated Chinese customs, the Yao and Miao remained in the hill regions, and were often cruelly oppressed by the Han. The tribes and the Han were involved in continuous conflicts. There was a major uprising in the 1830s, and another coincided with the Taiping Rebellion, which began in Guǎngxī.

Today the Zhuang people are China’s largest minority group, with well over 15 million people concentrated in Guǎngxī. In 1955 Guǎngxī province was reconstituted as the Guǎngxī Zhuang Autonomous Region. The Zhuang are, however, virtually indistinguishable from the Han Chinese, the last outward vestige of their original identity being their linguistic links with the Thai people. Besides the Zhuang, Miao and Yao minorities, Guǎngxī is home to smaller numbers of Dong, Maonan, Mulao, Jing (Vietnamese Gin) and Yi peoples. Until very recently, 75% of Guǎngxī’s population was non-Han.

China’s first canal was built in Guǎngxī during the Qin dynasty, but the scattered Han were unable use it for economic advantage and the province remained comparatively poor until the 20th century. The first attempts to modernise Guǎngxī were made in 1926–27 when the ‘Guǎngxī Clique’ (the main opposition to Chiang Kaishek within the Kuomintang) controlled much of Guǎngdōng, Húnán, Guǎngxī and Húběi. After the outbreak of war with Japan, the province was the scene of major battles and substantial destruction.

Despite recent improvements in the quality of life in Guǎngxī, the province remains one of China’s less affluent areas, although the Chinese government’s ‘develop the west’ programme has resulted in large public works expenditure on roads, communications, water conservation and housing.

CLIMATE
Latitudinally, Guǎngxī may approximate balmy Florida in the USA, but don’t just pack sunscreen and a bathing suit. Average temperatures range from 13°C in January to 28°C in August and pockets of malaria-carrying mosquitoes pose a year-round risk, but there’s a clear north–south divide. On the edge of the Yúnnán–Guízhōu Plateau, Guǎngxī province slopes from a higher elevation in the northwest to the lower-lying southeast. Though still subtropical, highlands in the north of the province are more temperate than the steamier south, and winters can be cold and miserable. Much of the annual 150cm to 200cm of rain falls from June to August; less heavy (but more constant) early rains in March bring dismal, cold damp. Note that coastal regions can get hit by typhoons starting in summer. May, September and October are generally the best times to visit.

FESTIVALS
In the region of Sānjiāng, popular festivals include the Bamboo Instrument Competition in Sānjiāng and Dúdòng (first day of the first lunar month), Firecracker and Opera Festivals in Chéngyāng (seventh day of the first lunar month), Méilín (second day of the second lunar month), Dōujǐāng (15th day of the second lunar month), Fúlù/Gúyí (third day of third lunar month) and Shāyí (fourth day of third lunar month). Bullfighting in Pínglǔ and Bǎxié is staged from the 15th to the 16th of the sixth lunar month. Festivals around Róngshuì include the Bamboo Instrument Festival in Róngshuì (13th day of the first lunar month), the Ancient Dragon Hill Festival in Xiàngfèn (16th day of the first lunar month) and the New Tree Festival at Yuánbào Shān (sixth day of the sixth lunar month).

LANGUAGE
Travellers with knowledge of Mandarin will have few problems navigating Guǎngxī’s linguistic universe, although the stubborn insistence on local dialects in small villages and rural backwaters can occasionally leave you speechless. Cantonese (Guǎngdōnghuà) speakers will be on the same wavelength as the locals in Nǎnníng, Guíping, Wúzhōu, Chóngzuō, Píngxiáng, Dāxīn and Bǎisè,