We’ve said it before and we’ll say it again: if you have time for but one province in China, Yúnnán should be it. Strong words but hyperbole is remarkably understated when describing Yúnnán. No other province can rival Yúnnán’s diversity in land and people. Guìzhōu is also an ethnic mosaic, Sìchuan’s rivers garner much of the Southwest’s glory and Guǎngxi’s scenery leaps from every encyclopaedia’s entry on China. Yet Yúnnán can top ‘em all.

Just gaze at a map. Yúnnán’s majestic, and often sacred, peaks thrust from the Tibetan ranges to the north, lush jungle lies a two-day bus ride south and a fertile plain spreads through the rest of the province. It’s also home to China’s highest number of species of flora and fauna – including 2500 varieties of wild flowers and plants – and known for its mild climate year-round. Indeed, the province’s nicknames include ‘Kingdom of Plants’ and ‘Garden of Heavenly Marvellous Flowers’; the capital’s nickname is ‘Spring City’.

A huge attraction is the province’s astonishingly diverse populace. Home to nearly half of all China’s ethnic minorities, nearly 50% of the province is non-Han (Han are China’s main ethnic group). Village-hop this breathtaking province and greet a new minority group each day, many in time-capsule towns that you’ll never forget. Smacks of PR pulp? Well, just be prepared that if you start here, you may never get to another province. It has happened.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Feel your jaw hit your chest watching a sunrise or sunset over the Yuanyang rice terraces (p323)
- Glimpse the Tibet border, marvel at sublime Méilǐ Xuěshān, and find your own Shangri-la in the northwestern towns of Děqīn (p294) and Shangri-la (Xiānggé Lìlā) (p287)
- Flee the freeze up north and get your Southeast Asia fix in Xíshuāngbānnà (p324)
- Lose your way (and your cares) in the funky old towns of Lìjiāng (p267) and Dǎlǐ (p257), then strike out into the sublime countryside around them.
- Escape the hordes and explore the regional time-warp towns and villages of Shāxi (p277), Wēishān (p245), Jiānchuān (p274) and Nuòdèng (p248)
- Test your legs (and recharge your soul) trekking Tiger Leaping Gorge (p281), Southwest China’s hiking rite of passage

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**HISTORY**

In the 1960s scientists rocked the anthropological world when they determined that fragments of humanlike teeth discovered by railway engineers in Yuánmóu, northwest of Kūnmíng, belonged to hominids who lived 1.75 million to 2.5 million years ago. This and further discoveries proved what was once considered a wild, isolated region was inhabited before any other in China.

Yúnnán’s other great anthropological discovery was of sophisticated Bronze Age cultures around Diān Chí (Lake Dian). First discovered in the 1950s, excavations throughout southeast Yúnnán are filling gaps in a previously unknown period of the province.

It wasn’t until the Warring States period (453–221 BC) that the rest of China became interested in the frontiers. Armies invaded twice before Chu general Zhuang Qiao put himself into power as the emperor of the Dian kingdom near Kūnmíng. Though regular contact with the rest of China was still a long way off, it was Zhuang who facilitated eventual expansion and the first large-scale migration.

Qin dynasty emperor Qin Shihuang extended a road from Sìchuān to Qūjing in northeast Yūnnán and established the first jun (prefecture). As the Qin dynasty ceded to the Han dynasty, western Yūnnán was organised within prefectures and the famed Southern Silk Route into Burma and India was established. Meanwhile, Yūnnán was...
occupied by large numbers of non-Chinese aboriginal people. They lacked good political organisation and their chieftains either obeyed or ignored the emperor.

In the Three Kingdoms period (AD 220–280), a kingdom including parts of Sichuán was formed when a rebellion by Yúnnán’s up-and-coming elite was put down. From this time and throughout the Western Jin period (AD 265–316), Yúnnán crept ever closer to consolidation, and came under the jurisdiction of some sort of Chinese control.

The power base of Yúnnán also shifted slowly – first eastward to Qūjìng, then westward. By the 7th century AD the Bai people had established a powerful kingdom, the Nanzhao, south of Dàlí. Initially allied with the Chinese against the Tibetans, this kingdom extended its power until, in the middle of the 8th century, it was able to challenge and defeat the Tang armies. It took control of a large slice of the Southwest and established itself as a fully independent entity, dominating trade routes from China to India and Burma.

The Nanzhao kingdom fell in the 10th century and was replaced by the kingdom of Dàlí, an independent state overrun by Kublai Khan and the Mongols in the mid-13th century. Kublai’s armies also brought in many of Southwest China’s Muslims, who were warriors from Central Asia.

The Ming dynasty purged the Mongols but Yúnnán resisted capitulation to the emperor’s armies. Finally, after 15 centuries of resistance to northern rule, the Qing emperor cowed enough local power-brokers into submission to gain a modicum of control. In 1658 this part of the Southwest was finally integrated into the empire as the province of Yúnnán.

Even so it remained an isolated frontier region, with scattered Chinese garrisons and settlements in the valleys and basins, a mixed aboriginal population occupying the highlands, and various Dai (Thai) and other minorities along the Mekong River (Láncāng Jiāng). Like the rest of the Southwest, Yúnnán was always one of the first regions to break with the northern government. During China’s countless political purges, fallen officials often found themselves exiled here, which added to the province’s rebellious character.

Right up to the 20th century, Yúnnán looked as much to its neighbours Indochina and Burma as it did to the Chinese emperor. Wracked by ethnic disturbances, including the bloody 1855 Muslim uprising and even bloodier Chinese army put-down, Yúnnán was exploited by local warlords, European powers along the border, and the emperor. It was the death of China, at least in the east, with the arrival of Japanese forces in 1937 that was to ironically augur a better future for Yúnnán. Strategically located away from Japan’s forces in the east, the province was used to shuttle material for the Allied war machine. Later, the Red Army would be welcomed by a peasantry that felt it had been ignored long enough.

Today, Yúnnán province looks firmly back in the Chinese fold. It is a province of 42 million people, including a veritable constellation of minorities (25 registered): the Zhuang, Hui, Yi, Miao, Tibetans, Mongols, Yao, Bai, Hani, Dai, Lisu, Lahu, Wa, Naxi, Jingpo, Pumi, Nu, Achang, Bulang, Jinuo and Drung. These groups make up more than a third of the population, but they occupy two-thirds of the land.

**CLIMATE**

Yúnnán has a stunning range of geomorphology – 76.4m above sea level in Hékǒu to 6740m in the Tibetan plateau with an average of 2000m – and thus the official classification as ‘subtropical highland monsoon’ really translates as dozens of microclimates. In the grip of summer (June through August) you can freeze your tail off in the north, and in the midst of winter (mid-November through late February) you can get by with a light coat within a 12-hour ride south of Kūnmíng, the capital, which seemingly lacks ‘weather’, its mean temperature never fluctuating more than 10°C throughout the year. Dàlí is also blessed with an ideal temperature year-round, with temperatures rarely dipping below 4°C in the winter months or above 25°C in summer.

More detail about the worrisome extremes: in the frozen northwestern region around Déqīn and Shangri-la, winters reach chilling lows of -12°C and summer temperatures peak at highs of 19°C. And though Guǎngdōng’s southernmost peninsula juts a bit further south than Yúnnán’s own border with Laos, to most, Yúnnán is the real ‘south’ China. The Xīshuāngbānnà borderline with Laos lies on the 21° latitude – meaning steamy subtropics; here the summer months soar to 33°C.