Yúnnán 云南

Once a place of banishment for disgraced officials (who must have arrived and chuckled at their inadvertent luck), Yúnnán – China’s sixth-largest province – has become the second-most cited ‘dream destination’ for Chinese travellers. Foreigners have been ecstatic over the area since China opened to tourism, and it boasts two of the country’s original backpacker haunts – Dàlì and Lìjiāng.

Just consider the superlatives. More than half of China’s ethnic minority groups reside here, providing an extraordinary glimpse into China’s mixed salad of humanity. History buffs flock to the remnants of ancient Bronze Age cultures around Diàn Chí (Lake Dian), the site of the powerful and rebellious kingdoms of the province that were a thorn in the side of the emperor for 15 centuries, and the oldest human remains yet found in China (human teeth fragments dating from 1.75 million to 2.5 million years ago).

Then there’s the preternatural (and variegated) natural splendour of the land – triple-thick jungle sliced by the Mekong River in the south, soul-recharging glimpses of the sun over rice terraces in the central and southeastern regions, and the rising shoulders of the Himalayan frontier as you edge towards Tibet. The province is also home to the nation’s highest number of species of flora and fauna, including 2500 varieties of wildflowers and plants.

In one week you can sweat in the tropics and freeze in the Himalaya and in between check out towns that time forgot. So, whatever time you’ve given yourself in Yúnnán when doing you’re planning, double it. Trust us on this one.

HIGHLIGHTS

■ Feel your jaw hit your chest at the Yuányáng Rice Terraces (p696)

■ Marvel at the sublime peaks (and glacier) around Déqìn (p723)

■ Lose your way (and your cares) among the canals and cobbled lanes of Lìjiāng’s old town (p706)

■ Escape the hordes of Lìjiāng and light out for time-warp Shāxī (p712)

■ Test your legs (and recharge your soul) trekking Tiger Leaping Gorge (p713)

POPULATION: 42.2 MILLION   www.yunnantourism.net
History

Given its remote location, harsh terrain and diverse ethnic make-up, Yunnan was long ago considered a backward place populated by barbarians, and thus a pain to govern.

Qin Shi Huang and the Han emperors held tentative imperial power over the southwest and forged southern Silk Road trade routes to Burma, but by the 7th century the Bai people had established their own powerful kingdom, Nanzhao, south of Dali. 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 the trade routes from China to India and Burma.

In the 10th century it was replaced by the kingdom of Dali, an independent state lasting till the Mongols swept through in the mid-13th century. After 15 centuries of resistance to northern rule, this part of the southwest was finally integrated into the empire as the province of Yunnan.

Even so, it remained an isolated frontier region, with scattered Chinese garrisons and settlements in the valleys and basins, a mixed aboriginal population in the highlands, and various Dai (Thai) and other minorities along the Mekong River (Lancang Jiang) – one reason that right through the