

# The Valley of Lijiang, China

**By Laura Mignosa**

Each November since 1995 our group has traveled to China to explore the wonder of this country and to experience Chinese medicine as it is practiced in Beijing hospitals. Our trip to China in 2001 was particularly memorable with a visit to the famous “Lijiang Old Town” in Yunnan province, China. It has a history going back more than 800 years and was once a confluence for trade along the old tea horse road. If we are to say Beijing with all its activity and growth is Yang, then Lijiang is truly the Yin of China. It sits at an altitude of 5,280 feet, at the base of the Himalayas in Yunnan province with Jade Snow Mountain watching over it.

Though the SARS epidemic was being reported in the United States as active during 2003, our doctor friends and hosts told us this was under control and not to worry. We trusted their word and found Beijing to be alive and well with small changes that meant a lot. All hotels had installed a walk-through device that measured a person’s temperature. If the device detected a temperature over 100 degrees, a soldier armed with a rifle would escort you to a separate room where you would provide him with information on your previous whereabouts, whom you may have come in contact with, and where you were going.

A doctor would be on hand to confirm whether you might have SARS or not. We learned that anyone who was diagnosed in this way would be sent to one of the five hospitals in the city that dealt exclusively with SARS. It was amazing to see how this country managed its emergency situation with armed military personnel in the hotels and on the street, but that is the way it was during that time. We felt completely safe, however.

We were so excited about our trip to Lijiang and had already taken an overnight sleeper train — much like the Orient Express — to Xi’an. We saw the Terra Cotta Soldiers of the first Qin Emperor Shi Huangdi and had our books signed by the farmer who first found the tombs. During our three-day stay there, adventurers in our group also hiked the Shan Han Mountain, which is one of the Five Sacred Mountains of China. The mountain resembles a lotus flower. It has been fitted in

some spots with chains to help boost climbers and rope bridges to cross divides. Occasionally clouds clear for a moment and you can catch a peak of an old Buddhist temple. This was the reward for the arduous climb and well worth it.

We left Xi'an and transferred to a smaller plane in Kunming in order to land in the small valley of Lijiang. We exited on the tarmac and, without exception; each of us had tears in our eyes. The snow-capped mountains surrounded us while the clean, crisp air restored us. It was beyond our imaginations! We entered a very small building to get our luggage and leave with Xiao Wu, our local guide. A doctor with an armed soldier flashed a light at our foreheads to measure our temperature as we entered. Even in the most obscure airport high in the Himalayas, China continued to be on guard against SARS. It was reassuring.

We then continued to the Old City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Lijiang is the city on which the book **Lost Horizon** was based and is the place where over fifty percent of the herbs used in Traditional Chinese herbal therapy are grown. Since there was no way for us to carry all our luggage, Xiao Wu arranged for porters to carry it for us. It took about fifteen minutes to walk the hutongs to our hotel in the center of the old town. Along the way we took in all the sights around us — the children, ducks, chickens, dogs, cats and family life in general that we did not see in Beijing.

What makes Lijiang unique is the Naxi ethnic minority. The Naxi people are a culture originating from Tibet. Their religion is a blend of Tibetan Buddhism, Islam, and Taoism and shamanism. The Dongba (shamans) created a written language consisting of more than 1300 pictographs over a thousand years ago. It is the only hieroglyphic language still in use today.

The importance of the shaman notwithstanding, women play a dominant role in Nàxi society, which is matrilineal in nature. Inheritance passes from the mother through the youngest daughter, and women control the purse strings, work the fields and trade at markets. It is the men who traditionally function as child raisers, gardeners, and musicians.

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We went into a courtyard home where four generations of men were playing mahjong and smoking long pipes. Since the Naxi people have their own language, even those who spoke

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Chinese in our group had to rely on Xiao Wu to interpret for us. We asked how they lived so long and well and thought we would hear of herbs or air or food, but instead they laughed and said, "We have no worries...our women take care of everything!"

Evenings can be spent listening to the traditional music of the Naxi people. Most musicians are 70 to 80 years old and come from different backgrounds. Some are farmers, some teachers or tailors and all use rare ancient instruments to maintain the ancient art form that has been practiced since before the days of Kublai Khan's invasion of Lijiang in the 13th century. These instruments are hundreds of years old and most people in China or from the West have never seen them, let alone heard them played. The women who sing as high and full as a bird's song and the orchestra that is said to be the first in the world, is an honor to behold.

The master of ceremonies is a very old and wise man who has been introducing the Naxi musicians for many, many years in Chinese. He is humorous we know, since most in the audience are Chinese and laugh often, and I believe, sometimes at our expense!

During our trip, we rode yaks at the mouth of the Yangtze River, saw China's Grand Canyon called Tiger Leaping Gorge and experienced the ambience of Jade Snow Mountain as it framed the moon each night. Women, who seem as in a trance, use gold and silver threads to embroider wall hangings that tell of the Naxi culture. Silversmiths, tailors and textile weavers are among the shops that line the maze of streets that allow no cars to pass.

In Lijiang, the air is pure and the water flowing through the old town is crystal clear. Walking the ancient streets of an 800-year-old city is other-worldly. It is truly an oasis that melds body and soul into one enchanting experience.

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