

FEATURE

JOURNEY TO SHANGRI-LA

By Ruby Tsao



Shangri-La, China: paradise found

While applying for the new 10-year visa to China at a Chinatown travel agency, we signed up on an 8-day tour of Yunnan, a province in the southwestern part of China.

“Shangri-La” seems to be a popular name in Asia. Now there is a city in Yunnan called Shangri-La, one of the stops for our tour. The fictional name first appeared in James Hilton’s novel *Lost Horizon* written in 1933. At the time, the world had experienced the cruelty of WWI, the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression. People longed for a peaceful world free from war and strife. *Lost Horizon* was a story of a plane crash with passengers stranded on a high mountain. They had to wait a month for rescuers to reach them. They settled in a Buddhist monastery in an isolated location. The monastery was equipped with modern plumbing. Hilton added a library and a grand piano. During their stay, they began

to love this tranquil village and its people untouched by the troubles of the outside world.

The book was a big hit. It was the first paperback published to be affordable to readers, called a “pocketbook” because it could be carried in the pocket. It was the inspiration for Frank Capra’s 1937 film “Lost Horizon”. Ever since, SHANGRI-LA became a popular subject in numerous

books, films and TV shows. Franklin D Roosevelt loved it that he named the presidential retreat “Shangri-La”, which was later changed to “Camp David”.

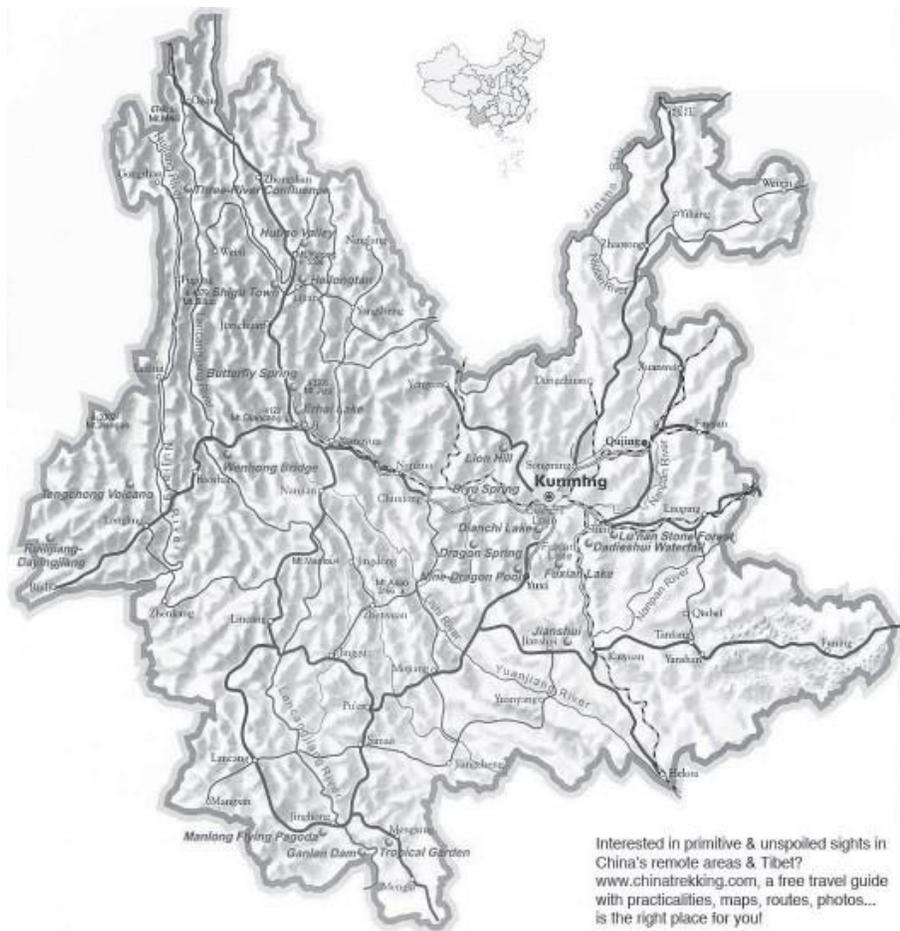
SHANGRI-LA was claimed to be situated in the Yunnan Province. Bordering 2538 miles with Vietnam, Laos and Burma (Myanmar), Yunnan is the far southwest province of China. As a part of One Belt One Road network, high speed trains will connect Yunnan with Southeast Asia—Laos, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia all the way to Singapore. With 152,000 square miles or 4.1 % of China’s total land area, Yunnan is about 10% larger than Germany. It has 45.7 million inhabitants (2009) compared with Germany’s population of 81 million. Yunnan is the most culturally diverse province in China. There are 26 ethnic groups in Yunnan with their own customs and traditions.

Yangtze River , Pearl River, Red River, Nujiang, Lancangjiang all pass through Yunnan to flow to the sea. Topography in Yunnan ranges

from 76 meters to 6740 meters above sea level with an abundance of tourist attractions such as the terraced fields, the Stone Forest and historical villages of Dali, Lijiang, etc. The province of Yunnan has rich mineral resources and the largest diversity of flora and fauna with 15,000 species of plants, 250 species of animals and 766 species of birds. Sixty percent of herbs used in traditional Chinese medicine come from the province of Yunnan. Snub-nosed monkeys, peacocks, white hair monkeys, wild elephants and butterflies and many plant species are special in Yunnan. The Tropical Botanical Garden in Xishuangbanna in western Yunnan has a live collection of 13000 species of tropical plants, also is home of the last wild elephants in China. Henry Paulson, former U.S. Secretary of Treasury appointed by George Bush and an avid advocate of nature conservancy, was instrumental in biodiversity conservation programs in Yunnan.

The tour starts from Kunming, Yunnan's capital city. It is named the City of Eternal Spring with its year-round spring-like climate at 6204 ft. elevation, Daguan Park is situated by Dianchi, the sixth largest fresh water lake in China. In 1999, the International Horticultural Exposition was held in Kunming. Today Yunnan is the largest flower producing and marketing province in China, rivaling the Netherlands.

During WWII, Kunming was the training ground and headquarters for Flying Tigers led by Claire Chennault of the First American Volunteer Group (AVG) of the Chinese Air Force. They



entered into service 12 days after Japan attacked Hawaii's Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. There were no more than 100 pilots in the operation between December 1941 and July, 1942 when AVG was disbanded.

Their brilliant and courageous aerial battles destroyed 296 Japanese aircraft losing only 14 pilots. It was the first action the US took



Kunming, Yunnan's capital city



Lijiang is situated near the snow-capped Jade Dragon Snow Mountain

against Japanese aggression after Japan's surprise attack at Pearl Harbor. Without a declaration of war or explicit warning, the Pearl Harbor attack was judged by Tokyo Trials to be a war crime. All 8 US Navy battleships were damaged, 188 US aircraft destroyed, 2403 Americans killed and 1178 others wounded. Americans were shocked by the devastation on American soil. Flying Tigers' notable success gave a great boost of morale in China as well as the United States and turned the tide in the war against Japan.

Lijiang is situated near the snow-capped Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, a historical village with buildings along a network of streams. In



Home of botanist and anthropologist Joseph Rock (1884-1962), now a museum.

1997, UNESCO named Lijiang a World Historical Heritage Site. We went to see a spectacular show of ethnic music and dances.

We visited the historical home of botanist and anthropologist Joseph Rock (1884-1962), now a museum in a village nearby. He left

China in 1949 to return to his home in Hawaii. Hilton's SHANGRI-LA was said to be inspired by a series of Joseph Rock's articles in National Geographic magazines.

We had a stop at Tiger Leaping Gorge. It is 9.3 miles long and 82ft wide at the narrowest point passing between mountains of 18360ft and 17703ft. A legendary tiger jumping over a stepping rock to escape a hunter gave rise to the name.

In Dali, we saw Cangshan and Erhai at the same time. A ribbon of cloud floats over Cangshan. Erhai is an elongated lake 24 miles long. Dali is famous for its marble rock. We visited Butterfly Fountain and three beautiful Buddhist temples dating back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Nearby in Lufeng we visited the Dinosaur Museum, one of the most concentrated sites of dinosaur bones. The largest dinosaur weighed 30 tons.

Situated near Meili Snow Mountain with an elevation of 22100 ft., Zhongdian was renamed Shangri-La City on December 17, 2001. It is the capital of Diqing Autonomous Prefecture in the northwestern part of Yunnan at 10370 ft elevation. When we arrived, we were advised to buy cans of oxygen at the first stop in case of trouble

with sleep. No one in our group seemed to suffer any ill effects. We visited the beautiful Sumzanling Monastery with golden roofs. The view was spectacular with the gold finish of the building shining in the light of sunset. On this trip, we found the Garden of Eden among snow-capped mountains and azure lakes. Tourists from China as well as from foreign countries flock here to have a look at this legendary Utopia. With an abundance of tourists, SHANGRI-LA is no longer an isolated, tranquil village. Paradise Lost is now paradise found.

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Ruby Tsao, born in China, went to Taiwan with family in 1949; received BA from National Taiwan University; awarded full scholarship from an international education foundation to study in the US, received MS from the University of Michigan; worked in libraries before switching to investments after 4 children arrived.

She has served as President of General Resource Technology, Inc. and treasurer of Tsao Foundation -both organizations to promote utilization and research of renewable resources technology developed by her husband Professor George Tsao. Her interests include travel and writing. She writes on history and culture in the hopes to promote understanding of China for better US-China relations.



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