



# china: the dragon awakes

by Peter Ellegard

The dancers whirled hand in hand, circling the roaring fire and solo flute player. As he increased the tempo so they matched it with faster and faster steps. The flute player and dancers all sported gaucho-style cowboy hats and brightly-coloured tunics with wide, multi-hued woven belts.

A scene typical of an Andes village. Yet this was not South America, but rural China. Lugu Lake to be precise, high in the mountains straddling the border of south-western provinces Yunnan and Sichuan. The dancers belonged to the Mosuo minority group, one of China's 55 ethnic minorities and a matriarchal society in which women run households. There is no marriage – couples get together at night but go their separate ways each day – and children are raised without fathers.

Lugu Lake is one of many little-known areas of China being discovered by tourists as the sleeping dragon awakens and opens up to the outside world. Local families have embraced the new-found interest from outsiders, adding accommodation blocks and communal dining rooms to their homes. Traditional wooden fishing boats ferry visitors across the lake, the women and men singing love songs as they row.



Getting there involves a tortuous day-long bus journey from gateway town Lijiang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site with an historic old town criss-crossed by cobbled alleys and gurgling streams. Close to Tibet and the fabled land of Shangri-La, Lijiang is home to the culturally-rich Naxi minority group.

Lugu Lake and Lijiang highlight China's amazing diversity, but are unlikely to be on the itinerary of first-time visitors. Most opt for a tour covering Beijing, Xian for its terracotta warriors, a Yangtze River cruise and possibly Shanghai and Guilin, perhaps also stopping off in Hong Kong.

Beijing is the best place to start a tour. It is not only China's political capital, but its cultural heart as well. You will still see bicycles by the thousand, especially at rush hour, but they mostly use special cycle roadways alongside the main carriageways. The motor car is the new emperor of the road in Beijing.

Likewise, old buildings are making way for new. Hotels, offices, shops and apartment blocks are springing up all over the city as it spearheads China's growth, along with Shanghai, and readies itself for the 2008 Olympics. Many of Beijing's traditional hutong neighbourhoods, built around narrow alleys, have been torn down for new developments. Thankfully a number still remain and you can explore them on a pedicab (tricycle rickshaw) tour.

The Forbidden City is Beijing's main attraction and doesn't disappoint. The best-preserved and largest group of ancient buildings in China, it housed the Ming and Qing dynasties for 500 years in opulence hidden from public view. The main entrance is beyond Tiananmen gate, opposite the famous square where flying kites is a popular pastime today. To avoid the hordes of visitors, go very early or start at the less-crowded northern



# WIN

A PAIR OF FLIGHTS TO

# CHINA

SEE PAGE 13

*Hong Kong is an excellent gateway to southern China. Besides going shopping in Stanley market, visiting the sampans of Aberdeen and going to the top of Victoria Peak you can also now visit the new Hong Kong Disneyland*

gate. Inside, the ornate palace buildings are awe-inspiring, although the Starbucks café does seem somewhat incongruous.

There are several hotels near the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, making a good base to discover the sights at your own pace and witness the flag raising and lowering ceremonies in the square.

Nearby are Beihai Park, where locals gather early each morning to practice tai chi, dance or practice calligraphy using large brushes and water, and Wangfujing Street, one of Beijing's foremost shopping streets with adjacent food markets. Here you can try weird and wonderful dishes such as fried scorpion and silkworm, but steer clear if you are an animal lover. The squeamish may also want to avoid some dishes served up in restaurants throughout China as local delicacies might well offend some visitors' sensibilities. But in the main, China's richly diverse cuisine is a treat to savour.

Other key Beijing attractions are the circular Temple of Heaven and the Summer Palace, while the Great Wall of China is just an hour away. A day tour can be combined with a visit to the Ming Tombs with their giant carved statues. Largely rebuilt and with a cable car to whisk the lazy and less able up to the parapet, the wall at nearest point Badaling is nonetheless an amazing experience. It marches across hills seemingly in every direction, and some sections are very steep. In summer it gets extremely crowded. Winters are biting cold, but you can enjoy the wall without the crowds.

For evening entertainment, take in a traditional Beijing Opera performance or down a few beers at one of the many bars in Sanlitung Nanlu, known as Bar Street by locals, after you have dined on Beijing duck or Mongolian hotpot.





A highlight of any trip to China is to see Xian's army of 6,000 life-size terracotta warrior and horse figures, which lay buried for 2,000 years. The city has many good quality hotels so you don't have to slum it to see them, while other attractions include the city's old Muslim Quarter.

Despite the completion of the Yangtze Dam project over two years ago, you can still take a cruise on the Yangtze River to see the dramatic scenery of the Three Gorges through a series of locks. Although the gorges are slowly disappearing under the rising water, it will not reach its final level for several years yet.

Shanghai may boast fewer tourist attractions than Beijing – the key ones being the European architecture of its Bund waterfront opposite the futuristic Pudong financial district and the Shanghai Museum – but if it's shopping, nightlife or fine dining you're after, Shanghai's the place. It's also a great place to visit during festivals such as Chinese New Year, when decorative lanterns festoon areas such as the old Yu Gardens Bazaar.

Just inland from Shanghai are a number of historic water towns often missed by visitors. They include historic Suzhou on the Grand Canal, famed for its many beautiful gardens, and quaint towns such as Tongli (where a former primary school now houses a tasteful sex museum) Wuxi and Hangzhou, regarded as the queen of them all.

Hong Kong is an excellent gateway to southern China. Besides going shopping in Stanley market, visiting the sampans of Aberdeen and going to the top of Victoria Peak you can also now visit the new Hong Kong Disneyland. Just across the border on the mainland, golfers can stay and play at the world's biggest golf complex, Mission Hills, its



10 courses all by celebrity golfers and designers. The nearby city of Guangzhou is the capital of Guangdong province and the centre of Cantonese culture and cuisine.

Also in the south, the jagged limestone peak scenery around Guilin is another must-see, best viewed on a half-day cruise along the Li River to the town of Yangshuo. This area also has many caves with breathtaking rock formations. A one or two-day side trip from Guilin to visit the mountain-top Dragon's Backbone rice terraces is well worthwhile too. You can stay in guest houses operated by the local Zhuang people in mountain villages after a climb or sedan chair ride up precipitous paths.

And if you want to see China's most famous ambassador, the giant panda, Chengdu in Sichuan province has a breeding and research centre close to the city centre. There are also mountain preserves in Sichuan and other provinces where you can see them in their natural environment, although encounters in the wild are rare.

Other places to visit include tropical island Hainan, Confucius' home town of Qufu and China's china town, Jingdezhen, where Ming porcelain was made and the tradition continues. There are also many villages and towns throughout the country locked in a time warp and little changed over centuries.

At three times the size of Europe, you will only be able to see a fraction of China in one visit. If you plan to go in 2006, the year of the dog, take it in small bites and leave places to see on future visits. China will certainly make its mark on you. But chances are it will be the friendly and welcoming people who will captivate you as much as its cities and sights.



# factfile

## getting there

Fly from Birmingham to China with the following airlines:

	Beijing	Guangzhou	Hong Kong	Shanghai
<b>Air France</b> [via Paris]	•	•	•	•
<b>Lufthansa</b> [via Frankfurt or Munich]	•	•	•	•
<b>Emirates</b> [via Dubai]	•		• Sept 06	•
<b>KLM</b> [via Amsterdam]	•		•	•
<b>Uzbekistan</b> [via Tashkent]	•			
<b>AeroSvit</b> [via Kiev]	•			

For more information and to book visit [www.bhx.co.uk](http://www.bhx.co.uk) and click 'book your trip' or you can call 0845 330 6600 (discounts available for BHX Flight Club members on telephone bookings only)

## don't miss

- Beijing's Forbidden City, Summer Palace and the Great Wall.
- The Terracotta Warriors of Xian.
- A river cruise down the mighty Yangtze River through the Three Gorges
- A riverboat trip along the Li River from Guilin to see the region's evocative limestone mountains.
- The history and culture of Yunnan province – especially Lijiang and Lugu Lake.
- The Harbin Ice and Snow Festival, in Heilongjiang province – one of the world's foremost winter festivals with stunning ice and snow carvings illuminated by dazzling colours at night.

## vital statistics

### Flight time from Birmingham:

From just over 12 hours to Beijing and from 15 hours to Shanghai and Hong Kong with connections via gateways including Paris, Amsterdam, Dubai, Frankfurt and Munich.

### Time difference:

8 hours ahead of GMT. All of China is on the same time zone.

### Currency:

Yuan (also known as Renminbi, or RMB).

### Language:

Mandarin Chinese is the most widely-spoken language. Cantonese is spoken in southern Guangdong province and Hong Kong. Minority groups have their own dialects.

### Best time to go:

Between spring and autumn is the best time to tour China, although winter can bring beautiful, clear but cold days to Beijing. The Harbin Ice and Snow Festival usually runs from mid-January to mid-February.