

Leaping Tiger, Sleeping Dragon

Tiger Leaping Gorge in southwest China's Yunnan province is a peaceful refuge from big city mania. But is the locals' fury enough to save it from the dammed?

by Karen Goa

It's not every day you see a dragon. Gaping at the beast's snow-tipped spine I stumble over a root on the trail, then lurch back – just in time to stop myself pitching over the edge of a sure-to-be-gruesome drop hundreds of metres to the Yangtze River below. The thirteen glacial peaks of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain flank one of the deepest river gorges on the planet. Tiger Leaping Gorge - named, so the story goes, for a legendary tiger that leaped across the chasm while evading a hunter - slashes through Jade Dragon Snow Mountain and its opposite, Haba Snow Mountain, for fifteen mesmerising kilometers.

Carved deep by the Yangtze River (known in this part of China as the Jinsha-Jiang or Golden Sands River) the gorge has attracted travellers throughout the millennia. Along a trail where south Chinese traders once trekked tea to Tibet, pack-toting trampers now trip over their own feet searching for mythical beasts.

Our 15-strong group is unexpectedly Irish, with a few British thrown in amongst a couple of young Americans, my New Zealand friend and I, and a lone Australian chef. Over the past few days the bus has carried us away from the homicidal traffic and drizzling skies of Kunming city – “a small city, only a million people” our elfin guide, Lily, assures us - to the elegant old town of Dali, to twinkie-lit, touristy Lijiang and then to the village of Qiaotou at the foot of the gorge, where we empty out of the bus.

At the track's head a dogpile of local youths lounging under a tree watches us straggle up the path from the bus stop. I round the first bend half-expecting queues of trampers elbowing each other off the path and wall-to-wall stalls hawking every trinket from temple bells to Tiger T-shirts.

Instead, there are red apples on the trees, and fields of maize slanting down steep hillsides. A lone bullock plows a vegetable patch, its Naxi owner chirruping it gently along. There's not another sound except the thud of boot on earth and awed murmurs from the walkers.

It's a far cry from the iron and coal mines spewing gunk skyward along the road from Kunming and the hustle-bustle of China's megacities. Still, all is not well in paradise. The gorge lies within a UNESCO world heritage site and is a nature reserve. But plans are afoot to dam this beauty spot by 2012, on the back of the Three Gorges dam project further downstream.

On a Ming blue afternoon, walking along in the quiet with only the odd startled goat for company, the needs of the modern world seem remote and ridiculous - apart from the thirst for cold drinking water, that is. It's a searing 30C. We're nearly two thousand metres above sea level. Watering holes are few. When a small trailside house pokes into view Lily reminds us this is the last place to buy water for the day.

One of the young Americans, Will, rinses out a bandana he's bought to wear under his hat, foreign legion style. It freely and endlessly bleeds blue dye; no amount of washing runs the water clear. He trades it for a small, used lime-green hand towel off the clothesline at the hut. For the rest of the trip Will and his greyhound-like sister Tia

outpace the mostly middle-aged rest of us, the lime-green towel semaphoring 'I'm way ahead of you' in the distance.

My own fitness isn't exactly mountaineering strength. I've shed such heavy luxuries as books and chocolate but the pack still hangs like a gremlin on my back. A pair of nuggety packhorses tethered in the shade of a eucalyptus tree tosses their manes and snorts, as if they know they'll be the ones picking up the slack when we go all flabby.

The next couple of kilometers are an uphill grind. This is merely a taste of what lies ahead tomorrow: the '28 bends', a tangle of serpentine switchbacks climbing nearly a thousand metres. By the time we pass a guard of huffy chooks at the Naxi Guesthouse's gate I'm sweaty, bone-weary and grateful for the green tea our Naxi hosts pour for us. The Naxi, an ethnic minority originally from Tibet, have farmed these hillsides for a thousand years. Their fields are symmetrical works of art, as is the guesthouse. Built in classical two-storied Naxi style an elegant upswept roof sits atop carved wooden walls squared around a courtyard strewn with maize husks drying in the sun. As we sink into chairs beneath golden ropes of maize our hosts smile, return our 'ni hao' greetings and vanish until dinnertime.

Sebastian the affable Aussie chef is press ganged into ordering meals for the group. Unlike Naxi restaurants in Lijiang serving up fried dragonfly, roasted bullfrog or pig's stomach in oil this is simple fare: plates of rice, stir fried aubergine and mushrooms, broccoli and sliced green pumpkin, all lavishly slathered with the chili we've grown to either love or hate.

"Beer!" cry the perishing Irishmen.

Our narrow room looks out onto the sun setting on the dragon's back above us, and two fat pigs in a sty below. In the wee hours of the morning the guests on either side of us – I eliminate the pigs as suspects – snore so strenuously I can almost feel the walls squeezing in and out. I give up, pull on my thermals and step outside. With no electrical glow to dim them, the stars are a streaming river of light.

The next day the Irishmen envy our view – "You had a view of a pig? Get away with you. We'd not so much as a trotter." But after yesterday's tramping the Irishwomen call it quits. "Can't move another step, me darlin'." Lily organizes a minibus to take them down to another guesthouse on the lower gorge road, where they'll stay until we finish the tramp. The rest of us shrug our packs over our shoulders and face up to the 28 bends. In the cool of the morning the first part of the track is deceptively flat and easy, the view as jaggedly mountainous as any hiker could hope for. At this time of the day I have plenty of energy to study the hay tied in neat topknots to feed the cows, and houses of stone hewn from the hillside.

Then we hit the bends. We string out along the track. Lily encourages the stragglers at the back, our shy young local guide Mr Yang sets the pace in front. For what seems a life sentence I plod along, one foot after another, my pack full of rocks some prankster must have put in when I wasn't looking. My lungs, accustomed to going about their business with more oxygen to fuel them I'm finding at 2500 metres, flap as usefully as wet dishtowels.

At one of the bends – only a masochist would count them – I stop on the pretext of admiring some tiny purple and yellow wildflowers along the trail, but really to suck in some oxygen. Ahead of me a local Naxi guide speaks rapidly into a cell phone clamped to his ear.

A moment later a horseman astride one of the nuggety ponies thunders back down the track. Two of our team give in and sling their packs on the horses. Two more give up entirely and sling themselves on the horses. Even in this remotest of rural spots a guide can whistle up a rescue mount on a cell phone.

When at last the bends are behind us it's a straightforward trot on the flat. Under the dragon's spine the hills are furred green with cypresses, the peaks cleft and runnelled and gouged by glacial run-off. We pass a bounty of walnut and pear trees, and marijuana forests higher than a horse's head.

I've caught a second wind from somewhere, so the Americans and I arrive ahead of everyone else at Halfway House Guesthouse. While we wait for our fellow walkers we sip more green tea, this time beneath bleached bullock skulls dangling from the rafters, and contemplate whether to order 'fried bean crud' from the menu tonight.

The rest of the group dribbles in.

"We need a horse of beer!" cry the parching Irishmen.

The next day is so perfect for walking I don't even notice the wretched pack. I feel downright pathetic, though, when lean peasant farmers hauling loads of hay or plastic water jugs up the hill pass me at a snapping pace.

The last tramping test is a wet one. I pick my way on slippery rocks across a stream washing across the path from a high, clear waterfall. Under this dousing, the sole of my boot parts company with the upper bit. This would be worrying if the tramp weren't coming to an end soon. But a half hour of walking down hill to another guesthouse takes me to the mid-point of Tiger Leaping Gorge. It's end of the walk. Reunited with our bus – and the well-rested Irishwomen – I reward my three days' hiking efforts with a bar of the left-behind chocolate.

The bus tootles back along the lower gorge road to our last stop on the trip – Tiger Leaping Rock. Car-sized chunks of the road have fallen away down the hill. In places it's a skinny thing dropping steeply to the river, barely navigable by pony never mind a bus. It's not a worry for New Zealanders used to mountainous slips and slides, but others aren't so keen.

'Oh my dear lord Jesus!' cry the petrified Irishmen.

The bus flings open its doors at Tiger Leaping Rock car park, not a minute too soon for the severely unnerved acrophobics amongst us. So this is where the missing trinket-sellers have been hiding. Resisting beaded necklaces and bracelets, pomegranates and plastic miniature cow skulls I trot down, down down the dozens of steps to the river. In the middle of the river there's a prism-shaped rock, lashed by foam, where the leaping tiger is said to have escaped the hunter. Even without tigers - the last one was spotted in the 1950s - it's thrilling to be near the river dodging spray churned up from the rapids. A bloated, drowned sow and piglet swirl in the eddies. It's a warning against venturing too near the edge.

I huff and puff back up the hill, stepping aside for porters carting tourists the size of a bloated pig up the stairs in lotus-patterned sedan chairs. The porters, like the horsemen, co-ordinate their customers by cell phone. It's a reminder that, for even the most basic of tasks in the most pristine of places, progress seems inevitable.

Peasants once floated across the Jinsha's waters on goat-leather bladders. A dam might soon block this river forever. Will push come to shove? It already has. Not long ago a group of angry farmers pushed a county official into the river. If the project goes ahead,

as many as 100 000 people could be displaced, mainly the Naxi and other minority groups who have tilled these fields for generations.

At the far end of the gorge the dragon slumbers in the clouds. I can't help hoping it will awaken in time to give the tiger's tale a happy ending.

Karen Goa travelled to China courtesy of Korean Air and Peregrine Adventures Pty Ltd.