




INSIDERS OUT

ALONG SOUTHERN CHINA'S
ROADS LESS TRAMMELED

text by Shelley Jiang and Gabriel Monroe; photos by Shelley Jiang

Itinerant editors of the Insider's Guide to Beijing, Gabriel Monroe and Shelley Jiang decided to weather the global financial tsunami with four months of roving through rural China. They began with Yunnan, Guangxi and Guizhou, where they traveled in the dizzying orbit of rickety buses, otherworldly insects and mesmerizing landscapes. This autumn will see them trying to adopt their very own baby camel in Barkol, the "county of ten thousand camels," Xinjiang. It will all eventually become a book, probably titled On the Snail Trail: Spiral-Themed China.



There's no time like a recession for traveling. Seven-day vacations? No thanks, make it 70. Bid a temporary farewell to the 100-*kuai* burgers and 40-*kuai* beers – instead, submerge yourself in cleaner air, explore wondrously strange landscapes, and mingle among people for whom Beijing is as mysterious and distant as the dark face of Uranus.

In the China outside the Beijing municipality, life is your sweet, succulent, gloriously inexpensive oyster.

We know. We've been there. We've sucked that oyster right out of its shiny shell. For two months, we wandered across southwestern China, searching for the most beautiful, less-traveled places – and found them.

We've picnicked in seas of yellow blossoms and swashbuckled our way through shrubbery that threatened to engulf us. We've guzzled *baijiu* with the Water Tribe (Shui minority 水族), bargained for swaths of embroidered fabric and bumped in cantankerous buses on even more cantankerous roads – only to be greeted with unparalleled vistas at the end of the journey. We've hitched rides in three-wheeled motorbike-horse cart hybrids and, in turn, given lifts to passing strangers in a red Kia “Thousand Mile Horse.” In pursuit of the perfect view, we've hiked through mud and rain and sunshine.

And the diarrhea was negligible, honestly.

Here people may be a little skeptical, and rightly so. “Undiscovered China” may seem like a particularly vexing oxymoron. After a visit to a Badaling or a Huangshan, it becomes evident that the world's most populous nation generally favors travel as a density equation: pack the most people into the most tour buses in the shortest span of time within a designated seven-day travel period.

Even in the lesser-known countryside, tourism development is growing. Wouldn't any county want to discover the next Jiuzhaigou? As outsiders gradually trickle in, backwater towns and villages renegotiate and redefine their ties to the rest of the nation (the city folk, that is). The trick, then, is to find the towns that haven't been consumed by tourism, that remain gracefully true to their former, anonymous selves.

Fortunately, this is a vast nation, much of it rural and mountainous, with remote corners known only to its inhabitants. Few roads lead to these places, and the ones that do often struggle to live up to certain definitions of the word “road.” The specter of high-powered development only extends so far, and the rest is left to the few who dare the venture. Those who take these humble roads are rewarded with a rarity of beauty, a clarity of kindness and a simplicity of understanding – and not a single raucous souvenir vendor in sight.

THE ROAD TO ALU

Much of our advance research was gathered by crawling through online travelogues by domestic tourist-adventurers. Most of the time, we waded through repetitive drivel. But every once in a while, vague, unsupported advice from an earnest Internet troll was too intriguing to ignore.

So it was on our second day in Luoping, Yunnan, known for its brilliantly blossoming rapeseed flowers that transform the countryside for a few colorful weeks. The tip from our Internet stranger: Aside from the more well-known viewing spot at Niujie, there were even more beautiful flowers and terraces, seven kilometers along the road to Alu. But, he added, no one has ever gone there and he was only repeating hearsay.

Our ears pricked at the thought of untrammelled territory. “Seven

kilometers?” we thought. “Not too far.” We decided to hike along the highway.

So it wasn’t exactly the Long March, just a hot, thirsty walk on the narrow shoulder of a two-lane road. While it wasn’t the Third Ring Road, a steady succession of cars, buses and gritty trucks sped along the curves, veering dangerously close to the precipitous mountainsides. All of them found it necessary to honk non-stop at two lone walkers, whom they assumed to be blind and exceedingly deaf. Far from Beijing’s enlightened emission restrictions, we closed our lungs, eyes and ears each time a beaten-up fossil of a truck belched past us.

The hint, though nebulous, was straightforward enough: “Seven kilometers in the direction of Alu (阿鲁).” If this dear stranger was as



This page: Golden highland scenery along the road from Luositian to Alu (Luoping County, Yunnan)

Previous page: Karst peaks rise out of a sudden fog storm above blossoming fields of rapeseed (Luoping County, Yunnan 云南罗平)

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faithful an odometer as he was a judge of floral pulchritude, we'd be fine. Still, the sun was high, its rays unfiltered, and we had only brought along one 600ml bottle of water. Would we recognize "more beautiful" when we saw it?

But as we walked, worries about finding the "right" spot faded next to the dramatic landscape, gloriously yellow under a wide blue sky. The rapeseed flowers in the fields around Luoping had already passed their blooming peak; up here, in the rollicking, flowing hills, the higher elevation had delayed springtime just enough for us. Extending as far as we could see in all directions were seas of bright golden flowers, terraced and whorled in as many shapes as the mountains would allow.

Beyond each valley was another mountain, and behind every mountain

there were ten more. A vibrant yellow had swept across it all in flamboyant supremacy.

The countryside around kilometer seven, once we arrived, turned out fine indeed, but at that point it was just gravy (golden highland butter-sauce, to be specific).

We climbed a high ridge to look at the land spreading out all around us – yellow flowers, sculpted terraces, a wild garden of rocks scattered over the gentle valley, and behind that, the mountains and roads went on and on.

We are now more susceptible to the enigmatic instructions of Internet trolls than ever before.

Those were the seven kilometers toward Alu.



By daylight, Linlüe's young midnight scamperers affect a more subdued posture (Linlüe village, Sanjiang County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region 广西壮族自治区三江侗族自治县独峒乡林略村)



THE SINGERS OF LINLÜE

The thing about Linlüe folk is that they know how to have fun. The people in Dudong – the largest village in the area – were always saying, “Oh, they’re doing such-and-such in Linlüe tonight. Let’s go check it out!” Whether it was an all-night singing marathon or a raucous day of bull jousting, off they’d go on their motorbikes to tackle the 10km of unpaved mountain roads.

Everyone else in Sanjiang County went to the county-organized celebration of Sanyue San, a holiday on the third day of the third month. Linlüe stayed put on its mountaintop, slept in, and threw its own party.

The young woman who ran our guesthouse – a bare-bones concrete affair – spilled us the beans. There would be singing, she said, and it would go late.

Singing? Not “performance,” just singing. In a country ruled by KTV, a healthy skepticism toward incidents of public crooning is well-learned. But we were in north-eastern Guangxi, deep in the land of the Dong ethnic minority. The Dong sing well, they sing long. One of their most beloved traditional formats is the epic duet. We were told that any Dong husband and wife duo could sing to each other for three days and three nights without repeating a song. Such was their skill at improvisation and memorization both.

We drove up as the evening slowly sank into full night. The road was a serpentine, bumpy mess of dirt and loose rocks. It was for the best, though, as the utter darkness necessitated a deliberate approach – not a single light could be seen save for the occasional motorcycle.

After a vertiginous, belly-scraping crawl of a ride, a small cluster of lights slowly resolved into the dim shapes of houses. But everything seemed quiet, shuttered. Only thanks to a passing mother-daughter expedition did we manage to find the village square; most of Linlüe was tucked beneath the road. Everyone had flashlights – the girl carefully kept her beam trained just slightly behind her, for the two visitors descending the narrow, cobblestone path.

Linlüe folk live on a different schedule, they told us. Mountain folk rise late, eat late and go to bed late. And so it was that in the houses we passed, people were just finishing supper at 9pm, while in the little square only a trickle of early birds had sat down in front of a brightly lit and garlanded platform. The kids, though, were rejoicing in the holiday atmosphere, running amok in frenetic orbits.

As a recording of the duet-style droned on, a trickle of families flowed into the square. Women arrived with tiny babies in tow, while the bigger babies went berserk with gangs of playmates. Old ladies came in twos and threes, old men brought stools and puffed their pipes. The running kids, the happy chatter everywhere, the people coming and going, the haphazard preparations, all fed the buzz of a village getting together for a special night.

Inherent in the messiness was pure delight. It didn’t matter if things got started late – this was their night for fun. The waiting period verged upon chaos, but eventually, everyone found their place, the performers appeared, the camcorder rolled and the lights cut off their random tour of the village to finally point at the stage.

The opening act consisted of several giggling little girls and women performing a traditional welcoming song. Then the stars of the night, a man and a woman from the nearby town of Bajiang (八江), took the stage. There was little drama – the emphasis fell all onto the music, whose plaintive, undulating melodies were mesmerizing. The duo did not sing together, but in a call-and-response format, a dialogue of song. Their voices mellow, smoky, a little nasal, they flowed comfortably into each other with the familiarity of years.

Instead of applauding or dancing, the rapt audience showed its appreciation in a distinctive local style. Ad-libs and clever improvisation were met by charmed giggles, and the performers were showered with attentive admiration – and cash.

Bashful toddlers clutching red envelopes were gently pushed by their mothers to the stage, while older kids ran up proudly, but self-consciously. Teens, women, men, grannies and grandpas all ascended the stage in turn. The singers interrupted themselves between lines to murmur modest thank you’s after each gift. Their hands soon filled with thick stacks of *bongbao*, even as the singing never stopped.

It was an individual way of expressing gratitude that, when echoed across a community, also reflected the spirit of the village. Dong villages tackle communal tasks with admirable comprehension of unity and cooperation, whether organizing a festival or the construction of a drum tower or “wind and rain” bridge. Stone tablets commemorate all those who contribute, a child’s five *mao* donation as lovingly remembered as a grandfather who gave ten *yuan*. Thus, little by little, a community would gather enough money for their projects, celebrations and the building of communal hangout spaces. Or, in this case, enough to flatter guest performers.

At other, more famous Dong villages, tourists booked singing and dancing performances and paid. But here, through sheer luck and timing, we witnessed a show that the village hosted for itself. There were no short, snappy songs for outsiders, no forced smiles, excess costuming or acrobatics. The plain, casual nature of the night, coupled with the impenetrable lyrics and unfamiliar lilting melodies, spoke evocatively of a beloved, shared living culture. The Dong have a saying: “Food nourishes the body, songs nourish the heart” (*Kgonx sangx soh, kegal sangx sais* 饭养身, 歌养心).

Sitting in the dark, almost indistinguishable from the crowd, we felt our hearts grow stronger too.

An aerial photograph of a mountainous landscape. In the foreground, there are dense green forests. The middle ground features terraced rice fields, which are green and follow the contours of the hills. A white, winding road snakes through the landscape, starting from the left, curving around a hill, and then continuing towards the right. The background shows more mountains under a cloudy sky. The text 'THE HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN ON EARTH MAY DESPERATELY REQUIRE MAINTENANCE' is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The text is decorated with stylized white clouds and green foliage. The top right corner of the image has a rounded corner.

THE HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN ON EARTH MAY DESPERATELY REQUIRE MAINTENANCE

A serpentine road situation outside of Zhaoxing, Guizhou (贵州肇兴)

IT'S NOT RECOMMENDED TO TAKE NATIONAL HIGHWAY 321 DRIVING ANYTHING OTHER THAN A SUPER-POWERED SPORT UTILITY VEHICLE SHEATHED IN ADAMANTUM NAILS

We never understood the meaning of the Chinese word 路况 (*lukuang*), as in “road situation,” before driving in Guizhou province.

Back home it snows, and when it snows the road may become unsafe to drive on. You may flip off an interstate, for example. You may have no choice but to enlist the experience of a nearly blind grandfather, whose molecular familiarity with the road is the only competent means to pilot a vehicle through a world where earth and sky (road and not-road), to the eye, are the same undelineated white of a blank sheet of paper. But those are snow situations. The road is actually fine – under all that snow. When the road itself is a situation, then you have a road situation.

Driving from Guilin to the northwestern corner of Guizhou and back over the course of 30 days, we experienced a great many “road situations.”

A good road situation is almost always an expensive road situation. We came to genuinely enjoy being shaken down for tolls, as the alternative was a bad road situation, which usually means “calculate how long it will take you to get to X if your average speed is the slowest the car is capable of.” Of course, the slowest speed that a car is capable of going is “not at all.” Sadly, in such situations, stopping fairly often is advisable, depending on one’s strategic approach to frequent duels with oncoming monster trucks with bad brakes barreling around harrowingly narrow, twisting mountain turns.

National Highway 321 had the honor of introducing us to road situations. According to veterans, 321 is much better now than it used to be. Technically, it is as wide as it is supposed to be in most parts. Nevertheless, it is not recommended to take 321 driving anything other than a super-powered sport utility vehicle sheathed in adamantium nails, the type that automakers test-drive on underwater volcanoes.

Unfortunately for us, we were yet uninitiated novices, and thus completely undeterred.

If all goes smoothly, the 100km stretch from Sanjiang, Guangxi to Congjiang,



Guizhou takes four hours. The road is an unthinkable morass, rutted out in rocky mud puddles and eroded into innumerable holes by the legions of enormous construction trucks that recklessly challenge the highway’s many *weiqiao* (“dangerous bridge”) and their five-ton weight limits.

Worst of all, most of the road wasn’t paved. When it rains – and it does, frequently, all day, non-stop, three-fourths of the year – everything turns to gloom. How it merits the name of National Highway was carefully debated as we crawled through uneven depths of mud and dirt. It was perhaps intended to be a slalom trail for cars?

“Highway 321, Sanjiang to Congjiang – world-famous,” said our host at the end of the day, Mr. Nine-Headed Bird. After spiritedly ushering our hapless, abused Thousand Mile Horse into a parking space in front of a handsome Dong drum tower, he imparted a nugget of perfectly superfluous advice: “A car like this isn’t really suitable for driving on that road.” Mud-bathed to a spattered brown ghost of its original lipstick-red color, with its belly plate smashed and scraped by rocks to the point that it began to drag on the ground, exhausted, our poor little Kia sedan had seen better days. But it would see worse.

In the end, our shoddy, budget-rental vehicle was equal to its legendary workhorse namesake, carrying us not just one thousand *li*, but nearly eight thousand. We safely returned the beast without it quitting on the highway and killing us. Thus, we can proclaim ourselves latter-day Bo Le (伯乐) – the sagacious talent scout of the Warring States who recognized the emaciated Thousand-*Li* Horse for the hero it was. We knew all along it was a fine horse.

A COUNTRY GIRL'S BEST FRIEND?



The Dong minority people are masters of elaborate woodwork

By the time we arrived at the village, trudging along in squishing socks, it was raining hard. We were grateful for shelter and warmth as the old woman led us into the dim inner room. Surprisingly, it was quite crowded compared to the shack's empty outer room. A few children scampered about, at times charmed into stillness by the television, while a man stood around. Several women were hunched over repurposed school desks and what looked like stripped-down sewing machines. Upon closer examination, we saw that they were grinding black pencil-shaped rods against flat, spinning wheels. Aside from the fluorescent lamps at each workstation and the television, there was no other light.

"What are they making?" I asked.

They were making diamonds. "Out of the rain and into the diamond sweatshop" – isn't that a saying?

We had been lost, looking for a remote village called Gaomai (高迈). A local who leads eight-day walking treks from Chengyang, Guangxi, to Zhaoxing, Guizhou, had told us that it was a nice place.

The path was, as we understood it, well-marked and easy to follow along its four kilometers. The guide had also given us a hand-drawn map, dots connected by a few lines into the shape of a sailboat – we were apparently walking up the foresail. But as we followed a stone footpath through a terraced valley, we slowly realized there were many more paths in reality than in the sailboat.

A friendly farmer, waiting out the drizzle in a covered bridge, helped us out. "Go straight, then cross the stream up ahead." Simple enough.

Perhaps we were overeager, and crossed the stream too soon. The guiding principle of the day ("if there are stones in the path sometimes, it must be the right path") didn't hold up as we wandered far up into the terraces on the mountainsides. After we dubiously wandered through a tea tree (*chapao* 茶泡) orchard, flirting with some skittish calves along the way, it started to rain again.

The hike was calculated to take perhaps an hour, and at this point we had already been on our way for over two hours. We scoured the sky for smoke, or any other sign of the elusive village. Not a trace. The rain

began to fall harder as we asked directions from an elderly woman tending a plot of rapeseed. As was frequently the case with the older minority people that we encountered, she could understand our Mandarin but couldn't speak it back very well. She told us we were close; she knew the way. She was from Gaomai, and offered to lead us to her house for shelter from the rain.

Walking from a little-known place to a lesser-known place to a yet lesser-known place, we weren't expecting her house to be a sweatshop producing industrial diamonds.

Of course, we should have known.

Just as "fragrant wine doesn't fear a deep alley" (酒香不怕巷子深), a lucrative industry doesn't blink at obscure supply lines. Down in the lowlands, three counties and a lot of bad mountain roads from Gaomai, enterprising Wuzhou (梧州) Township was the synthetic diamond capital of the world.

In recent years, Wuzhou, Guangxi, had become a global leader in producing man-made diamonds (technically the diamond simulant cubic zirconia). According to Xinhua, Wuzhou, which borders Guangdong province,

accounts for 95 percent of the domestic volume of synthetic diamonds as well as more than 80 percent of the global market. All this fake glitter adds up to over RMB 3 billion each year.

Spending all day grinding pegs of zirconium dioxide into "diamonds," a peasant can earn RMB 100 each day that they wouldn't see tending the fields. The financial incentive is significant, but so are the health risks. Frequent contact with the gaseous and residual forms of zirconium – prized for its chemical durability – can contribute to serious long-term health problems.

Over the following weeks we saw several other diamond workshops scattered amongst the rough of Dong minority country. But our visit to Gaomai made us amateur experts on the diamond rub. That day, as we stumbled from drenched disorientation to a friendly meal in a backwater diamond shack, we'd been ambushed by a lesson in rural Chinese economics.

Anything can happen anywhere. And it does. 🌧️

OUT OF THE RAIN AND INTO THE DIAMOND SWEATSHOP – ISN'T THAT A SAYING?