

# Yunnan:

## EXPLORATION OF A SCENIC PARADISE

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attractions such as the Blue-Moon Valley and Spruce Meadow. We began our day with the Blue-Moon Valley where we were greeted with pristine waters surrounded by lush greenery. It seemed to be a hotspot for locals as well, with many couples having their wedding shoots there! The clear blue waters mirrored the nearby greenery perfectly, creating an enchanting view.

The glacier cableway took us to the start of the path leading up to the highest traversable point in the area of the mountain. This was when we truly started to feel the effects of the thin air as we had to use our oxygen cylinders every three steps or risk feeling completely out of breath. The trouble was all worth it as we climbed all the way up to the highest point at 4,680 m, surrounded by majestic slopes and glimpses of blue skies peeking through the dense fog.

### Challenging ourselves

The highlight of the trip was, without a doubt, my two-day hike across Tiger Leaping Gorge. We set out early on the first day from the Naxi Guesthouse where the initial path was kind to us, with only gentle upslopes to tackle. This quickly changed when we got to the real challenge of the hike – the infamous 28 bends, a winding, rocky climb with 28 bends leading us to the highest point of the trek. As a true city girl with no prior hiking experience, the steep incline and unstable footholds nearly broke me, and I wondered what I had gotten myself into. Thankfully, after plenty of rest stops to snack and enjoy the view at, and a great deal of encouragement from passing hikers, we finally made it to the top. We even managed to catch a glimpse of the famous gorge and could hear its roaring waters all the way up from where we were in the mountains! From there on, it was a short hike to our first stop, the Tea Horse

Yunnan is a mountainous province in southwestern China, known for its stunning views and rich culture. Initially only looking for new places to explore, I was quickly sold on the idea of a trip to Yunnan after seeing images of breathtaking mountains and beautiful ancient cities shared by my friends. At the start of October, a friend and I departed for Yunnan, excited to experience all that this amazing place had to offer!

### The adventure begins

Our first stop was Dali where we visited the “Li Xiang Bang”, which translates to the “Ideal Land”. It was created to resemble the Greek island of Santorini, with dazzling white buildings overlooking the blue waters of Erhai Lake. After navigating a series of confusing stairways, we finally made it to a cafe where we paid for an overpriced drink in exchange for a balcony offering a direct view of the lake and the mountains framing it. While I am unable to comment on how authentic the experience is compared to Santorini, which I have yet to visit, I thoroughly enjoyed the experience of sipping my drink while gazing at the beautiful expanse of water before me.

Looking back on our trip, I am glad we chose to stay within Lijiang Ancient City. It is a charming old town comprising a maze of cobblestone streets, wooden buildings with colourful flowers growing on every balcony, and flowing canals surrounded by breathtaking views of the neighbouring mountains. I found it an interesting blend of old and new, with shops selling traditional crafts right beside trendy cafes, and teahouses giving way to lively bars as night fell. It also offers easy access to the famous Yulong (Jade Dragon) Snow Mountain by way of a forty-minute car ride.

The Yulong Snow Mountain stands at an elevation of 5,569 m and is named so for its snow-covered peaks that appear like a jade dragon from afar. It is surrounded by many other beautiful







#### Legend

1. The scenic view at Napahai
2. Yaks grazing on grass right in front of us
3. Lijiang Ancient City
4. Natural waterfalls along the hike

Guesthouse, where we fuelled up with a quick lunch before setting off on the final leg of our day. We sped through the remaining hike and arrived at our lodgings for the night at Halfway Guesthouse just in time to watch the sun set.

After a well-deserved rest overnight, we started the second day of our hike towards our destination, Tina's Guesthouse, where we would catch a bus towards Shangri-La. This was undoubtedly the best part of the hike – while our views at the start had been marred by highways and manmade bridges, we had ventured far enough into the mountains on the second day that I was able to fully immerse myself in the beauty of the surrounding mountains, foliage and natural waterfalls along our trek. In fact, the adjacent mountains were so close, it seemed like I could touch them if I just reached my hands out far enough! We were also greeted by many mountain goats along the way grazing on wildflowers growing along the slopes. It is truly an experience of a lifetime which I would recommend to anyone considering a trip to Yunnan. I do, however, wish that we had conserved just a little bit more energy to make it down all the way to the roaring waters of the famous gorge!

### Wrapping up the trip with a bang

We ended our trip in Shangri-La, a picturesque city nestled among majestic mountains, renowned for its rich Tibetan cultures and historic monasteries. We visited the Songzanlin Monastery, the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Yunnan province, and were captivated by its golden roofs and colourful prayer flags dancing in the

wind – which I later discovered were meant to spread goodwill, compassion and blessings across the universe! The prayer halls were utterly stunning as well, filled with ornate Buddha statues and intricate murals depicting the stories of various deities. The peaceful atmosphere and rhythmic chanting of the monks offered a rare serenity that lingered long after I left the monastery.

Another place that thoroughly impressed me with its scenic views was the Napahai Scenic Area. Based on what the local guide explained to us, the lake fills up and forms the Napahai Lake during the wetter seasons of summer and autumn when there is heavier rainfall. But in the drier seasons of winter and spring, the lake recedes and reveals a vast grassland, the Yila Grassland! It was the start of autumn when we visited so we managed to experience both the grassland and the beautiful Napahai Lake. It felt completely surreal to be walking on the grass plain with the vast blue sky stretching out beyond us and yaks grazing just a few metres away. We even managed to catch a double rainbow that day!

### Final thoughts

For those looking for a new travel destination or an escape from city life, Yunnan is a perfect getaway. A short three-hour flight away from Singapore, it guarantees a truly amazing experience of a lifetime. From towering mountains to peaceful monasteries, Yunnan is truly a province of unparalleled beauty where every corner has its own rich culture and breathtaking views to offer! ♦

Dr Yap is a medical officer in the public health system. In her free time, she enjoys reading, painting and spending time with her friends and family. She can often be found looking at new destinations to travel to and aims to visit one new country per year!

