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LET YOUR HAIR DOWN IN GUANGXI PROVINCE

More than just a stop in Guilin

Steve Gillick

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29 JUN 2015: The women of the Yao Minority in Huangluo Village cut their hair once in their entire lifetime. At the age of 16, before they get married,

they unwrap what appears to be a shiny, black turban around their head to reveal tresses that often reach 1.7 meters (5 1/2 feet) or longer. After marriage, they grow their hair again, as a harbinger of good fortune, longevity and wealth (a kind of 'hair way to heaven').



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In days gone by, only their husband and child were allowed to see the lengthy locks but today, the idea of letting your hair down takes on a whole new meaning as the hair is the featured attraction in cultural shows for tourists.

The Yao Minority Village, representing one of 12 ethnic groups in Guangxi Province, lies in Longsheng County, two hours north of the city of Guilin, which has long been regarded as one of China's tourism meccas. The sub-tropical/monsoon climate - it rains 265 days of the year - has not only resulted in abundant rice crops, but has contributed to the area's most famous feature: Karst (limestone) landforms that have been transformed over the years into verdant, fairy-tale-shaped mountains that in turn, attract upwards of 12 million visitors annually.

Our idyllic thoughts of spending a pastoral day meeting and learning about the Zhuang and Yao ethnic groups, and then leisurely rambling through the rice paddies, were somewhat dashed.



When we arrived in the area we counted no less than 50 motor coaches that had just unloaded 2000 people, also here for a day of exploration. But fortunately we were greeted by local officials who whisked us off to Huangluo Yao Village to see the performance. And there, we joined about 75 others to marvel at a display of costumes, singing, folk dancing and a mock marriage ceremony. After some of the more extroverted audience members volunteered to ‘marry’ a local, the performers, in Rapunzel-esque style, let down their long, black locks for all to see.

Our adventure continued after lunch with a visit to the rice terraces and Jinzhu Village, home to members of the Zhuang minority.

While the majority of tourists thankfully headed to the cable cars to get an aerial view of the terraces, we took the road less travelled—actually a walking trail that slowly curves up the mountain, offering spectacular views of the terraces, up close and personal.



The Longji rice terraces were first cultivated in the 13th century as an efficient means of growing rice on a mountain, by decreasing soil erosion while at the same time increasing irrigation.

The nickname, Dragons Backbone Rice Terraces, refers to a mythological vision of nine dragons meeting five fierce tigers on the mountain slope. The terraces look like the dragons' scales while the mountain ridge resembles the backbone. On misty days, it is said that the dragons can be seen galloping in the clouds over the mountain. The spectacular scenery changes with the seasons, so this is an ideal destination for travellers seeking to unplug, to contemplate, daydream or simply to stare sheer beauty in the face. As we continued walking, the clucking chickens, crowing roosters, nosey dogs and curious children announced our arrival in Longji Ancient Zhuang Village, which houses about 100 families. The Village museum provides an excellent overview of Zhuang culture, including "the four treasures of Longji", all of which are products of the high mountains and cold climate:

- 1) Cloud and Mist Tea
- 2) rice wine
- 3) glutinous rice
- 4) red hot chili peppers.

But the visit to Longshen County was only part of the amazing time we spent in Guangxi province.

The city of Guilin is without doubt the major attraction with the Li and Peach Blossom Rivers wending their way around streets lined with Osmanthus and Cinnamon trees, and all against a backdrop of awesome karst hills.

We visited Elephant Trunk Hill (the symbol of the city), where the rock is said to resemble an elephant drinking from the Li River. Not to be missed, just past the 'good luck' Rooster and Dragon shrine, are the 'love' statues: cloth and wire models of couples, including the scene from the movie Titanic, where Leonardo stands behind Kate as she flies into the wind on the bow of the ship.

About a 20-minute drive cross town is Reed Flute Cave, filled with stalactites, stalagmites and unusual rock formations. Coloured lights illuminate the rocks and a video, projected onto the ceiling portrays the history of the 180 million year old cave from its formation, through the roar of the dinosaur era, to its discovery 1200 years ago. While the cave visit sounds a bit kitschy, it was actually quite well done.



After dinner we took the boat tour that travels through the city's four lakes and two rivers. The boat passes by the illuminated Sun and the Moon twin pagodas, and stops by a number of cultural performance venues.

Most visitors to Guilin take the four-hour, day cruise on the Li River to Yangshuo. This is where visitors can photograph the absolutely stunning karst formations as far as the eye can see. Yangshuo, formerly a haven for backpackers who wanted to get away from it all, is a very busy town that oozes shops, restaurants, wax museums and cafes. Pretty well all of the tourists from the 100 or so boats that departed Guilin that morning can be found traipsing through the streets, but there are some shady, quiet areas to enjoy a coffee or beer by the riverfront. And in the cool of the evening we attended "Impression Sanjie Liu", performed in the world's largest natural theatre with the Li River as

the stage and twelve karst hills as the backdrop. The performance is colourful, dramatic, impressive and very popular.

We spent our final day in Guangxi visiting the provincial capital, Nanning, which is about three hours south of Guilin. After walking around the peaceful Nanning Ethnical Garden that features the culture and heritage of the five local ethnic groups, we visited the Guangxi Museum with its displays of porcelain treasures from the five dynasties. In the afternoon we explored Qing Xiu Shan (Pretty Green Mountain) Scenic Spot, with its amazing garden of Cycad plants, a pond packed to the gills with colourful carp, great views from the Nine-story pagoda, and a touch of serenity at the Guanyin Temple. A busy day ended at the night market; full of foods, flavours and colours with locals and visitors munching on crab, prawns, oysters, squid, crayfish, chicken, pork and a dazzling array of local fruits. Nanning turned out to be a real treasure!



Guangxi Province is absolutely more than just a stop in Guilin. It's a place to let your hair down (like the Yao women), relax, explore the streets, meander through rice terraces, discover the markets and gape at beautiful landforms. For China-bound travellers interested in a greater return on their travel investment, Guangxi Province should be on the itinerary.

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A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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