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STEPPING INTO SERENDIPITY

In Hunan the Heat is On

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06 OCT 2014: Things are certainly heating up in the province of Hunan. The red hot chili pepper is the star ingredient of Hunan cuisine, but the spirit of hot, spicy and savoury activities characterizes many aspects of this fascinating area of China from the mountain views, accessible by a mere thousand (or so) stairs, to ancient cities such as

Fenghuang, a.k.a Phoenix, which in the spirit of fiery regeneration, continue to rise from the ashes on a fairly regular basis.



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Hunan's provincial capital of Changsha is about a 90 minute flight from Shanghai. Along the way the curiosity of visitors is titillated with sneak previews of mountains, rice terraces and a patchwork quilt of farmland.

As guests of the China National Tourist Office we flew to Changsha, met our guide and immediately set out on a four and a half hour bus ride south to Lang Shan, a town bedecked in colourful banners and billboards to welcome delegates to Hunan's International Tourism Festival. The next day, despite a slight drizzle, we sat outdoors to watch the opening ceremonies of the festival, complete with honorific speeches from local officials and pleasantly interspersed with dramatic, colourful and entertaining performances that celebrated stories and myths of some of the local minority groups including the Tujia, Miao, Dong and Uyghurs.

Afterward we had the privilege to connect with the dramatic landscape. We visited the Pepper Peak Scenic Area, part of Mount Lang Shan. We walked the cliffside pathways and climbed the hundreds of stairs between Candle Peak and Camel Peak, including a crouching stair climb through a dark rock crevice called the Dragon Mouth. The mountain peaks are part of a landform called 'Danxia' which consist of red sandstone that has been eroded over the centuries into columns, resembling chili peppers, candles and camels. (The forms are similar to the karst (limestone) formations in Guilin).

The 99-Step Ladder is the final stage of the climb to the top of Camel Peak with four surprises – encounters with serendipity—in store. The first was the small alter at the top dedicated to the local hero, Yang Kuifa who in true Robin Hood style, stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Eventually he was pursued by local officials and killed for his alleged transgressions. A small wooden statue pays tribute to his adventures, and happiness, longevity and safety is the reward, according to local legend, for having visited the site.

The second surprise was the view, and despite the steamy, humid, overcast and heated conditions, the panorama of trees and mountains was exhilarating. The third surprise was that after climbing hundreds of stairs so far, we now had to descend a whole new set of stairs where mountain views competed for our attention as we tried to negotiate the uneven steps. And the fourth surprise was what is known as the Danxia Linear Valley—a narrow crack in the mountain through which the staircase descends, allowing visitors to

get a true look at the forces of nature from inside the mountain.

The next morning promised a gleaming glow. Let me explain.

We started our climb, passing by the Danxia Sheer Cliffs that are absolutely massive at 100 meters high and 300 meters long. We soon reached Tianyi Alley, a 239 meter long path with stairs and walkways that cuts through a mountain where 'only a gleam of light is in sight' and hence the gleaming glow. This was followed by a walk through Yuxian Alley, another narrow passageway covered in green moss and lichens and where your shoulders brush the rocks on either side as you pass through the narrowest sections.

For lunch the hotel invited us to a private banquet so we could sample local foods. I gingerly picked out those searing red chilies with my chop sticks but a few snuck past the inspection and definitely livened up the dishes. The delicious meal featured rice tea, cucumber juice, daikon radish, funghi, jelly fish, curry chicken, chili duck with lemongrass and duck blood, pork blood tofu, duck with seaweed, shrimp egg custard, spicy eggplant, pancake, steamed rice and local grapes.

And we ate everything!

But with only a few minutes rest, we once again donned our trekking gear and headed out to the Bajiaozhai Scenic Area, where 1777 steps lead to a viewing platform where eight rounded mountain peaks mystically huddle together and occasionally poke through the mist and clouds. We thought of the concept of Yin and Yang. Yin is the suffering, which for us was climbing all those steps in the

humid heat after gorging ourselves at lunch time. The Yang is the reward: awesome views of the eight peaks from the viewing platforms. Then Yin steps in again (literally) as our legs are now wobbly from the morning and afternoon climbs and we descend the 1777 steps. The Yang is the amazing experience and the feeling of accomplishment.

The following day we switched gears from trekking to wandering as we visited the Ancient Cities of Qianyang and Hongjiang. The former is a maze of alleyways, shops and historic houses; the latter is famous for its history of prostitution and opium. Designated sites in each town provide short performances of life in the town, complete with music and costume.

But the mother of all ancient cities is Fenghuang, also called Phoenix. It was built in 1704 and has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site with its mix of riverside houses on stilts, modern and crumbling buildings, boats plying the Tuo Jiang River, Miao women washing their clothes in the river and selling flowers, men pulling on wads of gooey sweetness that will become ginger candy, and a veritable Disneyworld of shops, bars, discos and restaurants. At night time, all the buildings in the city come alive with lights, while during the day the city is a group tourist mecca.

And there is so much more in Hunan. We wandered the streets on a regular basis to get a taste of local life: the street markets, baked potato sellers, motorcycle repairmen, kids playing, mothers showing off their babies, people curious about us, as we were of them, and the attempts on both sides to talk, understand and smile.

Hunan is a pretty amazing destination for those

with a more active bent to their holiday expectations. There's nothing like stepping into serendipity—walking up and down mountain paths, through crevices and around corners as the day light changes and new vistas appear minute by minute. It's a hot destination in terms of the heat of the climate, the heat of the food, and the opportunity to venture outside of Shanghai or Beijing to discover and share the connection between the power of nature, the local people and the land.

Hunan



Anti-Litter sign in the National Parks





Steve Gillick

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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