



in the *land* of the miao

Sheridan Rogers goes off the beaten track in southwest China, visiting villages in Guizhou province that you don't find in many guide books.



Main: Huanggoushu Falls
Above: A Miao girl at Huanggoushu Falls. Courtesy Doug Parrington
Top: A typical wind and rain bridge built by the Miao



It was mid afternoon by the time we stopped for lunch in Shi Dong, a remote village in Guizhou province, southwestern China. We were running late because of an accident on the 'super highway' between Guiyang, the busy industrial capital of Guizhou, and Kai Li, a pretty town 200 kilometres to the east.

Signs along the way in both Mandarin and 'Chinglish' had given plenty of warnings – "Rear End Collision, Keep Space" – but it was clear that someone hadn't been paying attention. The traffic was heavy and after an hour or so we were diverted onto a winding country road.

The highway had taken us through some of the most otherworldly scenery I've ever seen, a fairytale landscape where conical karst formations pop up like islands in a sea of changing greens. As our bus wound its way through the misty, mountainous countryside, we glimpsed terraced fields of corn and sunflowers interspersed by brilliant green rice paddies and thick pine forests. It felt as though we were passing through one of those mythical Middle Earth landscapes described by Tolkien.

Some 18 different ethnic minorities live in this fairytale landscape,



Main: The rural scenery is beautiful
Right: Drying chillies by the river in
Shiqiao village

“Some of the young
women were in
traditional dress, with
tall, elaborate silver
headdresses and rows
of silver filigree
necklaces and
bangles”

including the Miao, which helps to explain why some describe Guizhou as “a thousand islands of culture”.

By the time we reached Shi Dong, we were parched and hungry. Fortunately, a sit-down lunch had been prepared for us by Mrs Wu, whose husband, Wu Shui Gen, is famous in the district for his exquisite silver jewellery. Before entering their modest home, we were surrounded by numerous Miao women, all eager to show us their silverware, handmade textiles and embroidery.

Once inside, we sat on child-size stools around a low, round kitchen table and helped ourselves to typical Miao dishes, like sour soup, pickled sour vegetables, sour fish, congee and fried free-range chicken. We were spared some of their other special foods, things like bamboo worms, bee pupae, yellow ant eggs, piebald spiders, beetle eggs and other worms!

Before I went to southwest China, I'd never heard of the cities of Guiyang and Kai Li, let alone ancient villages like Shi Dong or Lang De and

Shiqiao. When I tried to track down some information in travel books before departing, I found only two minor references and they were both to Guiyang. Given that Guiyang is the capital of Guizhou province, home to more than three million people and one of the fastest-growing cities in China, it was a surprising omission.

It wasn't until I came across the 2005 *Lonely Planet Guide to China* that I began to understand why. Traditionally known as China's 'Wild West', it was a retreat for dissident tribes and criminals, far from the central government's authority.

Guizhou (which, ironically, means “precious land”) is one of China's poorest provinces and has been overlooked by tourists in favour of better-known regions like Yunnan and Sichuan.

Until recently, the majority of foreign tourists to Guizhou have been backpackers, many of whom hike between villages and time their visits to coincide with the numerous ethnic festivals – Guizhou enjoys more folk festivals than any other province in



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tips

- A visa is required. Phone the Chinese Consulate in Sydney, (02) 8595 8000, or visit www.sydney.chineseconsulate.org
- Budget \$5 per person per day to cover tips for both tour guide and driver, \$1 per piece of luggage for the bell boy in the hotel.
- Currency is the Chinese Yuan Renminbi – AU\$1 = 6 CNY approximately.

furtherinformation

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Helen Wong's Tours, phone 1300 788 328 or visit www.helenwongstours.com.au
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China. These include Sharing the Sister's Meal Festival (the Miao version of Valentine's Day), Dragon Boat, Hill-Leaping and Torch Festivals.

We spent the evening in Kai Li, an elegant town of 300,000 people. The main streets are reminiscent of wide Parisian boulevards and are lined with plane trees. There's not a lot to do in Kai Li but it's a good base from which to visit the surrounding villages, and the national parks which boast black bears, monkeys and porcupines.

The following day, we were up early and off to visit the Miao villages of Lang De and Shiqiao. Picturesque Lang De has become something of a show village since it was opened to foreign tourists 20 years ago, so don't be surprised to come across a few tour buses. As we approached, I felt I was in Switzerland because the houses looked so similar to Swiss

chalets, the only giveaway being the garlands of bright yellow corn and red chillies which are slung across their façades. Most have three storeys and are built on the hillside out of local cedar, with black-tiled roofs. Animals are kept on the ground floor, families live on the second floor, and crops and grains are stored on the top floor. Cobbled pathways run between the houses and in the centre of the village is a stone courtyard where Miao ancestors are honoured.

It's possible to rent a room in the village for as little as \$4 or \$5 and to eat in the Happy Farmer Family Restaurant, which overlooks paddy fields and the spectacular Wind and Rain Bridge. Lang De lies on the Bala River, one of many which run through this area of picture-postcard valleys and river flats, where we glimpsed local people swimming, washing and tending their bullocks.





Then it was on to Shiqiao, a charming village in which most of the households are involved in the ancient craft of paper making. This one was my favourite, not only because the people were so friendly and welcoming, but also because it was less like a show village and felt more authentic. We were able to wander around freely and to watch the various steps involved in paper making – much of the paper is sold to Europe to be made into envelopes, cards, wallpaper, kites and lampshades. Some of the householders even beckoned us inside to share their food and to look at their houses.

You could easily spend weeks visiting villages in this part of Guizhou. In fact, in one of the villages we bumped into Meng Ma, a PhD student from Melbourne University, who was doing it the hard way and hiking between steep hillside villages to further her research on the Miao people.

You mustn't leave Guizhou without visiting the stunning Huangguoshu Falls. Situated 140 kilometres south west of Guiyang, these are the

largest falls in Asia (74 metres high and 81 metres wide) and Guizhou's main tourist attraction. Set in a large park, it's a six-kilometre round walk among bonsai gardens, rock sculptures and water-lily ponds at the top, then down hundreds of steps to the river and back up again to walk through a tunnel which takes you in behind the falls, a truly hobbit-like experience.

Guizhou is not for the faint-hearted, but its striking landscapes, friendly people and colourful cultures make it a very memorable and enriching experience. •

• *Sheridan Rogers travelled to south-west China with Selective Tours.*



Main: Corn drying outside a house in Shiqiao village

Above: A local shop

Right: Young Miao woman in Shidong village wearing traditional dress

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