

China

Ancient cities, mountains and a good cup of tea

Hit the historic Tea Horse Road in the southwestern province of Yunnan to explore old trading routes, and stay at chic hotels along the way, says **Tom Chesshyre**

We're perched on low-slung chairs in a teahouse in Lijiang's old town and our "tea master", a studious-looking twentysomething with designer glasses, is pouring the contents of a teapot over a porcelain frog. The liquid spills off the frog's back on to a table with a ridge around the edge and a drain.

"If the frog gets tea, we all get rich!" says Diana Hu, who runs the little Fu Xing Chan tea house. Frogs appear to be a lucky charm in this part of southwestern China. Our group nods in approval. Hu smiles, Zen-like, and the tea master gazes at the table, deep in concentration as he delicately separates leaves for our drinks. Time ticks by. The frog gets another dousing. Tea clearly means more than merely brewing a cuppa round here... it's an important ritual, a key part of the way of life.

So begins our traditional tea ceremony in one of the most important tea centres in China. Lijiang was once a key stop on an ancient network of trails that spreads like a spider's web for more than 2,100 miles, linking plantations in southern Yunnan province to Tibet and Sichuan province farther north. It earned itself the name the Tea Horse Road — and, as we are about to find out, it's fast turning into a popular tourist route.

For many centuries until the mid-20th century, when vehicles took over, caravans of horses transported tea in this region. At Lijiang, horses and horsemen were changed. "High altitude is a big problem for people from the south," says Hu. "So they carried the tea this far and then Naxi men took over using local horses with very strong legs." The Naxi are the mountain people, an ethnic minority in northern Yunnan that numbers about 300,000.

The city became a bustling trading post with a labyrinth of cobbled lanes twisting between streams with narrow bridges surrounded by low, grey-stone buildings with curly-topped roofs. This is much as Lijiang looks today, despite a devastating earthquake in 1996 that flattened many buildings, causing 300 deaths and injuring

A teashop in Lijiang

Need to know

Tom Chesshyre was a guest of Cox & Kings (020 3642 0861, coxandkings.co.uk), which has a nine-day, seven-night B&B package to Lijiang from £2,595pp. The tour covers Chengdu (in Sichuan province), Lijiang, Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, Tiger Leaping Gorge, Shangri-La and Benzilan. This includes all flights, transfers, and nights in LUX* Lijiang, LUX* Benzilan and the Grand Hyatt Lijiang Mountain Lodge. Further reading: *Tea Horse Road: China's Ancient Trade Road to Tibet* by Michael Freeman and Selena Ahmed (River Books, £25)

17,000. Thankfully the lure of creating a new modern city was resisted and the old town was reconstructed as before. "Actually, it's better now," confides one local, who says structures are sturdier and that once crumbling parts have been smartened.

Lijiang has a fantasy feel, especially after dark, when red lanterns illuminate the maze-like alleys. You might have stepped back a thousand years or more, if you ignore all the tourist shops selling pashmina-style scarves, bongo drums and jade jewellery, that is. The city is certainly not a secret to holidaymakers; Banyan Tree, Aman and InterContinental hotels have been here a while. The hope is, however, that new improved highways to the tea plantations in the south, about 500 miles away, and northwards to the border with Tibet, about 100 miles away, will create a trail that attracts more overseas travellers. Plenty of domestic Chinese tourists already come, and now boutique hotels are springing up outside Lijiang to appeal to westerners intending to stay in style.

So what is there to see and do on the Tea Horse Road? Well, the first thing of course is: drink tea. There is a subtle bittersweet taste to Pu'er tea, the special tea from the south of Yunnan province that is not treated immediately after being picked, as most tea is to prevent deterioration in the leaves. Instead, the tea is left to ferment, tied up in discus-like packages made from bamboo leaves. The result is that the flavour gets better with age. Tibetans particularly adore the drink, which is low in caffeine and provides vitamins and minerals that make up for a lack of vegetables and fruit in their winter diet.

Health consciousness is big in these parts, where there is a flourishing Chinese medicine industry. To find out more we visit Baisha, a village on the edge of Lijiang, where we pass elderly women dancing jauntily for exercise in a courtyard, duck into a 700-year-old temple with beautiful frescoes, and meet Dr Ho.

We are not the first people to make the acquaintance of Dr Ho. Far from it. Michael Palin and the travel writer Bruce Chatwin have been here before us; Palin had been following in the footsteps of Chatwin, who had labelled Dr Ho "the



Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, seen from Lijiang



Taoist physician in the Jade Dragon Mountains". His evocative description of Dr Ho's little ramshackle Chinese herbal medicine clinic and his recommendation of Baisha have meant many others have since dropped by; the village has become a regular stop-off on the Tea Horse Road.

Dr Ho is tiny, aged 94, with inscrutable marbleised eyes and hunched shoulders. His clinic's walls are plastered with yellowing cuttings of articles about him; proof of his worldwide fame. In a corner sits a kettle and tea cups (everybody seems addicted to tea in Yunnan province). After prescribing medicine to an Israeli couple seeking fertility treatment, he offers our group catch-all advice for good health. "Optimism is the best medicine," he whispers.

Feeling lucky, we depart for Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, about 40 minutes'

drive to the north. After queuing for an hour amid hundreds of Chinese tourists dressed in long red padded gowns hired for the trip to the top — which we mistakenly decide not to rent — we board a packed cable car. This whisks us from 3,356m to 4,506m amid what seems like a gale; the peak of the mountain is at 5,596m.

It is a long way up. Some fellow passengers have brought oxygen canisters (sold in a shop at the base), while others turn a bit green — a few are so queasy they stay on the cable car and go straight back down. Bear in mind that the village of the highest resort in the European Alps is at 2,300m.

The view at the top is of a flash of granite peaks amid sweeping clouds and a snow-swept terrace. We are freezing. There is not a whole lot to see in these conditions. We queue to go back down, crammed between hundreds of Chinese wrapped in their padded gowns who are not shy about taking selfies of themselves... and us.

Don't miss the marvellous 90-minute show at the foot of the mountain that tells the history of the Naxi people. This is in an outdoor auditorium with terraces on which horses gallop (some carrying old tea satchels), drums beat and great choruses break out. There must be 500 or more dancing actors. It's one of the most memorable live performances of any sort I've witnessed — in a spectacular setting. The clouds part and sunshine bathes the jagged mountain peaks; it's staggering to think that real horseback traders once passed this inhospitable way.



Open-air performance at the foot of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain

Onwards, northwards. The drive to the city of Shangri-La — as Zhongdian was renamed in 2001 — takes a couple of hours. "Shangri-La" began as the fictional Himalayan place described by James Hilton in his book *Lost Horizon*, which subsequently became synonymous with "paradise". Canny local officials decided to nab the name to attract visitors. On the way into town we stop at Tiger Leaping Gorge, a 3,700m deep gorge (one of the world's deepest), with a raging river at the bottom. A zigzagging path plunges steeply to platforms by the water, one with a snarling sculpture of the legendary dragon that was said to have leapt across mountains here.

Shangri-La City, once another key calling point on the Tea Horse Road, is a peculiar place with a run of higgledy-piggledy shops selling more shawls, bongos and vegetables, a root that grows locally and is said to be an aphrodisiac. The old town area is small, with a square with a museum telling the story of the tea horsemen (displays show old saddles and harnesses), plus a fabulous Buddhist monastery on a hill with a giant golden prayer wheel. At night the city is lit with glowing lanterns and is busy with restaurants serving hotpot meals, where people sit at a table with a bubbling cauldron of spicy broth into which you drop meat, fish and vegetables. There are some interesting choices, such as yak tongue, "mare beef testicles", "pig throat", "bat foot", and "fresh goose intestines", although I stick to cuttlefish and seaweed with noddles (very tasty).

Benzilan is the next stopover on our Tea Horse Road adventure. We are staying at the new LUX* hotel, which is on the banks of the gurgling, brown Yangtze River. This is a good-value design hotel, a mixture of minimalism and comfort with an infinity pool and a teahouse serving the best Pu'er. It's one of a planned eight cheap-but-chic properties on the Tea Horse Road, including one we stayed at in Lijiang, and another due to open in Shangri-La in 2018.

To experience what life might have been like on a remote part of the old tea-trading route we take a day trip from Benzilan across a snowy 4,292m pass to Adong, a village within a dozen miles of Tibet. Here we drink cups of welcome tea at a local guesthouse that offers meals when booked in advance. Horses are still used in the village; one trots by as we enjoy a fine lunch of spicy pork, tofu with cabbage, sliced sweet pepper and "tea eggs" (eggs boiled in tea, with a smoky taste I could see taking off at home).

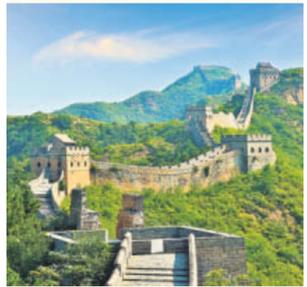
The owner, Sonam Dorje, says there are two remaining (long-ago retired) tea horsemen in Adong, but they are too elderly to be visited. We sit for a while with Dorje talking about life in the mountains, drinking Dali beers followed by fiery shots of a local liquor and then more tea.

Outside, overnight snow slowly melts on the mountain slopes. More hoofs clatter by on the narrow track. Then silence descends. This is what the Tea Horse Road is all about, high on the hills away from the clamour of the tourist crowds.

Great ways to see China — off the beaten track

Hike and bike the Great Wall

Take a week-long hike-and-bike journey around the lesser-known parts of the Great Wall of China, below. Setting off from Beijing, you'll cycle up to 60 miles a day, or hike for two to seven hours, with stops at Panjiakou, Huangyaguan and Gubeikou. Accommodation includes a night in a "Quan", a former military barracks that now serves as guest houses. Details A seven-night trip is from £1,590pp, including all meals, bike hire, entry fees into some attractions, and guiding but not flights (020 8875 5060, worldexpeditions.co.uk)



China by rail

Set off on a train odyssey from Beijing to Shanghai, more than 700 miles away. This private, ten-night tour starts with two days in the capital before heading south in first class. Stop at Xian to see the Terracotta Warriors and the towers and temples of Wuhan and Nanjing before arriving in the modern metropolis of Shanghai. Details A ten-night trip is from £2,995pp, including flights, private transfers, high-speed rail tickets and B&B (020 3642 0861, coxandkings.co.uk)

Cruise the Yangtze

Set sail down Asia's longest river, the Yangtze, as part of a ten-day trip travelling from Beijing to Shanghai via Chengdu. The three-night cruise is on the five-star *Sanctuary Yangzi Explorer*, with 62 suites. You'll anchor at Fengdu to meet local families and pause at a farmers' market, and visit the scenic Bamboo Gorge by "pea pod" boat. Non-water-based highlights include visiting the Terracotta Warriors. Details The nine-night trip is from £4,800pp, including most meals and guiding, but excluding flights (01242 547892, abercrombiekent.co.uk)

Walk through the rice terraces

How about hiking through the magnificent rice terraces of Longsheng? This rural China trip takes in some of the most scenic spots between Shanghai and Hong Kong. Spend a couple of days exploring these sloping layers of green before wandering through the cobbled streets of Lijiang Old Town. You'll also be able to spend the afternoon in an ancient teahouse, visit Shangri-La and stop at Songzanlin Monastery, the largest Tibetan Buddhist Monastery in Yunnan. Details The 13-night trip costs from £4,400pp, including flights, transfers and B&B (0208 682 5060, scottddunn.com) **Ellie Ross**