

The Ancient Tea-Horse Trail



Journey along the legendary tea-horse trail, an ancient trading route connecting Western China with Tibet and India, on this 16-day guided tour of Yunnan province. Beginning in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, you'll travel up onto the Tibetan Plateau via the ancient settlements of Dali, Shaxi, Lijiang and Zhongdian (Shangri-La). During the course of the journey, you'll visit remote minority villages, sleep in characterful boutique hotels and traditional guesthouses, and explore some of China's most beautiful landscapes.

Day 1: Arrive Kunming

Your tour begins in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province. On arrival at the airport/station, you will be met by your guide and transferred to a centrally-located hotel for two nights. Depending on the time of your arrival, it may be possible to arrange for a half-day tour of Kunming this afternoon.

Kunming is a gateway city, connecting travellers to the ancient towns of Dali and Lijiang in the north of Yunnan province, as well as the famous Stone Forest (Shilin) and more remote attractions such as the Yuanyang rice terraces. The city has few major attractions of its own, but a pleasant afternoon can be spent here exploring the People's Park and the local temples, with or

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without a guide. On the outskirts of the city, the Golden Temple is Kunming's most impressive religious site, and offers an introduction to China's Taoist traditions (it even features miniature replicas of other famous Tongwa temples), while Yuantong Temple (pictured), close to the centre of the city, is one of the oldest Buddhist temples and monasteries in Yunnan province, dating back to the ninth century AD.



Day 2: Shilin Stone Forest, Kunming (B, L)

After breakfast at the hotel, depart Kunming for Shilin, the famous Stone Forest. 90km from Kunming, Shilin is reached after a 1-2 hour drive through beautiful hill country.

The Shilin Stone Forest is one of China's great natural wonders. It offers a stunning spectacle of towering limestone pillars that have been sculpted and twisted by the elements into strange and beautiful formations. Seen from a distance, the limestone pillars do indeed resemble a forest. Get closer, however, and you'll discover small rock pools and limestone caverns. Pathways meander in and around the pillars, leading to clifftop balconies with wonderful views of the dramatic formations below.



Spend the morning exploring the Stone Forest with your guide, before returning to the city in the afternoon. On the way back to Kunming, you might like to make a brief stop at a local Sani village and market.

The rest of the day is at leisure in Kunming. In the evening, we can arrange for you to attend an evening performance of "Dynamic Yunnan", a long-running dance show that draws on the dress and customs of Yunnan's many minority tribes (at additional cost).



Day 3: Kunming to Dali (B, L)

Transfer to the airport this morning for the early flight to Dali (45 minutes flying time). On arrival in Dali, you will be met by your guide and begin your tour of Dali's vibrant city centre and famous Three Pagodas.

One of Yunnan's oldest cities, Dali was once the centre of the independent Dali State, founded over 1,000 years ago by the Buddhist Bai people. At the time, Dali was a trading capital, and one of the major settlements on the tea-horse trail that connected Western China, then a patchwork of independent kingdoms, with India and south-east Asia. Even today, Dali remains the cultural capital of the Bai people, and its lively old quarter still thrives with market stalls selling Bai crafts and handmade batik fabrics.

After lunch, check into Xiao Ya Dali, a traditional courtyard hotel set in the heart of Dali old town. In the afternoon, you might like to pay a visit to a nearby Bai

village, Zhoucheng, which features a lovely market and traditional outdoor theatre set under the shade of a giant banyan tree. It's a pleasant spot to spend an hour's leisure time. The evening is free for you to explore Dali at your own pace.

Day 4: Cangshan Mountains and Erhai Lake (B, L)

Today will be spent exploring Dali's surrounding region. Start with a bicycle tour around Erhai Lake, following one of a number of popular biking routes which take in small lakeshore villages and market towns. (If you're not keen on cycling, we can arrange for a boat cruise on the Lake).

In the afternoon, venture into the Cangshan Mountains, taking the cable car up to a high landing point in the mountains and spending a few hours exploring the fixed trails on foot. If you'd prefer to get off-the-beaten-path, there are short walking trails at the foot of the mountains, one of which passes a quiet Zen temple and nunnery with beautiful gardens.



Day 5: Dali Old Town and Weishan (B, L)

After breakfast, depart on a full-day excursion to Weishan Ancient Town. Weishan is a one and a half hour drive from Dali, but you can break up the journey with a stop at Donglihua Village, a sleepy Hui settlement.

Weishan is a 600 year old town set in the Weishan highlands. Unlike a number of towns in the region, Weishan largely survived the ravages of the Cultural Revolution intact. It still contains many original buildings, built out of brick, mud and wood, and a number of beautifully-decorated temples.

Many travellers prefer Weishan to Dali. It's not as busy, and less work has gone into prettifying the old town, creating an altogether more authentic atmosphere.

There are some light trekking routes in the hills surrounding Weishan. After exploring Weishan's old town, you might like to take a 2-hour hike to the top of Weibaoshan Hill, before driving back to Dali in the late afternoon. The rest of the evening is at leisure in Dali.



Day 6: Dali to Shaxi (B, L)

Depart Dali this morning and drive north along the ancient tea-horse trail to Shaxi Village. This is a 3 hour drive that follows an old winding trail – the original tea-horse trading route – through beautiful hill country. There will be plenty of opportunities to stop and take photos along the way.

Arrive in Shaxi Village around noon and check into the Old Theatre Inn, a gorgeous boutique hotel set in one of Shaxi's satellite villages. In the afternoon, explore Shaxi village with your local guide.



'Shaxi', as used in the tourist literature, refers to a collection of villages, of which Shaxi itself is the largest. The villages are set in a deep valley in the Himalayan foothills, between Dali and Lijiang, amid rice paddies and pine-forested hills. It is widely considered one of the most beautiful settlements in western China, yet remains largely untouched by mass tourism.

You can spend a few hours exploring Shaxi, with its pretty temples, traditional theatre stage, old caravansary and narrow alleyways. It's easy to imagine you've stepped a thousand years back in time as you explore this centuries old bazaar town.



If time allows, you might like to hike to Shibaoshan (Stone Treasure Mountain), a small mountain range dotted with carefully-hidden grottoes housing carved Buddhas.

Day 7: Shaxi to Lijiang (B, L, D)

Depart Shaxi this morning and continue along the tea-horse trail to Lijiang.

Lijiang was founded in the early 12th century as a market town and trading post serving the original tea-horse trunk road. Much of the old town was destroyed in 1997 by a devastating earthquake, but it has since been rebuilt in a style that conforms closely to the original town's layout and aesthetic, and granted UNESCO World Heritage status.

The centre of Lijiang contains hundreds of houses, some of them modern reconstructions but others original, set within a maze of cobbled streets and waterways. It's one of China's most attractive "Ancient" towns, drawing in huge crowds every year—Lijiang has long been popular with young Chinese honeymooners—though its size and labyrinthine layout means it's always possible to escape the crowds.



Lijiang was traditionally the home of the Naxi people, who originated in north-western China before migrating south two thousand years ago. Close descendants of the Tibetans, the Naxi developed their own pictographic writing style, the unique characters of which can still be seen on walls and buildings in Lijiang's old town.



After lunch at a local restaurant in Lijiang, check into the Zen Garden Hotel, a beautiful courtyard hotel set on a high hill overlooking the old town. After resting at the hotel, enjoy a late afternoon walking tour through Lijiang and its lively market. Time allowing, you might also like to visit the Black Dragon Pool Park, situated on the outskirts of the city. In the evening, enjoy a traditional Naxi dinner in the nearby village of Shuhe.

Day 8: Baisha and Jade Dragon Snow Mountain (B, L)

Lijiang is at its best in the early morning, when the streets are empty and the market stalls shut. Try waking before noon to get some photos of the town in the dawn light. The Zen Garden's hilltop location allows for beautiful photos of Lijiang's iconic rooftops.



Your guide will meet you at the hotel after breakfast. Your destination today is the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, or Yulong, which is a 45 minute drive from Lijiang. Before visiting the mountain, however, pay a visit to Baisha village.



The small village of Baisha is the oldest Naxi settlement in the region, predating Lijiang by several hundred years. It still retains many centuries-old structures, including the Dabaoji Palace, a 16th-century temple famous for its 55 murals. Take the time to explore the palace and the village itself, before continuing to Yulong Mountain.

In Naxi tradition, Yulong is considered a holy mountain. For this reason, its snow-capped peak has never been climbed, as Naxi tradition prohibits this. You can, however, take a cable car to a high-altitude meadow on the upper slopes of the mountain, where there are beautiful pine forests to explore. On a clear day, the views are wonderful.

Return to Lijiang in the late afternoon. The rest of the evening is at leisure.

Day 9: Tiger Leaping Gorge (B, L, D)

Start the day with a visit to Lashi Lake, situated just outside Lijiang. On arrival at the lake, ditch the vehicle and set off on a 1-2 hour guided horseback tour (a walking tour is also possible if you are not keen to ride).

Your ride ends at the ancient Zhiyun Monastery, a quiet Buddhist temple on the northern shores of the lake. From Zhiyun, you can trek 2-3 hours to the tea and horse trail guesthouse for a lunch break. After lunch, drive to Tiger Leaping Gorge.

One of the deepest gorges in the world, Tiger Leaping Gorge is among China's most popular trekking destinations, thanks to its beautiful scenery and high cliff trails. The full Tiger Gorge Trail takes two days to complete and requires a night in a local guesthouse. As you'll be arriving late this afternoon, we'll arrange for a shorter hike to



Tina's Guesthouse, near the start of the trail, where you stay tonight. (If you'd like more time to hike, we can include an extra night on the trail, or alternatively, skip the tour of Lashi Lake.)



Day 10: Haba Village (B, L, D)

Wake early to watch the sun as it rises over Haba Peak, the tallest of the Jade Dragon Mountains. Then, after an early breakfast in the guesthouse, trek down to Shenchuan Bridge, stopping for lunch along the way at the Walnut Garden, a local restaurant and guesthouse.

After lunch, drive over the Haba Mountain pass to Haba Village, a predominantly Muslim village set in a beautiful valley at the foot of the mountain massif. After a tour of the village and its mosque, continue by vehicle to Baidi Village, a pretty Naxi settlement where you'll spend the night in a local home stay.



Day 11: Shangri-La (B, L)

Leave Baidi this morning and drive to the neighbouring village of Baishuitai, famous for its limestone terraces. These mineral terraces—curious white rock formations that from a distance resemble rice terraces—are a natural wonder. After lunch in Baishuitai, continue to the Tibetan city of Zhongdian, otherwise known as Shangri-La.

Zhongdian – renamed “Shangri-La” in 2001 in an attempt to promote tourism to the region – is a beautiful town on the high Tibetan Plateau. It is one of the major centres for Tibetan Buddhist culture outside of Tibet itself, and features one of the most stunning Tibetan monasteries in China, as well as a charming old quarter.

On arrival in Shangri-La, check into Songtsam Retreat, a gorgeous boutique hotel situated on the outskirts of town, overlooking the Songzanlin Monastery.

The evening is at leisure to explore Shangri-La's colourful old town.



Day 12: Nixi and Gangjue Villages (B, L, D)

After breakfast at your hotel, pay a morning visit to Gedan Songzanlin Monastery, the most significant lamasery in the Shangri-La Region, and a major centre of Tibetan culture and religion outside of Tibet.

After exploring the monastery, drive to a highland lake where you can enjoy a gentle walk and picnic lunch. Following lunch, a horseback tour of the lake will take you to Nixi Village, a Tibetan settlement located deep in the mountains. Here you can examine Tibetan black earthenware, a traditional craft that has been practiced in this region for over 1,000 years.

After a brief tour of the traditional earthenware workshops, continue by private vehicle to the Balagezong Scenic Area, famous for its beautiful scenery – of rivers, grassland plains, gorges, lakes and, towering above it all, the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas. Hike to Ganjue Village, enjoying the spectacular scenery along the way.

Tonight, you stay in a local farmer's guesthouse in Ganjue.

Day 13: Tacheng (B, L)

After breakfast in the guesthouse, say goodbye to your hosts and trek to Bala Village, a short distance from Ganjue along an easy walking trail. From Bala, continue by vehicle to the Tibetan town of Benzilan, famous as a centre of Tibetan costume-making.

Spend the rest of the morning exploring Benzilan at leisure, learning more about the local crafts or just taking in the wonderful views of the surrounding mountains.



Leave Benzilan after lunch and drive 80km through the scenic gorges of the Jinshanjiang River to Qizong Village. On arrival, enjoy a short tour of this pretty village ending at its central focal point, a 3,000 year old Gingko Tree. Late afternoon, drive to Tacheng City, arriving early evening. On arrival in Tacheng, check into Songtsam Tacheng for one night.

Day 14: Cizhong (B, L)

Start the day with a visit to Tacheng's most famous attraction, the Tacheng Golden Snub-Nosed Monkey Reserve, a national park housing 2,000 of these rare and endangered primates, which are endemic to this region.



In the afternoon, drive 140km to Tongle Village, a small Lishu settlement within the Tibet Autonomous Prefecture.

From Tongle, continue 40km to Cizhong Town, arriving early evening. Overnight at Songtsam Cizhong.

Day 15: Deqin (B, L)

Enjoy a morning tour of Cizhong, taking in its major landmarks, including the 19th-century Catholic Church. After lunch in town, drive through the dramatic Lancang Jiang River Canyon to Deqin, the northernmost settlement in the Tibet Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan, situated on the border with Tibet proper.

Deqin is a medium-sized town of 80,000 inhabitants, which serves as a great base from which to explore the surrounding mountains, known locally as the Meili Snow Mountains.



In the afternoon, enjoy a tour of the Feilaisi Temple, which is located just outside of Deqin and which offers stunning views of the Meili Mountains.

Early evening, check in the Songtsam Meili Retreat, which enjoys a fabulous location in the tiny hamlet of Gujiunong, a short drive from Deqin town. Get your camera ready for the sunset – the views of the Meili mountains are spectacular.

Day 16: Departure (B)

After breakfast in the hotel, you will be transferred to the airport in time for the flight to your next destination. There are daily flights from Deqin to Kunming, Chengdu, Shanghai, Beijing and Lhasa.

Price Guide: *The cost of this itinerary is from **£4,225 per person**, based on twin share and subject to availability at the time of booking. For more information, or if you would like to enquire about a tailor-made holiday combining part or all of the above itinerary, please [contact us](#).*

Includes:

- Internal flights
- Accommodation and meals as described
- Activities as per itinerary (optional activities on self-guided days not included)
- Private guide and vehicle
- Return airport transfers

Excludes:

- International flights – ask us for a quote
- Travel insurance – ask us for a quote
- Items of a personal nature
- Additional activities
- Tips