



LOCAL TRAVEL text and photos by Gary Bowerman

the singing landlady of Xijiang

hitting the high notes in the Switzerland of China

mrs Li is serenading me. Her smiling face positioned close to mine, she strives to hit the climactic note of a folk song rendering thanks for a bountiful harvest. With strained vocal chords and an engagingly large grin, she then presents two bowls of rice wine which I must drink immediately. The slightly sour liquor burns through my body, causing a slight, undisguisable convulsion. "Soon," Mrs Li says with a giggle, "you will have drunk as much as I have tonight."

Having ascertained the reason for our landlady's faltering octave range, we tuck into the vast spread she has prepared and stare across the silhouetted hills into which the ethnic Miao village of Xijiang has been grafted. Having arrived after dark via a five-hour drive from the provincial capital of Guiyang and been plied

with copious local vintage, the view quickly morphs into a mazy haze. We return to the singing and drinking.

At dawn, the scene befits a movie screen. The open-frontage of Mrs Li's wooden lodge which she built in traditional Miao style with a loan she hopes to repay within three years, overlooks the awakening village below. As Xijiang rubs the sleep from its eyes, a gentle mist clings to the wooden rooftops, dampening the fragrance of pine in the valley. Cockerels are crowing; fresh corn is being hung to dry and market traders are unpacking their wares. Dominating the view are the mystical mountains that define this picturesque corner of eastern Guizhou province.

Guizhou is sometimes called the Switzerland of China, due to its profusion of alpine peaks elegantly tailored with pristine

pine forests that shelter spectacular river valleys, lakes and passes. With far fewer tourists than neighboring Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, it has become a cherished retreat among Chinese and overseas backpackers seeking to avoid the crowds.

The Family Li Inn was built to cater for this steady trickle of carefree independent travelers wending their way through one of China's poorest provinces. Mrs Li has noticed an additional trend, however. "We get lots of small groups from companies in Guiyang, who come here to eat, drink and party together on my balcony, then go home the next day," she says. As a result, Mrs Li has become something of a local celebrity. "The visitors all like to take my picture when I am singing," she adds with a smile. "Maybe, they show their friends back in the city."

Her accentuation of the word 'city'



speaks volumes, because Xijiang is as proudly remote and non-urban as could be imagined. Known as the Village of One Thousand Homes, it is the largest of a landlocked archipelago of Miao villages that adorn the valleys in the foothills around Mount Lei Gong.

And Mrs Li's balcony is fast becoming Xijiang's hottest property. From here, the dramatic mountain scenery boasts a distinct Swiss sensibility, though there are no cowbells, yodelling or ski resorts. What's more, at RMB 20 for a basic room, including a communal hot shower, the prices are distinctly un-Swiss. But the intricate agricultural terracing that has, over time, carved eye-catching irrigational staircases into the mountainsides is also reminiscent of South America. For a few hungover post-dawn moments, memories of high-altitude bus journeys through the vertiginous Peruvian Andes flash across my eyes.

Such self-indulgence is quickly punctured by an apparition. Or so it seemed. Next to me, a Taiwanese filmmaker is photographing his wife against the sublime backdrop. She is modelling traditional Miao ceremonial dress and her beautiful body-length scarlet robe is embroidered with green, gold and blue detailing. Again, I am transported South of the Border – as the intricate weaving, rich colors and storytelling patterns of the skirts are noticeably similar to those worn by natives of the highland villages

in Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia. But it is her distinctive Miao headdress that most catches the eye – a magnificently tasselled solid silver crown topped by an engraved pair of razor-sharp oxen horns.

The regional abundance of this precious metal is evident on the cobble streets in the village below. The market square is a basketball court, with a single wooden totem pole at the far end. A smattering of noodle stalls and vegetable and fresh meat vendors have the space to themselves. Early-rising travelers wielding state-of-the-art digital cameras sit at small tables outside a backpacker hostel. At the far end of the single street, a cluster of small storefronts displays ornamental bracelets, earrings, pendants, wine cups and pots fashioned from the high-grade silver mined in the verdant hillsides. The prices would make the jewelers of Geneva, Davos or Gstaad blush with shame.

Confronted with such vivid scenery and nursing an increasingly apparent need to clear our rice-wine-weary heads, we make for the hills. Hiking across the valleys is a pleasure: well-worn pathways meander between the rice terraces, created for human and equine feet to transport harvested crops from the misty peaks to the village marketplaces. We pass countless crop-pickers, each carrying two baskets of freshly-cut grasses and edible leaves and herbs across their shoulders on the ends of sturdy bamboo poles. A group of local children fishing

in a rice paddy decide to hang up their improvised fishing rods and guide us down into the next valley.

The lushness of the scenery is complemented by the bounty of the produce: rice and corn are the staple crops, though grapes, oranges and limes are also cultivated, as well as bamboo shoots, cabbages, celery, spring onions and potent postbox-red chillies. The hillside is both an idyllic picnic spot and a natural salad platter – all that is needed is some cracked black pepper, red wine vinegar and extra-virgin olive oil. And maybe a crisp Sauvignon Blanc.

Though the misty haze has stubbornly refused to clear, the highest vantage point yields sweeping vistas of the neighboring valleys and villages. Too tempting, in fact. We decide to follow an elliptical eight-kilometer path that dips into an adjacent village, before circling back around the valley to Xijiang.

But Mount Lei Gong, renowned for its thunderous wrath, shows us little mercy. Without warning, black rain clouds plug the valley, the thunder rumbles a throaty roar and a heavy shower descends. Caught between villages, shelter is a distant hope. There is no other option but to seek a mental distraction. Memories of Mrs Li's late-night tunes and warming rice wine somehow see us through the storm. In Xijiang, it's never over until the landlady sings. ■