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A month ago, I made the move from California to Yunnan. It's been an onslaught of new experiences, people, and information, but I would not have it any other way. I've found that approaching this strange and wonderful culture with wide-eyed enthusiasm, and an openness to the possibilities, will yield the greatest journey.

I am well aware that the internet is rife with guides to everywhere, especially tourist locations such as [Lijiang](#). Most of these, however, come from the perspective of an expert who is well aware of the socio-cultural ins and outs of the given location. They will provide the best in hotel and restaurant recommendations, as well as some of the best tour package suggestions. Even the [Lonely Planet](#) series bears similarity to these dry and rote commercial guides. Sometimes, an acceptance of bewilderment, a wayfarer attitude, and an aptitude for poor choices that comes with being in a new place for the first time is more refreshing.



I woke up at 6am in the train's sleeper car. I was an hour away from arrival, and was mostly concerned with finding someone to share the taxi cost with in order to get to the old town on the cheap. The only people sharing my compartment were a Chinese couple who spent the first hour of the ride the previous evening admiring the eagle on the cover of my American passport. Strange, indeed, but my only option. Using a mix of my elementary-level Mandarin and Pleco, I was able to convince them that it was in our financial best interest to team up. For some reason, this took an actual conversation on their part to come to a decision.

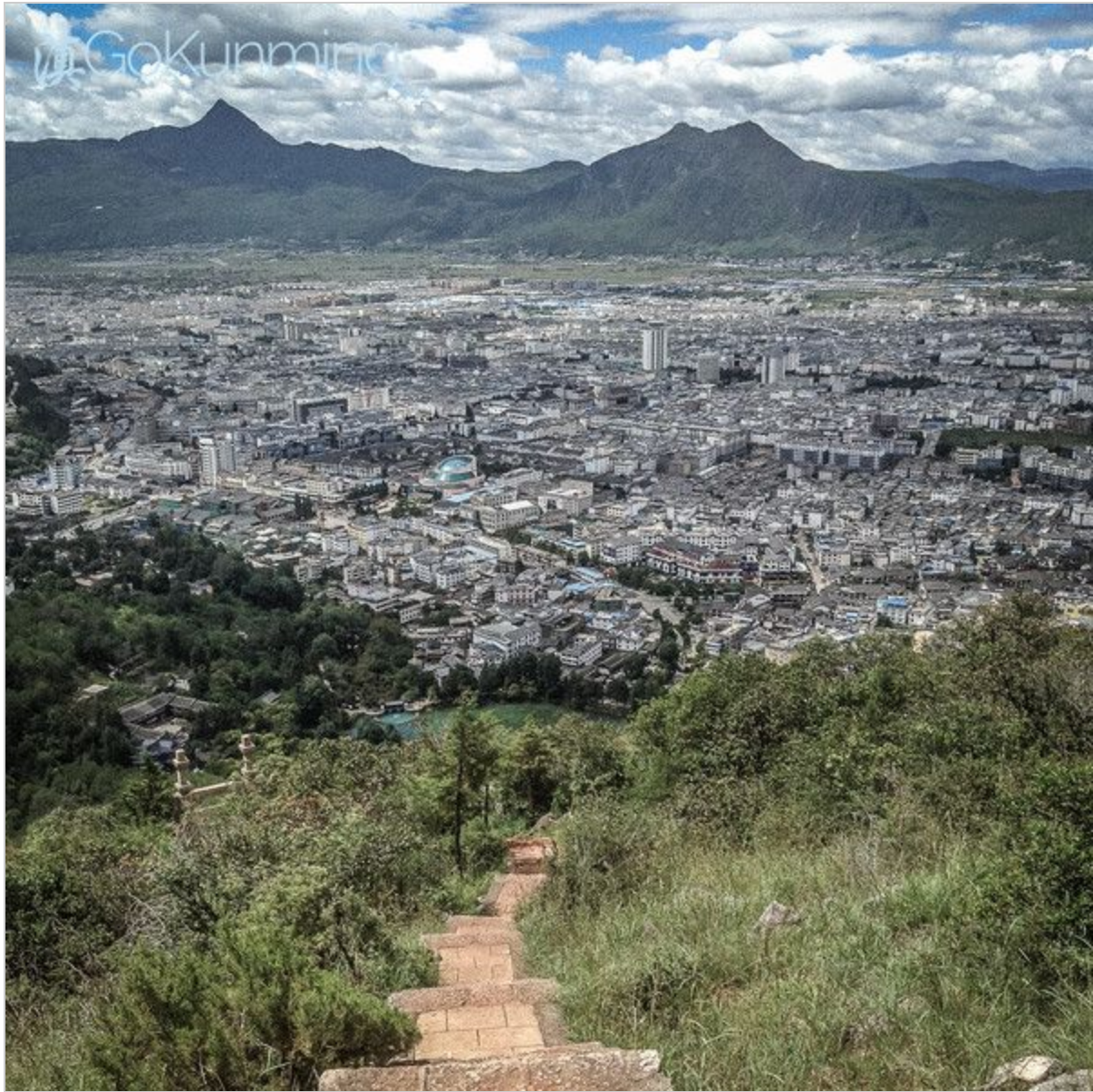
Disembarking, I followed my new friends through the cavernous train station of Lijiang. For a comparatively small city, the station was remarkable large. Since the Chinese couple, obviously, was Chinese, it saved me the trouble of communicating with the taxi driver in my Mandarin/English/iphone-mediated way. It ended up costing me ten yuan, rather than the 30 yuan total, so it was a mission well-accomplished.



We arrived at the southern gate of the ancient city, and I was amazed. I had been warned many times before that Lijiang was heavily commercial and fake. Seeing it, however, I could understand how it remained one of the largest tourist attractions in Yunnan. Looking past the gate, it appeared as though it were a time warp going back several centuries. My hostel was located at the northern point of the town, and while I could have gotten another ride, it seemed prudent, as well as more adventurous, to go it on foot. It was 7:30am at this point, and the old town was deserted. From my perspective, it seemed as though I had the place to myself. The sun was rising, a few animals were wandering about, but I was otherwise alone. I walked through alleys, along canals, past ancient arches and gates.

It took an hour, a lot of meandering, and a bit of map reading, but I eventually made it to my hostel at the north end of town. It was 40 yuan a night for a dorm bed, and was well worth it. The beer fridge was self-serve, and its' content ranged from Tsingtao to

ten-year Trappist Rochefort — quite a variance, indeed. The terrace on the roof made for an enjoyable place to relax, especially after grabbing one of those beers.



As far as I could tell, breakfast options were identical to those in Kunming, though perhaps with a Naxi spin. The only true difference was that a bowl costing seven yuan in Kunming was 15 in Lijiang. After breakfast, I decided to wander my way around town again. I only had 48 hours to spend in the town before returning to Kunming, so I had to make the most of it.

My first stop was Black Dragon Pool. I was charged an 80 yuan 'Old Town Maintenance Fee' in order to gain entry, which made my wallet suffer, but it was worth it. There is a reason that the pond is what comes up when searching Lijiang online — it is strikingly beautiful. With the clear water, the pagodas, the temple, the [Naxi](#) architecture and a striking mountain in the background, the scene lived up to its picturesque description. After walking around around the lake, I hiked up a nearby mountain to get a panoramic view of the city. At the top, not only are there amazing views, but a radio antenna, Tibetan prayer flags, and a pagoda. For the moment, I was satisfied.



Heading back down the backside of the mountain, my phone, and therefore my map, died, leaving me to blindly wander around the trails and, later, the old town, until I got back to the hostel. The old town is a labyrinth of narrow walkways and alleys, so one wrong turn would leave me totally lost. At that point, it was midday and the town had awoken. No longer dreamily deserted, the town was now teeming with just-opened shops, merchants, and fellow tourists.

It was clear fairly immediately that the Chinese around me were not locals. For once, me and everyone around me were in the same boat. The only problem I could readily

see was that all the stores were very similar and followed a pattern. First a women's clothing store, then a drum/ukelele store, a Tibetan antique shop, a flower pastry bakery, a pipe shop, a men's clothing store, and a small restaurant. At each of these places, they had the same merchandise as their fellows. Each women's clothing store had the same items on display. When lost, and looking for landmarks, this made things especially disorienting.



As a fun aside, the garbage trucks in Lijiang are quite interesting. With the streets being so narrow, they resemble vans more than anything. What makes them fascinating though, is the fact that they loudly play classical music as they drive around, to the point that I was immediately conditioned to know when they were coming, even after only being in the town for a couple of hours.

For dinner that night, I decided to make a go of getting a proper meal by myself, something I do not normally do in Kunming. Since Lijiang is unique in its Naxi heritage, I decided to find a restaurant where I could find some local cuisine. After walking around for a bit, I found a place called Naxi Snacks, which sounded perfect. Because I was eating alone, I was put at the 'loners table', with all the other patrons who were by themselves. In my broken Chinese, I asked the lady across from me if she'd like to eat together. She laughed, agreed, then proceeded to order a bunch of dishes she thought

the *laowai* would enjoy. Enjoy, I did! Between the roasted fish, seaweed salad, and eggplant, it was wonderful meal that I didn't even mind paying for. That's high praise, coming from me.



Another food seemingly unique to Lijiang are the flower pastries. They cost two yuan per, and are pretty good. Most stores in the town appeared to make them fresh, which made them quite a bit more appealing. I have to do research on what they actually are, but they seemed at the time to be puff pastries infused with some sort of flower, and then filled with various things. I tried what I think were the ones filled with red bean paste, and other filled with something resembling grapes.

Later on, my fellow dorm roommates and I went out to try out the nightlife in Lijiang. Our group consisted of three Frenchmen, and two first-time travelers from North Carolina in the United States. There seemed to be a never-ending series of cafés and bars, complete with live music. We ended up at a place called where a Dali Beer was 35

yuan, compared to the eight yuan back at the hostel. We decided to be in it for the experience and not the money, so we carried on. The music was actually quite decent — a good night all around.



On my second, and last, day, I mostly rehashed activities from the first. I continued to explore the maze that is the old town, relaxed on the rooftop terrace, as well as returned to Black Dragon Pool for more picturesque scenes. Of note, I tried to climb to the top of the hill on the edge of the old town to get a panoramic view of the area. It would have cost me 50 additional yuan for the privilege, so I was not having it. Instead, I snuck into a nearby building that was under-construction, climbed up to the top, and got those photos my own way.

That night, I met up with some friends to get dinner. We ended up at what must have been the Lijiang Food Court, which had pretty much every possible meat on offer. Of critical import, there was a station where one could buy a sausage wrapped in another

sausage, another for enormous hunks of bacon, and a third for massive — 80 yuan! — yak ribs. I am not much of a meat eater, but it all looked incredible!



As we finished up the meal, it began drizzle, rain, then downpour before evolving into what seemed like an all-out typhoon. By the time we got back to the hostel, the scenic alleys had become canals for an enormous river caused by the inclement weather. Adding to that, it then began to hail. Not just little pebbles, but massive chunks of ice. By the time the storm subsided, it looked as though it had snowed, with buildup around every door and window. I'll be honest, this was not the weather I expected a summer South of the Clouds.

Unfortunately, due to my limited time, I did not get to see all the unique locales that the Lijiang area has to offer. Primary among these, I regret not being able to see [Tiger Leaping Gorge](#) or visit [Baisha Village](#). I realize that these are integral to the experience beyond the old town, and will make it a priority to get back to the area to experience these places.

Overall, I did not find Lijiang to be the Disney-esque tourist trap many made it out to be. While it was indeed expensive relative to other places in Yunnan, so is every other popular tourist destination in the world. In that regard, I found Lijiang to be better than

most. As I intimated, I would definitely come back, if not immediately, then eventually, and hopefully with a fuller wallet.

Images: Jordan Steinberg