

Bordering northern Vietnam, parts of the Guangxi province resemble an inland Halong Bay. Emerald green-topped karst peaks sprout from an otherwise flat landscape, while a reposeful Li River (*Li Jiang*) meanders through these bizarre up-thrusts.

From as early as the Tang Dynasty, Chinese poets, painters and philosophers have immortalised the region's ethereal terrain. Over 1,000 years of visiting dignitaries, including former USA Presidents Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, have echoed similar sentiments. Nixon gushed during his 1972 visit: "No city can surpass the beauty of Guilin".

Except maybe Yangshuo, or so a popular Chinese saying goes. With its casual, youthful feel, rural surrounding and miscellany of bars and cafes, it's true this backpacker haven is not unlike Byron circa 1991, albeit lacking a beachside location.

The Guangxi region is home to a diverse ethnic mix of non-Han minority groups such as the Zhuang, Yao and Miao peoples. For the most part, the locals are good-humoured

towards foreigners, if not still a little curious of them. This inquisitiveness comes as a surprise, considering that the street our bus pulls into on arrival in Yangshuo is called *Xi Jie* or "West Street". It's a pedestrian mall lined with hostels and cafes serving a hit-and-miss fusion of Chinese and Western cuisine.

The gastronomically adventurous will be rewarded, however, in the form of simple local delicacies such as steamed pork dumplings, Guilin rice noodles and smoky-sweet eggplant, potato and green pepper dishes.

For lunch I bypass the backpacker staples (banana pancakes and pizzas) to sample the local cuisine: *pijiuyu* or "beer fish", local river fish cooked with fresh chillies, spring onion, tomato, ginger and, the pivotal ingredient, beer. To pay tribute to the fish, I wash it down with a crisp Tsingtao beer.

Privy to local expat advice, I'd skipped the half-day river cruise downstream from Guilin in favour of independent travel. If you do opt for the cruise, be prepared to humour the tour guides as they enlighten you on the resemblance of each passing peak to something more animate. In fairness, the contemplative observer who named Guilin's Elephant Trunk Hill (*Xiangbi Shan*) took little poetic licence – from the right angle, it resembles an elephant dipping its snout into the Li River.

Superficially sleepy this town may be, but it's not without its national quota of

entrepreneurially-minded locals. While persistent touts can become irksome in the hub of Yangshuo, for the resolute traveller escape is only a bicycle or motorised scooter ride away (starting at 5 yuan or about \$1 a day). Out here the villagers are, gratefully, a little more nonchalant than their urban kin.

It's tough-peddalling without any gears, but I can't imagine a better way to savour what must be China's greenest scenery. Farmers are at work in the paddy fields, and village children enjoy a frolic in the water alongside buffalo. After an hour or so, I dismount from my bike to climb Moon Hill (*Yueliang Shan*). My reward for making the steep climb up 800 steps is a panoramic view of fields and villages nestled among the karst pinnacles.

For the diehard rock-climber, there are upwards of seventy-five recognised, challenging climbs just outside Yangshuo. The climbing fraternity can be found at either of The Lizard Lounge ([www.chinaclimb.com](http://www.chinaclimb.com)) or Karst Cafe.

Much more relaxing to my mind is to drift on a two-seater bamboo raft, motored by a man adeptly wielding a bamboo pole, along the Yulong River. The setting sun bathes the bamboo groves and willow trees lining the riverbanks in diffused light, and each enchanting scene is mirrored in the calm waters for a second viewing.

The serenity of our journey is broken intermittently by shouts from river vendors as they approach at full pole. As well as local beer, vendors peddle a citrus fruit called *youzi*, which looks like a giant pear-shaped grapefruit large enough to feed a small family. The vendor asks if I would like her to "kill" the fruit,

which translates to expertly removing the thick rind with thumb and knife.

Night falls. Absent from the darkening landscape is the region's iconic image of a lone cormorant fisherman, while scenes of modest dwellings, farmers tending fields by hand, and women washing clothes in the river endure. Sadly, the night fishermen have for the most part been relegated to a tourist attraction due to a diminishing fish population.

As I journey back to Guilin after my Yangshuo weekend, it's easy to believe reports that China's roads are the world's deadliest. With our driver frequently veering onto the wrong side of the road, our "slow" bus beats the express bus home.

I'm amazed that the Chinese passengers can fall asleep, while I sit rigid in the back seat like a stunned animal caught in the headlights of the oncoming traffic. If not for the fear, I'm unable to sleep for the incessant beeping of our driver's horn, as he signals his intention to overtake any vehicle not attempting to break the sound barrier.

We arrive at my apartment in Guilin to far more soothing sounds – the click-clack of Mahjong tiles and the feverish chatter of those playing, mostly family and neighbours. I drift off to sleep, reassured that some things remain constant in this fast-developing land – and that's a genuine sense of community and family. ■

# yangshuo:

## THE BYRON BAY OF CHINA

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY SALLY BROWN

A savvy way to promote a travel destination to a restless twenty-something is to tout it as "the next Byron Bay". Think Goa: the Byron Bay of India. Think Brighton: the Byron Bay of England. Enter Yangshuo: the Byron Bay of China. Adopting this angle, an Aussie expat convinced me to explore the Guangxi autonomous region in southern China, in particular, the tranquil city of Guilin and its visual rival, nearby Yangshuo.

