

# The Best of China

**W**ith every new edition of this book, identifying the “best of China” becomes a more and more difficult task. As this once isolated giant awakens, forces are being unleashed that impact tourism. Devastating pollution, widespread corruption, and the sheer volume of tourists have transformed many of China’s best-known sights into filthy, overpriced circuses. To find the very best that China has to offer, it is sadly becoming more important to know what to avoid, rather than what to see.

Perhaps the best advice that we can give is to focus on nature. After suffering through the devastating Cultural Revolution, what little remains of the country’s much-vaunted 5,000 years of culture is being lost in the rush to get rich—even small cities have become heavily polluted sweatshops. Fortunately, China still has some of the most spectacular natural scenery on the planet. Many places within the People’s Republic have only recently been opened to visitors, so we have only had a few decades to unlock some of this enormous realm’s secrets. While we certainly do not claim to have uncovered everything, we have been truly inspired by this huge treasure house, and have included here what we have discovered so far.

## 1 The Best China Experiences

- **Strolling Past the Old Russian Architecture in Harbin:** At the heart of the Russian-built city, Zhongyang Dajie’s unexpected cupola-topped Art Nouveau mansions are reminders of the 1920s and 1930s, when Harbin was the liveliest stop on this leg of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. See chapter 5.
- **Exploring the Forbidden City’s Forgotten Corners (Beijing):** No one fails to be impressed by the grandeur of the Forbidden City’s central axis, which is all most visitors see. But the quieter maze of pavilions, gardens, courtyards, and theaters to either side have the greater charm. See p. 110.
- **Dining on Shanghai’s Bund:** China’s most famous waterfront street of colonial architecture, the Bund, has become the toniest address in town, with the redevelopment of a few formerly stodgy old buildings into some of the city’s finest shopping and dining establishments. These rooftop restaurants offer unsurpassed views of Shanghai, old and new. See chapter 9.
- **Cycling the City Wall in Xi’an:** The largest city walls in China have been much pierced for modern purposes and can be tackled in a modern way, too, with a breezy, traffic-light-free ride above the rooftops on rented bicycles and tandems. Behold views of remnants of vernacular architecture, clustered around small temples. See chapter 7.
- **Exploring Li Jiang’s Old Town:** Built over 800 years ago and partly rebuilt after a massive 1996 earthquake, Li Jiang’s old town, with its maze of cobblestone streets, gurgling streams, and original and reconstructed traditional

Naxi houses, is one of the most atmospheric places in China, hordes of tourists notwithstanding. Rise before the sun, then watch its golden rays filter through the gray winding streets, lighting up the dark wooden houses. See chapter 12.

- **Walking on the Great Wall from Jinshanling to Simatai** (Beijing): The Great Wall, winding snakelike through the mountains, was meant to be walked. This magnificent 3-hour hike follows China's greatest monument through various states of repair, from freshly restored to thoroughly crumbling, over steep peaks and gentle flats, and through patches of wilderness and rugged farmland, with over two dozen watchtowers along the way. See chapter 4.
- **Riding the Star Ferry** (Hong Kong): There's no better way to get acquainted with Hong Kong than to ride the cheapest cruise in China. The century-old green-and-white Star ferries weave between tugs, junks, and oceangoing vessels in a 5-minute harbor crossing, and thanks to the wonderful Suzy Wong novel, remain one of the territories' premier attractions. See chapter 11.
- **Exploring the karst scenery around Yangshuo**: The cruise down the now-polluted Li River between Guilin and Yangshuo may be overexposed and overpriced, but the scenery area remains captivating. Avoid the pricey taxis and motorbike rentals and explore instead in traditional Chinese style, by bicycle. Both the Yulong River and the Jin Bao are still relatively peaceful as they flick lazily through serrated hills like dragon's teeth. See chapter 12.
- **Unwinding in a Sichuan Teahouse**: One of the great pleasures of being in Sichuan is drinking tea at a neighborhood teahouse. On any given afternoon at Qingyang Gong in Chengdu,

for instance, seniors can be found playing mahjong with friends while their caged songbirds sit in nearby trees providing ambient music. As patrons eat watermelon seeds, nuts, dried squid, or beef jerky, attendants appear at regular intervals to refill their cups from copper kettles. For an afternoon of perfect relaxation, stop by and forget about sightseeing for a few hours. See chapter 13.

- **Gazing at the Sea of Terra-Cotta Warriors at the Tomb of Qin Shi Huang** (Xi'an): The first sight of the tomb, in a hangarlike building, leaves many visitors stunned and awed. This destination is at the top of almost every visitor's list, and it does not disappoint. See p. 266.
- **Strolling in Shanghai's French Concession**: The domain of the French community up until 1949 was colonial Shanghai's trendiest area, and it remains full of tree-lined boulevards, colonial mansions, and Art Deco masterpieces, now bundled up with phone lines and pole-hung washing. Some of the city's best shopping is also here. Just beyond the former concession is one of modern Shanghai's trendiest areas, the megadevelopment of restaurants and shops known as **Xin Tiandi**. See chapter 9.
- **Getting Lost in the lanes around Beijing's Back Lakes**: No other city in the world has anything quite like the *hutong*, narrow lanes once "as numberless as the hairs on an ox." Now rapidly vanishing, the best-preserved *hutong* are found around a pair of man-made lakes in the city center. This area is almost the last repository of Old Beijing's gritty, low-rise charm, dotted with tiny temples, hole-in-the-wall noodle shops, and quiet courtyard houses whose older residents still wear Mao suits. See the walking tour, "The Back Lakes," on p. 124.

- **Strolling the Old Neighborhoods of Kashgar:** The dusty alleys, colorful residential doorways, and mud-brick walls remain as they have been for decades. Kids with henna-dyed feet and fingernails will approach you speaking a few words of Chinese and English; men with donkey carts trudge down narrow passages; bakers arrange round large slabs of nan in coal ovens built into the ground. Spending hours watching how citizens of Kashgar live is one of the most rewarding experiences along the Silk Road. See p. 323.
- **Taking a “Peapod” Boat on Shennong Stream (Yangzi River):** Best of the Three Gorges cruise excursions, this 2-hour journey through a long, narrow canyon takes passengers to one of the famous suspended coffins of the Ba people, then returns them downstream in a fraction of the time. Along the way, howler monkeys may be spotted swinging through the trees, small waterfalls appear from the rocks, and swallows and other small birds flit about. The water in this small tributary is surprisingly clear, and the scenery and silence are thoroughly calming. See chapter 13.

## 2 The Best Small Towns

- **Xia He (Gansu):** This delightful monastery town nestles in a mountain valley at an elevation of 2,900m (9,500 ft.). It's divided into two sections, primarily Hui (Muslim) and Han Chinese at its eastern end, changing abruptly to Tibetan as you climb westward to the gorgeous gilded roofs of the vast Labrang Monastery. Tibetan pilgrims make you welcome on the 3km (2-mile) circuit around the monastery's perimeter. See chapter 7.
- **Manzhouli (Inner Mongolia):** A tiny town of 50,000 on the Russian border, lost in a sea of grass, Manzhouli is the East-meets-Wild-West frontier outpost David Carradine should have used as the backdrop to the TV series *Kung Fu*. It stands on the edge of the Hulun Buir, an emerald expanse of grassland shot through with radiant patches of wildflowers. See p. 210.
- **Dali (Yunnan):** This home of the Bai people, a backpacker's mecca recently gentrified for larger numbers of tourists, remains a retreat from the world. You can hike part of the impressive 19-peak Green Mountains (Cang Shan) to the west, sail on the cerulean Er Hai Lake to the east, and take a bike ride into any of the nearby Bai villages. See p. 656.
- **Dunhuang (Gansu):** Surrounded by barren deserts, this oasis town beckons with sand dunes, camel treks, and the Buddhist cave art of Mogao. Its tree-lined streets and backpacker cafes give it a laid-back feeling that is hard to find elsewhere in China. See p. 295.
- **Yangshuo (Guangxi):** While much of the central area is now tacky and overcommercialized, this small town on the Li River, nestled in a cluster of spiny pinnacles, has retained enough of its laid-back charm to be a delightful alternative to Guilin. Yangshuo is at the cutting edge of Chinese tourism and features some of its best innovations as well as some of its worst. See p. 608.

### 3 The Best Countryside Trips

- **Jiuzhai Gou** (Sichuan): This national park has dense forest, green meadows, rivers, rapids, ribbon lakes in various shades of blue and green, chalky shoals, and waterfalls of every kind. Of cultural interest are six Tibetan villages of the original nine from which this valley gets its name. See p. 718.
- **Chang Bai Shan** (Jilin): This long-dormant 2,600m-high (8,500-ft.) volcano is home to Tian Chi, a deep, pure, mist-enshrouded crater lake that straddles the China–North Korea border and is sacred to both Koreans and Manchurians. The northern approach to the lake, with its trail that climbs alongside the thundering Changbai Waterfall, is best in the fall. The western approach is ideal in early summer, when its vast fields of vibrant wildflowers are in full bloom. See p. 195.
- **Langmu Si** (Gansu): This Tibetan monastic center is largely unknown to Chinese tourists, and the tranquil mountain village is reminiscent of Li Jiang before it was “discovered.” The town is home to two major Tibetan monasteries, housing around 1,000 monks whose chanting of the scriptures may be heard throughout the day. Ramble through narrow ravines and moraine valleys crowded with wildflowers, or take a horse trek up Flower Cap Mountain to obtain stunning views as far as the holy mountain of Amnye Machen. See p. 287.
- **Amnye Machen** (Qinghai): The route around this holy mountain, for a while believed to be the world’s highest, must be clockwise—turning back is sacrilegious. So once you start on the 3-day horse trek, or the 7- to 10-day walk with the aid of a baggage-carrying yak, there’s no turning back. But the scenery around the 6,282m (20,605-ft.) peak, and the company of sometimes entire villages of Tibetans, make the trek well worthwhile. See p. 775.
- **Around Li Jiang** (Yunnan): This area offers a wide variety of countryside experiences, from riding a chairlift up to the glacier park of the magnificent, snowcapped **Jade Dragon Snow Mountain**, to hiking the sheer-sided **Tiger Leaping Gorge** while the Yangzi River rages below, to being rowed in a “pig-trough” boat across the pristine **Lugu Lake**—China’s answer to Lake Tahoe. See p. 675.
- **Karakul Lake** (Xinjiang): On the highway between Kashgar and Tashkurgan lie stark, jagged mountains surrounded by a pristine lake at an altitude over 4,000m (13,120 ft.). Come here for some peace and quiet and a change of scenery from the dusty Uighur towns along the Silk Road. See p. 328.
- **Wu Ling Yuan & Zhang Jia Jie** (Hunan): This scenic area is made up of three subtropical parklands, with quartzite sandstone peaks and pillars to rival Guilin’s scenery. There are plentiful rare plants and insects, swarms of butterflies, a large cave with calcite deposits, and stunning views through bamboo, pine, and oak forests. See p. 753.
- **Everest Base Camp** (Tibet): Whether by 3-hour drive from the village of Pelbar, or by a 3- to 4-day trek from Tingri, the trip to the tented base camp (at 5,150m/16,890 ft.) or to rooms in Rongbuk Monastery (at 4,980m/16,330 ft.) offers unbeatable vistas of the world’s toothiest snowcaps set against a startling cobalt sky. See chapter 14.

- **Hulun Buir Grasslands** (Inner Mongolia): Located just outside the remote border town of Manzhouli, the Hulun Buir's grasslands are the most pristine in China. This expanse of gentle emerald hills, perfectly punctuated with small streams and rocky outcrops, is all the more attractive for how difficult it is to reach. See chapter 5.
- **Eastern Qing Tombs** (Hebei): This rural tomb complex offers more to the visitor than the better-known Ming Tombs, but sees a fraction of the visitors. Undeniably difficult to reach, the effort is rewarded many times over by the Qianlong emperor's breathtakingly beautiful tomb chamber, **Yu Ling**, and an (unintentionally) drop-dead funny photo exhibit of the much-maligned dowager empress Cixi. See chapter 4.
- **The Bamboo Forests of Anji** (Zhejiang): Vast oceans of bamboo, immortalized by the kung-fu acrobatics of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, make this a part of the country that will appeal to the emerging generation of ecotourists. Apart from mystical, secluded groves, the bamboo museum highlights a plant that is receiving more and more attention as we begin to recognize the importance of sustainable lifestyles. See p. 483.
- **Yandangshan** (Zhejiang): A less well known, but equally stunning collection of spectacular peaks that rival any other area in the country but as yet do not have the same stratospheric ticket prices. See p. 489.

#### 4 The Best Mansions & Palaces

- **Wang Jia Dayuan** (Pingyao): It took a century for this vast mansion to grow to 123 courtyards and 1,118 houses; the decorative lattice screens and windows, shaped openings between rooms and courtyards, and undulating walls are exquisite examples of Ming and Qing vernacular architecture. See p. 243.
- **Potala Palace** (Lhasa): A monastery, a palace, and a prison, the Potala symbolizes the fusion of secular and religious power in Tibet in a vast, slab-sided, red-and-white agglomeration on a hilltop dominating central Lhasa. Despite the ruination of its surroundings, there's no more haunting sight within China's modern political boundaries, and nothing else that speaks so clearly of the otherness of Tibet. See p. 785.
- **The Forbidden City** (Beijing): Preeminent among the surviving complexes of ancient buildings in China, the former residence of the emperors needs far more time than most tours give it. See "The Best China Experiences," earlier in this chapter, and p. 110.
- **Wei Huanggong** (Changchun): Also known as the Puppet Emperor's Palace and best known in the west as the setting for part of Bernardo Bertolucci's film *The Last Emperor*, this impressive palace complex, opened to visitors after an admirable full-scale restoration in 2002, was the residence of Henry Puyi, China's last emperor and subsequently puppet ruler of Japanese-controlled Manchukuo. See p. 186.
- **Wang Jia Dayuan** (Hebei): With investment from a Beijing entrepreneur, part of a traditional courtyard mansion that once housed Shanhaiguan's wealthiest burgher has been magnificently restored and is expected to expand farther south. Set in the heart of the old walled town, it also boasts a folk museum crammed with curiosities. Four of the rooms are available for overnight stays, although you'll have to be out before the next day's visitors arrive. See p. 150.

- **Qiao Jia Dayuan** (Pingyao): One of the loveliest of the several merchant family mansions of this area, this was the set for the film *Raise the Red Lantern*. With six large courtyards, 313 houses, and fine craftsmanship of lattices, lintels, carvings, wooden balustrades, and chimneys throughout, the 18th-century manse takes hours to explore. See p. 243.
- **Bishu Shanzhuang** (Chengde): The imperial summer resort and its

surrounding Eight Outer Temples form another of the greatest ancient architectural complexes of China, arranged around a green valley. The temples have bizarre borrowings from a number of minority architectural traditions, and both temples and palace have 18th-century replicas of buildings of which the country is most proud. See p. 144.

## 5 The Best Museums

- **Hong Kong Museum of History** (Hong Kong): A life-size diorama of a Neolithic settlement, replicas of fishing boats and traditional houses, ethnic clothing, displays of colorful festivals, and whole streets of old shop frontages with their interiors removed piece by piece and rebuilt here, make this the most entertaining museum in China. See p. 576.
- **Shanxi Lishi Bowuguan** (Xi'an): If you can visit only one museum in China, this should be it. An unrivaled collection of treasures, many demonstrating Xi'an's international contacts via the Silk Routes, is more professionally displayed here than almost anywhere else in the mainland. See p. 265.
- **Sanxing Dui Bowuguan** (Chengdu): An attractive and well-laid-out museum housing items from a group of sacrificial pits, this is one of the most significant finds in 20th-century China. See p. 701.
- **Shanghai Bowuguan** (Shanghai): In terms of display and English labeling, this ultramodern museum (lights fade as you approach cabinets), loaded with stunning antiquities, is China's most modern and inviting. See p. 466.
- **Nanjing Datusha Jinianguan** (Nanjing): The deaths of over 300,000 Chinese, killed over the course of 6 weeks during the 1937 Japanese invasion of Nanjing, are commemorated here. Photographs and artifacts documenting the Japanese onslaught, the atrocities suffered, and the aftermath, are sobering, grisly, and shockingly effective. See p. 399.
- **Wang Anting Xiaoxiao Zhanlanguan** (Chengdu): Located in a narrow lane west of the main town square, this small, one-of-a-kind museum contains tens of thousands of Mao pins, Cultural Revolution memorabilia, and vintage photographs. The museum occupies the living room of its devoted proprietor. See p. 702.
- **Quanzhou Taiwan Friendship Museum** (Quanzhou): Although the Minnan design of this building is impressive, the real reason that I recommend it is to see how ridiculous (and increasingly frightening and dangerous) propaganda concerning Taiwan has become in the last few years. To paraphrase Rich Hall, in showpieces like this, China is somewhat like a beauty contestant, absolutely gorgeous until it opens its mouth. See p. 507.

## 6 The Best Temples

- **Kong Miao** (Qufu): One of China's greatest classical architectural complexes, this spectacular temple in Confucius's hometown is the largest and most magnificent of the hundreds of temples around the country honoring the sage. Greatly enlarged since it was originally built in 478 B.C., it has a series of gates and buildings aligned on a north-south axis and decorated with imperial flourishes like yellow-tiled roofs and dragon-entwined pillars. See p. 372.
- **Maiji Shan Shiku** (Tianshui): This haystack-shaped mountain of soft red rock, covered in brilliant green foliage, is China's prettiest cave-temple site, and the only one where statuary has been added to the cave walls rather than carved out of them. Views from the stairs and walkways lacing the cliffs are spectacular (including those straight down). See p. 276.
- **Guan Yin Dong** (Yandangshan): the Goddess of Mercy Cave consists of 10 stories of wooden timbers over 100m (328 ft.) high, and constructed deep inside a huge long vertical crevasse. Absolutely breathtaking and set in some of the most beautiful surroundings. See p. 491.
- **Zhengding** (Hebei): Neither the most spectacular nor the best known of temple groups, but within a short walking distance of each other, are some of China's oldest surviving unimproved temple buildings (one of which houses a 30m-high/90-ft. multiarmed bronze of Guanyin), and a collection of ancient pagodas so varied it's almost as if they've been set out specifically to surprise you. See p. 151.
- **Jokhang Temple** (Lhasa): The spiritual heart of Tibetan Buddhism, this temple should be visited twice: once to see the intense devotion of pilgrims circumnavigating it by prostrating themselves repeatedly across cobblestones made slippery by centuries of burning yak-butter lamps, and rubbing their foreheads against the statuary in the dim, smoky interior; and a second time in the afternoon for a closer look at the ancient images they venerate. See p. 779.
- **Temple of Heaven** (Beijing): The circular Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, one of the finest achievements of Ming architecture, is almost as well known as a symbol of Beijing as the Tian'an Men, but the three-tiered sacrificial altar of plain stone is thought by many to be the most sublime object of beauty in China. See p. 118.
- **Sakya Monastery (Sajia Si)** (Sakya): The massive 35m (115-ft.) windowless gray walls of Lhakhang Chenmo tower above the village and fields on the southern bank of the Trum Chu. Completed in 1274, this monastery fort was largely funded by Kublai Khan, and unlike the older temples of north Sakya, it survived the Cultural Revolution. See p. 800.
- **Mogao Shiku** (Dunhuang): The biggest, best-preserved, and most significant site of Buddhist statuary and frescoes in all China, with the broadest historical range, the Mogao Caves, in their tranquil desert setting, should be your choice if you can see only one cave site. See p. 298.
- **Yonghe Gong** (Beijing): After the Qing Yongzheng emperor moved into the Forbidden City, his personal residence was converted into this temple. Several impressive incense burners are scattered throughout the golden-roofed complex, also known as the Lama Temple. A 20m-tall (60-ft.) sandalwood statue of Maitreya, the

future Buddha, fills the last building. See p. 121.

- **Baoding Shan** (Dazu): Artistically among the subtlest and most sophisticated of China's Buddhist grottoes, these Song dynasty caves are situated around a horseshoe-shaped cove, at the center of which is lush forest. See p. 730.
- **Longmen Shiku (Dragon Gate Grottoes)** (Luoyang): The grottoes go well beyond just the identity of a temple, as these caves are considered one of the best sculptural treasures in China. The site comprises a mind-boggling 2,300 caves and niches

with more than 2,800 inscriptions and over 100,000 Buddhist statues. See p. 349.

- **Yungang Shiku** (Shanxi): These are the earliest Buddhist caves carved in China. Most were hollowed out over a 65-year period between 460 and 524. Viewed as a whole, they show a movement from Indian and central Asian artistic models to greater reliance on Chinese traditions. See p. 218.

See also Chengde's Bishu Shanzhuang and its Eight Outer Temples, in "The Best Mansions & Palaces," above.

## 7 The Best Markets

- **Kashgar Sunday Bazaar:** The bazaar is now split in two and not quite what it was, but the livestock part of the market, southeast of town, is still well worth visiting. Bearded Uighur men in traditional blue-and-white garb sharpen their knives and trim their sheep, small boys gorge themselves on Hami melons, and Kyrgyz in dark fur hats pick up and drop dozens of lambs to test their weight and meatiness before settling deals with vigorous and protracted handshakes. See p. 324.
- **Panjiayuan Jiuhuo Shichang** (Beijing): A vast outdoor market held on weekends, Panjiayuan teems with what is very likely the world's best selection of things Chinese: row upon row of everything from reproduction Ming furniture to the traditional clothing worn by China's many minorities to Mao memorabilia. Most of the antiques are fakes, although experts have made some surprising finds in the bedlam. See p. 135.
- **Kaifeng Tutechan Shichang** (Kaifeng): Visitors overnight in Kaifeng just so they can attend this famous and festive night market

whose mainstay is the wide variety of delicious local snacks on offer, such as five-spice roasted bread, sesame soup, and spicy lamb kabob. See p. 358.

- **Khotan Sunday Market:** This is everything the Kashgar Market once was. Jewelers pore over gemstones, blacksmiths busy themselves shoeing horses and repairing farm tools, blanket makers beat cotton balls, rat-poison sellers proudly demonstrate the efficacy of their products—the sights and smells are overwhelming. Don't miss the horse-riding enclosure toward the north side of the melee, where buyers test the road-worthiness of both beast and attached cart, with frequent spectacular tumbles. See p. 331.
- **Temple Street Night Market** (Hong Kong): Prices here are outrageous compared to those at China's other markets, but the scene at this night market is very entertaining, especially the fortunetellers and street-side performers singing Chinese opera. See p. 585.
- **South Bund Fabric Market** (Shanghai): Bales and bales of fabric (silk, cotton, linen, wool, and cashmere) are sold here at ridiculously low



prices. Many stalls have their own in-house tailors who can stitch you a suit, or anything else you want, at rates that are less than half what you'd pay at retail outlets. See p. 470.

- **Haizhu Square Wholesale Market** (Guangzhou): With so many markets

to choose from in a city whose very *raison d'être* is commerce, it is difficult to know which one to choose first. This is one of the most colorful. If it was made in China then there is a very good chance that you will find it around here somewhere. See p. 537.

## 8 The Best Festivals

For dates and contact information, see also the “China Calendar of Events” on p. 27.

- **Saka Dawa**, held throughout the Tibetan world, celebrates the Buddha passing away and thus attaining nirvana. It's held on the 8th to 15th days of the fourth lunar month, with religious dancing, mass chanting, and “sunning the Buddha”—the public display of giant sanctified silk portraits. See chapter 14.
- **Ice and Snow Festival** (Harbin): Not so much a festival as an extended city-wide exhibition, Harbin's Ice and Snow Festival runs from December to March every year and is without doubt the northeast's top winter attraction. The festival centers around hundreds of elaborate ice and snow sculptures, frosty reproductions of everything from Tian'an Men to Elvis. See chapter 5.
- **Sanyue Jie** (Dali): This once-religious festival celebrated by the Bai people in mid-April/early May now features 5 days and nights of considerably more secular singing, dancing, wrestling, horse racing, and large-scale trading.

This is a rare opportunity to see not only the Bai but a number of Yunnan's other ethnic minorities, gathering in one of the most beautiful and serene settings in the foothills of the Green Mountains (Cang Shan). See chapter 12.

- **Kurban Bairam** (Kashgar): Celebrations are held in Muslim communities across China, but in Kashgar they involve feats of tightrope-walking in the main square and wild dancing outside the Idkah Mosque. The 4-day festival is held 70 days after the breaking of the fast of Ramadan, on the 10th day of the 12th month (Dhul-Hijjah) in the Islamic calendar. See chapter 2.
- **Miao New Year Festival** (Xi Jiang, Langde): The Miao celebrate many festivals, but one of the biggest blowouts is the occasion of the Miao New Year, usually around December. The celebration features songs, dances, bullfights, and *lusheng* competitions, not to mention Miao women gorgeously bedecked in silver headdresses engaging in various courtship rituals. See chapter 12.

## 9 The Best Up-and-Coming Destinations

- **Yushu** (Qinghai): Khampa areas within the Tibet “Autonomous Regions” are closed to the individual traveler, but here these fiercely proud Tibetan warriors trade in a traditional market town beneath a stern gray-and-red monastery. See chapter 14.
- **Yanbian** (Jilin): A lush, achingly pretty hilly region perched on China's border with North Korea, parts of which have only recently been opened to tourism, Yanbian is home to the largest population of ethnic Koreans outside the peninsula itself.

Independent-minded travelers have the opportunity to explore one of the few truly bicultural societies in China. See chapter 5.

- **Pingyao** (Shanxi): Chinese tourists have discovered Pingyao, but the number of Western tourists is still relatively low at what is one of the best-preserved Ming and Qing towns in China. An intact Ming city wall surrounds clusters of elegant high-walled courtyard residences, some of which are also guesthouses. See chapter 6.
- **Bama** (Guangxi): Difficult to reach as yet, but this is what the countryside

around Guilin wants to be when it grows up. There are limited facilities, but caves and peaks that will amaze even the most experienced travelers. See chapter 12.

- **Yi Xian** (Anhui): Often visited en route to or from Huang Shan, this UNESCO World Heritage county is famous for its Ming and Qing dynasty memorial arches and residential houses. Structures with ornate brick, stone, and wood carvings are like a peek into an architectural past that is quickly being destroyed in China's booming cities.

## 10 The Best Local Accommodations

- **Dunhuang Shanzhuang** (Dunhuang): The finest hotel on the Silk Routes, with views of the Mingsha Shan Dunes, this imposing fortress is surrounded by stylishly renovated courtyard houses. See p. 300.
- **Lusong Yuan Binguan**: Of all Beijing's traditional courtyard-style hotels, this former imperial residence has the most character, recalling the opulence of China's "feudal" era, but with a more lived-in feel than you'll find elsewhere. See p. 97.
- **Longmen Guibin Lou** (Harbin): Built by the Russian-controlled Chinese Eastern Railroad in 1901, the Longmen has served as a hospital, the Russian embassy, and a cheap hostel for migrant workers. In the 1930s and 1940s, it was part of the illustrious Japanese-owned Yamato Hotel chain. The Chinese Railway Bureau renovated the building in 1996, preserving the original Russian woodwork and restoring much of its turn-of-the-20th-century atmosphere. Rooms are palatial and decorated with period furniture. See p. 206.
- **Seman Binguan** (Kashgar): Set on the grounds of the former Russian

consulate, this has merely two government-issued stars and poor service, but standard rooms and suites in the original and beautifully decorated consulate buildings, with their high ceilings and dramatic oil paintings, can be bargained down to low prices. This is the nearest you'll get to experiencing some "Great Game" ambience. See p. 325.

- **Deju Yuan & Tian Yuan Kui** (Pingyao): These are the top two courtyard guesthouses in a town full of ancient architecture. The Deju Yuan has rooms decorated with calligraphy and furnished with dark wooden Ming-style tables and chairs and traditional heated brick beds. The Tian Yuan Kui also offers occasional opera performances on hot summer nights when the guesthouse is full and the performers available. See p. 244.
- **Ye Baihe Binguan (Night Lily Guest House)** (Gulang Yu): One of the latest, and certainly one of the most successful conversions of early colonial architecture. A fascinating combination of Qing dynasty furniture and modern interior-design styles, although the

antique beds have been causing a few problems for very tall foreign visitors whom they were definitely not designed for in the first place. See p. 521.

- **The Peninsula** (Hong Kong): Built in 1928 and retaining the atmosphere of its colonial past, The Peninsula has long been the grand old hotel of Hong Kong. It boasts an ornate lobby popular for people-watching, some of Hong Kong's best restaurants, and gorgeous rooms with sweeping views of Victoria Harbour. See p. 562.
- **Yangshuo Shengdi (Mountain Retreat)** (Yangshuo): Situated in one of the area's most picturesque settings,

this small but luxurious hotel is a world away from the usual trials and tribulations of traveling in China. This is the kind of place where you will want to extend your vacation indefinitely. See p. 612.

- **The Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute** (Jingde Zhen): A restored porcelain workshop complete with ancient kilns and water hammers that now functions as an artists' retreat in a superb rural location. While much of China's historical architecture is being demolished wholesale, here is a place that reveres its past and deserves our support. See p. 528.

## 11 The Best Buys

- **Chen Lu** (Shanxi): Seventeen small factories turn out different styles of pottery, and their showrooms have starting prices so low you'll volunteer to pay more. You can also buy original works in the houses of individual artisans. See p. 273.
- **Ba Xian An** (Xi'an): There are fakes aplenty, as everywhere else, but this bustling antiques market, fed by continuous new discoveries in the surrounding plain, is too atmospheric to miss. See p. 267.
- **Jatson School** (Lhasa): High-quality Tibetan handicrafts, including traditional Tibetan clothing, paper, incense, mandala *thangkas*, yak-hide boots, ceramic dolls, door hangings, bags, and cowboy hats, are all made on-site and sold at very fair prices. Your money goes to support Tibetan poor, orphaned, and children with disabilities. See p. 787.
- **Fake Name-Brand Clothing and Accessories:** Adequate to near-perfect imitations of items by North Face, Louis Vuitton, Prada, and just about any other expensive label you can think of can be had for a song at

several markets in China, especially at Beijing's Silk Street and Hongqiao markets, Shanghai's Xiangyang Lu market, and Shenzhen's Luo Hu Commercial City (not quite as cheaply). See chapters 4, 9, and 10.

- **Factory 798** (Beijing): We were sure that an ad hoc gathering of designers, painters, and sculptors selling avant-garde art in a former military complex wasn't something the regime would tolerate for long. We were wrong. Market rents are now charged, so don't expect to pick up a bargain, but the Dashanzi art district makes for a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon of gallery- and cafe-hopping. See p. 122.
- **Khawachen Carpet and Wool Handicraft Co. Ltd** (Lhasa): This U.S.-Tibetan factory's carpets have rich but tasteful shades woven into delightful traditional patterns. Carpets can also be made to order. You'll pay much less here than in New York or even Beijing. See p. 788.
- **Qipao:** Tailors in Beijing and Shanghai will cut a custom-fit *qipao*, the tight-fitting traditional dress better known by its Cantonese name

*cheongsam*, sometimes for hundreds of dollars less than in Hong Kong and the West. A quality tailored dress, lined with silk and finished with handmade buttons, typically costs between \$100 and \$200. Slightly less fancy versions go for as little as \$50. See chapters 4 and 9.

- **Bamboo:** The ecologically minded will be impressed and amazed at the versatility of this wondrous plant. Apart from the usual carvings, look for bamboo fiber that has been made into everything from socks to bath towels and the delicious Anji Science Bamboo Beer.
- **Minority Fabrics and Costumes** (Yunnan and Guizhou): While all of

the popular tourist destinations have shops selling silver Miao headdresses, those will to venture out to the lands of the more obscure ethnic minorities will be justly rewarded. A traditional Bouyi jacket from a weekly market near Luoping now holds pride of place in my own girlfriends' wardrobe, while the World Vision charity in Yuanyang supports local embroidery cooperatives that produces a range of designs from a world almost forgotten in the new millennium.

**Note:** Pearls, antiques, jade, jewelry in general, and objets d'art are fakes or are not worth the asking price (usually both). Unless you are an expert or are happy to have a fake, do not buy these things.