

Exiting Xanadu

—On the Road To Daxu

Second of Two-Part Report

On the road to Daxu, the “Gate of Eternal Peace.”

Travelogue and photos
by Lowell Bennett



The Daxu waterfront.

Gone to G-Town— Though they share the same range of bosomy Chinese mountains, that’s about the end of any semblance in the look and feel of these neighboring destinations in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Yangshuo exudes a distinctly provincial character. The town is charming and village-like in parts. And Guilin is a modern city on the move. This is a place of frenetic energy, fanciful lighting, friendly inhabitants—and drinkable snakes. And then, at the end of the road, there is Daxu.



The Sun and Moon Pagodas—Guilin.

After a few days I departed Yangshuo in route to Guilin on one of the luxury buses that run about every 30 minutes. That term, “luxury bus,” turned out not to be ironic. Very clean, comfortable seats, TV, sound system and attractive in-route flight attendant. (Though, unless you are partial to amped-up Chinese music videos, I would recommend ear plugs or a personal headset attached to your own entertainment.) Just more than an hour later, we rolled into Guilin.

The night before in Yangshuo, while on the outdoor patio of the Morning Sun Hotel, I was visiting with the hotel’s proprietors, sampling a few of the locally-made beers, *Li Qi*, when I mentioned my intent to head up to Guilin the next day. The manager, going by the English name of “Mark,” immediately produced a PDA and a few minutes later he had booked me a room through a Guilin-based travel agent friend.

I appreciated his effort. In Guilin I was checked into the top floor of the Hotel Universal, overlooking the Liberation Bridge crossing the Li River. The travel agent,

Xiong Wei (“Nancy”), met me in the hotel lobby to settle up business, then volunteered to show me around a bit.

A midsized city, most of Guilin is new, beautified and alive with energy. Much of that latter element is generated by what seems to be a majority population of fashionable and educated young people. This is reflected in most of the town’s business districts. Commercial storefronts project: *modern, young, sophisticated and stylish*. And the entire city seems very much involved in collectively maintaining their civic and personal pride-of-appearance.

Part of this is evident in the urban center’s rather dramatic exterior lighting. Expectantly, the Sun and Moon pagodas reflect this aesthetic, glowing silver and copper across their shared lakefront realm. The riverfront, too, is fantastically lit up. The multi-hued effects stop far short of gaudy and it all works. Day and night, the downtown looks great.

Otherwise, in the course of a very short stroll, one can traverse immaculate riverfront promenades, broad urban commercial cor-

ridors, intimate neighborhood *hutongs* (alleys), and the grounds of a former Ming Dynasty palace, now the dignified domain of Guangxi Normal University.

Dare to Dine

During our walking tour, Nancy asked if I would like to join her and her office associates for dinner. Seemed like a good idea, and not much later the taxi dropped us at the Asia Pacific Restaurant, a place that specializes in fresh food—really fresh.

In the restaurant lobby, the site of caged pheasants and many varieties of live sea critters swimming in their tanks was tolerable—by one possessing perhaps overly prudish Western culinary sensibilities (though typically I don’t like to hear my meal protest in advance). On the other hand, as to the fate of the rather cute rodent-like creature... I did not want to think about it.

And then there are the snakes.

Snatched at the head and rudely removed from the company of his caged buddies—it’s a quick and permanent trip to dark city. A



A clean and quiet place by the Lijiang River—Daxu Cha Fang, a tea house and antique emporium.

snip of the shears and through the newly opened spout where formerly there was a head the blood is drained into a glass. Why a glass, I wondered.

We were escorted to a second-floor private room already occupied by Nancy's boss, Mr. Tan, and three of her staff. That included a very-cheerful 22-year-old German guy serving his off-shore internship with the Guilin-based travel agency. He was doing what interns are destined to do: working his tale off for experience and about zero cash. Meanwhile, he was getting in some no-expense travel to spots around southern China.

All at the table spoke good English, but



A serpentine supper—Guilin.

none knew the word for the bizarre thing that would soon show up in my pre-dinner cocktail. But let me back up.

Upon entering many restaurants in China, near the reception counter one may notice one or two large glass decanting containers. Inside is what residents call wine. But in the US the potency would qualify the liquid as booze—strong booze. Often within are soaking herbs and, in some cases, turtles, frogs and, yes, snakes. I stay away from the reptile-infused stuff, but I do like to have a single sample of the plant-flavored varieties—just to get a feel for things in varying restaurants in various regions.

That was the same fictional explanation I gave my host, Mr. Tan, when I asked about the availability of such a sippable blend in this place. A few minutes later, two highly disreputable-looking beverages arrived at the table. One, crimson in color, was a mix of the fortified wine and fresh blood—as drained from a just then dispatched viper. That was unappealing enough. But the other potion really got my attention. The still clear cocktail seemed to hold a fresh (of course) organ of some sort. This was when the translation

issue came up, with neither the German intern nor the English-speaking Chinese at the table being able to tell me what this thing was.

A digital translator was produced, Nancy punched it a few times and read: “Gel... gal... begins with something like gall...?”

“Gallbladder,” I completed.

“Oh, yeah, that’s it,” the German said.

Mr. Tan used a toothpick to pierce the departed snake’s recently occupied organ and soon the clear liquid in the glass was made yellow.

“Hmmm,” I said to myself as I eyeballed that two-ounce solution. “Now how am I going to get out of this?”

I didn’t.

The viper libations will be difficult for me to describe here—Both were milder tasting than, for instance, a shot of your basic tequila. I suppose if you imagine having the taste of a raw piece of beef and a double-strong sake simultaneously in your mouth—that might vaguely describe the blood-infused stuff. As for the gallbladder-spiked cocktail... well... if you’re ever in Guilin...

The snake himself? He was pretty tasty.

The hot-braised meat was mild, very lean, chewy but not tough. The skin, stripped, chopped and cooked dry, is eaten separate from the meat like chips. For those of you who have eaten that even more bizarre American snack, *pork rinds*—very similar, but my particular snake’s hide was lighter, crisper and milder.

Path to the Past

During that evening’s serpentine supper, Nancy went to her mobile phone to arrange a guide for the next day. In the morning I met Zuo Hong Ping (“Effie”) in the hotel lobby and we quickly boarded a taxi for which she competently negotiated.

In excellent and very pleasant-sounding English, the college educated Effie, of Zhuang descent, began to share some of her encyclopedic knowledge of culture, geography, population counts, ethnic compositions, economic data and the other sort of information which I typically neither retain nor write about.

I asked her one question: “Do any of the western-types you show around ever bug you?” Her answer was, as expected, diplomatic. And 25 minutes after departing Guilin’s very modern downtown we seemed to step into another dimension.

Full up with wealthy merchants, about 500 years ago Daxu was still a prosperous trading post on the Lijiang River. Not any more. Many of the structures in the village are indeed a half-millennium-old—and older—and they look it. The narrow main road remains as it was then, just decayed and now only traversed by manually-powered carts, the occasional motor scooter and an old single-cylinder three-wheel truck that shuttles for the linear town.

The young people have left for life in Guilin’s new apartment buildings, schools, Internet bars, nightclubs and gleaming shopping districts. But the grandparents remain, still doing what their own parents, grandparents and great grandparents did before them. Some trade in any way they can and some have turned to modest farming, though this was never a farming town.

One could become saddened by the stagnant flow of life in a decayed village, or one could take note of other aspects and choose to be fascinated.

A Wine in Time

For five generations of Han descent, the



Buckets of winemaking leftovers destined for the village hogs. (At a residual 3 percent alcohol content, the swine likely look forward to closing time.)

Lu family has operated their Daxu winery operation in the same location, producing grades of varying potency. River water is purified and the wine is fermented and cooked within the same vessels and in the same manner employed for generations. Some clients drop by to pick up their personal stock, and much is transported to customers and restaurants in Guilin.

The winery produces its booze in four grades of quality. The three backroom brew masters work nonstop, and Haiyan and her father, now heading up the family operation, keep busy at the retail counter.

There is a medieval quality to the manufacturing process—like perhaps that man-sized boiling vat within the dungeon-like floor could be applied to another use. But I tried a taste of the higher grade stuff and it wasn’t bad.

At the end of the day the strained refuse, by then a gruel-like mixture with about 3 percent alcohol content, is given over to the village pigs. I’m just guessing, but it could be that the hogs look forward to closing time.

Not far away is a very different commercial operation. The building occupied by Daxu Cha Fang, a tea house and antique emporium, is in good shape. The interior is solid and very clean. The backdoor opens to the sun, the fields and the river. The antique goods displayed are for sale and many are indeed beautiful.

The Buddha carving, molded from a single stump, is polished to a high luster. The starting price was about right, but I did not enter negotiations. The thing weighs a ton.

The proprietor, Han Chunzhi, of Manchu descent, was once a Guilin-based tour guide. She points to a photo on the wall. There she is, about 30 years younger, posing for the photograph, standing next to a seated Richard Nixon.

Chunzhi has retired. Now she peacefully minds this clean and quiet shop by the river in this place of the past, this place at the end of the road, Daxu. 🇨🇳



A Happy Buddha and “Effie,” a college educated and expert guide of Zhuang descent.