

Go on, gorge yourself: A trek through Tiger Leaping Gorge, SW China

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Tourism in China is booming. Flick through the pages of any Sunday supplement and the chances are you'll find an advert for an all-inclusive tour of the country. Take a closer look at the itinerary and it's even more likely that it includes a boat trip through the Three Gorges on the Yangtze River. The Chinese government's decision to dam the river and form the world's largest hydroelectric power station has been a dream for the tourism industry: better come quick, because the waters are rising fast.

Speak to someone who has actually been on a three gorges trip, however, and you might get a different opinion. Many report that the trip is overpriced and overrated: three days on a boat packed with tourists for a half-day glimpse of the actual gorges. In fact, ask any hardened China traveller and they'll tell you that the only Yangtze gorge worth its salt is a thousand miles upstream, deep in the south-west of China: Tiger Leaping Gorge.

Formed as the Yangtze surged between the mountains of Haba Shan and Yulong Xueshan, Tiger Leaping Gorge is very different from the sedate scenery of the Three Gorges. There are no pleasure boats here. 16 km long and a dizzy 3900 m from the waters of the Yangtze to the mountaintops, it is one of the deepest gorges in the world and perfect for an increasingly popular pursuit: gorge-trekking.

Base camp for my trek was the town of Qiaotou, a three hour bus ride away from the popular tourist stop Lijiang in the Yunnan region. The Chinese authorities - never ones to miss a trick where tourism is concerned - have officially renamed Qiaotou as Tiger Leaping Gorge Town but, as I found after some momentary confusion, it's best to stick to Qiaotou if you want a response from the bus driver.

My first stop in Qiaotou was the Gorged Tiger Café run by Margo, an uncompromising Australian who provided me with pre-trek sustenance, a map, a safe place to leave any excess baggage and most importantly, a weather forecast. My second stop was an obligatory one: the roadside ticket booth. As with any 'tourist attraction' in China, there's a price. The good news is that at 50 RMB (about £5) it shouldn't break the bank. And those on a really tight budget can always set off before dawn and sneak past the booth before it opens.

Theoretically there are two ways to trek the gorge, a high and a low trail, but since the authorities widened the low trail to take vehicles the high trail is the way to go. I found the path to be well worn, generally safe (though there is a risk of landslides after any period of rain) and well signposted. And, although it obviously requires some effort, it is suitable for most ages and physical conditions. You can complete it at your own pace – while most people take two days, some linger at various points and take four or five, and a small number don their running gear and try to finish it in a day.

The first section of the trek was a relatively gentle climb, but after a few hours the track started to ascend quite rapidly through what are popularly known as the 28 bends. This was the most arduous part of the trek, and I half-regretted having

confidently given the brush-off earlier to the locals who offer to carry tired trekkers up on horseback. Each of the lung-bursting hairpins was worth it, however, for the magnificent views of the snow-capped mountains opposite and the Yangtze rapids below.

Once the bends had been negotiated I reached the highest point of the trek. The gorge itself takes its name from a legendary tiger that once leapt from one side to the other. For a small fee, enterprising locals at the summit will take you down the side of the mountain to the rock from which the tiger reputedly leapt.

I passed various family-run guesthouses en route where you can grab a bed for the night or refuel with some home-cooking. Margo's map helpfully points out where they are and the distances between them, and I used this to plan my stops ahead. At around the halfway mark I retired for the night at the Tea Horse Guesthouse, where I secured a basic room for 30 RMB (about £3).

The second day was a slow descent through waterfalls towards Walnut Garden, where the high trail joins the low. For serious trekkers, or those with plenty of time, it's possible to continue onwards from here but for most this marks the end of the trek. There are several places to stay in Walnut Garden but the most popular is Sean's Guesthouse. Sean, a laidback Tibetan, claims to have been responsible for developing the high trail into the walkable path it is today. He also happens to be married to Margo - between them they have the burgeoning tourist market sewn up.

After a welcome shower I joined the rest of Sean's guests on his huge terrace to unwind with some cold beers and trade tales. I don't know whether it was the feeling of achievement or perhaps just the chance to rest those weary limbs, but for me this was the highlight of the trek - and perhaps the highlight of my entire trip to China.

Getting There

There are flights to Lijiang from all major Chinese cities, or alternatively it can be reached by long-distance bus from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province. There are several buses per day from Lijiang to Qiaotou.

Being There

To get an early start on the trek requires an overnight stay in Qiaotou, and I stayed in the Tiger Leaping Gorge hotel for 50 RMB (£5). There are several guesthouses along the trek route offering beds for 30-50 RMB (£3-5).

When to go

The gorge can be trekked at any time of year, although you'll need several layers in winter. Spring and autumn are the best times, when the temperatures and humidity are reasonable.