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SATURDAY, JUNE 25, 2005

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Ancient Chinese secret

Winding alleys, silk-clad shamans and crowing roosters — this is the romantic China of a bygone era

BY PETER NOWAK
SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN

LIJIANG, China

You really haven't lived until you've been Evil Eyed by a Chinese shaman.

At least, I think it was an Evil Eye. The old guy, with red and blue silk robes draped over him and a multi-coloured hat complete with red flags atop his head, seemed to stare a hole through me as I gawked at his temple. He sat there motionless atop his throne, with only his gaze following me as I strolled. If it wasn't the Evil Eye, it certainly was a Very Uncomfortable Eye.

One of his initiates, similarly colourful in a blue robe with a red headband, was in the midst of explaining their ancient religion to my girlfriend, but between the weird pictogram murals on the wall, the flags hanging from the ceiling, and the old guy's death stare, it was somewhat hard to concentrate on what was being said.

The initiate's broken English was quite good — a surprise here in Lijiang, somewhat off the beaten path of foreign tourists.

I strayed back to his lecture when I heard, "Bill Clinton visited this temple." Indeed he had, in 1998. The initiate directed our attention to a photo of the former U.S. president displayed proudly on the wall as he surveyed the same temple we were in. I couldn't help but wonder if Bubba had been the recipient of the same Evil Eye.

This was no ordinary Chinese temple. It's the centre of the Dongba Cultural Research Institute, which is protected on the UNESCO World Heritage list, as is all of Lijiang's old town. It's also a highly unusual tourist attraction.

Lijiang is home to the Naxi minority people (pronounced Naw-shee) of China's Yunnan province. Dongba is specifically the term for their shamans, but also loosely used to describe the religion as a whole — a mix of Tibetan Bon, Taoism and animism, complete with animal sacrifices and exorcisms. The culture is particularly distinct for using the only remaining pictogram-heiroglyphic language in the world, a practice that has almost become extinct over the past few centuries.

The Research Institute was formed in 1981, and the 30-or-so remaining shamans have been busy since translating the more than 20,000 rolls of ancient Naxi scriptures to preserve the language. The temple also doubles as a classroom, where young Naxi learn their culture's ancient heritage.

There aren't many Chinese visitors found here. Naxi are closely related to



PETER NOWAK PHOTOS/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Lijiang's old town at night (above). Restaurants and cafes line the narrow, cobblestone alleys. A Dongba priest (right) sits on his throne. Lijiang is home to the Naxi people, whose religion combines Tibetan Bon, Taoism and animism.

Tibetans, and like their kin, seem to be more welcoming to foreign tourists than to the Han Chinese who have for so long oppressed their culture. It's rare to find a museum in China where displays have English captions, much less English-speaking staff, but the Dongba centre has both.

Lijiang is thus a place of contradictions — it's a veritable hotspot for Chinese tourists who flock here for the architecture and, of course, the shopping. Foreigners, meanwhile, are drawn by the history and culture. China has in recent years geared up massively for increased tourism, but most of this investment has unfortunately gone toward its own domestic travellers. But Lijiang, with its outreach to foreigners, is luckily one of the few places in China that both kinds of tourists can enjoy.

The old town, known as Dayan, is a short walk from Black Dragon Pool

See **TIME WINDS** H8
Teaching in Hainan China H6



If you go ...

GETTING THERE: Air Canada flies regularly to Hong Kong, where connections to the Yunnan capital of Kunming can be made. Daily flights to Lijiang depart from Kunming. If you have the time, daily buses run from Kunming to Lijiang via Dali, but they take the better part of a day to make the trip.

ACCOMMODATION: Lijiang has a plethora of guest-house options, with many in Dayan competing with each other. If you visit outside of high season for Chinese tourists — February, or the first weeks of October or May — it's best to simply show up and shop around. Double rooms can be had for as little as \$10, depending on your haggling ability. If booking is essential, try to get a Mandarin-speaking travel agent to help. Some options include:

A Liang Guesthouse: A traditional Naxi courtyard house, with only a handful of rooms. Beware the rooster. Phone: 888-512-9923.

Inn of the First Bend: A relatively easy to find place, owing to its large sign. Staff speak some English. Phone: 888-518-1688.

Old Town Youth Hostel: Caters to backpackers, but that also means staff have some English ability. Phone: 888-518-8611.

EATING: Lijiang differs from much of China in that it offers a veritable cornucopia of cheap, delicious Western food. The problem is finding the restaurants — they don't really have addresses, but most are near Sifang square. Standouts include the Prague Café, the Well Bistro and the Blue Papaya. Pasta, pizza, burgers and the like can be had here, with meals generally costing under \$6. There are also dozens of restaurants serving local specialties, such as baba bread and various yak-oriented dishes.

INFORMATION: For more information on Lijiang, see www.visitmekong.com/yunnan.

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