

Time winds back 800 years in serene square

From HI

Park, which houses the Research Institute. Dayan is what many North Americans think China looks like, and is indeed what many people think China should look like: old stone-and-timber buildings, tiny twisting alleys, babbling creeks, cobblestone streets.

Lijiang's new city, which surrounds Dayan, is like any other Chinese metropolis — noisy, dull and grey. But upon entering the quaint square that marks the entrance to old town, time winds back more than 800 years. Concrete streets give way to a cobblestone square, where people take a break from their usual hustle and bustle. The sounds of cars — not allowed in Dayan — are drowned out by the sloshing of a giant wooden mill wheel, still very much in operation.

Winding away from the square is Dayan's core, the three-kilometre-long Xin Dajie street, which leads into another square, Sifang. Lining the street are craft shops, restaurants and guesthouses, all housed in ancient-looking brick buildings, with carved wooden roofs, windows and doorways. Emanating from this artery, randomly and in every direction, are cramped streets and alleyways, hiding dozens more stores and cafes. It's a veritable labyrinth, and the numerous streams — with their curved stone bridges — that criss-cross the alleys only add to the confusion.

One of the few badges I got in boy scouts was orienteering. I liked to think that with a map and



Naxi dancers are an attraction in a town that somewhat resembles a cultural amusement park.

a sense of where north was, I could find anything. So naturally, navigating to the A Liang Guesthouse shouldn't have been a problem.

But nothing can prepare one for the chaos of Dayan's maze, and after wandering down one frustrating dead-end alley after another with luggage in tow, I chucked my map into the stream and left to providence our accommodation plans for the night.

Perhaps the Dongba shaman was mystically guiding us from afar, as we somehow eventually found our guesthouse. It was a tiny, family run courtyard house referred to by our guidebook and

by our host in Dali, our previous stop in Yunnan. The house was traditional Naxi style — two storeys, with eight or so rooms surrounding a courtyard, where much of the family's daily business occurs.

On our arrival, the wife was washing linen while the husband was feeding the child — the Naxi are largely matriarchal, and the men often tend to the children. They greeted us warmly with big smiles — very different from big Chinese hotels, where foreigners can sometimes get the cold shoulder. We swapped a few words back and forth in English and Mandarin and were shown to

our room, a tiny chamber that barely fit the bed. It was Spartan but functional — not the biggest or most luxurious of places I'd stayed, but easily the coolest.

The biggest problem in these historic, family run affairs is the automatic alarm clock — in other words, the rooster just outside your door that goes off at about four in the morning. Chinese tourists head to the luxury hotels in Lijiang's new town for this very reason, so if you want the full cultural experience, be prepared to get up early. After our first night, the family offered to make us dinner — I prayed it would be chicken, but alas, no



such luck.

Lijiang was the capital of the Naxi kingdom, so the numerous shops in town specialize in Naxi arts and crafts, with goods ranging from wooden animal carvings to copper bells. There are still around 17,000 Naxi people living in the city, although the genuine article can be difficult to make out. Realizing Lijiang's drawing power as a tourist attraction, the Chinese government has turned the town into somewhat of a cultural amusement park by offering cash incentives to locals who dress in traditional Naxi costume.

As a result, there are women who walk the alleys adorned in ridiculously large and luminous silver headdresses, looking to pose for photographs with tourists. Men sporting large, furry, Cossack-like hats also sell pony rides to children. I spotted one of these fellows on a break, puffing on a cigarette and talking

on his cell phone. It was pretty obvious he wasn't a real Naxi — a fact confirmed when he doffed his furry hat to reveal a New York Yankees baseball cap underneath.

But real Naxi aren't too hard to find. The throngs of Chinese tourists stick to the shops around Xin Dajie street and Sifang square, which leaves virtually the entire southern part of the town deserted. Here you can enjoy a peaceful stroll and admire the architecture, or sit by a bubbling stream and relax. Real Naxi, in their monochrome blue outfits, can be found here doing exactly the same. It's an easy town to while away a few days in.

No visit to Lijiang is complete without a hike up Lion Hill, which is crowned by Wangu Lou, a 22-metre wooden pagoda. The view of Dayan's jumbled rooftops from atop the hill or pagoda is amazing, an essential top-down look at the maze you've just navigated. If anything, the view inspires a feeling of accomplishment. It's even nicer at night-time, when the town is magically lit up with lanterns and candles floating along the streams.

Much of Lijiang was destroyed in 1996 by an earthquake, but rather than using the disaster as an excuse to modernize and build shopping malls and high-rises — as is now happening everywhere in China — the government chose to faithfully restore the old town. It's good to see that in a country that is moving forward so rapidly, there's still a place for the past.

Peter Nowak is a Canadian writer based in New Zealand

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