



travel

with Stephen McCarty

High society

The mainland's relentless pursuit of the capitalist dollar has had little effect on the simple way of life found among the rice terraces of the Longji Hills, discovers Peter Nowak.

The cries of children, screaming as if being punished by their parents for misbehaviour, break the village's serenity. I pry myself away from the view of the surrounding hills and investigate their shrieks, running to see what horror is unfolding on the other side of the rustic cabin.

When I round the corner it becomes obvious nothing dire is taking place. A group of youngsters is engaged in that time-honoured and universal boys' game: pile on. For the uninitiated, the rules are simple: pick one boy and, as the name says, pile on. It's a lot of fun for those on top and slightly less so for the poor soul on the bottom, but the turnaround is quick and everybody ends up losing at some point.

Five boys, aged about 10, are jockeying for better positions atop another youngster, who is yelping and laughing at the same time. Pile on truly is a sado-masochistic game. It's also a simple form of entertainment in a place where life is simple – something that is rapidly disappearing in China. As the country barrels faster and further into brazen capitalism and its people become more materialistic, the simple life is becoming undesirable.

That doesn't appear to be the case in the hamlet of

Pingan, where subsistence rice farming – contemptible to the nouveaux riches – is a traditional way of life. The little village, which comprises no more than 20 stone and wood huts, is one of many that rise up the Longji Hills, 100km north of Guilin, in southeastern Guangxi province. The hills – whose name translates as “dragon's spine” – are home to thousands of rice terraces stacked like giant shelves on the mountainsides. From a distance, they look like stepped Mayan pyramids, impressive in their sheer scale. Upon closer inspection, they are awe-inspiring: here is a man-made, yet organic, landscape on life-giving farmland that stands as testament to man's ingenuity and his ability to bend nature yet exist harmoniously with it.

The best way to reach the terraces is to sign up for a tour in Yangshuo. Although Guilin is closer, the city's travel agents cater mostly to domestic tourists who take cruises along the Li River to see the area's limestone karsts. Yangshuo, 70km south of Guilin, is peppered with travel agents offering all sorts of interesting day trips, including cave-exploration and rock-climbing expeditions.

I sign up for a tour of the terraces at the Seventh Heaven Cafe and Hostel, on Yangshuo's main strip, West Street. The cafe's affable owner, William Lu, is extra-

ordinarily helpful and hopeful: “If you're lucky, you'll get some sunshine. Terrific views!” he says. Our group meets in front of the cafe the following day at dawn. After picking up fellow travellers from some of the other hostels around town, our minibus sets off.

There's no such thing as a short road trip in China and most of the four-hour drive to the village is an interminable slog through a grey, miserable morning. It looks as though Lu's optimism is misplaced. As we near Longsheng, however, things become interesting. Our minibus slowly hauls its way up a winding mountain road and into the rain clouds. We are gradually enveloped in fog and mist, driving blind, and I start to fear we will soon become more statistics in China's staggering road-death toll. We catch glimpses of the fabled rice terraces – they blanket an area measuring 66 sq km – through gaps in the clouds and I can't help thinking it would be ironic if they were the last things we saw before dying.

But the tense moments atop the mountain soon give way to wonder on the way down. The clouds clear and we are finally on the Dragon's Spine, the astonishing stepped terraces stretching into the distance. A final bumpy ride along a wooded canyon and we arrive at the