

LONGING FOR LONGJI

FEBRUARY 23, 2007

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

The remote mountains to the north of Guilin are home to a collection of villages known as The Rice Terraces. The Chinese name for our destination is Longji, which literally means 'Dragon's Back'. Narrow gardens of rice and water descend the steep hills and catch the late afternoon light, like the shining ridges of a mystical beast. Twice a year I visit Longji with a photography tour, sharing my appreciation of these mountains with a new group of travellers and their cameras.

Longji marks the half-way point of our photographic journey across China. We have already visited the Terracotta Warriors in Xi'an, photographed the Great Wall at sunset and explored the Hutongs and Palaces of Beijing.

Few people have heard of this region before they visit, but the combination of friendly faces and remote isolation easily makes the Rice Terrace the highlight of the tour.

Arriving at Longji by private bus we not only leave behind the comforts of modernity, but we have to leave the bus behind as well. This is where the road ends and the Rice Terraces begin.

This is a photo tour not an adventure hike, so we have porters to carry our luggage up the trail for us. A squabble of old women have met us at the bus and begin bickering for our business. Regardless of shape or size, the bags are strapped into rattan baskets and carried up the trail to our guest-house.

Almost everyone feels guilty about hiring porters, at first, but even the strongest of our group proves no match for the lean and fit local women.

Ping-An is our home for the night, a quaint village of unique ethnic origins and peculiar architecture. Homes here are broad and lofty timber masterpieces, built for large extended families and made entirely without nails. Carpentry skills alone are employed to make them sturdy.

Nestled into the valley between two hills, the village is embraced by narrow terraced-fields and cold mountain streams. This is home to the Zhuong people.

Our host for the night is Mr Li. He remembers me from the last visit and immediately offers me a cup of rice-wine. I have to be watchful of his generosity – the cup may be very small but it has a way of being refilled without my knowing. I once asked Mr Li how his rice-wine is made, to which he replied, "I don't know about these things, my wife Qin takes care of everything."

Mr Li is not wrong. Qin was there to arrange our porters when the bus arrived, she was there to check us into our rooms, and she is with us before dinner to oversee the cooking. Should enough guests stay in the village to warrant a cultural show, Qin will be there too.

The next morning our group heads off in different directions to photograph the terraces.

Some travel across to the next village and come back with stories of their encounters with donkeys and peacocks, while others stay closer to the guest house and shoot the details of rice-paddies, chillies and domesticated ducks as they forage in the village.

Women from a neighbouring town have spotted our group and within minutes are showing us silver jewellery and hand-knitted fabrics.

These ladies are from a different ethnic minority, the Yao, and in contrast to the Zhuong people are persistent in the pursuit of tourist

dollars. Yao women are a striking sight with their vivid pink garments and long-black hair. To their credit, the hand-crafted items on sale are of excellent quality.

With every purchase an obligatory photo session takes place to preserve the moment.

Zhuong people are very different to the Yao, in both appearance and character. Without regard for money the Zhuong of Ping-An are exceptionally friendly to photographers. The joy of their kind faces and welcoming smiles is nothing short of a gift.

Travellers from a previous journey have sent us copies of their photos, and we take delight in returning these images to the locals. Travellers all over the world get hassled for currency when taking photos, but in Longji we can practice less economic forms of respect and gratitude.

The excitement of matching a person to a print is something I never grow tired of, and often yields memorable photo opportunities, which in turn will be shared on my next visit.

My fellow travellers are sometimes surprised that portraits are such a major part of a travel photographer's job. The faces and actions of local people are invariably the greatest keep-sakes of our journey, and in taking those photos you have to get up-close and personal with the locals.

It's a simple equation; the better your understanding of the subject, the more your photographs will reveal. In this manner the camera plays a unique role by bringing us deeper into the culture.

Lunch is provided on the guest house balcony by Mr Li. With just a few more hours left to enjoy Ping-An our group has struck a reflective note; the peaceful surrounds of a timber village has helped still our minds and given us some inspiration for the camera.

Only myself and the tour leader know what surprises lay ahead for the group. The beauty of Guilin's limestone peaks, lazy bike rides through farming communities and the stunning contrast of culture when we arrive in Shanghai. Even there we have our little secrets – historical water towns, delicious dumpling stalls and luxurious cocktail bars.

Qin arrives with a handful of eager old ladies, ready to porter our luggage back down the hill. We snap a few last shots before catching our bus and heading back to the real world, and one more week of photographic adventure.

