

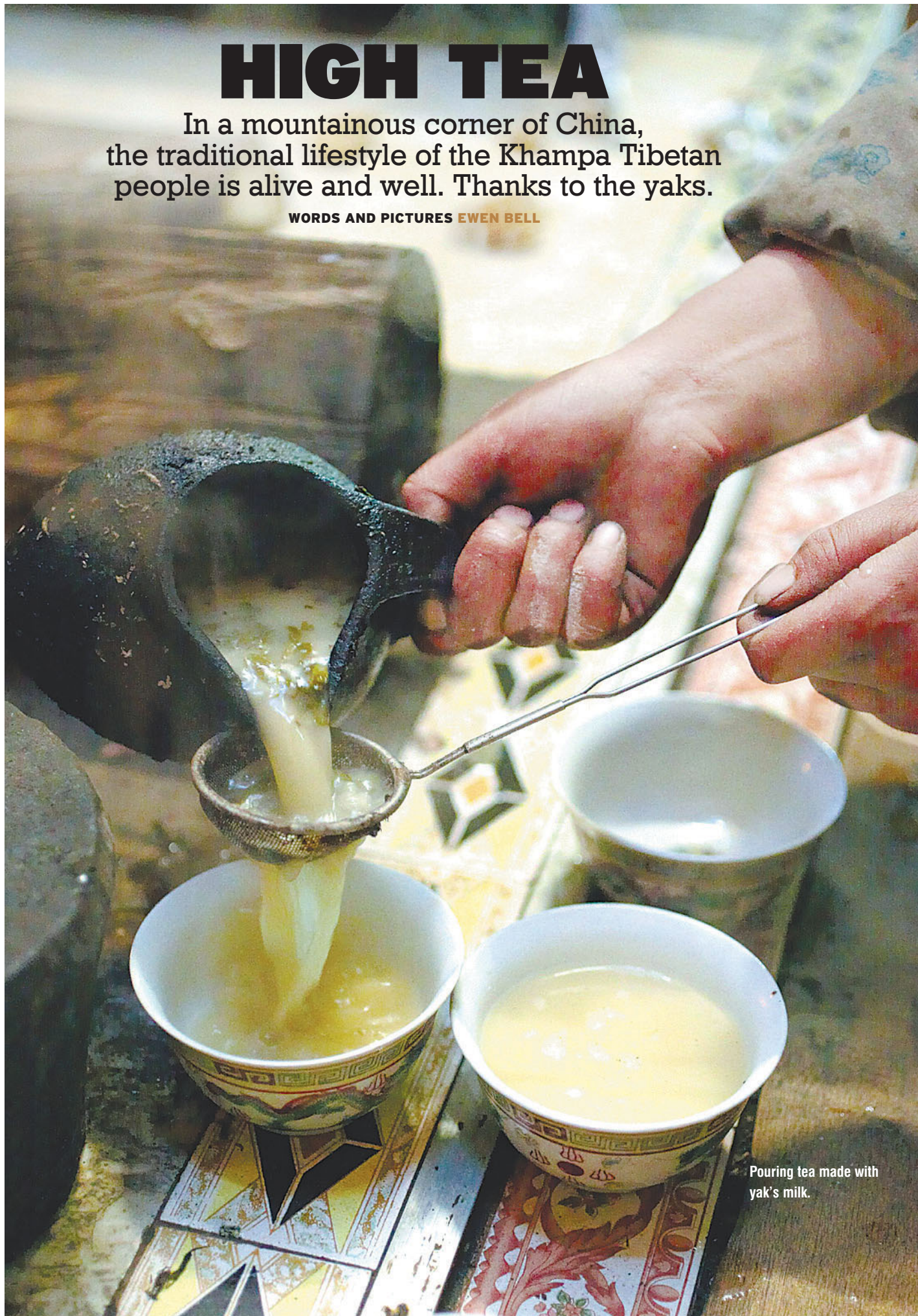
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HIGH TEA

In a mountainous corner of China, the traditional lifestyle of the Khampa Tibetan people is alive and well. Thanks to the yaks.

WORDS AND PICTURES EWEN BELL



Pouring tea made with yak's milk.



WITH AN EAGER smile the lady of the house hands me a cup of yak butter tea, so I accept politely and try to conceal my trepidation. Since arriving in the far north of China's Yunnan province, I have photographed yaks, eaten them in a hot-pot and been chased down a mountain by a big, angry bull. Now it is time to drink their butter.

I am grateful to have something warm in my hands and will rarely say no to a cup of tea. After the first sip, however, I decide that one cup is more than enough. The Tibetan habit of blending perfectly good tea with large chunks of yak butter is an acquired taste. I am told the fatty blend helps keep their skin moist and buffers their bodies from the cold. But the flavour is potent, salty and overwhelming. I could imagine the yak fur tasting pretty much the same.

I am in Ringha, a small village about an hour from Zhongdian. I'm taking a guided trek through the valley to get a first-hand view of Tibetan farming families. The altitude here is above 3400m and although it may be spring in Ringha the air is very cold and the oxygen very thin. I've spent the last two hours walking at a gentle pace and with each incline of the trail I have to catch my breath.

The farmhouse we are visiting is built from timber and straw, rendered with mud and ornately decorated with carvings and colourful murals. This traditional style is a strange combination of solid materials, lavish detail and dramatic scale. The ceilings are exceptionally tall, held up by massive timber beams. Above the cast-iron stove a wide gap in the roof funnels away

sa^{weekend}



The centre of Zhongdian.



Above left: Prayer flags outside the monastery at Ringha; candles in the prayer hall; and a local outside the Banyan Tree hotel.



FAST FACTS

GETTING THERE

Thai Airways flies twice daily from Melbourne to Bangkok with four connecting flights a week to Kunming. Low-season fares start from \$1335 including taxes. thaiairways.com.au. Domestic flights from Kunming into Lijiang and out of Zhongdian airport (Diqing) are operated daily by China Eastern Airlines from \$150 per sector. See your travel agent.

THE PACKAGE

The Spirit of the Yunnan package combines Banyan Tree Lijiang and Ringha five-star accommodation. For \$2700 a couple you get a guided tour of Lijiang's old town, a private car between properties with a stop at Tiger Leaping Gorge plus a trek through the valley of Ringha. banyantree.com or ph 1800 050 019.

wood smoke, but the room remains heavy with the smell of an open fire.

I enjoy the lingering scent of wood smoke more than the tea.

For the people of Ringha the yaks provide a better income than do tourists. If it weren't for the Banyan Tree hotel hidden at the edge of town there wouldn't be tourists here at all; it would be an untouched rural setting where Tibetan farming continues today as it has done for thousands of years.

I have mixed feelings about tourism developments and their impact on small communities, but this one strikes a good balance by virtue of its modest scale in relation to the surrounding valley. The pure sense of remoteness here is what makes it special; a valley on the road to nowhere and a town that looks down across the river delta. Guests can explore the yak meadows during the day and retreat to their Tibetan-style accommodation at night. The Banyan Tree Ringha is not an ostentatious sight as the villas and services have been built in the same style as nearby farmhouses. Inside they are far more comfortable and luxurious than the genuine article, and yak-based cuisine is optional rather than mandatory.

Ringha is a destination for travellers who want to immerse themselves in a peaceful landscape and extend themselves towards personal insights of the Tibetan people.

Zhongdian's major ethnic group is the Khampa Tibetans. They have been dominated by the Mongols and Chinese for centuries, but still retain their traditional ways and religion that make them distinct from Amdo Tibetans to the north and U-Tsang Tibetans to the west. The design of their houses, the colour of their clothing and their peculiarities in practising Buddhism all add distinction to their culture. The village takes the name Ringha from a modest monastery

that overlooks their valley. Directly translated from Tibetan, the name means "The Five Sacred".

Having sampled the yak butter tea and ground barley flour I continue my trek towards the monastery. The walk so far is less than 10km but my body is finding it hard at this altitude. I spent two days in Lijiang before ascending to Zhongdian, at an elevation of 2600m which helped me adjust a little but not completely. My guide has brought a horse for such occasions and I reluctantly hop aboard with my pride a little dented. But as our trail winds up the hill my reticence gives way to gratitude. No longer having to stop to catch my breath I can enjoy the serenity. The scenic vista is delicately edged with stands of thin pine trees and patches of snow that refuse to melt. My horse is wearing a large bell around his neck, which clangs an off-note with every step. The ringing echoes far ahead, gently alerting the spirits of the land to our arrival.

We pass a few villagers starting work on new houses or heading into the fields to tend stock and crops. The short growing season provides barley for fodder and flour, the yaks provide meat and milk and the seasonal snow melt sends pristine water down the valleys. In early spring the earth is still white with snow, but by the end of the season the landscape will be a carpet of green and garnished with wild flowers. It's yak heaven.

On arrival at the monastery my horse has to stay outside and we walk up the hill. Rocks are carved with prayers and piled around the entrance, pointing the way to a path leading into the forest. Near the top of the hill is a simple, white-washed wall and a timber door. Inside, the monastery is not much to

look at, a very humble abode for two or three monks in residence and a prayer hall filled with images of Buddha and favoured monks. Yet this is one of the oldest temples in Yunnan. Wax candles on the wall illuminate colourful flags, textiles and gilded offerings inside the temple. White and yellow silk scarves are tied around pillars and doors as an offering to the greater wisdom of the monks.

Outside the temple is a forest of prayer flags, draped from tree to tree in every direction. Visitors pay their respects, then pay a few coins extra to buy their own string of prayers. They hang in the breeze so that the parables and incantations written on the cloth are carried by the wind. In this manner the words are given breath and life. Beneath the flags I have to watch my step for pigs and dogs. Monasteries like Ringha are sanctuaries for animals whose life has been spared, their owners having brought them to the temple to be cared for by monks. Their animals are given grace in recognition of all the others that have necessarily died to provide a family with nourishment.

Tibetan Buddhism says that all living things have a soul. This goes for yaks as well. Yaks might not be as helpful as a Tibetan horse or as friendly as a puppy, but they are invaluable in helping the people of Ringha survive the winters. Each summer the yaks make merry of the high meadow grasses and fatten their udders with milk. Barley and butter are stored by families to ensure food for the leaner months.

Just be warned that the local brew made with yak butter, and served with ground barley flour, is not exactly everyone's cup of tea.

The author travelled courtesy of Banyan Tree and Small Luxury Hotels



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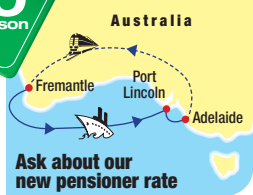
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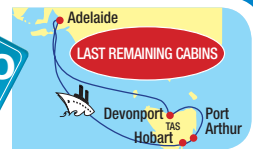
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