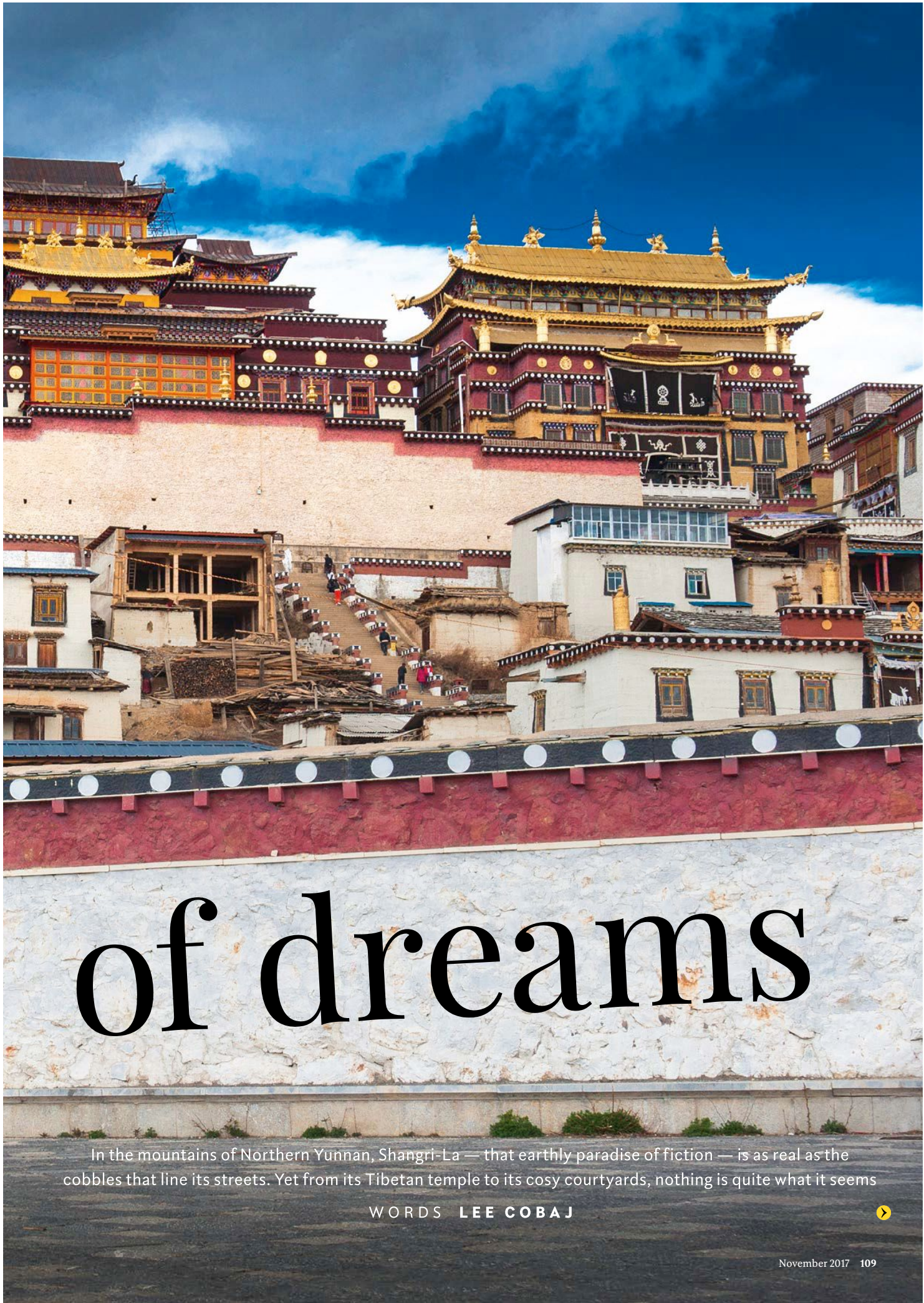


High on a mountain

IMAGE: GETTY



of dreams

In the mountains of Northern Yunnan, Shangri-La — that earthly paradise of fiction — is as real as the cobbles that line its streets. Yet from its Tibetan temple to its cosy courtyards, nothing is quite what it seems

WORDS LEE COBAJ





I'm high. So very high.

Some 14,205ft to be precise. If I was on board an aircraft and it decompressed, the oxygen masks would have dropped down by now. It seems impossible that anything should grow in this cold, airless place but I'm sitting on a magic carpet of bracken laced with tiny blue Himalayan poppies, wild purple pansies and hot-pink oleander flowers. At my back there's a lone *doubeng*, a cairn of loose stones, each of which has been deposited by a Buddhist pilgrim in thanks for their blessings. Vaporous clouds skim across snow-dappled mountaintops, dizzying valleys and azure skies as I breathe in the cool, sharp air and close my eyes.

I begin to meditate, and I'm unsure whether it's the lack of oxygen or Shika Mountain's supposed holy properties, but with the sun warming one half of my body and shadow chilling the other, my mind softens to mist almost immediately. Hypnotised by the gentle shush, shush, shush of the wind, akin to the sound of a distant river, I quickly drift off to a place of peace, equanimity, contentment. After two years of listening to mind-training podcasts, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm meant to be. Except I'm not. When I open my eyes some 15-minutes later, there's a perplexed looking security guard staring down at me.

Perched on the Tibetan Plateau, Shika Snow Mountain lies just outside the ancient city of Shangri-La in the far north of Yunnan, China. For now, most arrivals come from China, but their numbers are relatively low. Western travellers are rarer still. I give the security guard a nod and walk slowly, breathlessly — the altitude is taking its toll — back up to the summit, ascending through a tunnel of brass bells and red, yellow and blue prayer flags ringing and fluttering in the wind.

From this vantage point I can see the squat rooftops of Shangri-La, more than four miles away, haloed by peaks and valleys in summer shades of coral, copper and pink. Ringed by snow-capped mountains echoing the form of an eight-petal lotus flower, it perfectly fits the Buddhist vision of Shambhala as a mythical kingdom. But Shangri-La isn't what it seems. It's a projection, a receptacle of dreams.

During the Song and Tang Dynasties (1279-960BC and 907-618BC respectively), it was a crucial stop on the ancient Tea Horse Road, a grinding 2,500-mile trade route stretching from Sichuan to Lhasa, India and Nepal. In the 13th-century, Kublai Khan, grandson of Ghenghis, raided it for warhorses before burning it to the ground on his way to conquer China. A few hundred years later, the English

PREVIOUS PAGES: Gandeng

Sumtseling Monastery

FROM TOP: View from the summit of Shika Mountain; jewellery seller on the streets of Shangri-La

novelist James Hilton is believed to have commandeered these misty mountains as the utopian *mise en scène* for his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*.

More recently (and less romantically), the area was known as Zhongdian, a far-flung corner of China producing yak meat, mushrooms and little else. Then, in 2001, a canny marketer came along and graced it with its current moniker. To its majority ethnic Tibetan people, though, Shangri-La has been — and always will be — Gyalthang, otherwise known as Victory Plains, a key part of Greater Tibet.

Despite being conquered and annexed by the Red Army in 1950, its brightly-costumed population still refer to themselves as Tibetan rather than Chinese, with many of their young boys and girls making clandestine journeys across the Himalayas to study at one of the 71 Tibetan schools scattered across India.

Set up more than 50 years ago by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the Dalai Lama to preserve the culture of Tibetan refugees, the schools offer a free education, room and board to all who land at their doors. Unlike the majority of Tibetans living in the Tibetan Special Autonomous Region, who are denied passports by the Chinese government, those in Shangri-La are allowed to travel fairly freely. As long as they don't apply directly for an Indian visa — an obvious statement of intent — the authorities turn a blind eye to their comings and goings.

Yangse, who works at a foot massage parlour in the old town, was educated in India for 10 years. "I was nine when I went to the Tibetan school in Himachal Pradesh," she tells me as she tends to my feet with the touch of an eagle throttling its prey. "My sister went with me. We had all classes in the Tibetan language, ate Tibetan food, wore Tibetan clothes. We also learned English to improve our career choices and later, I studied commerce."

When I ask if she ever met the Dalai Lama, she beams. "Yes, of course, His Holiness would pray with us at least twice a year." Did she ever want to stay in India? "No. I was very happy to go but always wanted to finish my studies and come home to my family, and there's more opportunity here." Nowadays, almost every Tibetan school student returns home, and all by the same convoluted means.

While the journey isn't quite so tricky for tourists, reaching Shangri-La does still require some effort, with a visa application beforehand, at least three flights from the UK, and then limited accommodation options when you do land. But there's a new way of seeing this magical and mysterious place. Blueflower Travel, based out of Hong Kong, has teamed up with Farm Liotard, a Tibetan homestay run by French-British couple Constantine and Phoebe Slizewicz who

operate horse caravan tours with blinged-up bell tents, through the untouched wilds of the Aboudji mountains.

I've bought and borrowed the kit: pricey trekking shoes, super comfy socks, Glasgow Rangers waterproofs and a scarf borrowed from my brother. And I've trained beforehand, spending weeks marching up and down the hills of Hong Kong, where I live. But what I hadn't accounted for was the altitude sickness. It's advisable to allow at least a couple of days to acclimatise, but it turns out I need more. "Even Olympic athletes can come down with mountain sickness," my guide, Tashi, warns. I'm advised to go no higher than 3,300 metres above sea level.

So instead I spend the next few nights at the Banyan Tree Hotel, housed in a series of beautiful old converted farmhouses in the peaceful village of Ringa. From my balcony I survey the surrounding landscape: gentle hills, flowery meadows, herds of yaks plucking lazily at the grass. Rabbits bounce through the brush, piglets snuffle in the mud and women in embroidered dresses, wellington boots and shocking pink hats plod across soggy fields carrying huge bundles of firewood. Cutting through the centre of this bucolic scene is the Shudu River, a wide, gurgling waterway that leads into the Yangtze before eventually flowing all the way to the East China Sea a few miles outside of Shanghai.



ABOVE: Sheep farm in a hilltop village outside Shangri-La town

OPPOSITE: Tibetan in front elaborately decorated purple doors





IMAGES: SASKIA WESSELING





IMAGES: SASKIA WESSELING

LEFT: Ceremony at the colourful Gandeng Sumtseling Monastery
ABOVE: Monks playing the Tibetan horn



Burial rites

To ease me in, Tashi suggests a gentle trek to Dabao Temple, which resides halfway up the forested hills behind us. As we set out, the sky whitens and appears to lower, pushing against the hilltops. Then in a blink, blue skies and biblical shards of sunshine. The psychedelic weather continues as we pass through the village, where homes are hidden behind high stone walls and guarded by Tibetan mastiffs the size of ponies. Bored-looking yaks wander by, their thick tresses giving me serious winter coat envy, and a horned goat gives us the evil eye. Sidestepping him we wind upwards, through fir trees webbed with thousands of prayers flags until finally we're facing the temple's 800-year old entrance. It's a humble affair, a small stone block in a shaded glade. Incense pours from its dark interior, where a lone monk is deep in prayer. Not wanting to disturb him, we rest briefly in the grounds before heading back downhill to the riverbank.

"They perform water burials in that river," explains Tashi, before taking me through the somewhat startling local funeral rites. When someone in the village dies (and their body has been deemed free from disease), they're laid out in a wooden box at home for five days while family and loved ones come to pay their respects. So far, so Catholic. On the fifth day, however, 12 monks appear, offering prayers while two special lamas (spiritual leaders) carry the body down to the riverside. There, they wash the deceased one last time, before unveiling

a collection of special knives and cutting the corpse into 108 parts.

Moving up the river, they then throw the dismembered parts into the water for the fish to feed on. "This is why we don't eat fish from the river," Tashi says. I see where he's coming from — no one wants to inadvertently end up eating a relative. But Tashi's meaning is deeper than that.

"All of nature has honour. Everything has the right to live. We cannot take more from nature than we need. For us, it's better to take one life than many. One yak — one life — could feed a large family for over a month, but you would have to kill many fish, and take many lives, to feed that same family. We must give back too. With the water burial we do that, everything goes back to nature, feeding the fish, insects, vultures, the sky and the land."

This practice may appear somewhat alarming to outsiders, but for the Tibetans it's a response perfectly in line with their nature-loving ways. Before the arrival of Buddhism, the people here were animist, believing that everything in creation — plants, trees, rocks, mountains, water, the sky and even thunder — is alive with demons and spirits. As a concept it's not that far removed from the Buddhist belief in the sanctity of life, and so over time the two religions fused, with many animist practices remaining an integral part of Tibetan Buddhism today.

The next morning, I awaken to the sound of birds tweeting and yak bells clanking, and am met by another guide, also called Tashi. "It means good luck," he tells me in pitch-perfect English. "It's a popular name in these parts."

The weather is distinctly Scotland-in-October as we set out for Shangri-La's old town, passing by cloud-licked stupas, misty prairies and shaggy grasslands. The traditional Tibetan houses that punctuate the landscape are built like trapezium-shaped fortresses, apparently to mimic the shape of the mountains, with tiny barred windows and thick adobe walls. Behind these war-worthy barriers, the layout is nearly

BELOW: Tunnel of brass bells and prayer flags on the way up to the summit of Shika Mountain

FOLLOWING PAGE:
Rooster outside
Dabao Temple

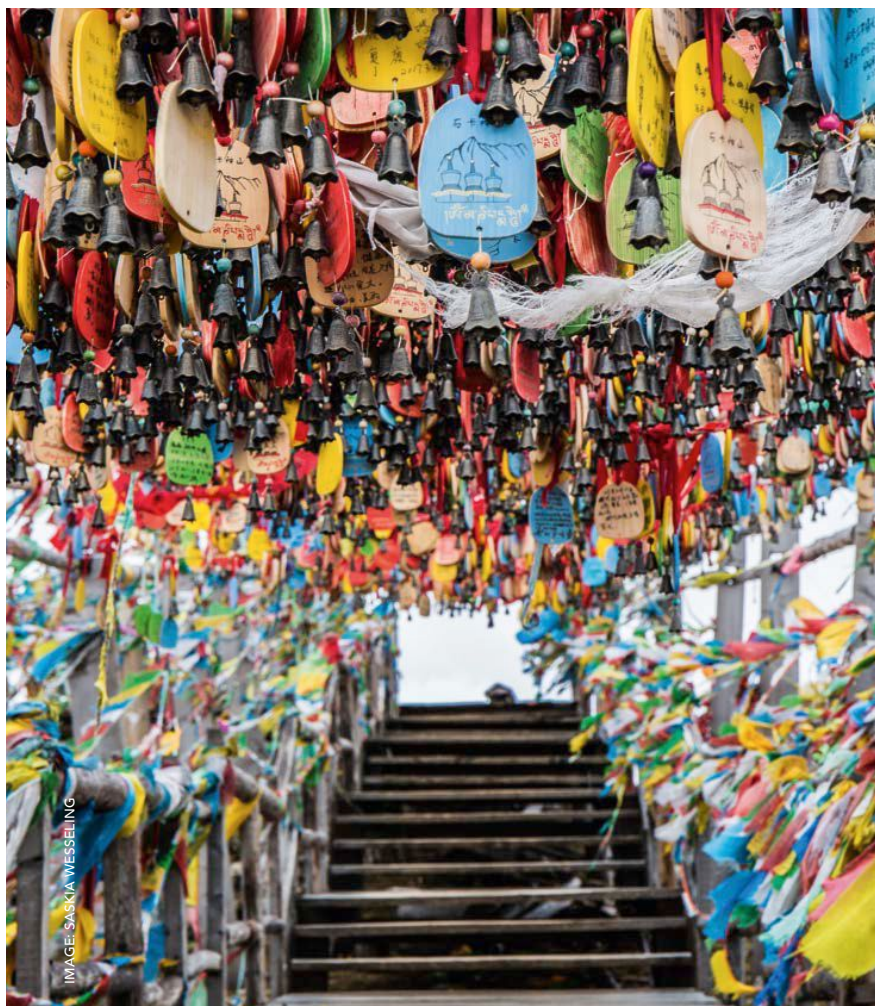


IMAGE: SASKIA WESSELING

always the same: a central courtyard cornered by two great double-decker villas, hewn from spruce and intricately carved and painted in cartoonish shades of yellow, pink, turquoise and green.

Further on, the scenery becomes less evocative, with dozens of new roads being built and construction on every corner of the small but rapidly expanding new town. “President Xi is coming to visit Shangri-La in September,” Tashi tells me. “This will help to bring more tourists.” I imagine if I returned to this place five years from now, I would hardly be able to recognise it.

As it turns out, the old town has already been transformed in recent years. In 2014, nearly 80% of its millennia-old buildings were destroyed when someone’s electric heater malfunctioned, causing an inferno that ripped through its tightly packed streets for 10 hours. What replaced the ancient settlement is a charming, if Disney-fied, version of the town, with winding cobbled streets, cosy courtyards and little wooden shop-houses selling decorative swords, silver trinkets, local delicacies — barbecued meat, yak’s curd cheese, barley wine — and some questionable-looking animal skins.

From here, we continue to the fairytale Gandeng Sumtseling Monastery, a structure so grand I’ve already spotted its towering white walls and sail-like golden rooftops from the other side of the city. Built by the fifth Dalai Lama in 1674, and modelled on Potala Palace in Tibet, of the hundreds of Buddhist monasteries scattered across the Himalayas, this was once among the most revered. But it too turns out to be something of an illusion. Just a few decades back, the monastery was raided and left in ruins, its clergy stripped of their robes and condemned to prison or hard labour, victims of the Cultural Revolution. And while policies have long since softened and believers may once again worship here, religion is still strictly controlled by the government. There are no pictures of the Dalai Lama anywhere.

On the surface, this knowledge does little to dampen the beauty and mystique of the monastery. Passing through its imposing entrance gate feels like entering a kaleidoscope, every inch adorned with rainbow-bright patterns, swirling motifs and cheerful murals of Lord Buddha in his many incarnations: Buddha as a farmer, Buddha as a scholar, boy

Buddha, dragon Buddha, Buddha as a businessman showered in gold and jewels. From here, wide stone stairs lead to a dozen different temples, each more vibrant than the last.

“We (Tibetans) are crazy about colour,” says Tashi. “Colour can be used to represent many different things: nature, emotions, status and even other dimensions. You can see we use red and yellow a lot on the outside of our buildings. This is to remind us of liberty — red and yellow are the colours of leaves when they fall from the trees in autumn, when they break free. These colours remind us that we should also try to break free of our earthly needs.”

I muse on this idea as I continue through the grounds, listening to the sounds of some 700 monks at study and prayer, their murmurings and baritone chants drifting out from behind picturesque wooden doorways. Unexpectedly I think of my mother, who died less than a year ago, and how I wish she were here with me. I reflect on the uncertainty of life and how, over the last week, the mountains, the weather, the people, the very walls of this monastery have spoken of impermanence, as if trying to show me the importance of living in the moment.

And I wonder if perhaps this is exactly where I’m meant to be. And if perhaps Shangri-La is exactly what it seems. □



ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Cathay Pacific flies from London and Manchester to Kunming via Hong Kong. From here, China Eastern Airways operates four flights a day to Deqen Shangri-La airport. cathaypacific.com ceair.com

AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 2h.

With only a handful of bus routes, a hire car’s the best way to get around.

When to go

Almost everything’s closed throughout winter, and with monsoon rains during July and August, it’s best to avoid these times of year. Go in April, May or June to view the region’s wild flowers in bloom, or from late September to early November for a better chance of blue skies and sunshine. By day, you can expect temperatures to peak at around 19°C, dropping to zero at night.

More info

Tibetan Children’s Villages. tcv.org.in

How to do it

BLUEFLOWER TRAVEL offers a five-night trip from £1,480 per person, including two nights’ room-only at the Banyan Tree Ringa (doubles from £180, B&B) and three nights’ camping with a horse caravan, including meals, guides and transfers. Excludes flights. blueflower.la banyantree.com