



HIGH ROAD TO CHINA

THERE'S NO NEED TO RIDE ROUGH WHEN TREKKING THE ANCIENT TEA HORSE ROAD IN YUNNAN, WRITES **LISA MURRAY**.

In a remote mountain village of China's Yunnan province, more than a dozen Tibetans and their horses are gathered outside the gates of a large timber farmhouse belonging to French photographer Constantin de Slizewicz and his wife, English chef Phoebe Osborn.

Excitement is building at the headquarters of Slizewicz's adventure group, Caravan Liotard, as the "muleteers" arrive to pick up the supplies for a four-day trek.

Food, gas heaters, colourful carpets, mattresses, Tibetan blankets and bell tents are packaged up in canvas bags and assembled in piles in the courtyard.

The cargo, which can reach up to two tonnes depending on the size of the touring group, will be hauled along a network of mountain caravan paths that once made up the ancient Tea Horse Road. The trading route, which operated between the seventh and 20th centuries, was so-named because the Chinese in Sichuan and Yunnan would trade their tea for Tibetan horses.

ABOVE: Constantin de Slizewicz and local guide Lozon lead a Caravan Liotard trek in the Aboudje mountains. BELOW: The Tibetan wall art inside Farm Liotard were a revelation when they first appeared from under layers of built-up grime.



Caravan Liotard, set up in 2010, is an attempt to recapture the adventure of this old trade route. "Our idea is to share on these caravans what we know about the local traditions and what we love about the region," says Slizewicz.

This is all done in comfort, with heated tents, soft bedding, good wine and three-course meals. Slizewicz is reviving the travelling style of the great 20th-century explorers, such as Frenchman Louis Liotard, after whom the tour company is named.

But it requires a lot of gear and the Tibetan villagers lining up at Slizewicz's gate are eager to be the first in to select their loads.

The most sought-after packages are those filled with food and drink that will decrease in weight over the trek. The last to go are usually the heaters – heavy and awkward to carry.

Slizewicz is striding among the packages to make sure everything is there. He later explains it's the small things that matter. Forgetting the bottle opener, for example, is a disaster.

The treks are a unique but not inexpensive experience in Yunnan, a province in China's south-west famous for its beautiful landscapes, ethnic diversity and spicy cuisine. A four-day premium trek for five people will set you back 13,750 yuan (\$2860) per person. The "caravan light" package, with less of the perks, drops to just under \$2000.

Our daughters Harriet and Clara are aged 8 and 6, so we have opted for an overnight stay in a bell tent at the group's headquarters and Slizewicz's home, Farm Liotard. We reckon in about five years' time the girls will be ready for a caravan.

While we were visiting last November, Osborn was learning how to make European charcuterie out of local yak meat from a couple who had flown out from Britain. We later hear the venture was a success and caravan guests can now feast on air-dried yak along with Western-style pancetta.

Osborn says the Tibetan farmhouse, which is a warehouse-like, raised timber structure with a long verandah overlooking



ABOVE: Setting up camp in the grasslands of the Aboudje mountains on the second night of the caravan. BELOW: Phoebe Osborn and Tibetan mastiff Georgy Porgy relax at Farm Liotard.

the courtyard, was a complete revelation. When they took it over, the walls had been blackened from years of cooking inside. But after days of washing and scraping, brightly coloured Tibetan paintings emerged from the black.

The house is a mix of Tibetan culture and old French country charm. Tea and lemon cake are served on the sun-drenched verandah in the afternoon; evening aperitifs and gourmet dinner in the ornate drawing room with its intricate wooden carvings, traditional carpets and well-stocked bar; and scrambled eggs and bacon for breakfast in the dining room above the industrial-style kitchen, which is part of a newly renovated wing.

The bell tents are very comfortable – more glamping than camping – but we are staying at the wrong time of year.

We snuggle together under our Tibetan blankets and wake up with frozen glasses of water next to our beds.

Harriet and Clara spend most of the time at Farm Liotard playing with the house dog Ewok, who was found on the streets of nearby Shangri-La covered in cement and bears an uncanny resemblance to the *Star Wars* characters after which he is named.

They also chase around the couple's



toddler, Konrad, who herds the chickens in the yard and tackles the pigs.

We trekked to the farm house in the Ringha Valley, which is surrounded by snow-capped mountains, from the old town of Shangri-La. The city renamed itself from Zhongdian in 2001 to capture the mystique (and tourism dollars) of the utopia described by writer James Hilton in his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*.

Much of Shangri-La's old town was destroyed in a fire four years ago, and some of its charm has been lost in the rebuilt "old-style" buildings. But its art centres, lively music scene and Tibetan temple (with a huge prayer wheel that rises above the town and is lit up at night) make it a must-include in any Yunnan adventure.

Caravan Liotard also owns the Flying Tigers Cafe in the old town, which is named after the famous World War II squadron of American volunteers who flew fighter planes painted with shark's teeth over China. The restaurant is famous for its selection of French and local wine and yak-cheese burgers.

Our travels in Yunnan along an extended route of the Tea Horse Road began in the old town of Lijiang. With its cobbled stone streets, boutique hotels and craft shops, the UNESCO World Heritage site attracts about 16 million visitors every year – mostly domestic tourists –

TAKE ME THERE

SHANGRI-LA

The owner of the Arro Khampa hotel has an art gallery around the corner where you can partake in local painting workshops. It's just a short walk from the Tibetan temple and its giant prayer wheel, and also close to the old quarter's main square – worth a visit to see the dancing there every night. Eat at the Flying Tigers Cafe, where you can also book your trek with Caravan Liotard.

LIJIANG

The Bivou Hotel will organise tours to villages and the Tiger Leaping Gorge. Staff are friendly and the restaurant serves special menus featuring local produce.

XIZHOU

The Linden Centre, a restored courtyard residential complex, is owned and run by husband and wife Brian and Jeanee Linden. The rooms deliberately have no televisions but there is plenty to do, including perusing the Linden Centre's extensive art collection or studying calligraphy, ceramics or the local Bai architecture.



who account for more than half of local gross domestic product.

From there we travelled north to the spectacular Tiger Leaping Gorge, one of the world's deepest and most extensive gorges, which according to folklore is so named because a tiger once leapt across its narrowest point.

Further south, and a little warmer, Dali is another popular destination for tourists in Yunnan, but we opt to go 20 minutes beyond the city and stay in Xizhou instead.

Unlike Dali, Lijiang and Shangri-La, Xizhou is only just starting to become a regular feature of the tourist trail, and its food markets and craft shops give visitors a real insight into local life. The architecture of the Bai people is striking. With their white walls and dark painted tiles, the buildings appear more Greek than Chinese, and in one of them, overlooking vivid green rice paddies, Harriet and Clara stir vats of natural indigo dye to make T-shirts.

Trekking through the breathtaking Ringha Valley, feeling the spray of the water thundering down the Tiger Leaping Gorge, sharing in the turn of a Tibetan prayer wheel or drinking steaming cups of Pu'er tea, it's hard not to contemplate the millions more tourists who are yet to discover Yunnan.

TOP: Fine dining in a bell tent, a copy of the type first used during the American Civil War. ABOVE: Prayer flags in the city of Shangri-La.

