

Caravane Liotard's four-day hikes in Yunnan and more extensive twice-yearly explorations into Sichuan bivouac guests at well-appointed tented camps.

# POMMES AND PRAYER FLAGS

A TREK INTO THE MOUNTAINS OF YUNNAN'S SHANGRI-LA COUNTY PROVIDES MODERN-DAY ADVENTURERS WITH A TASTE OF TRAVEL ALONG THE ANCIENT TEAHORSE ROAD.

BY THOMAS BIRD PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS GOISQUE





**FOR THE SECOND MORNING** in a row, I throw open the flap of my tent to marvel at a vista of glitter-coated grassland. The frost is as thick as snow and covers everything from the meadow flowers to the backs of our Tibetan ponies; it's as though we slipped magically into Narnia during the night.

Constantin de Slizewicz, our leader on this four-day expedition into the mountains of northwestern Yunnan, is already prowling around camp. "Would you like a *bière, mon frère?*" the suave Frenchman asks with a wink toward several frozen bottles of Shangri-La Beer sitting atop an old leather trunk. "Looks like we forgot to collect them before we went to bed."

As if on cue, one of the defrosting bottles pops open like a magnum of champagne.

Given the early hour and the still-lingering effects of the white rum that Constantin and his crew passed around last night, what I really need is caffeine. Thankfully, our Tibetan attendants have got the campfire going and are imbuing the crisp October air with the sweet promise of coffee.

By the time I return from splashing icy water onto my face at a nearby stream, the rest of our entourage has emerged from their sleeping bags and taken a seat around the breakfast table, which is laden with granola, yogurt, homemade charcuterie, cheeses, Tibetan flatbread, and a pot of Yunnan's finest pu'er tea.

"Eat well," advises Guillaume de Penfentenyo, another Frenchman who joined Constantin's Yunnan-based trekking operation, Caravane Liotard, in 2011. "Today is the real *caravane*."

"How long will we walk?" I ask.

"About eight hours, from here to a sacred lake and back."

Nodding as nonchalantly as possible, I load up my plate and steel myself for the long trek ahead.

Though both an expressway and railway are under construction, Shangri-La, a mountainous Yunnanese county nestled between the Jinsha River and the highlands of southwest Sichuan province, remains pleasingly detached from the outside world. Having spent the previous few weeks exploring the Tibetan Plateau, I arrive via Tibetan Airlines' midday hop from Lhasa, which, should

you have a window seat, offers unrivaled views of the rooftop of the world.

In the baggage reclaim area at Diqing Airport, I spot a pair of Hongkongers taking hits of air from oxygen bottles. Despite being at a lower elevation than Lhasa, we're still more than 3,000 meters above sea level. I've already acclimatized, but I'm road-weary and very grateful to see my name on a sign held aloft by a man who introduces himself as the manager of the Arro Khampa hotel, where I'll be spending the night.

The short drive to Dukezong (a.k.a. Shangri-La Old Town) takes me past a giant Buddhist stupa. It's a reminder that while I might have left Tibet proper, I remain firmly within its cultural sphere. Indeed, this rugged corner of Yunnan was once part of a historical Tibetan region known as Kham, and while it has been part of China since 1939, most inhabitants remain fiercely proud of their Tibetan heritage and culture.

With its winding cobblestone alleys and giant golden prayer wheel, it's hard to imagine that Shangri-La was a logging town just a generation ago. But what was then known as Zhongdian was forced to reinvent itself after a ban on the local timber industry was implemented in 1998. Officially adopting the name of the fictional Himalayan paradise depicted in James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, Shangri-La turned its attention to tourism, gussying up its old quarters and transforming its traditional mud-brick houses into galleries, inns, and cafés. Though a fire destroyed much of the original architecture in 2014, a speedy and spirited reconstruction effort aided by master carpenters from the nearby city of Dali has the place looking more or less as it did—as good as old, you might say.

I meet Constantin the next morning at Ferme Liotard, the beautifully renovated Tibetan farmhouse where he has lived with his English wife Phoebe and their young son since 2014. Set amid barley fields in the Ringha Valley just 15 minutes from town, the building is gorgeous, with thick timber beams and intricately painted wall panels. It's also the base for the four- and six-day trekking expeditions that Constantin—a Toulon-born former journalist and author who has called Yunnan home for the better part of two decades—runs under the Caravane Liotard banner. The name commemorates Louis Liotard, a French geographer and long rider who was gunned down by brigands in the Tibetan borderlands of Sichuan in 1940. It also evokes the trade caravans of the Tea Horse Road, an ancient network of mule paths through the Himalayas from China to India via Tibet.

Our own caravan is a modern-day tribute to those historic wayfarers, as well as a celebration of what Constantin calls "the genuine art of traveling"—a nod to the early-20th-century Yunnan expeditions led by explorers like Joseph Rock and the legendary Scottish botanist George Forrest. The group I'll be trekking with comprises an elegant French travel planner named Camille Gayraud, a family of four Hong Kong-based Brits, and a TV crew from France 2, along with Constantin, Guillaume, and a Tibetan guide in charge of a pair of provision-laden horses. There are also eight muleteers—farmers from the local village who are busy loading what looks to be a ton of equipment and supplies onto the backs of a dozen ponies. They'll set off first to set up the night's camp, leaving the rest of us to progress at a more leisurely pace.

Over brunch on the veranda of the farmhouse, Constantin tells me that one of his goals is to keep alive the region's centuries-old caravan tradition, which effectively came to an

*Opposite, from top: Tibetan villagers and ponies accompanying a Caravane Liotard party through the mountains; boiling water over a campfire.*





Clockwise from above: Caravane Liotard founder Constantin de Slizewicz; Lake Aboudje, the four-day trek's turn-back point; the balcony of de Slizewicz's Tibetan farmhouse.



end in the 1950s when roads obviated the need for horse and mule transport.

“Our arrangement with the villagers is very egalitarian: the families take it in turns to join the caravan. They spend the majority of their time farming, of course, but we already generate 50 percent of the village income. That’s something I am very proud of.”

Later, we’re all making merry in the courtyard, befriending the household pets and glugging down coffee, when the command comes to move out. “*Allons camarades, let’s go!*” Constantin bellows.

We pour out of the front gate, still merrily chatting as we march. It’s a gentle stroll past wooden frames of drying barley and mud-brick village houses until, beyond a temple festooned with prayer flags, our path becomes steep and muddy, and the conversation falters. But an hour’s trudge uphill is rewarded with a vista of vast hillsides carpeted in fall foliage. “Few things become so beautiful in death as leaves,” I jot in my notebook.

A few more arduous hours into the hike and altitude sickness takes its first victim: the TV crew’s Sichuanese camera operator, who has to be put on one of the horses.

Constantin cracks jokes and does impressions to maintain morale. “Allo people, welcome to the

BBC with me Michael Palin on the Tea Horse Road to Tibet,” he jests, speaking into a mock twig microphone.

We eventually emerge from the woods and see our campsite nestled in a grassland clearing, three spacious bell tents at the ready. The sighs of relief are palpable. We’ve only hiked for an afternoon but at this altitude every step is heavy, every kilometer a little bit longer than it should be.

That evening beneath a star-studded sky we dine by candlelight on ratatouille served with Lyonnaise potatoes and toast slathered in melted yak cheese, all washed down with ample pourings of French wine. When the temperature plummets, we huddle around the campfire. It’s a reminder of one of the survival challenges in a region where, as British journalist and historian Peter Hopkirk wrote in *Trespassers on the Roof of the World*, “one can suffer from frostbite and sunburn simultaneously.”

#### THE DETAILS

**Caravane Liotard’s** four-day excursions in Shangri-La are available from March through November and cost from US\$1,400 per person, including tent accommodation and meals on the trek. The 60-kilometer circuit involves an average of six hours of walking a day (caravane-liotard.com).

At some point during day two, I find my stride and am no longer distracted by the aching inner mechanisms of my body. My legs, heart, and lungs have found their harmony. The frost melts fast on the plateau, but as we reenter forests of larch and fir we’re mostly sheltered from the white heat of the sun, and I’m able to focus on the simple



act of walking. In the wilderness, beyond the tinnitus of urban life, my mind begins its own cerebral wanderings. I begin to recall the words of other restless writers whom I admire: Bruce Chatwin, who saw walking as “a virtue,” a cure-all for life’s ills; and that great champion of the woods Thoreau, who believed walking to be “a fourth estate, outside Church and State and People.”

Our group is smaller now that the TV crew has returned to Shangri-La, allowing for a more efficient hike. Constantin leads from the front, leaving Guillaume at midpoint to look after the British family while the Tibetan guide and his two horses trail at the rear. Occasionally Constantin disappears to scout for new trails, leaving the rest of us to catch our breath beside a mountain stream or photograph the mesmerizing scenery from a hillside clearing.

One time he pops out of the forest in front of me. “Dr. Bird, I

presume,” he jokes, paraphrasing Henry Morton Stanley’s famous line while offering me some water to refill my flask of tea.

This triggers a conversation about early Western adventurers like Forrest, who roamed these parts in search of rare rhododendrons at the turn of the 20th century. With a wild topography that harbors numerous distinct ecosystems, the province’s biodiversity is now renowned in ecological circles: four percent of China’s landmass is home to half its animal and plant species. I’m amazed by the variety of flora we encounter along just one mountain trail: ferns, pines, and all manner of exotic flowers, framing panoramas of snow-covered mountains.

“You see that big one over there?” says Constantin, pointing to a large white peak that towers above the tree line. “That’s where we’re going tomorrow.”

**Constantin’s scouting** has led him to a lake, and he decides we should make an impromptu stop there for day three’s picnic lunch. We push our way through some brambles to discover a stunning expanse of turquoise water that could almost be mistaken for a tropical lagoon, were it not sunk below a snow-brushed hillside and flanked by pine trees.

Camille the travel planner goes to work snapping pictures with her camera and phone; when you have several thousand social media followers, it pays to get a good shot. “Just look at the colors,” she says in a tone suffused with romance.

While we eat, I quiz Constantin as to how he found these trails. “I’d come up here alone or with Phoebe after we were just married. It was really old-school, using a compass and just trying find our way. If I saw a beer bottle or some firewood, I knew I was going

somewhere,” he says of the technique of following the remains of Tibetan campsites.

Unfortunately, lunch in paradise has to be brisk. Constantin keeps glancing at his watch, conscious of the need to press onward. We soon climb above the trees and enter a realm of rocky terrain scoured by a biting alpine wind that burns my nostrils and throws my hair into wild disarray.

“There are three mountain passes along this trail,” Guillaume explains as we enter the first, a plateau wedged between enormous mountain pillars. There are few signs of life now save the occasional stone shrine. No wonder Tibetans see such divinity in nature, I think, when confronted daily with a wilderness so magnificent yet unsparingly hostile.

After the second pass we’re forced to negotiate a snow-covered hillside for the first time. Without the benefit of snowshoes, the group quickly loses all cohesion and a great distance grows between the leaders and the stragglers, provoking groaning complaints on all sides. Constantin and Guillaume keep having fast conversations in French, and though I only catch a little of what they say, the sentiment is clear: they’re worried about the worsening conditions and the pace of our progress.

The third pass leads us into unsheltered terrain where the Himalayan wind impairs our speed and prompts everyone to dig into their backpacks for hats and gloves. I can no longer hear Constantin’s commands and can only follow as he beckons us toward an enormous boulder. I reach it, wind-induced tears blurring my eyesight. We’re well above the 4,000-meter mark now, and I’m gasping for air like a fish that has just been pulled from the sea.

But Constantin is wearing a big grin. “Look, *mon frère*,” he says pointing toward a deep gorge. “You’re missing something.” I peer over the edge and there it is, an emerald expanse surrounded on all sides by sharp and gigantic granite ridges. Aboudje—the sacred lake.

Guillaume says the name means “wondrous” or “wow” in the local Tibetan dialect. I can see why. Just as Hugh Conway, the protagonist in *Lost Horizon*, was seduced by Hilton’s mythical Shangri-La, I too am hypnotized by the unexpected beauty before me.

Though the wind howls against us, we stand our ground. Then, with a wave of a gloved hand, Constantin signals it’s time to descend, and we begin the long walk back to camp. ☉