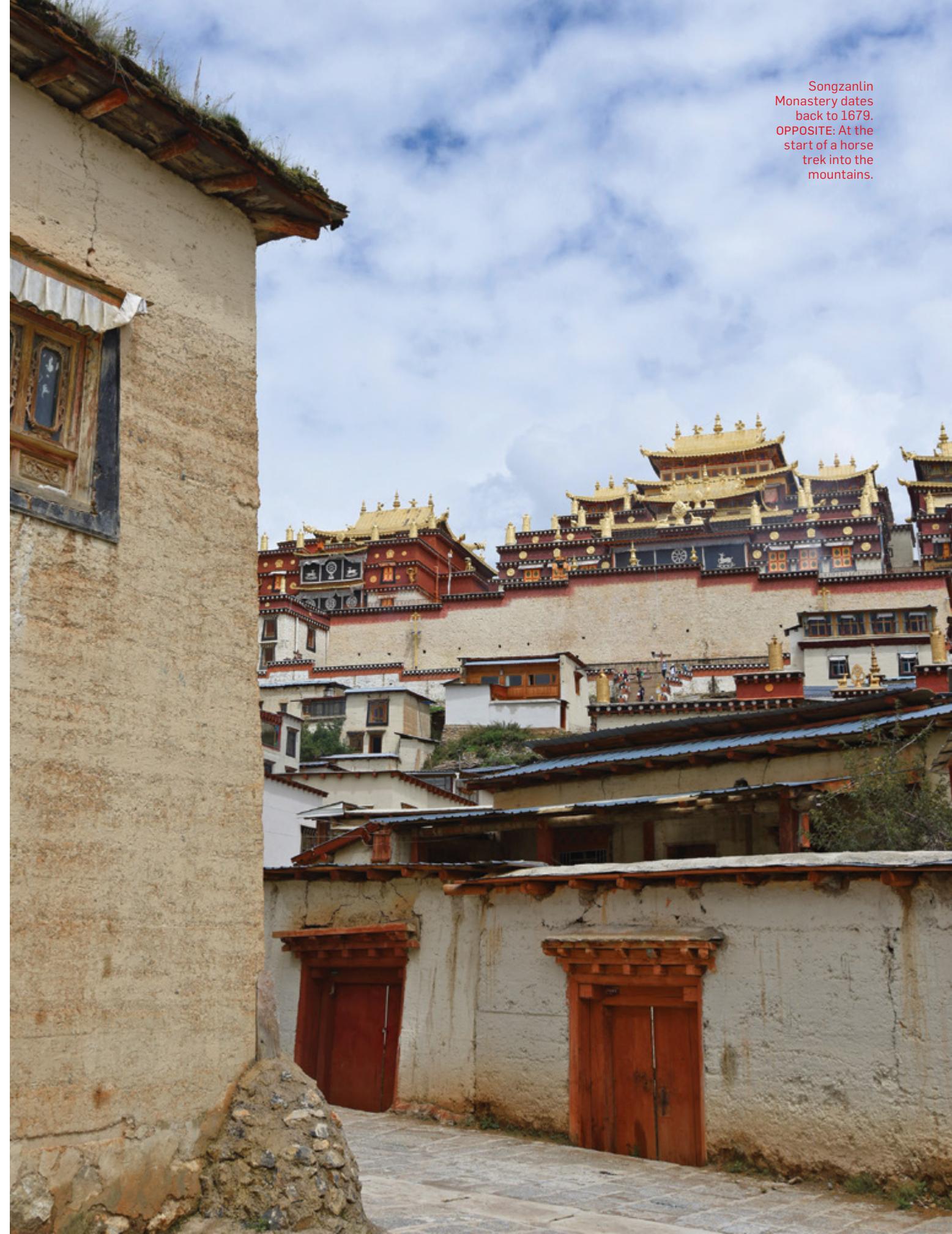


Off the Map

In the northern reaches of Yunnan, a Tibetan-influenced land with any number of names demands you slow down and enjoy the moment, even if you cannot fathom exactly where you are.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **CHRISTOPHER KUCWAY**



Songzanlin Monastery dates back to 1679. OPPOSITE: At the start of a horse trek into the mountains.



Constantin de Slizewicz wanders across the high-altitude grassland he knows like the back of his weathered hands,

and I'm not entirely convinced he knows where we're going. After a particularly wet rainy season, the land is spongy, its dark greens broken only by patches of viscous mud that will suck your boots off if you're not careful, sprouts of purple wildflowers and broken fence posts that are slowly receding into the Yunnan soil. This isn't a land that is easily tamed. It's so unruly that yaks saunter aimlessly, annoyed that we've appeared. Our Tibetan horses, draped in colorful if basic wool blankets, spot their unshod wild cousins along the way and snort a greeting—or is it an equine plea to be roaming wild once more?

There are no lines of demarcation here, few traces of man aside from the occasional worn path. That's how Constantin, he of the red scarf and pocket square, and knee-high muddy boots, and name you couldn't make up if you tried, prefers it. His is a classic tale of arriving from France a decade earlier, falling in love—with both the place and his English wife whom he met in the nearest town, Zhongdian—and not leaving. Now he leads group treks around the mountains of his adopted home. My problem is that I can't place where we are on a map. I'm not talking pinpoint GPS coordinates; I can't find any landmarks. I can tell you we're in Yunnan, due east of the northern tip of Burma, though there are no overland links through the mountains that form a natural border with China. I also know we're pretty much the last stop before the national highway reaches Lhasa, although it doesn't do that for another 1,600 kilometers. Constantin tells me to relax, enjoy this uncharted territory.

We'd started that morning with a short climb in a cold, drizzling rain to Baiji Temple, a muddy hike above Zhongdian, as the Chinese call the town, or Gyalthang, as the Tibetans refer to it, or Shangri-la, preferred moniker of the tourism marketing people. To Tibetans, Shangri-la is not an actual place but a feeling in their hearts. This land, Tibetan in nature yet within modern-day China, was home to more than 30 isolated cultures as late as the 1930s. Zhongdian was the last trading post before the Hengduan Mountains rise to the Tibetan Plateau. This valley that shares the Salween, Mekong and Yangtze rivers was along the Tea Horse Road, a route where Chinese tea was traded for Tibetan horses. It lasted into the

1940s, until horses were no longer of military use. Today, nearby Tangpeicun Village is home to a number of wizened veterans of that trade route, their faces as corrugated as the weather-beaten landscape they once crossed. At Baiji Temple, juniper branches for burning and prayer flags in hand, I made an offering, praying for clearer skies.

Whatever you call it, this corner of China with a Tibetan influence is still opening up to the world. There's even an argument that it's easier to see the Tibetan way of life here than it is in Lhasa, though that's up for debate. One local told me that he felt surveillance around Zhongdian is less than in his homeland, though he did warn of uttering the Dalai Lama's name too loudly. Culture may cross borders, political sensitivities less so. The latest link with the outside world is the Hylandia by Shangri-La, a smartly designed hotel that is a great base for exploring the countryside.

Back on that grassland with Constantin's advice in mind, we pause at the bottom of the pass to take it all in. Aside from a chill wind and some horse bells, all is silent. Soggy

OPPOSITE: The north of Yunnan ascends to the Tibetan Plateau. BELOW: Yaks remain beasts of burden here.



underfoot, the landscape sweeps out to more small hills that rise up briefly topping off in forests of pine. Above us is a big sky, one that dominates every view, its depth even more pronounced with intermittent clouds and those deepening shades of blue common once you ascend above 3,000 meters. Noting the lack of a trail, I ask Constantin where exactly we're headed and he waves his hand towards a forested saddle almost as if the answer was both obvious and irrelevant. Still, he knows. His Gallic sense of place prefers the journey over the arrival. Once at the edge of the plain, we detour up into the trees, along a dirt trail around piles of mani stones and prayer flags



FROM TOP: A Nixi snack of walnuts and mountain honey; black pottery in the hands of a master. OPPOSITE: The main room of Constantin's home, refurbished with a definitive Tibetan flavor.

strung in the forest, up to a small Buddhist temple that is sanctuary to more chickens and rabbits than monks.

Sharply back down the hill, past a line of prayer wheels, an inkling of the modern world appears in the form of a brief concrete road that twists around a bend. It leads to a small farming village that, over time, is being absorbed back into the landscape. Hollowed out stone walls are all that remain of some homes. Piglets scurry around. A jet black yak stares at us. Two women shovel rocks outside a farmhouse, oblivious to our passing.

Just as we clear the village, a traffic jam of sheep crests the ridge we're about to descend causing a Yunnan standoff. Atop that same ridge, we're afforded views of barley fields cut by a wide, cold river that snakes its way below sheer cliffs to the west. We cross the river on a bridge of lashed together tree trunks, each as thick as a yak. Around one final bend, through a thicket of branches, Constantin spots his place. Tibetan-style homes are multistory square structures, built against the elements and, from outside, practical in the extreme. Whitewashed stone walls are punctuated with sturdy wooden windows and topped off with a slate roof.

Pots of hot coffee and tea await on his porch, which overlooks a small courtyard and, beyond that, a walled-in grassland that could accommodate a football pitch or two. Inside, Constantin and his wife have refurbished the interiors to a Tibetan sheen that wouldn't be out of place in a homes magazine and, as a reward for today's trek—as if the scenery in this remote corner of Yunnan weren't enough—we're having a candlelit dinner in this wood-stove warmed room. Plush throw rugs with Tibetan motifs, hand-carved plank floors, ornately painted wood-paneled walls, all of this meshes with our European menu, French and Middle Kingdom wines. It really feels like we're far from everywhere, both geographically and in time. Constantin regales us with tales of living amongst Tibetan farmers in this far corner of China, of dinner parties with the unlikely mix of Buddhist monks and European trekkers—Pu'er tea or red wine, depending upon your preference—winters of welcome solitude and weeklong horse treks through the mountains. French and English, Tibetan and Mandarin, the lively soundtrack to this evening ends all too soon.

There's a silence that is hanging heavy over our lunch the next day. We're at our guide Zhaxi Qidan's home, his welcoming family decked out in their finest cottons and silks, all





smiles as they make room for us at their hearty Tibetan meal. The menu includes bowls of potatoes; slices of yak cheese; two mushroom dishes; and wedges of pork fat marinated in yak butter tea. As a group, our interest in assimilating into the local culture, if only for a few days, seems to have reached its limit. Yet, new experiences are what travel is all about, so we eat. Tentatively. Similar to the endless rounds of thick, salty yak butter tea we've been served—an acquired taste—the pork is oily and doesn't cross cultural palates well. Tsampa, or barley balls, are dry, the Tibetan cheese, dense and sharp.

I don't even recognize the massive mushroom my new friend Jasmine, with her permanent smile, bought that morning at the Zhongdian vegetable market. It was so large that she purchased a basket to lug it back to our hotel, fending off requests on the street to resell a fungus the size of a basketball. By lunchtime, that mushroom has been sliced down into bite-sized pieces and cooked with local greens, enough to feed 10 people on its own. All in, an unforgettable lunch and a reminder that Zhongdian, a modest town, remains a stop en route to somewhere else. Its wooden Tibetan quarter is being rebuilt after a fire in 2014, some of the twisting stone-cobbled side streets and lanes housing crafts shops such as Drogenling and the Yunnan Mountain Handicraft Center. New to the town is Shangri-La Hotels, though its modern address is called Hylandia by Shangri-La since many lesser inns have already appropriated the town's latest name. But Hylandia is in a class of its own, brimming with creature comforts expected of the Hong Kong-based group—arriving after midnight following a flight delay, hotel staff insisted a bowl of yak meat

noodles was in order and would arrive at my room once I did. The late-night meal went down a charm, the mix of aromatic herbs filling my modern digs and fending off any high-altitude hunger pangs.

Come sunrise, overlooking the town and all its Tibetan influence is Songzanlin Monastery, Yunnan's largest Tibetan monastery. A smaller, mirror image of Lhasa's Potala Palace, Songzanlin dates back to 1679 in one form or another and was originally commissioned by the fifth Dalai Lama. Consisting of two lamaseries, Zhacang and Jikang, the massive monastery has been extensively rebuilt, often with Han rather than Tibetan traits in mind, but retains much of its magic, particularly underneath the gilded copper roofs, in the darkened halls that explode with color from the Buddhist frescoes. We climb up to the top level for an audience with the head monk of this teaching monastery, who turns out to be in his 30s. Speaking in Mandarin, he informs us that our current life consists of facing the consequences of our previous lives. "How do we know how we should behave now when we don't know how we were in the past?" With that religious nugget to chew on, we take our leave. Once back in the main rooms, the full weight of towering images of Buddha presses down on passing supplicants; the centuries of history soar in one hall with 108 solid wood pillars, some of which stretch to 18 meters high. Still, the Han Chinese influence is never

FROM TOP: A Nixi kid with style; a hearty Tibetan lunch of pork fat, yak cheese, potatoes and mushrooms. OPPOSITE: Atop Songzanlin Monastery.



far away. One official tourism description paints an odd picture: “Pious believers, with their knees and foreheads knocking the ground at every step, come here to pray.”

Fifty-three-year-old Zha Xi Pei Cuo sits in a late-afternoon beam of light putting the final touches on his latest piece of black pottery. In the back room of his modest home, deep in a valley below highway 214 that leads to Lhasa and noted for the clays needed for his work, the only light shines on him. A master, he started this craft at 18 years old and today works only on commission.

Black pottery is thick, basic stuff, but the finished product brings something else to the table, maybe a little piece of this remote valley home to a dwindling number of Nixi, a Tibetan ethnic group. Their manual work uses a handful of wooden tools to shape and carve patterns in the vessels. But our visit is also a sit-down with this Nixi family. With that in mind, we relax with three generations on their wooden porch, dipping local walnuts into a bowl of the densest honey around. There’s an endless supply of both local delicacies but, unlike the pottery, neither is for sale. As on other days in Yunnan, it’s the moment that is important. So, I sit back and take it all in.

Over that rich, velvety mountain honey, I remember the pungent flavor of all the yak butter tea we’ve drunk along the way. I remember the smell of pine and juniper, and

sound of prayer flags whipping in the chill wind. The vibrant colors that make up the wardrobes of the locals. Unforgettable and not-to-be-photographed history-laden interiors of Songzanlin, and the lengthy explanations of Tibetan Buddhism from the young monk. But what stands out most, what resonates with those urges to return some day is something Constantin said to us in his home. With the most radiant grin, over French and local wines, within the confines of his beautifully restored Tibetan home that is warmed by cast-iron, wood-burning stoves, he explained his contented nature. “I live at the end of the world. I live in Shangri-la.” ☺



THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Zhongdian is connected by air to Chengdu and Shanghai-Hongqiao on China Eastern Airlines (flychinaeastern.com), and Kunming on Lucky Air (luckyairinc.com), among other Chinese cities. Expect delays as the Diqing airport is often fogged in.

Hylandia by Shangri-La

A great base to explore this remote region, the modern hotel is a mix of Tibetan, Nepalese, Indian and Chinese design that merges well. Try the ginger tea in the comfortable lobby, as an alternative to yak butter tea and to help with the altitude. Menus here are strong on organic dishes, and there’s even a garden on one rooftop. shangri-la.com; doubles from RMB750.

Caravane Liotard Treks for between two and 12 people are geared towards individual levels of experience, last between two and four days, and can top 4,000 meters.

Accommodation is in extremely comfortable yurt-like tents, with alternating Western and Tibetan meals. caravane-liotard.com; prices available on request.

Dropenling Handmade Tibetan handicrafts here are aimed at supporting local women working at home in more remote locales. 18 Cengfang Lu, Zhongdian; 86-887/823-2292; tibetcraft.com.

Yunnan Mountain Handicraft Center 1 Jinlong Jie, Zhongdian; 86-887/822-7742; ymhfshangri-la.com.

Nixi women combine colorful style with welcoming smiles. OPPOSITE: A staring contest you have no chance of winning.

