

Between a Rock and a Wondrous Place



The 'Explore Caravan' reaches the first day's pass. The muleteers and horses invariably went on ahead to make the first night's camp

Despite being among the first Western explorers to uncover southwestern China in the 1920s, American botanist Joseph Rock is far from being a household name. Today, one explorer is attempting to revitalise his reputation

Text and photographs by Amar Grover

Ploding up the rocky trail, I pause briefly in the thin air to catch my breath. Far below stretches a deep, narrow valley, its high jagged ridges and peaks bathed in dazzling sunshine while dark forests beneath remain cocooned in ice-cold shade. All is picture-still and silent.

On we trudge, climbing more steeply towards forbidding cliffs through a wilderness of loose, lichen-mottled stones and scree. As so often in the mountains, the pass is not immediately obvious. A knot of precipitous zigzags eventually herald the fissure-like notch in the barren ridge into which, curiously, is wedged a wooden 'doorframe'. We step through and into a vista dominated by the snow-capped Chenrezig mountain peak.

Our guide on this six-day hike through the wilds of China's Sichuan Province is Frenchman Constantin de

Slizewicz. Eccentric by demeanour and inquisitive by nature, he and I are loosely 'connected' by a traveller neither of us can ever meet. Joseph Rock is hardly – and probably never was – a household name, but in the 1920s and 1930s the American botanist-explorer led a series of expeditions into the far-flung reaches of Yunnan and Sichuan.

He might simply have remained a well-regarded yet relatively obscure and unconventional academic but for his set of China-focused articles published in *National Geographic* between 1924 and 1935. Copiously-illustrated features such as *Seeking the Mountains of Mystery*, *The Land of the Yellow Lama* and *Banishing the Devil of Disease Among the Naxi* gave tantalising glimpses into remote, little-known corners of the world's most populous country.

Rock's profound attachment to southwestern China was finally severed 70 years



An elderly man strolls into the courtyard of Wenfeng Si, an 18th century monastery high in the hills near Lijiang

ago as Mao's Communists looked set to win China's protracted civil war. Amid the mounting chaos and anti-foreign sentiment, he reluctantly fled in 1949 to Kalimpong in India and never returned.

Born in Austria to a modest family in 1884, Rock had emigrated to America in 1905. Scholarly yet rebellious, as a youth he was obsessed by foreign lands, particularly China. After years of drifting and beset by tuberculosis, he ended up in Hawaii, initially as a teacher and then a botanical collector in its Forestry Division. Here, tramping about the great outdoors (which seemed to ease his TB), the young botanist soon made a name for himself despite no formal training and became an authority on the islands' flora.

Following a successful collecting trip to Thailand, Burma and northeast India (for which he'd been tasked by the US Department of Agriculture to help find a cure for leprosy), in 1922 he was offered a stint collecting more plants and seeds in southwest China. Rock seized the opportunity. He was not the first Westerner to penetrate the wider region. With an eye on its Indo-Chinese interests, a succession of 19th century French military expeditions almost mirrored British counterparts fretting



Cresting the first day's pass. One or two muleteers and horses carrying a picnic lunch always stayed with the walkers in case of injury or fatigue

In the 1920s, the American botanist led a series of expeditions into the far-flung reaches of Yunnan and Sichuan

over the fringes of Burma and Assam. From the early 1900s, British plant collectors and explorers such as George Forrest and the indefatigable Frank Kingdon-Ward covered a vast area from Burma to Sikkim and Assam to Tibet, blending botany and business with spying and surveying.

Rock was distinguished by his peculiar thoroughness and dedication. Once established in Yunnan, he spent much of his time living near the town



Restaurants, bars and cafés line many of the canals and streams flowing through Dayan, Lijiang's restored old quarter. The town is one of China's most popular destinations for domestic tourists

of Lijiang until 1949. For centuries it had prospered on the 'Tea Horse Road', a trade route whose caravans of mules transported goods – particularly tea – to nearby Tibet and returned with prized horses. Lijiang and its hinterland was essentially the capital of the enigmatic Naxi, an ethnic group whose matriarchal society stirred Rock's curiosity.

Eschewing the bright lights of Dayan, Lijiang's picturesque old town, Rock settled in earthy Yuhu village 20km away. Here at the foot of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, he happily sought out herbs and plants on the massif's slopes. Meticulous, and bolstered by a respectable photographer's eye, his obsession with flora expanded into the region's Naxi people and culture, though he seemed to relish their arcane ceremonies and rituals rather more than humdrum everyday life. Local accounts of incredible gorges, rogue monastery-raiding lamas, sacred mountains and feudal half-forgotten kingdoms soon lured him further afield.

He could hardly have chosen a more exotic place. A global hotspot of biodiversity, Yunnan still boasts an array of what China now calls (and officially recognises) 'minority nationalities' – ethnic groups such as the Naxi with



Monks chat beside a lake in front of Sumtseling Monastery on the edge Shangri-la. This Tibetan Buddhist monastery is the largest in Yunnan Province



As in Rock's day, the muleteers are key to the journey's viability, let alone its relative comfort



Camping beside streams in seemingly forgotten valleys, the caravan almost touched the 'old China' of Rock's expeditions

A local infant and grandmother come to see off the caravan



distinct origins and cultures. It was partly these factors that coaxed my first visit to Lijiang and Rock's obscure world in autumn of 1989: a time when most locals still rode bicycles, wore plain Mao-style garments, and the few regional hotels accepting foreigners often used 'Number 1' or 'Number 2' to prefix and distinguish their names.

Having lapsed into a tranquil, almost forgotten, backwater by the 1980s, today Lijiang is among the country's top destinations for domestic tourists. Meticulously restored after a potent 1996 earthquake, Dayan – its historic old town of wooden houses, lantern-lit courtyards and charcoal-grey tiled roofs – is veined with water channels and cobbled lanes. Dotted with guesthouses and lined with 'boutiques', its humped bridges and open squares lend a faintly idyllic, almost Disney-esque veneer marred by the sheer number of Instagram-eyed visitors brandishing selfie sticks.

It doesn't stop there. Nearby Tiger Leaping Gorge, where the youthful Yangtze River slashes a spectacular 15km canyon between high peaks, has evolved

Local authorities harnessed the fictional mountain utopia of Hilton's *Lost Horizon* claiming this was the 'real' Shangri-la

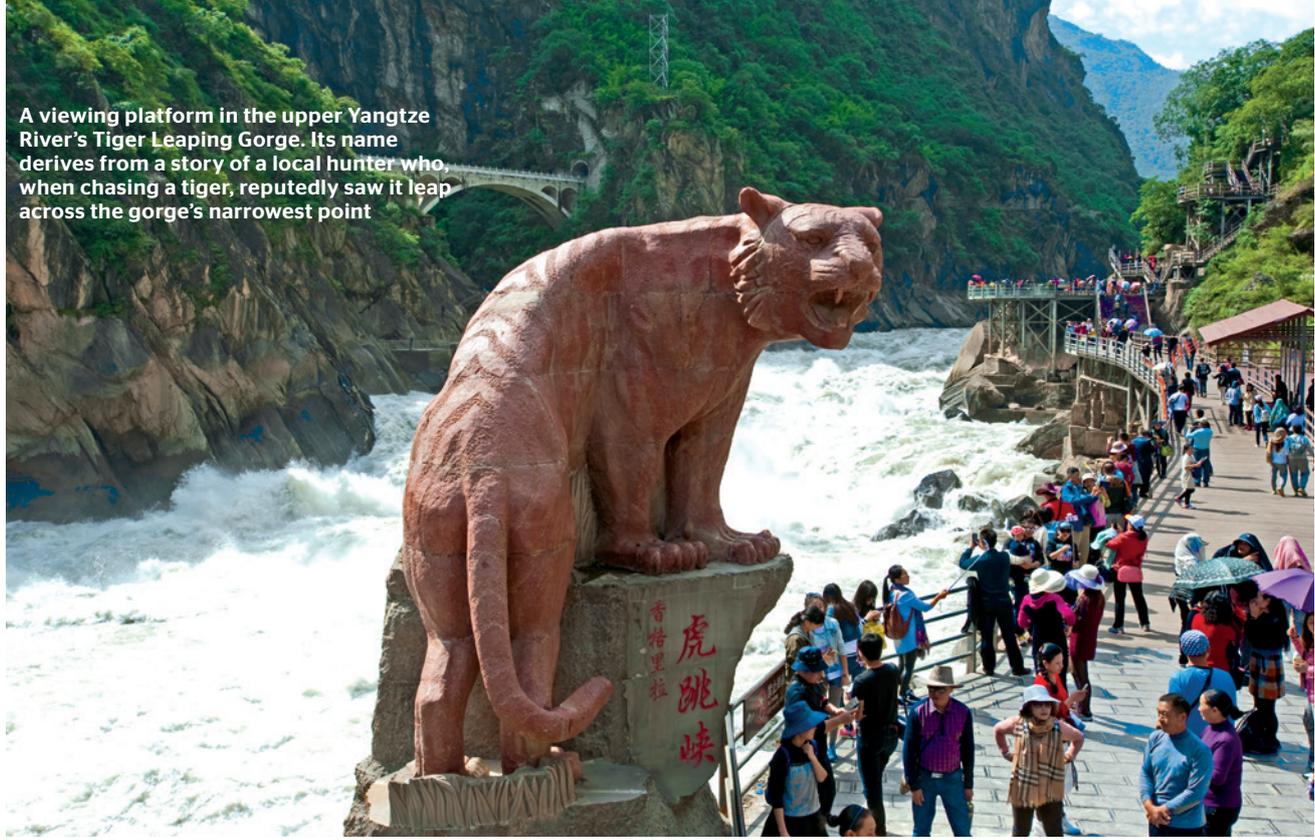
from a fabled two-day backpackers' trek into a more formal attraction boasting dramatic viewing platforms, stepped walkways and a clumsy tiger statue.

Rock's former home in still-earthy Yuhu is now a modest museum with displays of his evocative black-and-white photography, dental equipment, cases and even his rickety bed frame. Once-pristine Jade Dragon Snow Mountain has several oft-lamented cable cars whisking tourists – mainly from China's eastern seaboard – up to the craggy snowline and so-called yak meadows.

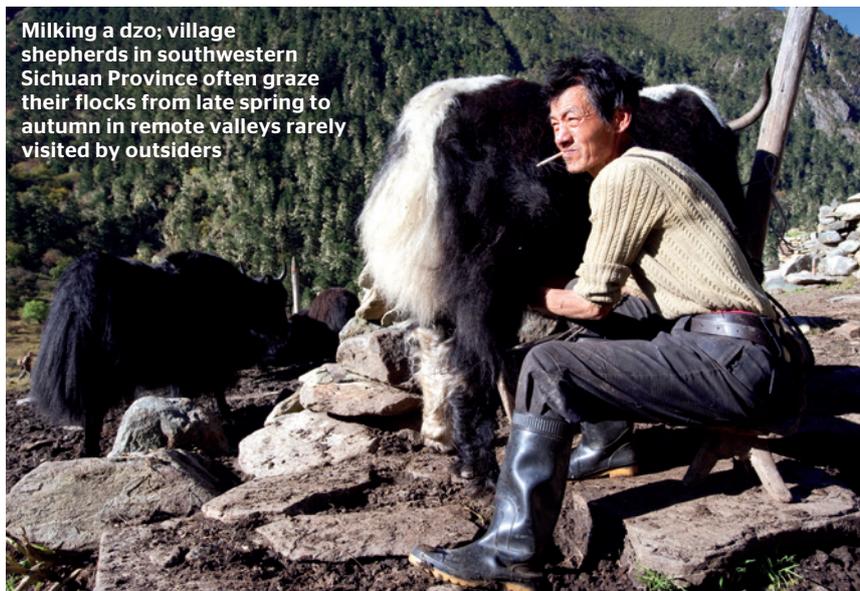
The remoteness of Lugu Lake on the border with Sichuan is now relieved by a new road and even an airport.

Tourism here has been cannily marketed. About 160km north, the town of 'Shangri-la' is a gateway to the vast Tibetan Plateau, sacred Mt Meili and the stupendous gorges of the upper Yangtze, Mekong and Salween – the Three Parallel Rivers National Park. Until 2001 Shangri-la was known as Zhongdian (or Gyalthang to its mainly Tibetan populace) and famed for its Buddhist monastery, Yunnan's largest. Then, aiming to both stem serious logging and promote tourism, local authorities harnessed the fictional mountain utopia of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* claiming this was the 'real' Shangri-la.

'Some say Hilton's idea of Shangri-la was possibly inspired by Rock's articles,' explains de Slizewicz one evening as we sip pre-dinner rum before a crackling fire. 'It was Rock, too, who helped get me here.' By 'here' he means his home in a small village tucked away in a valley about an hour's drive from Shangri-la. An inveterate Sino-phile, especially



A viewing platform in the upper Yangtze River's Tiger Leaping Gorge. Its name derives from a story of a local hunter who, when chasing a tiger, reputedly saw it leap across the gorge's narrowest point



Milking a dzo; village shepherds in southwestern Sichuan Province often graze their flocks from late spring to autumn in remote valleys rarely visited by outsiders

when it comes to borderlands such as these, de Slizewicz has spent 18 years in China, ten in Shangri-la. Now living in a restored Tibetan farmhouse with his English wife and their young son, it was clear during my short stay how much they embrace their environment and adore the unusual milieu.

'I first came across Rock in 1997,' says de Slizewicz. 'A knowledgeable friend had mentioned how some remote communities – Tibetans, Mosuo, even Goloks – still followed ancient traditions and hid away from the world.' De Slizewicz was hooked. He stiffened his boots with the spirit of adventure, and began exploring parts of southwest China that lay well beyond mainstream tourism. By the mid-2000s, when writing about

his own escapades and Tibet's 'forgotten people', he realised how much he envied Rock's distinctly old-fashioned expedition style: '...big tents, porcelain, library and a solid crew of muleteers.'

So he decided to recreate the spirit of Rock's caravans by establishing Caravane Liotard (the name comes from a novice French explorer killed by bandits in 1940 trying to reach Tibet) and running tours into the wilds of an almost 'untouched' China. You sleep with duvets on soft mattresses in spacious heated bell tents and dine on three-course dinners washed down with wine. A hardy crew of muleteers make and break camp, and lend a happily garrulous atmosphere. Most clients are China-based expatriates. 'It's the

only way to honour these landscapes,' enthuses de Slizewicz.

Once a year he organises a longer, bolder 'Explore Caravan' where the walking is harder, the passes higher and the commitment heftier. It's on one such journey that I find myself beside the fire with de Slizewicz, half a dozen guests, ten muleteers and 29 horses carrying one-and-a-half tonnes of gear.

Bookended by time-forgotten villages, our six-day hike yo-yos through a series of valleys visited, if at all, by shepherds grazing herds of yaks and staying in rudimentary huts. It also lends a flavour of the old Tea Horse Road. Hiking from forests and meadows up through tree lines to tarn-dotted uplands, the trails are clear but now seem little used. Prayer flags and stone cairns colour the mountain passes and seem to invigorate our crew. Unlike Rock we don't have a library or folding bath; few of us brave the crystalline streams and rivers to bathe timidly in their frigid waters.

I'd paused just below the loftiest pass to gaze at distant Chenrezig and watch our horses clatter down the trail as the muleteers sang heartily. Named after the Buddha of compassion, it's the highest of three peaks that now comprise Yading Nature Reserve. We were well beyond its own tourist zone and all the better for it.

De Slizewicz noted how Rock had explored Yading from another direction and venerated its ethereal beauty. Lingering in our caravan's wake, it almost felt as though he was just yards behind urging us on. ●