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REMOTE CONTROL

Outside China's shiny, noisy cities, there are age-old villages, serene mountaintops and as much Tai Chi as you can handle. Bliss, says ***Harry Dean***

Will the papers ever grow tired of running stories on China? More to the point, will they ever tire of running stories on China without experiencing it first-hand? Critical editorials from a corner office are one thing — seeing and getting to know it are another.

I wanted to avoid the big cities, the attention-grabbers, the bullies in the PRC schoolyard. I didn't want to spend seven days in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong, but desired an experience where all my attention was on the people and places and I could let someone else worry about the fine details. Every 'luxury' travel company promises this, so I was giving Brown & Hudson the benefit of the doubt.

One month later I was gliding across the silky waters of Hangzhou's West lake past the morning Tai Chi class, having lunch in a 300-year-old courtyard house, praying with the monks at 5am deep in a Zhejiang valley, cycling around a Shangri-La lake, and all the while staying in China's best hotels. Benefit of the doubt rewarded.

My experience began with a phone call and a simple questionnaire. In my questionnaire I'd asked for a combination of cultural diversity and active discovery, to follow local customs, and to learn Tai Chi. I'd listed my interests, how long I wanted to spend at sights, how many museums in a day, preferred styles of transportation, dining — and massage. (That is a very promising sign.) The route they suggested was Pingyao, Hangzhou and Shangri-La, staying in a boutique hotel, an Aman and a Banyan Tree.

Clockwise from above: Shangri-La, Pingyao and Hangzhou offer a relaxing world and culture that is unrecognisable from the high-rise hustle of China's major cities

Philippe, my Brown & Hudson guide, met me at my hotel in Beijing and presently we were on our way to Pingyao in Shanxi Province. Our VIP tickets allowed for rapid access to the train carriage and in three hours of bullet-speed travel across farmland and villages we reached Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi province. This was the scene of China's gold rush ten years ago. If you wonder where China's rich come from, then this is a good place to look, but the riches I'm referring to date back not ten years but 360, to the Qing dynasty, when Pingyao was the

financial capital of China. China looks set to surpass the US in ten years' time with the world's largest economy, and here, where the Rishengchang Bank was set up in 1823, is where it all began. Pingyao was the strategic trading hub for tea traders, who would buy tea in the south and send it by boat to Russia. It was only when the sums of money became so large that one merchant set up a bank that would let money (silver in those days) be deposited in one city and collected in another.

The town is much the same today as it was then. It has been magnificently preserved and as you wander along the cobbled streets, darting in and out of tea houses and bakeries, you slip back in time and become a character in the film *Raise the Red Lantern*. One businesswoman has revamped a courtyard house to five-star standard but without touching any of the original structure; it is now called Relais & Châteaux Jing's Residence. Sleeping in the same room in which the master of the house would have slept, waking up and peering through the smoke trickling over the rooftops — a sight which has remained untouched for centuries — conveys simply and peacefully a form of luxury we rarely sense.

Following a short flight to Hangzhou we arrived at the luscious West Lake. Surrounded by hills on three sides and dotted with boatmen skimming along its surface, it is one of the most romantic places in China. The lilies and osmanthus trees offer shade to promenading newlyweds. Chairman Mao used to entertain guests at a private residence on the banks and Zhou Enlai would often visit the Laowai Restaurant in the middle of the lake. Writers, poets, musicians, painters would come here for inspiration, and China's leaders for contemplation. It is the greenest city in China, a stark contrast with the sprawling densities of the big cities.

We retreat to the simplistic and nurturing Amanfayun, in Fayun village, deep in the tea-growing district. The layout of the resort is as it always was and a short stroll along the pathway, winding up through the bamboo forests, leads to the Yongfu Temple, where

at 5am you can join in morning prayers with the Buddhist monks and breakfast on dim sum. We have always assumed that 'knowing how the other half lives' refers purely to social status, but we can consider it in hemispheres as well.

Propel yourself to 3,200 metres above sea level and you reach what seemed to me a heaven on earth. The land James Hilton envisaged in his book *Lost Horizon* was 'discovered' by the Chinese in the city of Diqing in north Yunnan, nestling on the right flank of the Tibetan plateau. A six-day drive to the west brings you to Lhasa, where you can stay in the award-winning Banyan Tree Ringha in a wooden Tibetan two-storey house and rise to the sound of a tractor ploughing barley or the gushing river splicing through the valley's green carpet.

Apart from the occasional modern Hummer, one owned by the county's Tibetan mastiff-breeder, you can wander the cobbled streets of the old town and sample the life, people, and culture of Tibet as they have been and as they have remained. Tibet — culturally speaking — encompasses Tibet proper, Qinghai, north Yunnan and South-west Sichuan, an area laced together by Tibetan Buddhism. If you climb 174 steps, you can visit the resplendent Songzanlin Monastery, a five-storey Tibetan Style building covered in carvings and vibrant paintings telling the story of Tibetan Buddhism.

If spinning the world's largest prayer wheel is not enough then saddle up or hop on a bike and pedal your way around the villages, streams, and tranquil lakes. The route is specifically chosen for cycling, and when hunger strikes there will already be a neatly laid out picnic in a secluded spot. When the muscles start to ache, head back to the Banyan Tree for a Lomi Lomi massage, a deep-tissue, elbow and hand workout.

B&H made it so easy: the slick airport transfers through VIP lounges, with private cars waiting at every landing; a perfectly balanced blend of local and Western cuisine — Shanxi noodles one day, cocotte of foie gras the next, poached eggs for breakfast and earth-baked beggar's chicken for dinner, vintage wines and local liquors, the finest teas in China and even a Saamba cooking class to make Tibetan barley bread; non-repetitive guides; speedy museum visits; timely massages; and a schedule which seemed to mould itself to my mood.

It all felt familiar because it perfectly suited me; harmony on holiday is rare.

Images courtesy of Banyan Tree; Hudson & Brown; Philippe Brown