



Dancers perform at the Jiuzhaigou Winter Ice Festival



Prayer flags brighten the Tibetan temples

China's fairyland

Jiuzhaigou – ‘the valley of nine villages’ – is a pretty pocket of Tibetan culture wedged among China’s most magnificent mountains and lakes, providing the perfect antidote to the intensity of Shanghai or Beijing. Story and photos by LOUISE GOLDSBURY.

The twisting road curves its way up towards the Tibetan plateau through the nine valleys that give Jiuzhaigou its name. But I’ve lost count at the second turn, too distracted by the whimsical world passing by my window.

Timber log homes trickle down the hills, and white smoke spirals out of chimneys and up to the darkening sky. The earthy scene is illuminated by reams of colourful prayer flags (known as longda) – triangles of blue, white, red, green and yellow cloth, strung diagonally, flapping in the breeze. Tall poles, with banners stretching from top to bottom, sprout from the ground, as if giving life to the village.

A few locals mill around, dressed in fur-trimmed coats and hats. They smile, lighting up their fresh faces and rosy cheeks. It must be the cold weather; we have come in winter for the annual ice festival

and, as a bonus, to miss the crowds of summer.

Jiuzhaigou (pronounced jiew-jai-go) is affectionately known as the ‘fairyland’ of China. Even the new highway and a cluster of five-star hotels do little to detract from this truly magical landscape – the virgin forests, the snow-capped mountains, the layered waterfalls and rivers and the dazzling, emerald lakes.

Then there are the villages’ centrepieces – the bright, white pagodas and multi-coloured temples. Tibetan Buddhism, derived from the local Tibetan ‘Bembo’ religion, was introduced to the region in the 7th century and is depicted in painted pictures on the walls.

Many houses and shopfronts are also decorated with ornate patterns, and the large arches, open windows and balconies create an inviting feel.

Traditional Tibetan houses have three levels: the ground floor for

animals and storage, with people living on the second floor, and the third floor is where they worship. The architecture reflects their belief that we live in between heaven and earth.

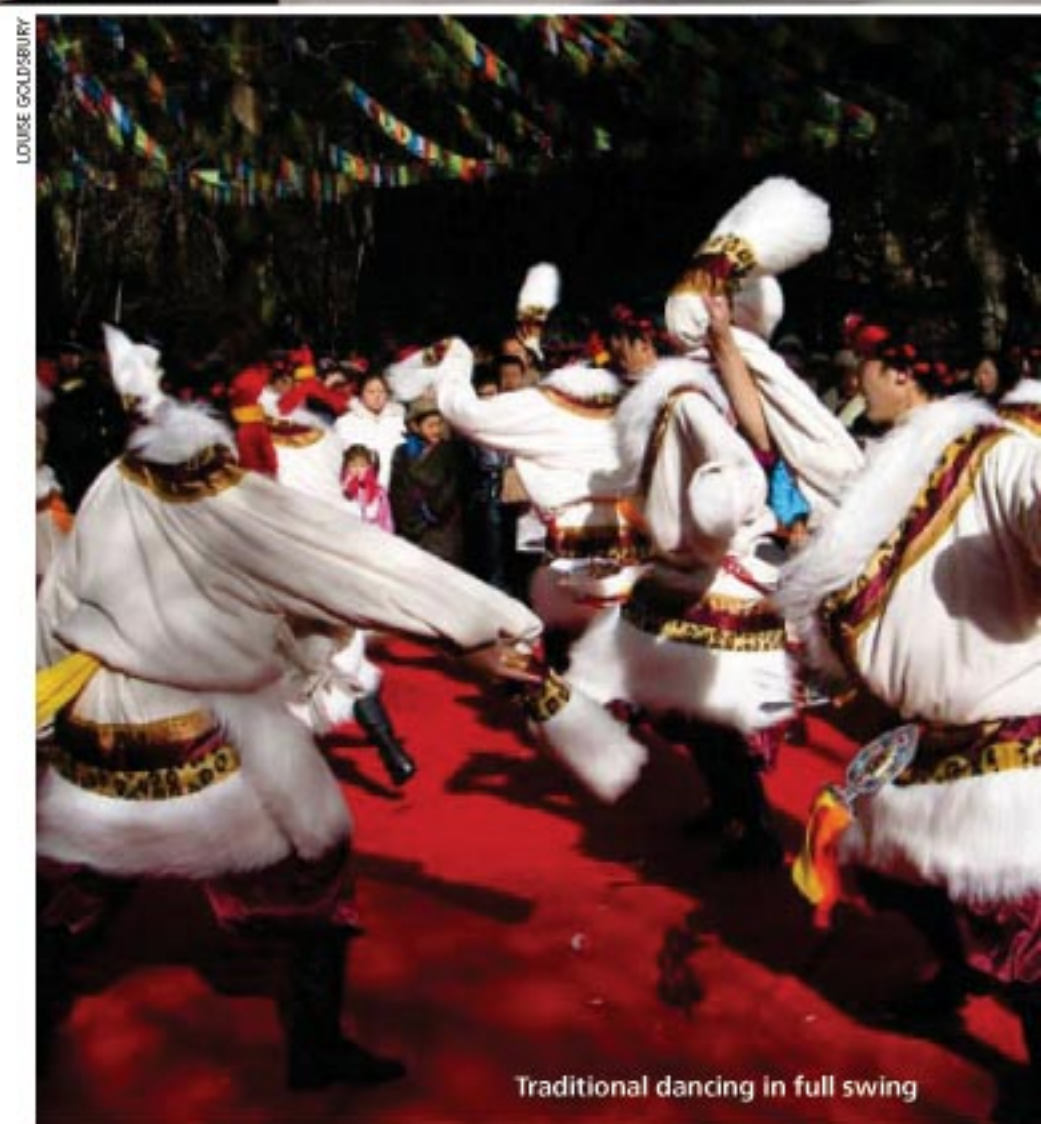
Right now, this North Sichuan province in the south-west of China resembles heaven. The closest comparison on earth is the Canadian Rockies, so amazing are the mountains.

A few minutes earlier I felt like we were the first foreigners to discover this hidden alpine paradise, but the region has long been popular with travellers, especially those from other parts of Asia. During high season (July through October) the World Heritage-listed Jiuzhaigou National Park has been forced to limit visitors to 28,000 a day and apparently you have to queue up to take photos of the famous lakes.

However, the masses are managed by eco-friendly, gas-powered shuttle buses that pick up passengers every 10 minutes. New boardwalks have also been constructed on the other side of the lakes to help thin the roadside scum and to provide a quiet trail away from the passing traffic.

For now, we have the place to ourselves. The fairyland has frozen into a peaceful, winter wonderland. Pine and fir tree branches are coated in snow, the sky is beaming blue and the ice layer on the lakes changes colour according to the temperature. The waterfalls are clear and pure, and small crests of icy water have frozen mid-tumble. But the ground is dry and I feel quite warm. Mind you, I am wearing a spencer, scarf, gloves, boots, three layers of clothing and two pairs of socks.

Our guide, Lily, says we should come back in spring, when



Traditional dancing in full swing



A plate and chopsticks make music at an impromptu performance



The mirror-like lakes range in colour from emerald green to sapphire blue

the alpine landscape is brightened by wild blossoms and birds, or autumn, with its kaleidoscope of yellow, red and orange foliage and fallen petals floating in the water.

Most people come for the lakes, which is understandable. The watery setting is so breathtaking that it seems nature has created these lakes as a liquid mirror for the mountains, trees and sky to admire themselves in.

Driving through Rize Gully, one of two gullies that flow from the south to Shuzheng, we stop at several spots along the way. Arrow Bamboo Lake was a main feature site for the 2002 Chinese film *Hero*. Panda Lake has circular black and white formations on the bottom, which are said to look like the cuddly animals. Five Flower Lake is shallow, exposing a criss-crossed pattern of ancient fallen tree trunks. Swan Lake is named for its visiting swans and ducks, while Five-Colour Pond is the most colourful. Long Lake, the largest, lives up to its name at 7.5km in length.

There are more than 100 other lakes of varying shades and swirls of turquoise, blue and green, with names such as Sleeping Dragon and Miniature Landscape Lake. Most visitors take the bus to the end of Rize or Shuzheng gullies, then make their way back downhill by foot on the boardwalks, taking the bus when the next site is too distant.

The bus is also essential for anyone who suffers in high altitudes. With altitudes between 1,800 and 3,000 metres, walking takes more effort, especially on the stairs, and you need to drink lots of water. Indeed, all of our small group feels more tired than usual,

we are breathing harder and two people have a headache.

We decide it's time to leave and relax at our accommodation, the Sheraton Hotel. After a bath, dinner, more water and a good night's sleep, everyone is feeling revived and the altitude doesn't bother us again. Perhaps we are used to it.

The next day we head to the opening of the Jiuzhaigou Winter Ice Festival. A short walk from the road leads down to a small square where we are welcomed by beautiful women in equally beautiful costumes.

We wander around the ice sculptures and meet some local people who are curious about these unfamiliar Australians. Everyone is exceptionally friendly and good-looking – it must be all that mountain air. Speeches are made, and then a big performance is

staged by dancers and singers in front of a large waterfall that has frozen into an ice curtain, a perfect theatre for the festivities.

Lunch is organised at a local house in the hills. Before we eat, the group of 15 men and women in pink and blue silk suits perform some traditional songs for us. They are playing red mandolins, and one man, about 80 years of age, is tapping chopsticks against a plate as he sings. I wonder if it was a last-minute improvisation or is this his instrument of choice?

Ushered inside to the dining room, we are seated at a round table set with bowls, dishes and a tiny glass for shots of the potent rice wine. We make a toast and say "gambei", which means you must knock back the wine in one mouthful. One is more than enough.

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Home in the hills



The wintery landscape at Jiuzhaigou

Our host pours us small bowls of *suyoucha*, a Tibetan tea made of yak butter. Then the food is served – all the vegetables are home-grown and delicious, and there is an endless parade of meat, including yak, seafood, nuts and fruit to finish. At the end they ask if we would like rice. Our guide explains that rice is regarded as poor man's food and it is considered insulting to offer it to special guests too early in the meal. By now we're too full for rice.

In the evening another cultural performance is held in town, attended by hundreds of locals and visitors. The loud, warbling singing of the females and the energetic male dancers with swords are highlights. Tibetan culture is noticeably strong here.

Some say, in fact, that Jiuzhaigou is more culturally Tibetan than many places in Tibet. We have certainly seen the evidence in the villages, clothing, food, dance and music – vibrant, lasting touches of the Tibetans who have lived in the valley for several generations, originating from tribes living at the foot of Aniquing Mountains.

At the craft markets we chat with some of the Tibetan people and buy handmade jewellery for \$2 to take a piece of the culture home to friends and family. But the real jewel of Jiuzhaigou is its natural beauty, where the lakes sparkle like emeralds and sapphires buried beneath the ancient mountains at all times of year.

Jiuzhaigou Valley covers 720 square kilometres in Sichuan Province, south-west China. Entry to Jiuzhaigou National Park costs about \$38, which includes a shuttle bus day pass. Entry costs 200RMB (about \$35) and people over 70 pay 50RMB (about \$9).

How to get there

From Chengdu, fly (45 minutes) or catch a bus (10 hours) to Jiuzhaigou. It is an 83km drive between the airport and the entrance of Jiuzhaigou National Park. Chengdu can be reached by air or train from main cities in China, including Shanghai and Beijing. Private or hire cars are not permitted in the National Park.

China Holidays offers a grand tour including Jiuzhaigou and the highlights of China's main cities, and six-day mini-tours of Jiuzhaigou and the ice festival. Tours include all transport, meals, accommodation and an English-speaking guide. Tel: (02) 9570 1555;

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