

# Hanoi to Yuanling

written by Marcus | 10 March, 2016



We first encountered China last year from behind the fence that had been put up along the border with Tajikistan. That was several time zones ago now. Since then it's been lurking at the edge of all our maps like a big red shadow, nudging up against Central Asia, looming over India and Nepal, then pulling us north through South East Asia. We could have run away down into Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia but we were intrigued by China and riding across it would take us to Korea and Japan which we are also keen to visit. We had plenty of expectations but we tried to put them to one side and see what it looked like for ourselves, from the saddle of a tandem.



Small shop with New Year decorations around the doorway

**22nd February – 10th March 2016**

As Vietnam disappears behind us the daunting task of crossing this enormous country lies ahead, blanketed in a big, grey cloud. Light rain is keeping people indoors and most of the shops are shut but somewhere fireworks are being launched as the tail end of the new year festivities go off with a bang. It's all adds to the mystery that we often feel when crossing a border.

Kirsty has roughly plotted our route by picking a few towns and points of interest between Hanoi and Beijing. We have a finite amount of time as we need to get to the capital by the start of April to embark on a little side trip that we've booked so we can't afford too many diversions. The first target we aim for is Nanning in Guanxi province.





Excited to see us

After being chased by the toll booth staff when we try to get onto the expressway we turn onto a smaller side road that is more bike friendly (and more legal). This takes us up and over rolling hills packed with sugar cane plantations with truck loads of it being harvested by hand and hauled off for refining.

Like Vietnam, there's not much land that isn't being used for farming or living so the evening campsite search begins at 5:30 and usually takes us until 6:30 to find something vaguely suitable. Night arrives very quickly though so provided we've got the tent up just before sunset we know we'll be hidden by the dark within about 20 minutes. One thing I love about our tent is it's ability to turn even the most inhospitable patch of rough ground into a cosy home. As soon as it's up and we've brewed our first cup of tea it doesn't matter that we're in the corner of a field or at the base of a quarry, inside the

Hilleberg we're warm and dry and have cake.



Camping amongst the harvested sugar cane

We're certainly an oddity in these parts. Everywhere we park up people stop and stare and there's usually a look of shock from the poor cafe owner whenever we try and buy food. Getting into the kitchen, opening pots and pointing to things we want generally results in a reasonable meal involving noodles and chunks of beef/chicken/pork/miscellaneous. There's then amazement as we manage to tuck in with the chopsticks.

Quite often people try and talk to us, realise we don't understand so then write it down instead which of course we still don't understand. It's not such a stupid thing to do though as Chinese characters are universal across all the different languages including Mandarin, Cantonese and the many regional dialects so although the spoken words may be very different everyone should still be able to understand



something that is written down. Unless of course you are are stupid Westerner in which case the complicated arrangement of lines is a complete mystery. We have to try and see pictures in the symbols for important words, for instance 'ladies' looks like a girl crossing her legs, 'gents' is a man with a big square head.



What does it all mean?





Watching foreigners shop is apparently very entertaining





Huddling round a fire on a wet, cold day



Most scooters were equipped with built in brollies, but we couldn't find a tandem length version

As we approach Nanning the road broadens out to give several lanes for cars but also a wide lane alongside just for two wheeled traffic, separated by a grass verge. This bike road takes us straight into the city and makes the journey surprisingly easy. We had expected negotiating these vast towns to be a hectic and dangerous affair but in fact the bike infrastructure is better than just about anywhere else we've ridden. There aren't a huge number of other cyclists though as most people are riding electric scooters. It feels very strange to be surrounded by scooters but everything to be so quiet, it's as if someone has pressed the mute button and is a complete contrast to the buzzing from the swarms of petrol scooters in Hanoi.





Amongst the electric scooters on Nanning

We stay with Nancy, an American who has spent the last 16 years living in China and now works at the enormous university here teaching English. She helps teach us some Chinese and I discover that in my attempt to say 'thank you' I'd actually been saying 'water water' which could explain the confused looks. The sounds that make up the Chinese language are nearly as tricky to grasp as the written characters.

At the strip of food stalls that cater for the 40,000 students, affectionately known as 'The Dog Hole', we discover bubble tea (milky tea with pieces of jelly, custard and/or soya beans at the bottom) and jianbing pancakes and quickly develop an addiction to both.





Preparing a jianbing pancake

The skyline is a forest of tall tower blocks with dozens of tower cranes constructing a whole lot more, continuing on for



endless kilometres, long after leaving the city centre. China is a country under construction with cities like this expanding every day. I suspect you've never heard of Nanning but there are 2 million people living there. In fact there are currently 61 cities of over a million people in China, (compare that to only 10 in the USA) and the number looks set to rise as more people move out of the rural areas.



Yet more towers in Nanning

Once we're clear of the city we pass through real forests and then onwards to Binzhou, a small provincial town of just 1/4 million people. We pull in to investigate a bike shop and the staff get very excited to see us. To brighten up the dreary grey skies I decide to buy some sunglasses with yellow lenses but the shop keeper won't let me pay for them. I offer our now redundant 10mm allen key which they reluctantly accept then rush back with a multi tool, again as a gift. Meanwhile Jeff has arrived to see what the fuss is about. He's an English

teacher at a nearby school and is delighted to meet some genuine 'ying guo ren', English people so invites us to lunch.



With Jeff outside his school

As we enter the restaurant we think he asks "Do you like duck?", which we enthusiastically reply with a nod and a "Yes please!". But when the hot plate of meat arrives we realise he actually said something else that begins with a D and ends with a waggy tail. Out of a combination of courtesy and curiosity we try a few bits of this local delicacy but find that it tastes very bland and isn't worth the inevitable guilt trip. After visiting Jeff's school we're sent off with a bag full of the unwanted leftovers which we promise to eat for dinner (or bury in the woods).

Once the sun drops then so does the temperature and by the morning the Garmin is showing just 4 degrees. It feels much colder though as a heavy mist surrounds us. We have to start the day without porridge as I'd let the fuel bottle run out so with numb hands we ride to the first noodle shack.





Steaming hot soup



Chicken or duck?

The karst hills have made a reappearance with the road slicing between spectacularly steep peaks that makes for a very bizarre landscape. Between the hills, small farming villages make use of whatever flat land they can find to grow rice and spring onions or for neat and orderly gardens. This seems to be a huge contrast from the modern wealthy cities. China has come a long way in the last 20 years but it hasn't brought these communities with it. People wash in buckets outside their wooden houses and the roads leading off the main highway are just rough tracks.





Limestone karst in a misty sunset





We need to be able to cook our noodles for dinner so we pull into a petrol station and offer up the fuel bottle while pointing at the pump. But the attendant shakes her head and points to a sign which of course we can't read. No amount of gesticulating seems to work so we ride on to the next one. The same thing happens: shake the head, point at a sign, no fuel allowed. By the third time we've guessed that they're not allowed to fill up small bottles but I beg and plead anyway in a hungry two-year-old tantrum type way. Another customer calls us over, smiles and seems to want a photo with us which I'm not in the mood for so with a huff we ride off.

Three or four kilometres later the same smiling man appears alongside us on his scooter, waving a plastic bottle full of petrol. Somehow he's managed to buy some and now wants to give it to us. I feel terrible that we'd ridden off now and let him take as many photos as he wants.



The good fuel-giving samaritan

We pass through Liuzhou, another huge city that occupies about 30km of our route again with bike lanes to allow a speedy



entry and exit. Then out the other side we're amongst strawberry fields and clementine orchards, topping up our fruit supplies from the roadside stalls as we go. Hauling up and over a small ridge of mountains brings us to Yangshuo, the next pin in the map.





Strawberry stand



Taking a break just before Yuanshuo



### Approaching Yangshuo

This popular destination sits right in the middle of some of the most impressive karst features we've come across. It's almost ridiculous how the huge rounded peaks rise up around the town and from a vantage point next to the TV tower we get a great panoramic view of the surrounding area.





Looking over Yuangshuo





## Yuangsho



## Yangshuo

Through Couchsurfing we've arranged to stay at the Zhuoyue English College in a village just outside Yangshuo. In return for room and board we agree to help out with some classes so spend two evenings chatting with the students to help them practice their English. The class is largely made up of adults who want to improve their language skills to help progress careers or potentially to move abroad. It's a really interesting and fun couple of hours while we learn a lot more about life in modern day China and the students ask questions about our travels. Kristin from Pennsylvania is also staying at the college and helping out but plans to stay for a few weeks as part of her year long backpacking trip. A much better alternative to the usual hostel accommodation.





The students of Zhuoyue English College

After Yangshuo it's a short ride to Guillin where we abandon the bike in The Green Forest Hostel and head to the bus station. We want to spend the night amongst the famous Longi Rice Terraces but it's in the mountains and off our route so we have to resort to petrol power to save time. While waiting for the bus we're approached by a man who, after some very hard bargaining, agrees to drive us up to the terraces for a price that rivals the bus.



Regulation safety headwear for handling lime

400 years of shovel work have resulted in an enormous area of terracing across several hill tops that is the largest of its kind in the world. We've arrived just as they've begun filling them with water in preparation for the next season of planting, the bands of silvery reflections stretch almost as far as we can see. Our driver introduces us to his friend who happens to run a small hotel amongst the terraces with an excellent vintage of rice wine and not so good boiled chicken that was clucking and flying just an hour ago.





## Gardening on the Longi Terraces









Longi Rice Terraces



Longi rice terraces





Endless terraces







The women of Longi. Their hair is wrapped up in this photo but can up to 2m long

The next day we're reunited with the bike in Guillin then continue pedalling on. It takes 50km to get clear of the city though as it's neighbouring towns are joined at the hip, merging into each other in a continuous stretch of activity. Kirsty then calls for a left turn and takes us off the main road and onto a bumpier route with a lumpier profile. But it's a road lined with forests and is altogether a more peaceful and pleasant place to ride. Some lengthy climbs take us up past acres of bamboo then down into valleys crammed full of vineyards. We cross into Hunan Province then winch up past Langshan Mountain which is completely hidden in the clouds.



Cherry blossom view





Oil seed rape is in full bloom everywhere

The instant celebrity status we're getting feels a bit like India. Each stop takes twice as long as it should once the amassed crowd have taken their selfies and everyone has measured themselves against me. As soon as one person comes a bit closer to take a look it opens the floodgates for everyone to pile in.



Another crowd gathering





### "One for the road"

In Wugang we get surrounded outside a bakery but get rescued when Zero steps in and leads us away to his parent's coffee shop. Zero chose his English name as he thought it sounded cool. He gives me a Chinese name of Shan Gow meaning 'tall bicycle' then attempts to teach me how to write it in calligraphy.





## Calligraphy lessons with Zero

He suggests we take a visit to the local English school as the children would love to meet some real life English people. The kids are wide eyed when we walk in and soon form an orderly queue for our autographs. Afterwards we're invited to lunch with the principal and some of the teachers where Zero reveals that he'd been thinking about asking for some work at the school. Our visit has served as the perfect introduction for him and I'm sure he'll be a fine teacher so we wish him the best of luck.



English lessons with Marcus and Kirsty at a school in Wugang  
Back in the countryside our road winds through villages where we catch glimpses of card games and marjong through almost every doorway. Gambling seems to be a national past time. Every now and then we also see an expressway high up on a bridge over a valley or smashing its way through a mountain. They seem to be built by drawing a straight line between major cities and throwing an unlimited budget at the project. One dilapidated town has an expressway passing right over the top

of it and an optimistic luxury jewellery brand has put up adverts on the concrete columns below. I suspect that the people using the rough road that we're on would be more interesting in spending their money on car repairs and new boots than a pair of gold earrings.





## Card school with The Chairman



An intense game of marjong





Expressway on stilts. We get the lowly local road below.

So our expectations of China being a difficult place to travel through are quickly being thrown out the back of the bike. We keep meeting amazing people who want to do whatever they can to help. None more so than Shirley, Ronnie and Mr Tang who we find a few days later in the city of Yuanling.

It's another cold, wet day. We've been missing our thicker quilt and waterproof gloves which were sent home before we flew to India, thinking we'd be skipping winter this year. After a night wearing all our clothes we find some £1 thermal gloves and push on but today our gears are playing up. On closer inspection I can see that the cable housing has split and I don't have any spare. We ride 20km to the next city, stuck in one gear, then try and seek out a bike shop. There's nothing obvious on the main drag so I run into a random shop to ask for help. Here we meet Shirley who makes a phone call, hops on her scooter and tells us to follow her. We end up at

Mr Tang's shop and he quickly fixes the cable then invites us to warm up inside.



Not a good day to get a mechanical problem



We've discovered that people in this region stay warm by sitting at a table that has a quilt surrounding it that you tuck your knees under. Under the table is a fire. Now a burning log under a table with your legs inches away from it may sound dangerous... well it is dangerous but when it feels this good we're prepared to risk a few singed hairs or some third degree burns.



Toasting knees under the table

To be honest Mr Tang's fire table uses a ferocious electric heater but is no less cosy or potentially lethal. We get given



plenty of hot green tea and try to explain our trip but soon it's time to go again. Just as we get set to push off Mr Tang stops us and asks if we'd like to stay the night. Looking up at the black clouds, then down at our watches to see that it's 4:30 already, then back at the fire table it's an offer we can't refuse.

Mr Tang and Shirley quickly make friends and some food is ordered for an impromptu dinner in the bike shop. Although they both speak a little English a lot of the conversation is conducted using Google Translate. We speak into the phone and a string of Chinese characters comes up on the screen, then they do the same with their phones and we get an English phrase to look at. It's as close as we can get to a babel fish and is about 40% accurate. Sometimes we get asked weird questions like "How faithful is your artichoke?" and I guess the messages we're showing them are equally confusing.



Dinner party in Mr Tang's bike shop

Ronnie arrives later and provides a more reliable interpretation service as he's an English teacher and keen



cyclist. We all head off to the town's only coffee shop, run by an entrepreneurial former pupil of Ronnie's, who treats us to drinks on the house. Then it's time to turn in, but first we make a plan to meet up with Shirley and Ronnie in the morning for a pre breakfast walk.

The decision to stay with Mr Tang proves to be a good one as there's heavy snow overnight. It makes our walk on Phoenix 'mountain' all the more scenic and we all practice Chinese voice exercises from the temple on the top. This essentially involves shouting at the top of your voice, or in Shirley's case, singing.



Snowy morning on Phoenix mountain in Yuanling





Snwoing in the temple on Phoenix Mountain

Back in town we met Mr Tang's brother and he buys us all breakfast. Each time we try and pay for something they refuse and we get told that this is the way they like to do things when looking after visitors. We don't want to risk offending them by refusing the gifts but no matter how hard we try we can't pay. We're overwhelmed.

One small thing we can do in return is to visit Ronnie's school to talk to his English class of 50 pupils. We dig out a few photos and tell a few stories which seems to go down well. They've been taught well by Ronnie, but for most of them this is the first time they've met a foreigner and heard a native English speaker.





Ronnie shows us round the staff room



This is supposed to be the Staff Room but the children crammed in to meet us.





The students at the Yuanling school

The inevitable lunch invitation takes us to a restaurant round the corner with two other teachers and Ronnie's wife where we pose for photos with the waitresses. The teachers are all amused by the attention we're getting and one of them asks if it would be the same if they visited us in Bristol. Sadly I have to tell them that no it probably wouldn't.

The unexpected snow soon thaws but by then Mr Tang has insisted we stay another night and in the evening Shirley cooks up a feast back at the bike shop where we're joined by more local cyclists. We're beginning to get big headed, like the symbol on the gents toilet sign.



Outside the best bike shop in Yuanling

All of this was down to that chance meeting with Shirley and perhaps if we'd stopped at the shop next door instead we'd have been sent away with a shake of the head or directed to a



different bike shop. Our trip is full of 'what ifs' though and we just have to see what each decision brings. Luckily in this case we chose well and had a brilliant couple of days as a result.



Shirley wrapped up well on her scooter

We're now nearly half way across China but there's still over 1500km left to ride before we reach Beijing. We've got 3 weeks



to get there which should be plenty but we now know that this country is full of unexpected surprises so can't take anything for granted.





Traditional baby basket in Yuanling

The speed of the internet is terrible here in China so I've not been able to add as many photos as I'd like. As soon as we get a better connection I'll update the China gallery with a few more.