Eugene Kaspersky

China Unknown

Volume One – the Mountains

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Chinese mountains

China is astonishingly rich in both natural and historical beauty. The fanciful forms and contrasts, the rich colors of the lakes, the lush green valleys, the deserts and their gigantic dunes. As to the famed history – there's what's known about, and also the still unsolved mysteries of the distant past. Temples and monasteries, palaces, colossal caves cut into mountains, pagodas, and of course the Great Wall. The list goes on and on...

Curiously, many of China's natural and historical masterpieces are practically unknown outside the country. Why that's so – I don't know for sure. Maybe it's because the Chinese tend not to attract tourists from abroad; after all, China has more than enough tourists of its own – hundreds of millions of them! Anyway, this inward-looking orientation means that a great many amazing places in the country don't even get a mention on, say, Wikipedia; finding out about them is often only possible through the tales of tourists who've been there and been duly bowled over. Thus, for now, there exists a large void when it comes to China and world tourism – a void I'd like to fill in a little, bit by bit, as best I can based on my own experiences...

China tales on my blog

There are more natural and historical sites in China than anywhere else in the world. But that shouldn't be too surprising...

First of all, China's history dates back at least four thousand years, and since ancient times it's been home to a variety of ethnic groups who've left their unique traces – and often mysteries – behind (not to mention the cultural heritage of China from the times of empires!).

Secondly, the natural beauty of China is very diverse: the highest peaks on the planet, amazing rock structures, desert landscapes, cascades of lakes, and much, much more. For this reason, it's simply impossible to fit the most interesting material into one book; accordingly, it will have to be divided up into categories. First – in this volume – there'll be stories of the mountains and rock formations of China; later will come everything else.

Since it's physically impossible to describe everything and show all the views from all angles, some of the lesser significant sights need to be passed over. In line with this, what are needed are some characteristics and criteria for sorting – grading – these sights. The Chinese have developed their own tourist classification, which goes from one to five A's (A, AA, AAA, AAAA, AAAAA), with the maximum grade, logically, being AAAAA – reserved only for the very best objects of natural beauty.

So far, so good; however, I don't always agree with their classification – mostly since what I value appears to differ from what the Chinese authorities value. I'm more interested in the contemplative component of an object of tourism. Another key thing for me is the possibility of getting to a given object without special preparation – be that of a mountaineering, water-navigation, speleological (caving), or other nature. In the Chinese classification, the main criteria are (I quote): "transportational accessibility, safety, cleanliness, uniqueness and remarkableness". Those leave the visual beauty and contemplative-admirability of an object in last place, with the main things being keeping tourists warm, cozy and nourished. To me that's all way off the mark. Accordingly, some years ago I decided to come up with my own classification of touristic awesomeness: the five-K classification!...

Criteria and classification of touristic coolness and beauty:

KKKKK (5K): Unique, breathtaking, monumental and varied.

KKKK (4K): Two out of: breathtaking, and/or monumental, and/or varied.

KKK (3K): One out of: breathtaking, monumental, or varied.

KK (2K): Fun, and not typical of everyday life.

K (1K): Very beautiful – especially if it's a sunrise or sunset.

0K: Nothing to see here – figuratively, and also literally (like a dawn fog on the Omsk-Tyumen highway).

NB: For categories 0-4K, the uniqueness of the given object gets an added K.

Thus, the main thing is the contemplativeness of the object and the possibility of getting to it without special preparation. Comfort and safety aren't the most important things.

In this book, I only include the Chinese mountain must-sees that were granted by me personally and wholly subjectively either 4K or 5K. There are, of course, other mountains in China with lower grades, but there are neither the pages nor the time (yours) for those to be included here.

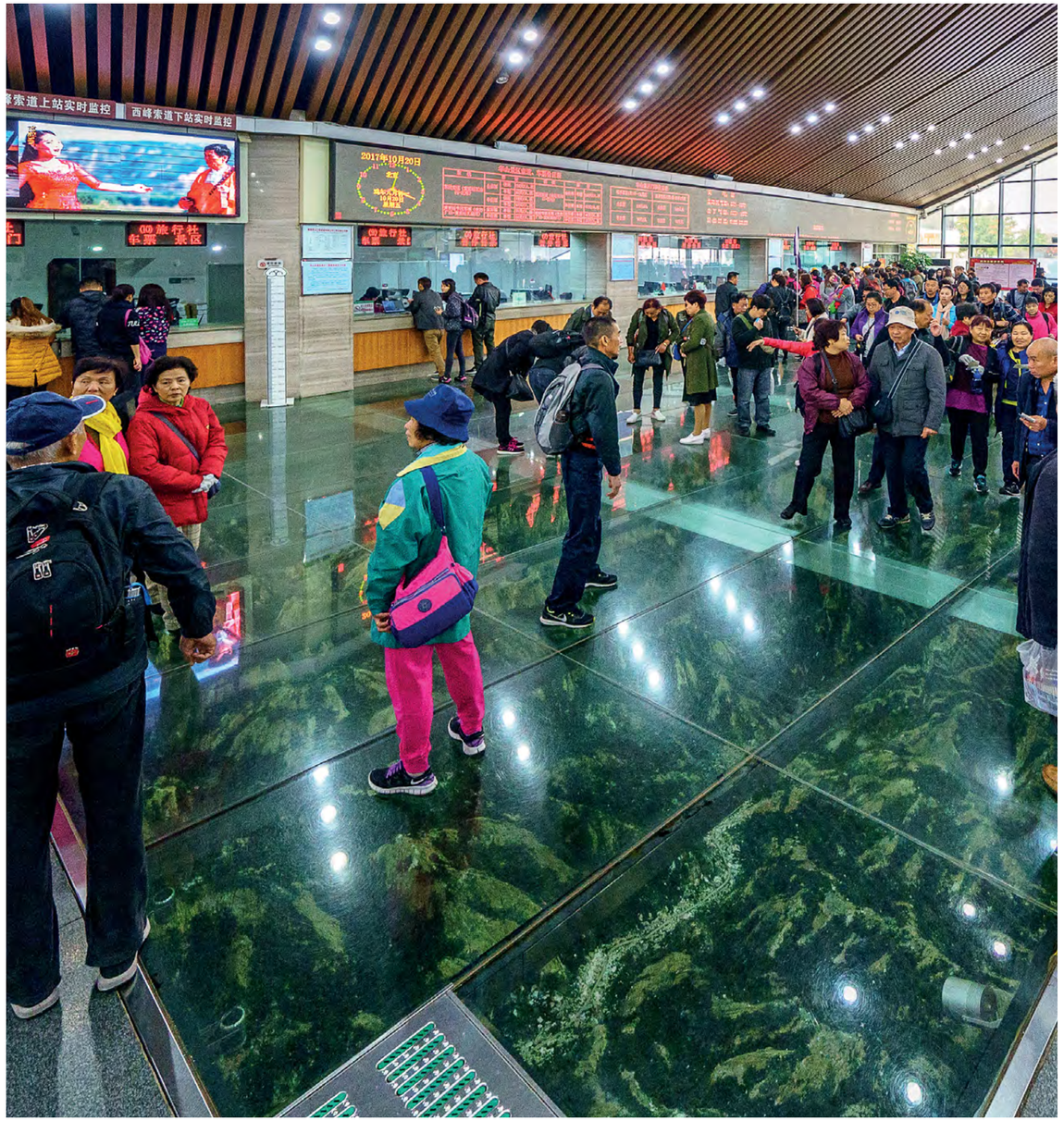
First of all – a small, China-specific life-hack...

During China's Golden Week (made up of the anniversary of the formation of the People's Republic of China, plus several days-off tagged on to it), there's absolutely nothing to do for the foreigner in China – not for business (no one's working), and not for tourism (the Chinese themselves are all on holiday – so everywhere's packed). Indeed, according to the internet some 700 million Chinese take a vacation inside the country during Golden Week! However, right after Golden Week everyone's already returned home before the working week begins, and so tourist attractions, national parks, and mountain routes are all practically empty. Obviously this is the best time for Chinese tourism: it's a week or two when you can travel, trek, and see China's top tourist attractions comfortably, meditatively, practically in silence, and with none of the usual pushing and shoving caused by overcrowding. One day you'll thank me for this tip :-).

All righty. Time to get to the tales about the very best mountains and rock formations of China. Prepare yourselves: there are plenty!...

Mount Hua (华山)

Mount Hua is situated around a hundred kilometers to the west of the city Xi'an (~150km by road). It's also known as Huashan, which means "China Mountain" – with the "China" written in the old hieroglyphic, meaning "of all Chinese", or something like "Big China". Those are the official names. But I call it Fairytale Mountain!...



We were here some two weeks after the end of Golden Week in the fall. That meant the volumes of (almost exclusively domestic) tourists had already started to rise – as you can see in the pic.

Here we were in the entrance building; underneath the glass – a scale model of what was to come. Then it was into a coach to get to the funicular.

Before the funicular – some steps; but lazier tourists can bypass the steps on this here contraption.

Chinese maps are generally informative but hard to follow. However, here at the very top of the mountain there are that many signs and maps that getting lost in this particular instance is practically impossible.

The most important thing to remember here is that there are two funiculars, and that you need to take the one that goes to the upper peaks. In all there are three peaks: to the west, south and east. There's also a mid-altitude peak a little lower. Then there's a lower – northern – peak, which it's best to finish off with by taking the "northern" funicular. Or you can do all the ascending and descending on foot. Confused? Then just remember the optimal route – the western > southern > eastern > northern peaks – and you'll be fine.

Here we are on the western peak; over the page – the view therefrom...

How folks love to strike unusual poses against... unusual backdrops!

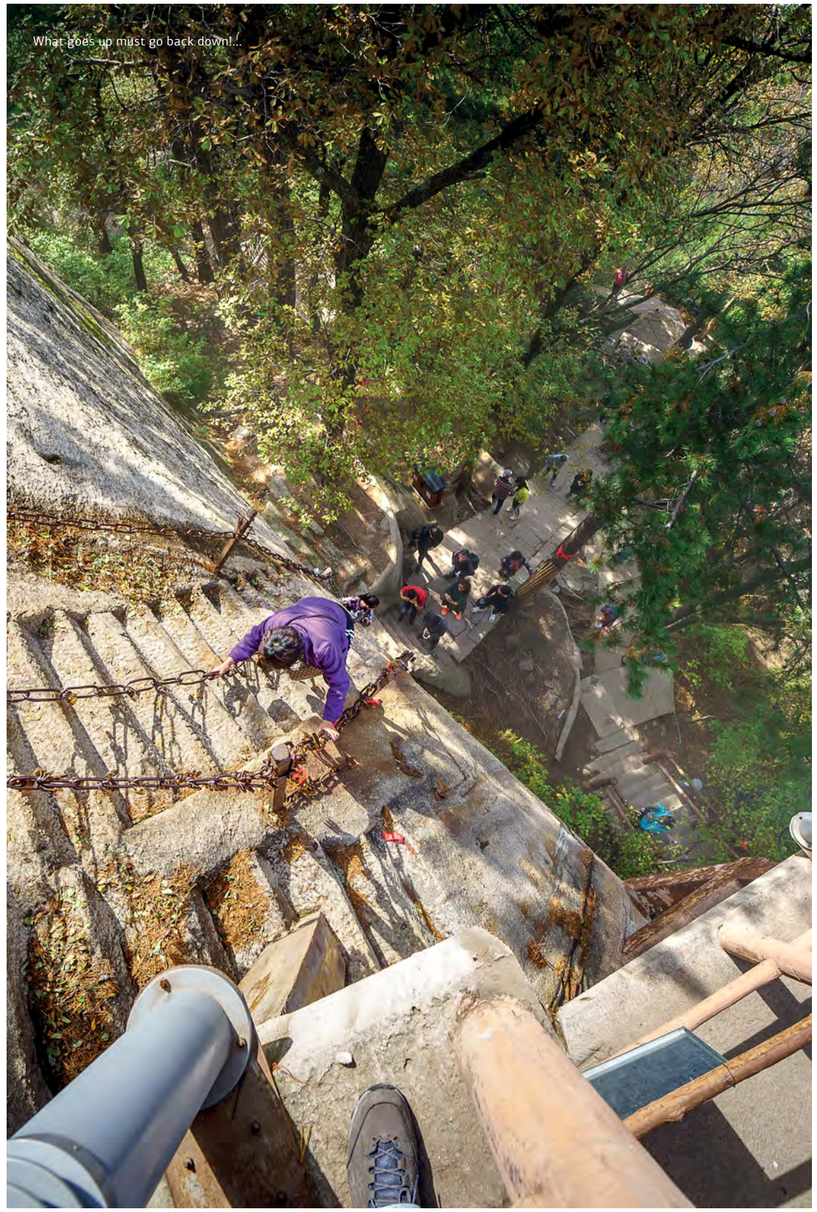
The southern peak: also oh-my-grandiosely-gorgeous – no matter which direction you look in!

And on the way up to the peaks – also picturesque

But best of all is the eastern peak with its famous “Plank Walk” – a suspended path that hugs a sheer cliff face. Even post-Golden Week, the line for it was enormous – we had to wait more than an hour. So if you ever come here and dare “walk the plank”, either take the first bus in the morning to get there, or stay in the hotel at the peak.

奇险天下第一山

Onward – upward!...



What goes up must go back down!...

The Phoenix Pavilion

The central peak turned out to be a little uninspiring compared to its neighbors; the views all around were still impressive!

The path back down to the northern peak

This tree is 530 years old!

These are the steps atop the narrow mountain ridge. Impressive...

And here's the final, northern peak.

And that was that: our mountain trek – done. Next it was into the cable car (the second one – on the northern slope), a photo to remember our experience by, then back to our digs. Excellent walk, fantastic views. Undeniably KKKKK!

The fish stone

Next time, I plan to go on foot up the steps. At the level of the top of the funicular it's 700 meters above sea level; the northern peak – 1614m; the difference: 914 meters. So I guess that means that in two to three hours you could easily get to the top before sunrise. Doable – but still a challenge. The backup option if not feeling up to it: simply stay the night in the hotel near the top.

And talking of steps...

The natural-wonder tourisms of the mountainous kind in China are all extremely steps-heavy. Well, of course they are (the clue's in the "mountainous" bit.). Everywhere you go – it's steps, steps, steps. Up and down, up and down – all day long. Often, you think you see up ahead the top of the flight of steps you're climbing, and are looking forward to a well-deserved break... but no – around the corner of a cliff they mischievously carry on up and up and up yet farther. More mischievousness: all of a sudden the width and height of the steps switch places – becoming real narrow so you only just manage to stay on them, and real tall so you have to engage 4x4 mode. On one trip, in 2018, in 10 days we walked/climbed/clambered over a hundred kilometers on paths and such precarious steps – with some 5000 meters of up-and-down along the vertical (300-600 meters per day). Yes – it can be very tough. So physical training before a trip is highly advised – as is dressing appropriately in comfortably breathable sports clothing.

Read on my blog:
Hip, hip, Hua!

Huangshan (黄山)
The ornate paysages of the Yellow Mountain

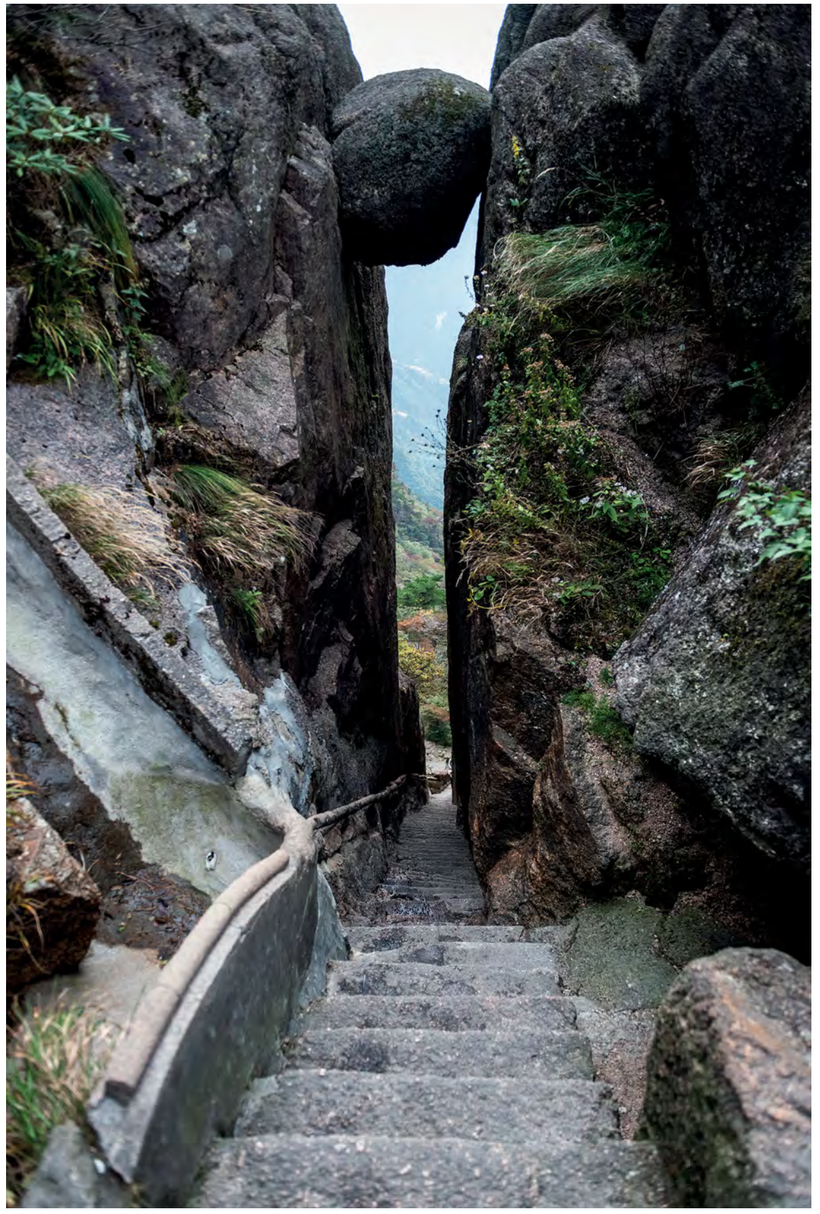
Named after the slightly yellow hue to the bedrock that makes up this mountain, Huangshan literally means Yellow Mountain. In 2017 we walked around it for a short while in thick fog and saw practically nothing. We therefore decided to return the following year with the hope of sunny weather so that we could verify for ourselves the truth of the rapturous accounts we'd found on the internet about this mountain.

So how was it? Well, let me just say that the internet doesn't (always) lie! Huangshan indeed turned out to be a uniquely beautiful mountain massif with granite cliffs, sprawling landscapes, and sheer drops with green pines and other brightly-colored autumnal shades. Put another way: another 5K-category mountain!

The internet states that these mountains were formed some hundred million years ago (the time of the dinosaurs), then glaciers and assorted other erosive effects did their thing down the millennia to carve out these here outlandishly unique configurations. These days it's all a protected national park and is one of the most popular tourist destinations in China. For example, in 2007 these mountains were visited by 1.5 million tourists; in 2017 – more than three million.

Three cable cars go up to the mountains, and everyone seems to want to travel in one early in the morning. The result is you can be standing in line for three to four hours – about the same time it takes to go up on foot! But that's when there are lots of tourists about; the only time it's quieter is, as mentioned, right after Golden Week.

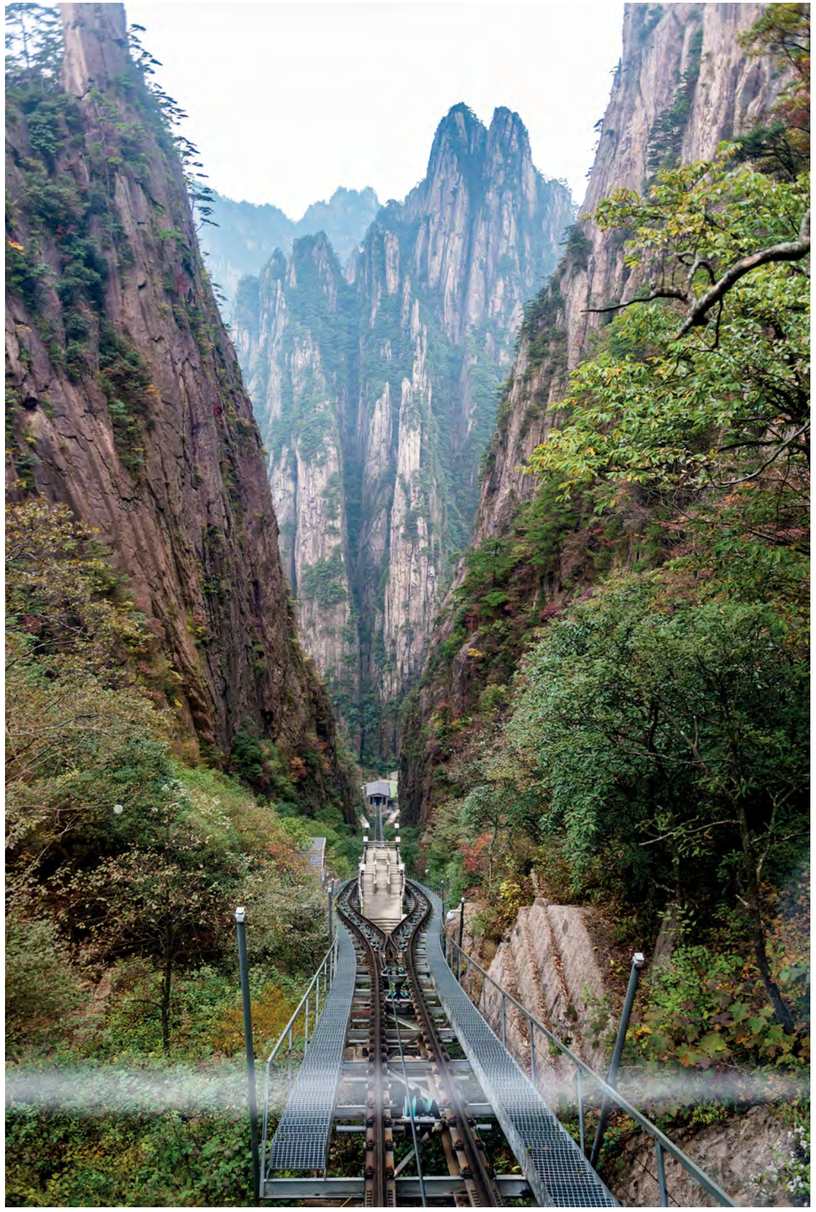
Fifteen minutes of picturesque ascent – and we're at the top. From there, paths go off in different directions. They're signposted – but not always in clear English in addition to Chinese, so it's good to know the main hieroglyphs for directions. The paths are sturdy and smooth – sometimes paved – and in places cut into the granite of the cliffs. Perfect! And it all adds up to a most comfortable and pleasant walk – which only complements the main feature: the extraordinarily beautiful views all around.



For those too tired (or unable) to walk, porters' services are offered – just as in most other parks of China. But porters are just one feature of the generally excellent service here. All paths are straight, clean, and with handrails and fences/walls where necessary. There's no shortage of trash cans – but they're not just any old trash cans, but smart and out-of-the-way ones cut into rock, for example; and these never seem to get full as workers regularly appear who empty them. The restrooms are clean (though perhaps on busy days their sterility may take a dip), and Chinese fast-food establishments appear by the paths every half-hour-to-hour or so.

So yes, walking here in good weather is really comfortable. But in order to take in all the outstanding natural beauty – including both a sunrise and sunset – one day is categorically insufficient. The full route here takes two full days. And for convenience you can spend the night around the mountain tops in a fairly decent hotel (though the food isn't too great). Or if the budget's tight, tents can be hired by the night from the hotels.

Now you know about the comforts and the places to say, let's be off on our walkies!...



Sikhai Canyon (西海) – one of the most impressive Huangshan landmarks.

That evening – a sensational sunset! Best viewed from Turtle Peak or Bright Top Peak.

It turned out that the two most OMG peaks – Lotus and Tiandu (都 and 峰) – take turns to be open to the public. Lotus is open for five years, then Tiandu (meaning Heavenly Capital, btw) for the next five, and so on. Therefore, having been once, you need to come back again in five years' time!

Check out the steps that go up the ridge all the way to the top.

What goes up, must come down – way down: a full hour or two (!) down endless spiral steps to the bus. Some of my travel companions had really sore legs afterward, since the admittedly tough Huangshan walk was first on our itinerary, and they hadn't had the chance to build up gently. Note for next time/to those thinking of coming here: special footwear needed, and training in the gym (or – better – jogging of a morning for months beforehand) advised.

Not far from the Huangshan massif there's another, very similar, absolutely mind-blowing mountain called Mount Sanqing. A sacred Tao mountain (known as the "sister" of Huangshan), apparently it boasts magical views of the surrounding landscapes. Must check it out next time...

Briefly – on logistics
There are several ways to get to this mountain. The simplest: via the local airport – to which there are many flights from all over the region. There's the train. There's also coach – which takes five to six hours from Shanghai.

Once here – how to do the walking?...

It seems to me it's best to hike anticlockwise (but clockwise is possible too). For example, to spend the night at the Hot Springs hotel, and then early the following morning walk to the cable-car base (just over a kilometer away) and take the first cable-car of the day – so as not to have anything to do with the buses. Then you climb up to the Lotus, and later descend down Sikhai Canyon. You spend the night in the Baiyun Hotel, enjoy the sunrise the following morning – and complete a half-circle. We walked anticlockwise following the signposts and it all worked out well.

Read on my blog:
Yellow Mountain

On the “Avatar” set: the Wulingyuan National Park,

also known as the Zhangjiajie National Forest Park (张家界国家森林公园)

A totally fantastic place – probably worthy of inclusion in the Top-20 most beautiful places in the world. 5K, without a doubt! The park is huge – apparently 369km². In all there are somewhere like three thousand rock columns of various forms and sizes, with all of them being impressive in terms of height: from a few hundred meters and upward. You can walk around here for hours; no – forever (especially if you don’t know Chinese and you get lost given that the signposts have scant English on them). But seriously – at an average tempo, you need at least three days to check out all the main beauty spots. And if you want to view them all but in different weather conditions, you probably need a whole week.

The thin columns rise up seemingly out of nowhere. The vertical edges are bare, while anything less than a sheer drop is covered with trees and other greenery. The mind is blown, while the jaw... would drop to the ground – if you could see it down below – and in both good and bad weather, which is all the more astonishing; also – from any angle: from up top looking down, or from the bottom and looking up: the effect is guaranteed to be the same. What does vary is whether you get wet in the rain, or burned under the bright mountain sun.

This is how they look from down below on a wet day. This was our first day – and we were wet too

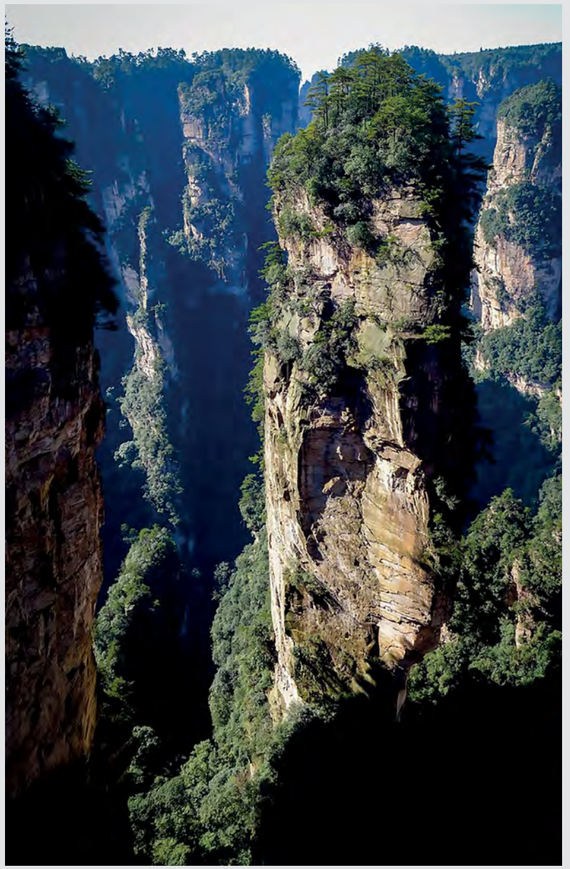
On this day there were clear skies and we got sunburned

There's actually a third variant of weather that these rock formations need to be checked out in: when the clouds lie deep in the valleys and the sun's shining bright above the rock towers, and the columns appear as if they're floating due to weightlessness as if in outer space – steaming away above the abyss. Alas, we didn't get to see this variant of weather; we'll leave that for next time...

But when there's impenetrable cloudiness the columns drown in white fog and comprehension of scale and distances is totally lost. Given these un-graspable dimensions and proportions, the brain simply ceases trying to understand it all rationally, and switches over exclusively to emotions. Then, when things brighten, you see all the details – right down to the very "roots" of the stone "tree trunks". All the same – heights, widths, breadths and volumes – still impossible to gauge.

Here and on the facing page, for example, are pairs of views of the same locations: one under a bright blue sky; the other amid cloudy/misty/foggy gloom.

The height of this stone arch (which you can walk across, btw) is around a thousand meters!...



...While the height of this column is a whopping 1080 meters! That's a full kilometer with an extra 80 meters as a bonus. Oh my *gangly*! By the way, it's now called Avatar Hallelujah Mountain!

They say that the landscapes here impressed James Cameron so much that, upon returning home, he immediately set about creating the movie Avatar. I agree, it looks strikingly similar. It seems the background scenery for the movie wasn't filmed here, but Cameron most certainly would have taken photos (there's no way he wouldn't have). And now, naturally, the theme's being actively capitalized upon by the ever-enterprising Chinese.

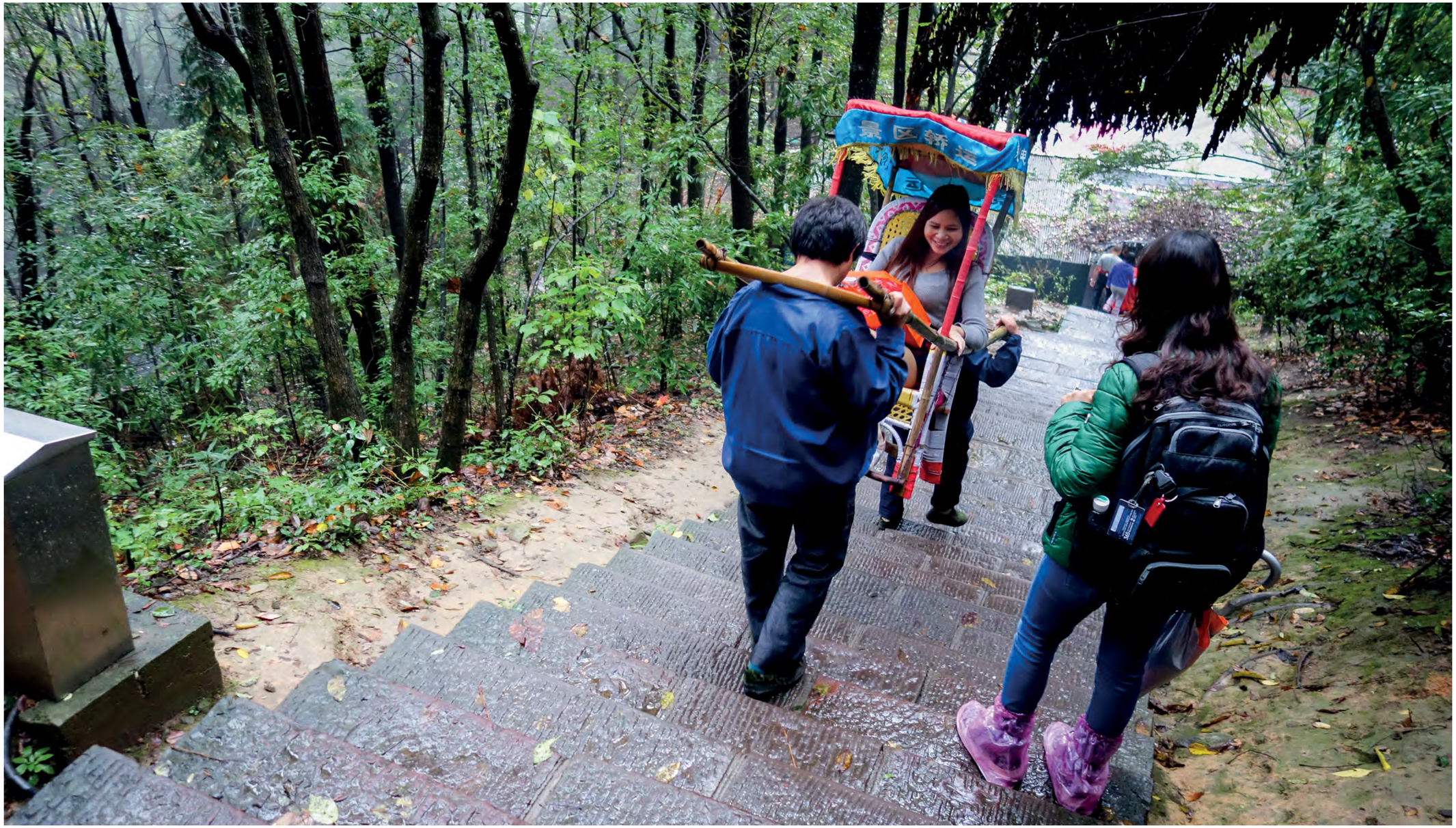
The maps you come across in the national park aren't very useful. In fact, understanding the distances you need to cover and the directions you need to go in without knowing Chinese is practically impossible. There are some English translations – but they don't help much either!

Then there are the battalions of Chinese tourists swarming the most scenic spots – even during low season (I can't imagine what it's like in the summer or during Chinese holidays). But that's the case with all popular tourist spots in China. The enthusiasm for travel here is just off the charts, and most of China's must-visit sites have long been adapted for industrial (large-scale, high-speed) tourism.

This park's no exception. Everything's well-organized, nicely painted and well-kempt, with solid paved paths and steps. However, you do notice litter along the edges of the trails, and it's especially upsetting seeing it dropped down the slopes into the Avatar gorges.

Buses run in all directions. Tourists are transported to the highest points in funiculars and even an elevator. Every 15 minutes or so at the side of the paths/steps, there are small stands selling snacks and drinks – good for refreshing yourself before continuing on your way.

But if you're completely exhausted, don't worry – on the steepest climbs and descents (some reaching 500–600 meters in elevation), porters are on hand ready to carry you anywhere you want for a reasonable fee. However, sometimes they stop along the way to renegotiate the price (we witnessed one such dialogue)!



These stunning natural constructions are to be found in southeastern China. And I'd highly recommend anyone to visit. A photographic shock is guaranteed. Every camera and smartphone here instantly seems to develop an automatic "masterpiece" button!

A word of warning: you need to be in good physical shape! If not (since you can't get everywhere on the paths or by bus), the soreness in your legs from climbing all the steps may be just too much to bear. And you often have to walk up and down steps just to see everything from different angles.

What else? Be prepared for real changeable weather – from scorching sun, to persistent and annoying drizzle.

And finally (on the “Avatar” national park) – how to get there and where to stay.

First of all, I didn’t expect to see so much infrastructure deep in the Chinese provinces, and by the looks of it I wouldn’t have seen any of it just two or three years ago since it’s all brand new. Thus, there are a great many shiny and clean hotels these days – and all within walking distance of the national park.

Getting to the park is also easy. It’s about 30-40 minutes from the airport in Zhangjiajie (the capital of the local districts), which takes 20+ flights daily from various parts of China (and for some reason also South Korea). I counted two flights from Beijing, 4-6 flights (depending on the day) from Shanghai, one daily flight from Guangzhou, and so on. By the way, the airport is also brand new, rather spacious, and clearly designed to handle large flows of passengers.

More on my blog:
On the Avatar set – in China

Danxia Landscapes (丹霞山)

"Danxia" is a collective term for the numerous red rock formations in China – a sort of national mountain-tourism brand. Any rocky landscape with reddish hues, steep cliffs, and significant bulk is classified as Danxia. Since we visited several such places, I felt I needed to organize and categorize them.

Danxia is undeniably 5K: Magnificent, monumental, and multifarious. And some Danxia rock formations are almost... indecently beautiful!

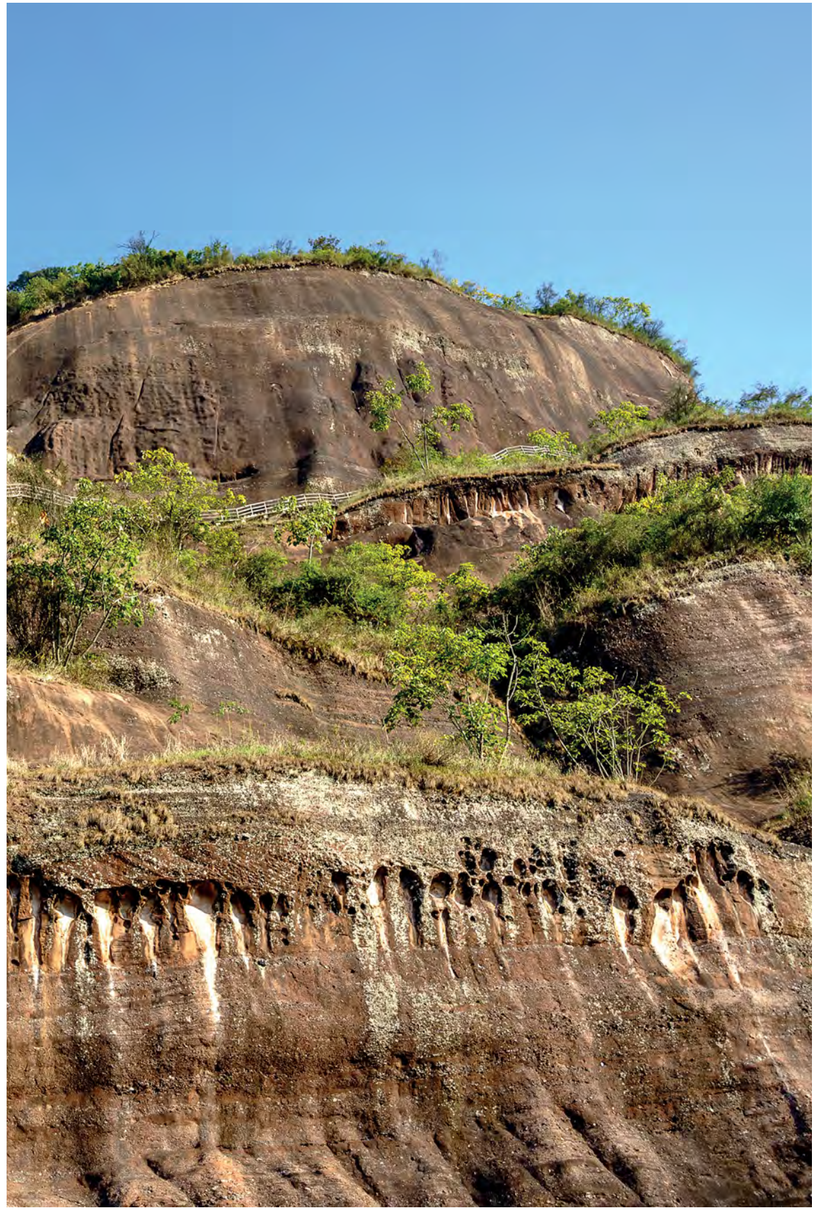
Danxia Mountain

There are dozens of Danxia locations across China; however, only this particular one is known specifically as Danxia Shan – which means Danxia Mountain.

So where should I begin? There's so much to tell... Ah, I know – let's start with a Danxia Shan sunrise!

The most popular (and famous) spot for taking in the sunrise around Danxia Shan is from the mountain known as Zhang Lao Feng. The name means Peak of the Elders – or simply Elder Peak in English. Getting up to the peak is super easy – just take the cable car, which starts operating at some ungodly hour every morning (we got there at 5am, but it was already in full swing ferrying eager tourists to the mountaintop).

Here we are at the top. After a quick walk we reach Zhang Lao Feng. And now I see why it's famous for its sunrises: the one we observed is one of the most incredible sunrises I've ever seen in my life! I'm not entirely sure, but... it might just be the best one ever! Simply mind-blowing. Total sensory overload!



Once the sun was fully up, off we set to explore the local contemplative landscapes. And there are plenty of them, in all directions, and of various calibers.

A few words of warning to those of you, dear readers, who may decide to one day come here...

First, there's lots and lots of walking needs doing – including lots and of ups and downs on steps, and daily distances of 15 to 20 kilometers.

Second, it feels insanely hot here. Temperatures hover somewhere between 28 and 35°C – but it's the crazy humidity that's really tough. Still, this is the tropics, and there's no getting around that fact. You just have to adapt: dress in light shorts and breathable sports t-shirts; otherwise your clothes will be unpleasantly wet through with perspiration (sports kit will be wet – but not quite as unpleasantly).

And third, as always, there'll be confusion with the Chinese names – so much so that sometimes you've no idea what's what or which direction you need to be going in.

Danxia Shan & Co. are located about 230km by road to the north of Guangzhou Airport (2.5-3 hours on a rather decent highway), not far from the regional "prefecture-level city" Shaoguan.

There are three main tourist-attraction mountains here:

1. 长老峰 – or "Tchan lao-fun" (as I hear it), aka Zhang Lao Feng (Elder Peak).
   As mentioned, catching a sunrise here is the thing to do; there's also "Woman's Rock", and a pretty river with boats (but you can walk around everything in half-an-hour).

2. 阳元石 – or "Yang-yue-shi," aka Male Mountain.
   Highlights: Male Rock, a gazebo at the very top of the cliff, and sunsets from the east side of the mountain.

3. 巴寨景区 – or "Ba-jai-den-chooey" (maybe I'm wrong, but that's how my ears hear it), aka Bazhai.
   Best bits: a terrace attached to a vertical cliff, 600 meters of climbing height (of which 200 meters are on a completely crazy staircase), and a super view of the mountain opposite – Kettle Mountain.

For those who sleep in and miss the sunrise – here's the entrance you go through...

...As for us early birds, we were already at the highest point of Zhang Lao Feng. Taking our time, we started the walk down into the valley.

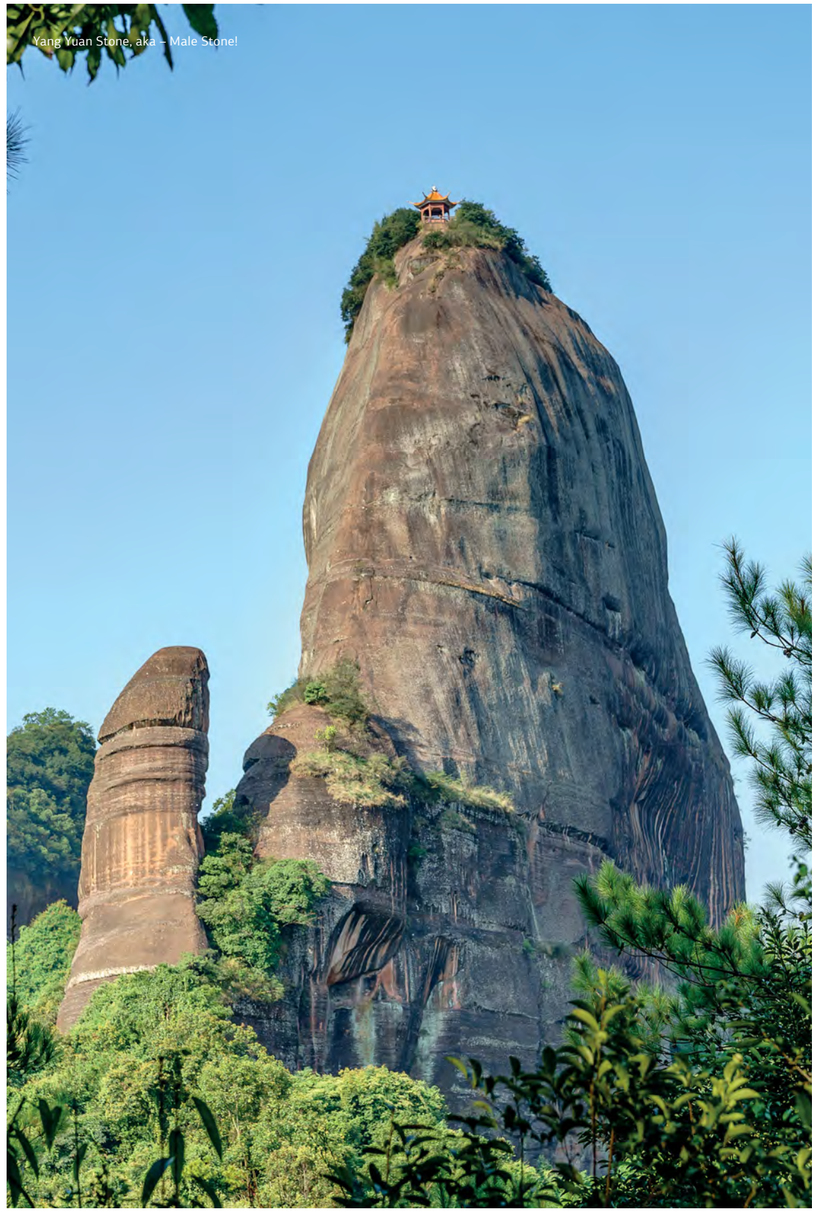
There are trails and staircases everywhere, but they're not always of the best quality; they also get rather steep, and though you're descending, it's still quite the endurance test.

Way up there perched atop the mountain is the pavilion we watched the sunrise from. From there we descended that tiny staircase clinging to the rock face.

And here's Female Rock (or Female Stone). The Chinese don't hold back on naming things! They don't seem to care, but I might have to slap an 18+ label on my Danxia stories!...

We had two walkabouts around here. The thing is, we'd only seen part of the mountain because we'd rushed past the left half (where the cable car is) in the dead of night without really noticing it. (Oh, I completely forgot! There's no need to bring warm clothes for the sunrise, but a headlamp is highly recommended.) So, after our first loop (cable car → sunrise → descent) we decided to climb back up again – this time in daylight.

The left-most (southern) part of the mountain – Rudder Stone



Yang Yuan Stone, aka – Male Stone!

Teapot Mountain. Yes – that's really what it's called. And it comes with a legend-fable, which goes something like this: there were two sisters who brewed up some too-weak tea for some companions, then something happened to them. That's all I recall. Anyway, the moral to the story is to never be mean when adding loose-leaf tea to the teapot for guests.

Read on my blog:
Up at the crack of Danxia

Up, down and around Danxia – all before noon

Guifeng (Turtle, 龟峰) Mountain and assorted other animal mountains

As of late 2025, the internet outside China knows almost nothing about this particular Turtle Mountain. Searching for Guifeng Mountain mostly brings up completely different places in China.

As we'd come to expect, at the park entrance there's an enormous, freshly built tourist center. This is where you buy tickets, check the map, hop on a bus – and off you pop.

Upon arrival we found out that there's not just Turtle Mountain here – which we'd hoped to fully explore in a couple of hours. It turned out there are a dozen different mountains and rock formations, and the hike taking in all of them takes five to six hours! Accordingly, a quick change of plan: let's see them all! Thus, in addition to the Turtle, we also checked out the rest of the "zoo" – including Camel Mountain, Elephant Mountain, and Snake Rock.

The route is circular. A bus drops you off at the start, and then you can either take a short walk and return by bus, or hike the full loop and come back via boat across a lake. It's easy to guess which option we (as usual) chose – see and do everything!

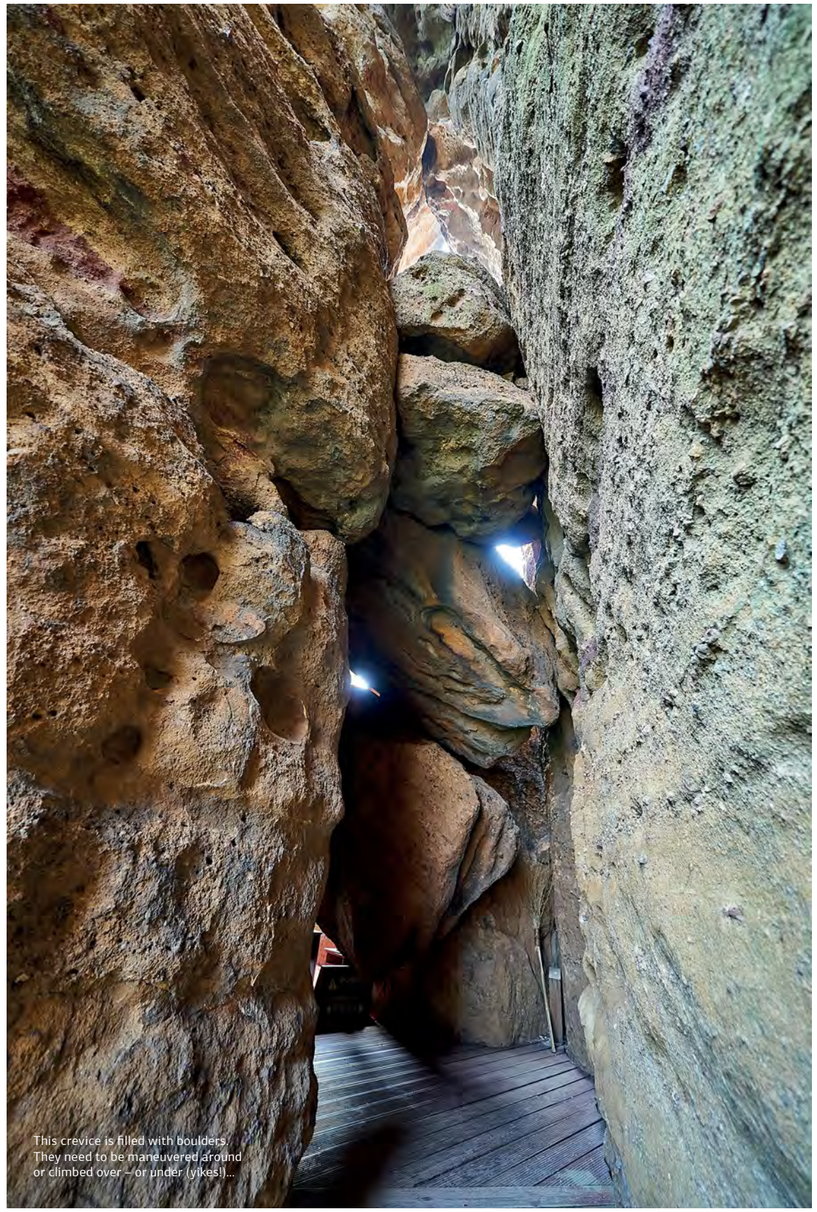
You go through this tunnel
to get to the animal mountains

This is the first narrow crevice we encountered – so narrow it's only single-file in places!

The path goes straight ahead and no branches come off it. Not much else to tell really. We walked, were bowled over by the scenery, and took a hundred or so photos. Then we walked some more – passing the next "zoo animal", gasped in awe, and snapped another ~hundred photos. And it went on and on like that through valleys and crevices for hours.

As to its rating, this is another undisputed 5K site – no question.

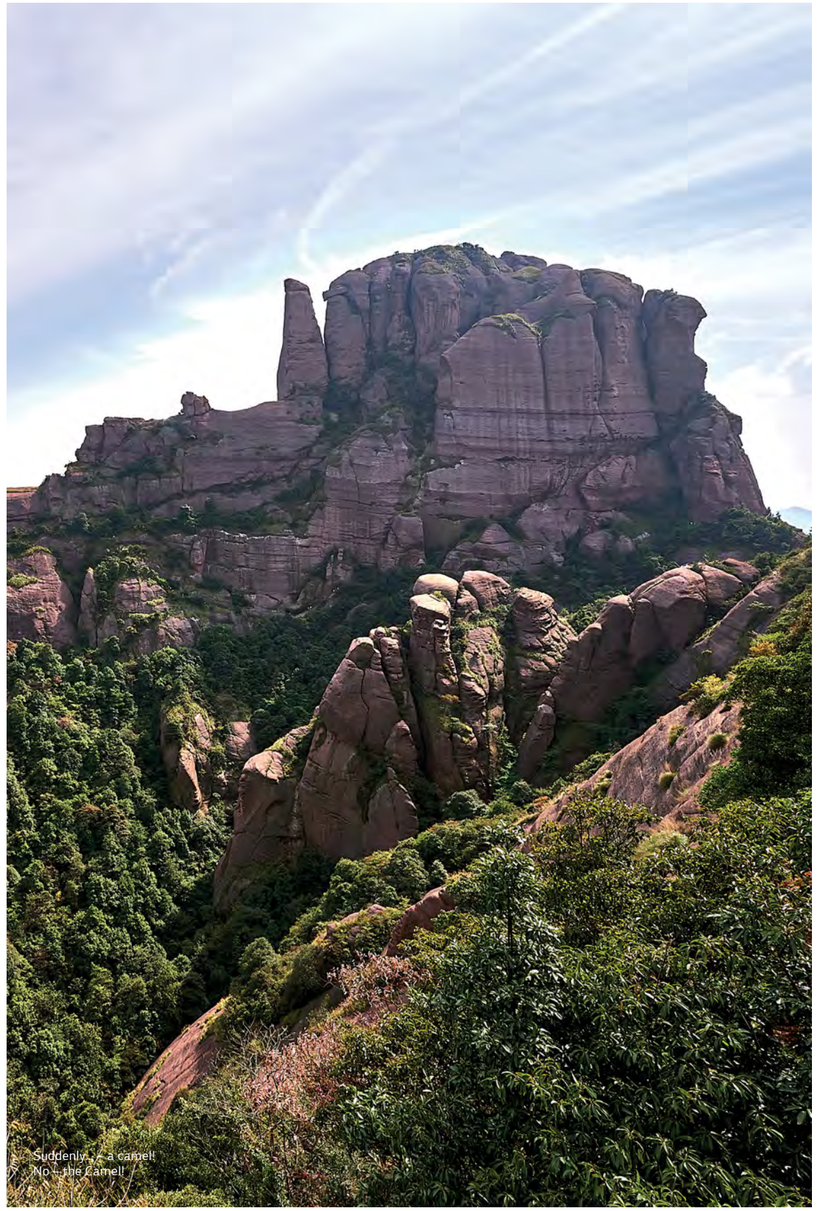
This tree is over a thousand years old! Wow... a sequoia!



This crevice is filled with boulders. They need to be maneuvered around or climbed over – or under (yikes!)...

You eventually pass through to the other side of the mountain; the views – oh my *grandiose!*

The views become increasingly grand and monumental; the stairs – increasingly steep!



Suddenly, – a camel!
No – the Camel!

And here we are at the top of the mountain opposite the Camel

What views!

'Alien' set in stone!

Not for the faint-hearted! It's best to just go through the practical motions: put on the shoe covers (so as not to scratch the glass), brace yourself, and just go for it!...

Alas, we didn't manage to get to the top of the Camel since all the paths and steps were closed for repairs. Instead we just stared at the surrounding scenery, took a breather at a café, then headed back down toward the lake and onto a boat.

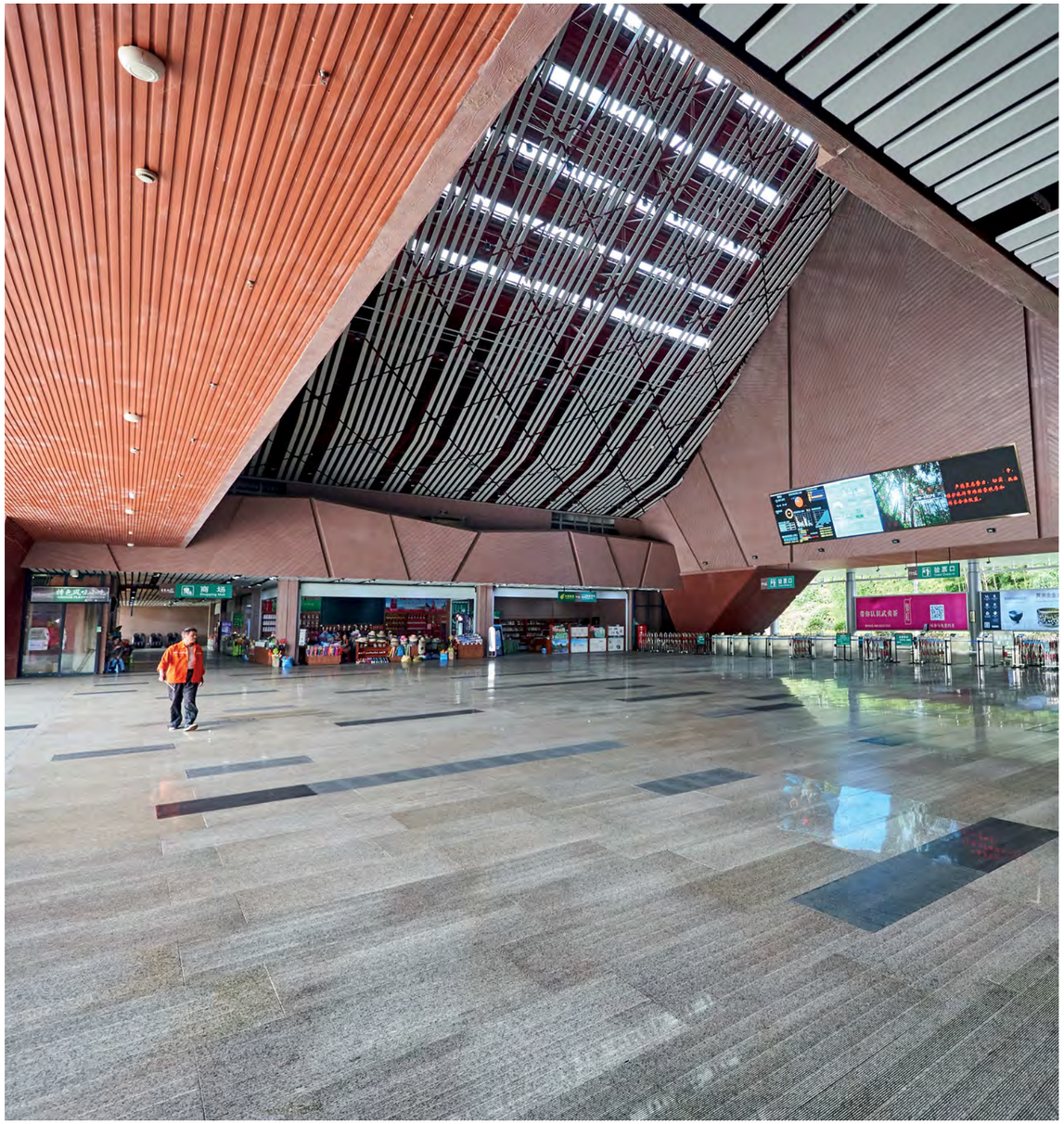
An amazing place. AAAAA and KKKKK. Simply must-visit. If you're ever in these parts, dear readers – a day at the Turtle is a must.

Read on my blog:
A turtle, a camel, and more – all in rock

The Wuyi Mountains (武夷山)

Also known as Wuyishan, the Wuyi Mountains are located in Fujian province, southeastern China. Another very decent Danxia-class mountain range, it features a narrow mountain river that cuts through it on which bamboo raft tours are organized. It's also well-known as a tea-growing region.

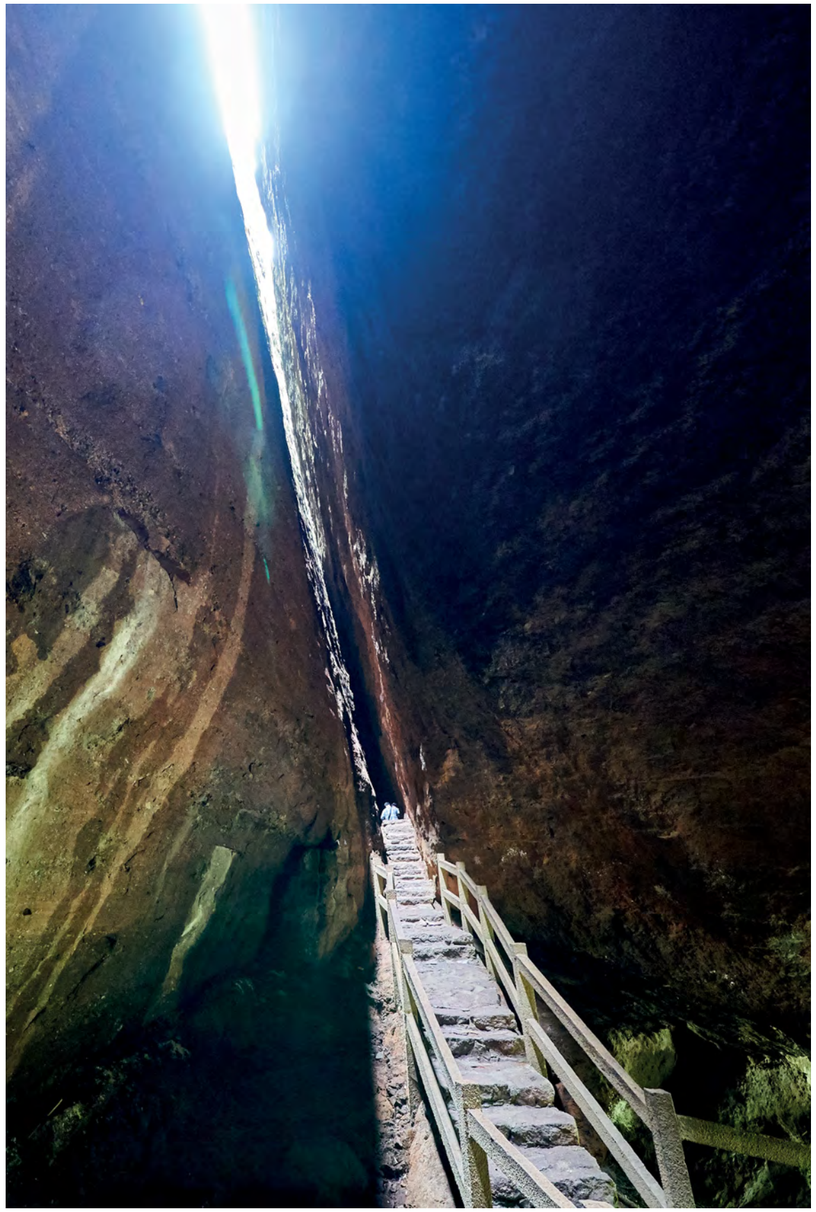
The site only recently began gaining traction as a new must-visit tourist destination, so everything here is freshly built, spotlessly clean, and neatly organized. China's grand scale continues to impress. If they do something, they do it BIG – and in the best way possible.



First up at Wuyishan – a big old cave. At its mouth you can go left or right. With no idea what the difference between the two routes might be, we randomly chose the left one. And it was the correct decision! It was the easy/amateur route – perfect as a warm-up, for, or course, we went the other way later (the more challenging/"pro" route), which turned out to be way more fun...

The cave splits into two cracks: right and left. Or, rather, it's the same crack, as any geometrically inclined reader can easily imagine.

Useful Wuyishan-caves hack: I highly recommend putting on sports-style, breathable shorts first thing in the morning without waiting for the midday heat. For the caves turned out to be Finnish saunas, Russian banyas, or Turkish hammams – whichever of those are the hottest and must humid :-)

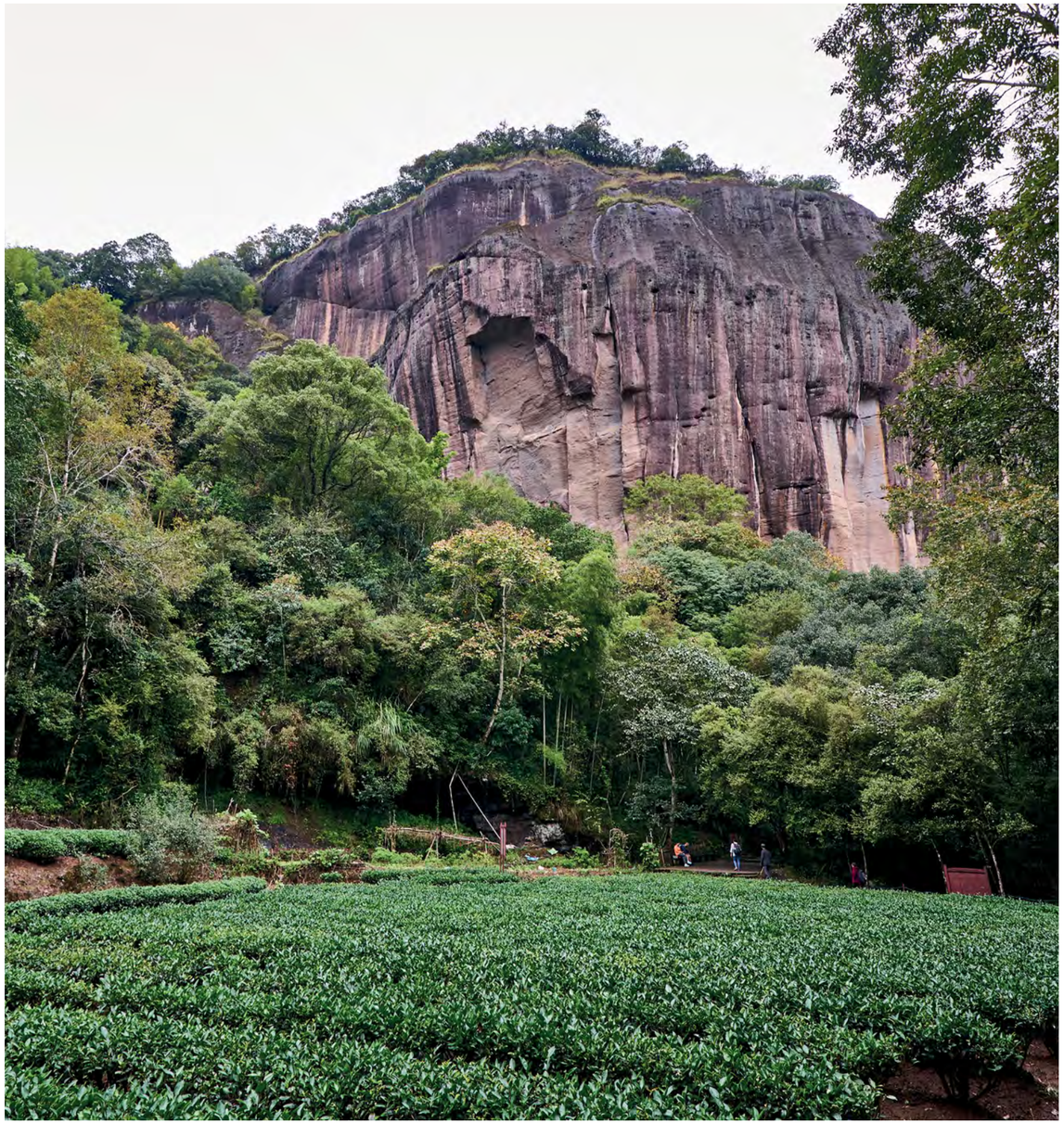


Here's the left crack: the exit from the cave

Our second crack at this... crack turned out to be tricky.

First there was a steep climb, but then it got so narrow it was almost impassable. I handed my backpack to a slimmer companion first, then my camera – and only then, inching sideways, did I manage to squeeze through. But don't get the wrong idea – my belly made it through just fine; it was my shoulders that got seriously scraped!

And nearby – tea fields.



Next up, we follow the “Wizard of Oz” Trail. But as to how far we walked along the yellow brick road – I’ve no idea. Let me warn you once again: all distances on maps installed along the way here are extremely inaccurate and unreliable. Road signs around here are confusing too – so much so that even native Chinese have trouble understanding where to go. And we should know since we had native Chinese in our group: they didn’t understand the signs either!

So you just keep on moving along – wherever the path may lead!

And again, endless tea plantations... right up in the mountains!

But the mountain-tea... *contemplantation* wasn't enough; we simply had to take a ride on the river on the bamboo rafts...

So we rushed to catch a bus. And here came a perfect example of the incomprehensible signage around here...

So, let's call the entrance to the "Park of Culture and Leisure" point A. There are also points B, C, D, and so on. The thing is, to get from D to B, you need to go via A! Why it's all so illogical I've no idea. And it's not the first time I've encountered such puzzling wackiness in China. Needless to say – we almost missed the bamboo rafting.

These aren't just red chairs – they're red massage chairs – hundreds of them! And they're set out in a snakes-and-ladders maze-like formation – much like you have maze-like barriers in airports to prevent crowding at the passport or security checks. But here – no barriers; massage chairs instead. So very China! :)

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TianYu Peak is the most beautiful spot in the whole of Wuyishan. Our feet were already rather sore from the hundred-or-so kilometers walked (plus the thousands of steps up and down); our eyes were somewhat glazed over from the overwhelming natural beauty all around, and our camera shutter buttons were overheating from the constant clicking! But we didn't give up, of course: we pressed on!...

If anyone felt like giving up, there was always the option of taking a "taxi" to the top for a very reasonable fee. We, of course (fitness value of the walk front of mind) passed

Here, there and everywhere, it's all about the tea. They say tea leaves grown here in the mountains are something real special. Not that I'd know: I have great respect for green tea, but I'm hardly well-versed in all its nuances and varieties. Anyway, we decided to take a quick walk along the "Tea Trail" here, during which plenty of "oohs" and "aahs" were to be heard from start to finish.

"Water Curtain Waterfall". Well, not much of a waterfall, really. But I can imagine how beautiful it must be during the rainy season.

Read more on my blog:
Wuyishan paths through crevasses and... tea plantations

Longhushan Mountains (龙虎山)

The name Longhushan literally means “dragon-tiger-mountain”. Longhushan is considered the birthplace of Taoism, so get ready to absorb a healthy dose of cultural material in addition to the breathtaking landscapes.

Actually, Longhushan refers not just to the colorful tiger-dragon mountains (of which there are a great many), but also a traditional Chinese town, a river rafting experience among the cliffs, and various other attractions in a park. Altogether, it makes up the Longhushan UNESCO Global Geopark, apparently!

As we'd come to expect, the park entrance and tourist center are cavernous buildings and vast areas designed to accommodate massive crowds of Chinese tourists at full capacity.

The first "attraction" in this rather large park is a walk among the cliffs. Then come the various water activities, the "Mosquito-Free Village" (yes, that's its actual name), and so on. Tour buses shuttle here and there throughout the park, allowing visitors to reach different points of interest, take a stroll, and either continue forward or head back – whatever suits them best.

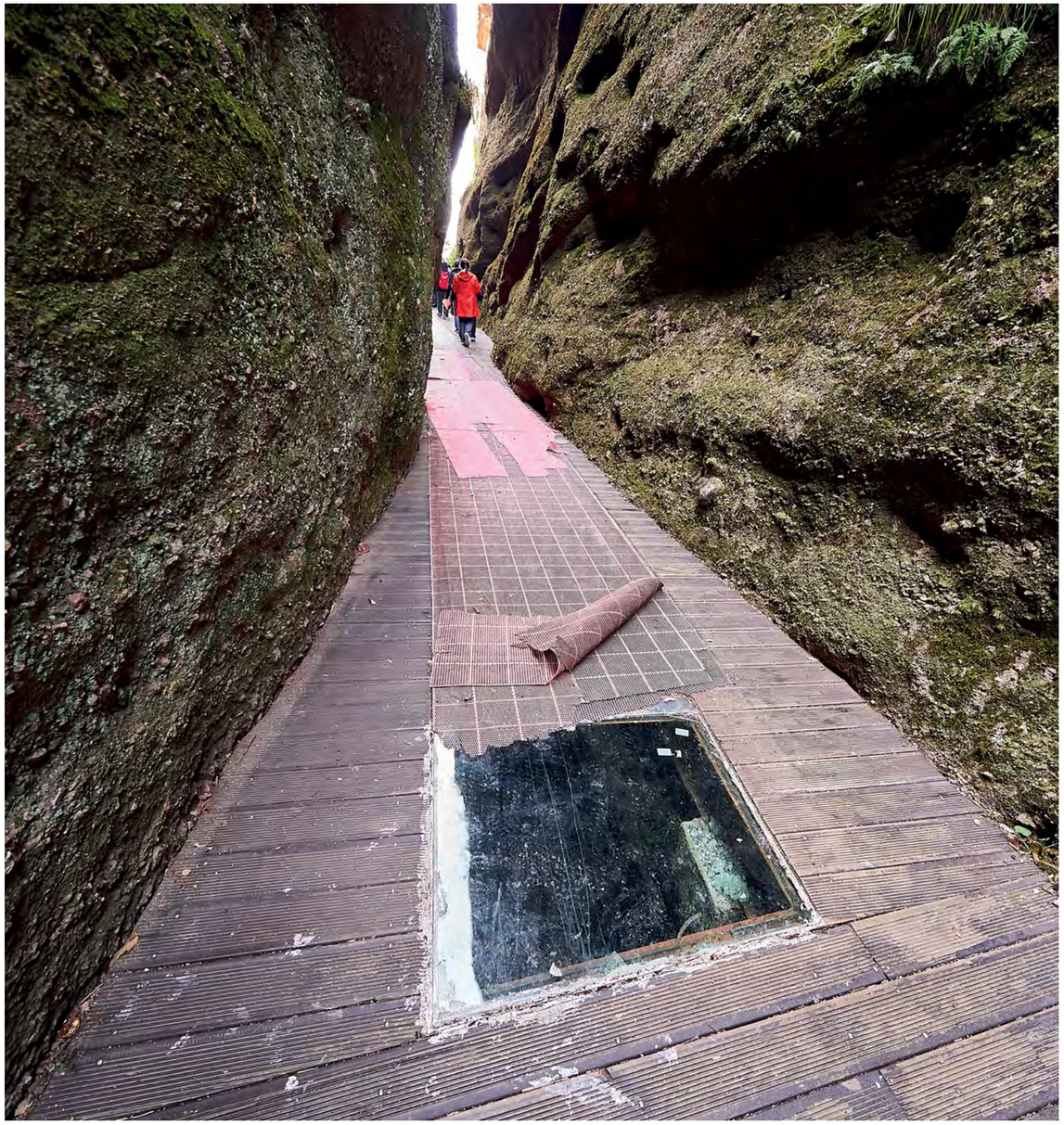
Naturally, all of this is rated AAAAA, has UNESCO heritage status, and has been awarded all sorts of other prestigious accolades (including KKKKK!).

The first bus stop is marked as a “walk along the red Danxia cliffs”. We step off the bus and head toward the cliffs. A short climb up some stairs, at the top of which a sign announces: “3 kilometers to the exit”. But such a distance doesn’t scare us, so off we go!...

It turned out that almost the entire three-kilometer hike was along a narrow pathway attached to a sheer cliff! In a word: insane! Not for the faint-hearted – only the brave! But it’s only a bit scary at first; after a while you get used to it, and you turn your attention more to the views all around and taking lots and lots of photos thereof. All in all – an unforgettable, unusual experience!

Sometimes the path squeezes through thin crevices in among the mountains in addition to the cliff-face hugging thing, but the latter is the most fun. So much fun, in fact, that at the end of it I wanted to walk it all over again: it's that thrilling! Highly recommended!

Curiously, there's no glass floor to this path, even though glass floors are rather popular in China. Well, some stretches do appear to be made of glass, but it's covered up with grubby rubber matting. In places the matting has worn away, and when you look down through the little windows you see remnants of... shattered glass! Just as well they cover it up with matting: don't want to scare the delicate tourists!



The views are simply mesmerizing! And it's impossible not to take a lot of photos...

Approaching the end of the walk – a “trunk” of rock; or should that be an “anteater” of rock?!

Walk – done. And what a walk it was. A magical place!

At night, uniquely unusual theatrical performances take place here. The actors remain in the scenery while the audience moves from one location to another. Then the spectators are seated in boats, and the show continues along the riverbanks and on the river itself, with the boats drifting slowly downstream. Music, dancing, light displays, lasers in the mist... A fascinating event – and unlike anything I've seen or heard before!

Read on my blog:
Longhu – by day and by night

Mount Jianglang (江郎山)

Also known as Jianglangshan, this Danxia mountain, located in the Zhejiang province in eastern China, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

There isn't much else around here besides this trident-shaped formation. However, here (as in many other places), you can see just how seriously China approaches tourism (rather, since we're in China – mass tourism). A massive tourist center was built from scratch, from where are organized dozens of buses shuttling visitors to and from the mountain-attraction in a continuous loop. Everything is new, clean and well-maintained; and right after Golden Week – practically empty! Perfect!

We boarded a bus, transferred to another, arrived at the mountain, studied the trail map – and off we set. The paths wind through the cliffs, and after a not-too-steep and not-too-long ascent, we reached a small viewing platform.

I don't like vertical photos, and this was taken with wide lens, but on this occasion there was no other way.

En route to the viewing platform, we passed this here rock that had broken off from a nearby cliff many years ago. As to its structure, you can see that it consists of small compressed stones, many of which are round – meaning they were smoothed by water or ice. This suggests that these mountains are made up of remnants of much older mountains, which first formed, and much later were destroyed – with the rock fragments getting polished by ocean waves or while they were carried along by glaciers, then compressed under immense pressure into a single structure. Eventually, tectonic movements pushed them upward, and erosion sculpted them into this trident-like design.

Alas, the highest platforms were unfortunately closed. But they say they'll be reopened soon (maybe they already are) once the renovations are completed, and it'll be possible to climb all the way up.

The views here are just stunning. And as the sun shifted westward, it occurred to me that at sunset this spot would provide the most magical view of all of the trident. Will have to give that a go next time...

Now, if any of you, dear readers, ever feel like paying a visit to these geological wonders (note: accessible only by car or train – there's no airport) to see them in person, I'll say this: if the peaks are closed, two to three hours are enough for a good overview. And if you also want to climb to the very top – allow another two hours, including time for meditative contemplation and taking photos. You could also add another hour for a walk along the lake (without the bus). In short: plenty of options.

Read on my blog:
Awesome Danxia threesome

Mount Emei (峨嵋山). Buddha and nothingness

Located near the city of Leshan, Emei is one of the four sacred mountains of Chinese Buddhism. In clear weather, it offers breathtaking views of Sichuan province from an altitude of... three thousand meters! Though we visited in thick fog, it was still impressive.

We marveled at the Buddha statue at the top (beautiful in its symmetry), the ancient temples, and the sensations of our lowland-acclimated bodies suddenly being three kilometers meters above sea-level. By the way, the Buddha statue isn't ancient at all; it's in fact quite young (especially compared to the Buddha in Leshan) – built in 2006.

Alas, the fog/clouds meant that instead of magical landscapes and horizons we had to settle for admiring the... stone elephants – not that they aren't charming. Also – there were hardly any tourists about! There's always a silver lining. That's the true Buddhist way)

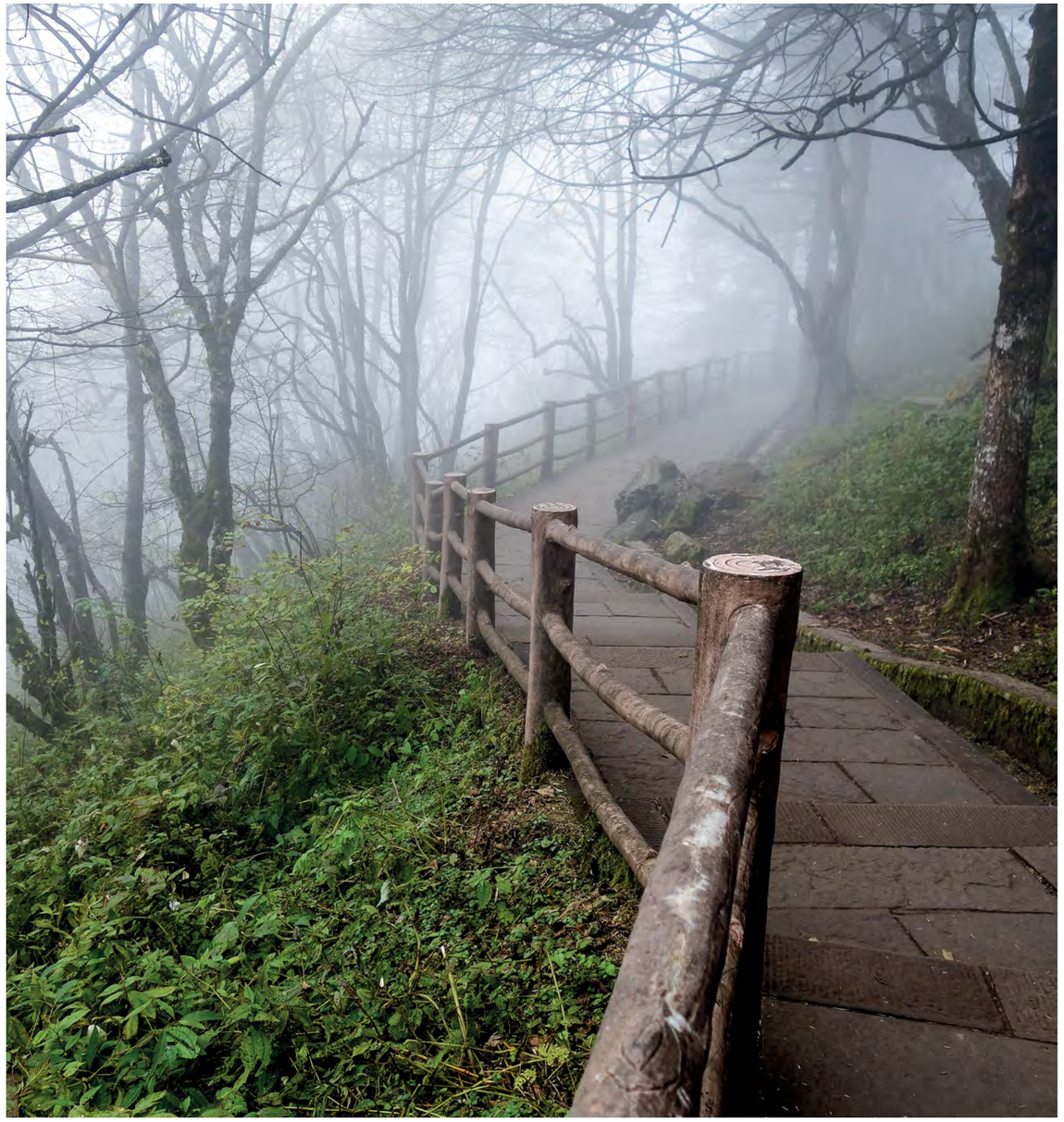
In good weather, there are various natural wonders to be beheld up at the summit: magical sunrises – with a solar halo around the Buddha, a “sea of clouds”, and breathtaking panoramic vistas. Alas, we only saw these misty scenes.

As compensation for the thick fog obscuring the surrounding landscapes, we reached the very top without having to wait in any lines. All the same, it took us three (3!) hours to get from the park entrance to the summit! Around 90 minutes by bus, and then a quick ride on a ski-lift-type cable-car followed by a walk.

This leads me to the logical conclusion: to enjoy the early-morning views you need to stay overnight near the top in the small hotel there. The standard is probably modest and monastic, but the main thing: it’s almost at the peak (just to remind – at 3000 meters!).

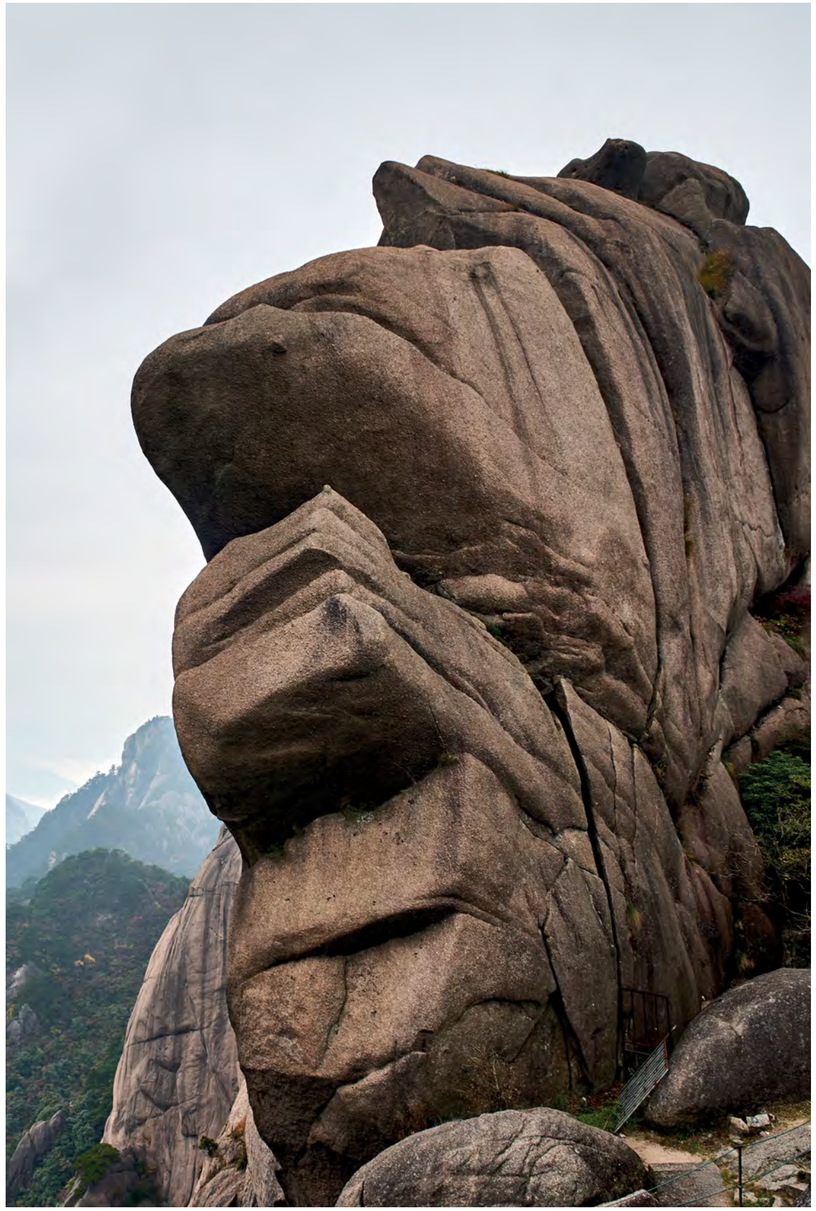
They also say there are beautiful hiking trails with stone and wooden paths here. But unfortunately, due to the nasty weather, we didn’t see any of those – though we imagined them vividly).

Read on my blog:
Buddha and nothingness



In closing, I should point out that this is far from a complete list of China's mountain wonders. Coming volumes in this book series will cover Zhangye Danxia, Taining Geopark, Everest (Base Camp), and Mount Kailash in Tibet. Other mountains are still yet to be visited – but will be in due time; however, based on both information and pictures on the internet, they don't seem to quite reach the KKKKK level of the Chinese natural mountain wonders I've just listed. Still, if fate ever takes you to this neck of the woods, why not spend a day or two exploring Binggou Danxia, Mount Chishui, or Mount Lanshan?

Zhangye Danxia



Everest

Kailash

Eugene Kaspersky

China Unknown

Volume One –
the Mountains

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More impressions:

China's list of natural wonders is both long and wide-ranging. But curiously, many of its masterpieces are virtually unknown outside the country.

Greater China pretty much remains a void – a blank – on the world tourism map. And that's where I come in: I aim to fill it in a little! Mountain formations, lush valleys, lakes of incredible colors, and similar natural wonders – all visited, snapped, and then told all about in travelogue/tourist-guide format.

Why China? Why not?! After all, in my personal Top-100 list of the world's most amazing places China takes up a full 10 entries – with another six as "bonus tracks".

I'm most interested in the contemplative aspect of travel, and the ability to visit a place without professional training (in mountaineering, diving, spelunking, etc.). For this reason, I've developed my own classification of tourism excellence: the one-to-five-K rating system!

In this book – the first in the series – I present China's must-see mountain masterpieces: the ones that are undeniably KKKKK rated!

Eugene Kaspersky

The top-100 most beautiful places in the world:

China Unknown

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