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RISING ON THE RIVER

Visitors have long been drawn to China's Li River valley for its spectacular landscapes, but a fresh wave of preservation means they can now experience the region's compelling architectural and cultural history, too. **BY SCOTT WALLACE**

AS I STEPPED off a tour boat in Yangshuo, China, an elderly man stood on the pier, balancing a pair of beady-eyed cormorants on a long bamboo pole. My guide, Jay Zhao, explained that for centuries, people here have used cormorants to dive for fish in the river. The birds do the hunting; the fishermen slip collars around their necks to keep them from swallowing their prey.

Jay turned to me and lowered his voice. "Cormorant fishing is disappearing," he said. "Same with the buffalo farming we saw upriver. Ten years from now, you won't see it anymore."

I'd come to southern China's Guangxi province to explore the Li River's unique mist-cloaked karst promontories—steep, jagged peaks that have inspired generations of Chinese landscape painters. Just a few decades ago, the area's main town, Yangshuo—which lies about 350 miles west

of Hong Kong and the same distance east of the Vietnamese border—was a sleepy place popular with backpackers. Now it's a busy tourism hub, and the rice fields and cormorant fishermen feel like relics of a vanishing past.

I wanted to take a firsthand look at how this region is fighting to preserve its cultural and historical treasures—and the Alila Yangshuo, a hotel housed in a refurbished sugar mill on a bend in the Li River, seemed like an ideal base. Since it opened in 2017, the property has drawn accolades for a design that tastefully balances old and new while blending seamlessly with the surrounding landscape.

"This is about how to take an old factory and give it a new lease on life," said Simon Kong, then the hotel's general manager, as he poured me a cup of coffee in the Sugar House Restaurant. "We wanted to make it a place future generations can appreciate," Kong said. As we talked, sunlight poured in through floor-to-ceiling windows set into one of the

The pool at Alila Yangshuo, a hotel housed in a former sugar factory on the banks of China's Li River.

factory's original brick walls. The roof, supported by exposed wooden beams, peaked nearly 50 feet overhead. Waitstaff hurried around in tunics and pants inspired by Maoist uniforms. "It's harder to convert an old building and give it fresh purpose than to just build something new," Kong said.

As we strolled the grounds, I began to appreciate how challenging the project must have been. The original mill, parts of which date back to the 1950s, was arranged around a coal-fired boiler room. That ground-floor space, which has retained its original blackened smokestack, now houses a chic boutique, presided over by a sculpture of a learned monk looking down from the library, which is in an overhead loft.

Most of the resort's 117 guest rooms occupy a newly built low-rise wing of concrete and sandstone covered with a latticework of custom-made bricks. "The challenge was to design new buildings that do not overpower the old," Kong said. My spacious, airy room, with its private balcony, minimalist furniture, and recessed lighting, was proof of that project's success.

Over the two days I spent at the hotel, I kept returning to the old loading dock for its mesmerizing view of the karst mountains, reflected in an expansive swimming pool flanked by a pair of 30-foot industrial trusses. I watched a photographer coax a young woman into seductive poses, framing his subject in the pool's reflection. "It's a one-of-a-kind, very Instagram hotel," Kong told me. "Guests bring all kinds of props and costumes to take photos for their posts." He added with a smile, "It's free promotion for us."



Exploring the Li River Valley

Visitors to Hong Kong and Shanghai should consider adding a three- or four-day side trip to this picturesque part of southeastern China.

GETTING THERE

There are daily direct flights from all major cities in eastern China to Guangxi's provincial hub, Guilin. From there, many companies offer scenic half-day boat trips down the Li River to Yangshuo. A new highway means you can reach Yangshuo by bus or private car in two hours (recommended for the return trip to Guilin). The rice terraces of Longsheng are also about two hours from Guilin by road, in the opposite direction from Yangshuo.

HOTELS

Shangri-La Hotel, Guilin

This riverside hotel has 439 spacious guest rooms, tastefully accented with traditional watercolors. Book on an upper floor on the river-facing side to see the sun set over the mountains. shangri-la.com; doubles from \$163.

Allia Yangshuo A masterpiece of architecture and design, the newly opened Allia features a magnificent swimming pool and

spa as well as a library, art gallery, and boutique. On the grounds is a climbing wall that runs along the face of a limestone cliff. allahotels.com; doubles from \$246.

Li-An Lodge A 16-room boutique hotel perched on a ridgeline overlooking a spectacular maze of terraced slopes in Longsheng. Guests need to walk 45 minutes uphill to reach the lodge, though they can hire porters and a sedan chair to help them make the climb. The team can provide trail maps for self-guided hikes around the Longsheng rice terraces. lianlodge.com; doubles from \$192.

TOUR OPERATOR

China specialists **Remote Lands** can arrange a tour of the Li River valley, including expert guides and excursions such as a river cruise and bike tours. remotelands.com; from \$5,200 per person for a four-night trip. —S.W.



PHOTO TOP: ANDREW HOWAT; COURTESY OF ALIX A. VANHOUTEN

• From top: Bamboo rafts cruising on the Li River, with the distinctive karst mountains in the background; a guest room at Li-An Yangshuo.

• Terraced rice paddies in Longsheng, in Guangxi province.

In a way, the entire Li River valley, which extends 50 miles upriver to the provincial capital of Guilin, is benefiting from the preservationist impulse that's currently finding a foothold in China after decades of determined modernization. The area has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, both for its stunning topography and its rich cultural history (primitive societies dwelled in the caves and among the crags here as far back as the sixth millennium B.C.). Time-pressed travelers can now drive to Yangshuo from Guilin in less than two hours via a brand-new highway. But the alternative route—a half-day cruise down the Li River—is time well spent, according to my guide Jay, who had booked us seats on a plush passenger boat.

As we departed from Guilin amid swirls of morning mist, Jay led me to the boat's upper deck, where the banner of the People's Republic of China flapped in the breeze. Traditional villages and vivid green orchards dotted the passing landscape. Fishermen balanced on rickety wooden rafts, casting nets into our wake.

"Look," Jay exclaimed, pointing beyond the bow as we rounded a bend in the river. Laid out before us was a Chinese scroll painting come to life: a succession of jagged, jade-green peaks rising up through diaphanous clouds. "It's like a fifty-mile-long art gallery," Jay said. I obliged a few fellow passengers who asked me to take their photos; by the time we arrived in Yangshuo, we were smiling and waving like old friends.

On the journey's last leg, we drove north to Longsheng, a picturesque county renowned for its diverse traditional cultures and mountain tribes. After an hour or so, we parked and set off on foot. For 45 minutes we followed a narrow path steadily uphill, crossing rushing brooks via footbridges and passing small hamlets carved into the mountainsides. At the top, we came to a magnificent, four-story wooden structure with a peaked tile roof, looking out on a spectacular view of terraced rice paddies that stretched in all directions. This was Li-An Lodge.

A young innkeeper named Tony Zhao offered to show me around. Each of the guesthouse's 16 rooms is furnished according to a theme, he explained, and showcases objets d'art and antiques collected by his boss—a U.S.-based photographer named Keren Su, who originally hails from Hangzhou. In the Double Happiness room, he pointed to a wood relief depicting a traditional village wedding ceremony. "This survived the Cultural Revolution," Tony said, referring to Mao Zedong's movement of the 1960s and 70s, in which artworks that seemed to idealize pre-Communist life were destroyed.

That night, I was startled awake by a loud crack of thunder. Wind and rain were blowing through the window, whipping the white chiffon curtains into an eerie, spectral dance. Each flash of lightning illuminated the rice terraces, their contours fading away into darkness. I reflected on all the change I'd witnessed down in the valley. Longsheng's swirling paddy fields felt like a counterpoint, somehow: a way of life etched into the landscape over centuries. The thought was reassuring, and with it in my mind, I closed the windows and went back to sleep.