

A Slow Boat through China

As the mighty Yangtze flows through the beautiful Three Gorges in China, a no-frills (read: no on-board entertainment) cruise proves to be just the thing for this restless writer.

Text and photographs Lucy Corne



When an almighty honk from a horn blasted me awake at 5 am, I should have been annoyed, but this wasn't the boat's captain just letting off steam or getting petty about the fact that we were all sleeping while he was awake. In fact, it was a less-than-subtle wake-up call that announced our arrival at the prettiest of the Yangtze River's famed Three Gorges. And I, for one, was not going to sleep through it. As it turned out, I was in the minority that chose scenery over sleep. I emerged, bleary-eyed, from my cabin to find that, for the moment at least, I had the Wu Gorge entirely to myself. For now, my fellow travellers were somehow snoozing through the blasts from the horn and the steady chugging of the engine, while I enjoyed the sight of an orange sun lifting through the haze, illuminating the towering riverbanks in its wake.

We'd joined the cruise two days earlier as it set sail from Chongqing, a typically bustling city in central China. Our route would follow the murky waters of the Yangtze, as it snaked

▲ Above: Docked at Wushan for the night.

Left: The Yangtze is the longest river in Asia, and the third-longest river in the world.



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▲ Above: A vegetable market in Wushan sells the fiery chillies the region's cuisine is famous for.

Below: Sampling the surprisingly mildly-spiced Chongqing hot pot.

Instead, our evenings would be divided between a lone restaurant, a single slot-machine and an open-air deck laden with patio chairs, slightly warm beer and endless bowls of free peanuts. It was perfect.

Our temporary travel companions were an eclectic bunch: Chinese pensioners, bearded backpackers, local kids with their grinning parents and an English family looking for an alternative way to spend the school holidays. Since we shared more than five words of a common language with the latter, we got to discussing the highs (beer under the stars) and the lows (the, let's say, 'fragrant' toilets in our cabins) of our chosen way to see central China.

“I enjoyed the sight of an orange sun lifting through the haze, illuminating the towering riverbanks in its wake.”



Rolling on the river

We awoke next morning to get our first glimpse of the river – wide, brown and with low banks almost invisible in the summer haze. It was far from beautiful, but I knew that the best was yet to come and settled down with my book until the first of the Three Gorges was upon us. As we entered Qutang Gorge, the riverbanks rose around us and the empty deck quickly filled with snap-happy passengers. Rolling hills dotted with box-like white houses soon gave way to sheer cliffs and then to steep ridges dusted with a layer of trees and bushes. It was a wonderful start to a

from Chongqing to Yichang, some 800 km east. There, the huge and hugely controversial Three Gorges Dam hinders passage and all but the intrepid (or the captains of cargo ships) alight and continue to Wuhan and beyond on wheels.

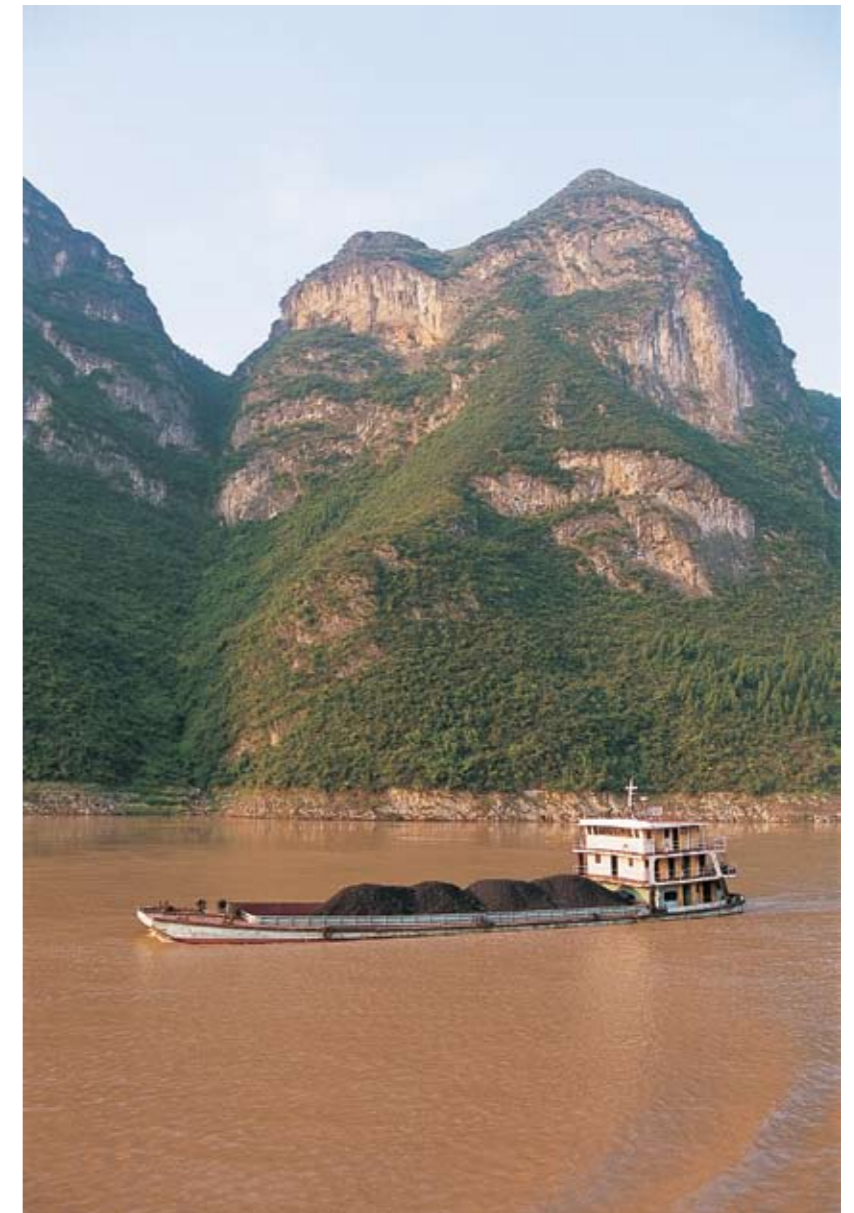
No frills, plenty thrills

With purse strings that didn't stretch to the pricier cruise ships, and travel dispositions unable to cope with the rugged charm of the cheapest boats making their way along the river, we settled on a mid-range vessel and splurged on their most expensive cabin – a simple room with two narrow beds, a squat toilet and a fabulous picture window taking up one wall. Our night-time departure meant we had to leave scenery-gazing for the morning, instead getting acquainted with our fellow passengers and our on-board entertainment options. The latter was a quick job, since venues for amusement were blissfully limited. An abundance of options often leaves me stressed, wondering what I might be missing elsewhere, and since this part of our trip was all about relaxation I was overjoyed with the lack of dancing-girls, casinos and rows of restaurants all vying for my attention.

day that would involve nothing more strenuous than reading, snoozing and enjoying excellent home-cooked dishes in a restaurant with 50 alleged menu options and six actual choices.

At around lunchtime we docked at Wushan, a town balanced high above the river. It was relocated from the riverbanks once the gorge got flooded in the first decade of the 21st century. From here, passengers could opt to take a smaller boat into the Little Three Gorges, linger on deck, or disembark and explore the town. Despite having heard tales of the smaller gorges' superior beauty, we decided that the chance to wander through a Chinese town with a population lower than 100,000 was an opportunity too rare to pass up.

After walking through a market lined with snoozing traders and piles of chillies used in the region's fiery cuisine, we decided it was time to seek out lunch. Normally, locating a restaurant in Asia is as easy as finding sand on a beach, but perhaps when the town was moved to its new spot someone neglected to move the eateries. We wandered in vain for half an hour, unable to find anywhere to eat nor anyone to help us. Deciding we might find someone there who could speak English (and keen to cool off in their air con), we entered a bank and met Min-do, a bank cashier and self-proclaimed 'foreign people's reception officer' for the few tourists who ventured from their boat. Steering us to an unmarked restaurant,



▲ The Yangtze is one of the busiest waterways in the world and barges carry tourists, coal and manufactured goods up and down its waters all through the day.

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► Right: Upstream from the Three Gorges Dam, the fog, this bridge and the barge below it make an ideal photo composition. Below: Enjoying a beer while cruising through the Xiling Gorge.

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she bid us farewell, leaving us with one of my preferred travel adventures – ordering lunch in a menu-less place through hand-signals and a trip into the kitchen to point at ingredients.

Ending up with a hotpot far less spicy than the region is known for and an audience of seven standing and watching us eat, we were simply glad to have found some food, and headed back down to the boat in time for sunset beers and some hotter dishes from the on-board eatery.

Solitude at sunrise

We moored for the night in Wushan to guarantee entering the loveliest of the gorges at sunrise, and it was the following morning that I was blasted awake to enjoy a rare slice of solitude in a constantly buzzing land. Soon enough, other passengers began to arrive and as we neared the end of the gorge I decided to nap in our cabin until we neared Xiling Gorge, the last on the itinerary and the longest at 66 km. Houses began to appear again and the passing boats heaped with coal announced that we were entering a part of the river more linked to industry than tourism. Sure enough, factories began to appear on the riverbanks and our watches told us that it was time to pack up.



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◀ A typical Chinese hot pot consists of a pot of simmering stock, into which are added ingredients like thin slices of meat, vegetables, mushrooms, wontons, egg dumplings and seafood.

Munching on spicy ginger candy we'd bought en route, we caught a brief and mesmerising glimpse of the infamous dam as we boarded buses to the Yichang city centre. Critics remain sceptical about the impact of the dam and the scenery is undoubtedly changing as water levels rise, but for the moment at least, a cruise down the Yangtze River remains one of the highlights of travelling in China, pre-dawn wake-up calls and all.

Whereabouts

How to go

Jet Airways has daily flights to Hong Kong from Delhi and Mumbai.

Where to stay

China has a host of accommodation options ranging from shared dorm rooms to five-star luxury hotels.

Keep in mind

While cruises tend to start in Chongqing and end in Yichang, the reverse is also possible. Prices range from US \$180 to US \$600, depending upon the boat. You can book the cruise through your hotel or from the port.

For more information

www.en.cnta.gov.cn



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An artist paints canvas with red to symbolize sunset doesn't make blue any lesser important, similarly you already have some numbers energies with you and you lack some, so to balance it Sandhya Mehta's system of numerology is helping many people throughout the world to lead a happier life, having more serene peace, calmness, success, and achieving their goals and objectives to satisfy their dreams and aim for more!

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