TALES & TRAILS

Tracking a mountain of history

Western region of province promises a vast visual feast of natural landscapes that took centuries to form. **Yang Yang** reports in Zhangjiajie, Hunan.

The 3,000-sandstone pillars in Zhangjiajie are often shrouded in cloud, giving the illusion that they are floating in the air. This otherworldly scenery makes Zhangjiajie in Hunan province a top destination for tourists from both home and abroad. [AI YING / FOR CHINA DAILY]

I, Xiangxi, or the western part of Hunan province, mountains dominate the landscape. At the peak of summer, they are draped in lush vegetation against a clear blue backdrop, creating a visual feast. While many of these mountains are undeveloped, one particular mountainous region in the region is magnet for tourists, particularly hikers.

In Zhangjiajie, my first stop on a seven-day trip to Xiangxi, I awoke to the sound of my alarm, feeling like a zombie as I stumbled out of bed, but when I drove the short distance to the Tianmen Mountain, the Tianzhu Mountain known to the Hunanese, I felt like I was rewarded with a glorious, jaw-dropping scenery unfolded in the earth.

As I gazed at the mountain, I was struck by the realization that the rocks that I saw were formed and merged under the sea hundreds of millions of years ago. Compared to them, our lives are but fleeting moments, vanishing in the blink of an eye.

Perhaps this is one reason why the Chinese people have always attributed to such reverence.

In the hearts of the people of Xiangxi, Tianmen Mountain is a sacred place.

Zhangjiajie, originally known as Dayong, was once governed by the Wu Kingdom (222-280). During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), then called Baofeng Mountain, was already a site of interest.

In the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), a 1,300-meter high cliff overlooking valleys, covering 1 hectare, was to be a colonial gateway to heaven. Hence, the mountain was being renamed Tianmen, or "Heaven's Gate".

Our driver, Hyuse-ah Xu Chuang, says that Tianmen Mountain is a place where people can feel their souls gradually shifting from earth to the west.

About 20 years ago, the giant cave was visible from South West Airlines on its flight from Nashville to Zhangjiajie. Today, however, to see it, one must travel to the Tianmen Mountain, which is 10 km from the Yuan'an, which has since become the city's tourist hub.

"Whenever I paint, prosperity follows," he says.

Now standing 131.5 meters high, 57 meters wide, and 60 meters deep, Tianmen Cave is the highest natural cave in the world. Tourists can see the cave from over 2,000-900 steps, depending on the tube the vacationer has run through the mountain.

Up and down

Tourists can follow the East Route to explore the mountainous terrain of Tianmen Mountain.

After taking the 7.5-km cable car ride — one of the longest of its kind in the world — I reached the 1,300-meter-high summit. There, I only managed to visit the Tianmen Cave, the Tianmen Pavilion, the Tianmen Stone Gate, and walk along the 99-meter-long glass walkway that clings to the cliff.

On the glass walkway, a little girl cried as she cautiously moved along the edge closest to the mountain, while her dad, who was walking on the side overlooking the view of the clouds below.

On such an unprecedented day, the mountain up offered a refreshing respite. Many tourists were relaxing in the shade of the trees, sipping water or enjoying snacks. In a hurry, I headed to the entrance of the "mountain pentecostal" residents, expecting them to take me to the other side of the mountain where I could explore the remaining eight attractions on my route. However, the residents let me directly down to the cave instead. My ticket did not allow another escalator this back to the other side of the mountain.

From the cave to the cable station, where another ride transported people back to the foot of the mountain, I had to choose between taking second-rate cabins or descending 898 steps by foot. Embracing an adventure, I chose the "second-rate" mentality, I decided to tackle the steps.

After safely landing the last step, I headed to a post office to send postcards to my friends. Upon hearing my story, a staff member suggested, "Why not climb up the Tianzhu Mountain? It is the tallest in the world, which has since become the city's tourist hub.

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The Tianmen Mountain in Zhangjiajie. Hunan province, resembles a colonial gateway to heaven. where visitors can ascend via a 999-step staircase. [WANG YONG / CHINA DAILY]

Left: Local people host a ritual at Tianwenzhai, a white-circular platform embraced by the mountains in Dehang Grand Canyon in Jishou, Xiangxi Tujia and Miao autonomous prefecture, Hunan province. **Center:** The glass bridge offers a panoramic and breathtaking view of the peaks and ravines in Zhangjiajie National Forest Park. [PHOTOS FROM CHINA DAILY: YANG YONG / CHINA DAILY; PHOTOS TO CHINA DAILY]

Right: The Loulan Waterfall in Dehang Grand Canyon is especially appealing on an overhead summer day. [PHOTOS TO CHINA DAILY: YANG YONG / CHINA DAILY]

Since soup bath is a signature dish in Zhangjiajie, Hunan province. [PHOTOS TO CHINA DAILY]

If you go

Getting there: You can fly to Zhangjiajie or take a high-speed train from nearby major cities in the country. From the airport or train station to the city center, a taxi costs about 50 yuan ($7).

Transportation: The city center of Zhangjiajie is close to Tianmen Mountain about a 10-minute bus ride. It takes about 50 minutes to travel from the city center to the Yuan'an Tourist Hub, which includes city Hunan province's top tourist attractions.

Accommodation: If you plan to visit Tianmen Mountain, you can stay near the lower station of the Tianmen Mountain cable car. Alternatively, you can stay near the Yuan'an station for a cost-effective option.

Zhangjiajie is also suitable for staying during your visit. Nina Dowl has many hotels to choose from, including the Zhangjiajie Grand Mansion and Zhangjiajie Huadiao, with room rates ranging from 300 yuan to 400 yuan per night.

Cuisine:

Soup bath is considered just a signature dish of Zhangjiajie. Nature's spring water serves as the base of crucial tonic, and add ingredients such as chicken, pork, and wild spinach.

• Guan Yang Jia Lazi soup fish is a specialty of Zhangjiajie. The soup is made with fish, tofu, and wild spinach and costs about 50 yuan per person.

• Tuo Pan Ji is a famous dish and stewed cake made from glutinous rice, pork, and potatoes. It costs 30 yuan per person.

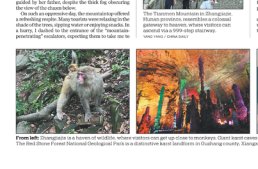
Activities:

• Explore natural attractions: Enjoy Zhangjiajie's scenery peaks and waters, the Yuan'an Tourist Hub, the glass walkway at Tianmen Mountain, the glass walkway, and climb the 999 steps to Tianmen Mountain.

• Watch performances: In Wulingyuan, the Zhangjiajie Grand Theatre presents local culture through large scale song and dance. The *Charming Xiangxi* performance also offers a glimpse into the rich folk customs of Xiangxi.

• Explore Jishou: Take a trip to Jishou Street, where you can buy hand-made crafts like Miao embroidery.

Online
Scan the code to watch the video.



From left: Zhangjiajie is a haven of wildlife, where visitors can get up close to monkeys. Giant karst caves in Zhangjiajie are a stunning showcase of natural wonders. The Aichiu Bridge opens across the Dehang Grand Canyon, a picture-perfect site in Jishou, Xiangxi Tujia and Miao autonomous prefecture. The Red Stone Forest National Geological Park is a distinctive karst landform in Zhuilongcun village, Xiangxi Tujia and Miao autonomous prefecture. Wing-suited daredevils take it to the extreme in Zhangjiajie. [PHOTOS BY YANG YONG / CHINA DAILY; PHOTOS TO CHINA DAILY; PHOTOS TO CHINA DAILY]

Traditional heritage living in harmony

By YANG YANG in Fenghuang, Hunan

On our way to a private Miao ethnic museum, we stumble upon a food fair in Fenghuang Ancient Town, Xiangxi, Hunan province. The traditional fair is a place on dates that include a three or an eight on the lunar calendar.

Elderly women carrying baskets of vegetables and fruits come to the fair to purchase food, utensils, clothing, decorations, pots, sides, and more. Cars line the main road adjacent to the main street, a line of farmsteads, are sits ready to sell their produce. Nearby, two vendors sell sweet medicinal perported to cure all ailments.

In the section dedicated to tradition, we first meet a woman who is a master of traditional Miao embroidery. Local Shizhong, a 32-year-old native folk singer and a representative inheritor of the Miao song intangible cultural heritage, holds an embroidery work approximately 100 years old. It's a defence price ninety seven yuan, which is a gift received from her grandmother.

She shows it to the vendors to demonstrate what she is searching for.

This is the daily wear. You can see many of us wearing ethnic clothing here," she says.

A village of Miao ethnic group in Fenghuang, Hunan province. [PHOTOS TO CHINA DAILY]

"For special occasions like festivals or weddings, we also wear intricate silver decorations."

At the museum, Long Qingdong, a 65-year-old guide, shows me the Miao people's tradition of skin drum dance. The dance, which is an ancient, although the pair of Nuoyang (male) and Nuoma (female) are revered as the most powerful deities.

Qingdong shows me the altar for votive ceremonies to displeased by visitors, but unaccepted by, after the ceremonies, the hanging of the sacrificial corbetured.

I meant admiration for the ancient ritual, this worship had, I thought, been the ancient human meeting with their ideas, upper intimidating, even in photos.

However, this residence, which was a mass sites for the local people, is a sacred ethnic group, with many collections of items from the traditional lives of Miao people, embodies their physical and spiritual characteristics of nature. It feels remarkably comfortable, even on a hot afternoon.

Like the Miao people in Jishou, the Tujia and Dong ethnic groups in Fenghuang also share a deep connection to their cultural traditions. They live harmoniously together, making it one of the most culturally diverse regions in China.

Jin Chen contributed to this story.

Xiangxi: A hidden gem of cultural diversity

Hundreds of millions of years ago, this land was once a vast ocean. Over time, as tectonic plates crashed and pushed against each other, they formed the land, which stands up for fifty years. Here, he pioneered the tradition of Chinese ink-wash poetry, naming Huashua the representative of Chinese poetry.

Over one hundred million years, ago, a remote area from the central Hunan Province emerged, a region where ethnic groups have lived for thousands of years. Today, ethnic minorities make up more than 40 percent of the total population of Xiangxi, which is Tujia ethnic group is the cultural center of the Tujia ethnic group, which is the largest ethnic minority in Hunan Province, the cultural center for the Miao ethnic group in Jishou, and the cultural center of the Dong ethnic group.

Xiangxi is a region where the Tujia people have developed the unique pole of power of the Tujia ethnic group, the Xiangxi Tujia, serving as the political, economic, cultural, and spiritual center of the region. Tujia culture has been passed down since the 14th century, Lancaster, a 2000 TV Series, Chinese Heritage, also, is where the Tujia people have lived for centuries.

At the regular fairs that take place in the Fenghuang Ancient Town, on near beautiful ethnic clothes and delicate decorations, bargaining for goods with vendors.

"Entering Xiqua, I wander in bewilderment, lost, I cannot find my way. In Huashua, Qin Yuan wrote such a poem, Huashua, Qin Yuan (The Lament). This film (Huashua) is based on the Tujia ethnic group's ancient poetry, Huashua, Qin Yuan's Tujia's. Here, he pioneered the tradition of Chinese ink-wash poetry, naming Huashua the representative of Chinese poetry.

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A village is nestled in the depth of mountains in western Hunan province. [PHOTOS TO CHINA DAILY]