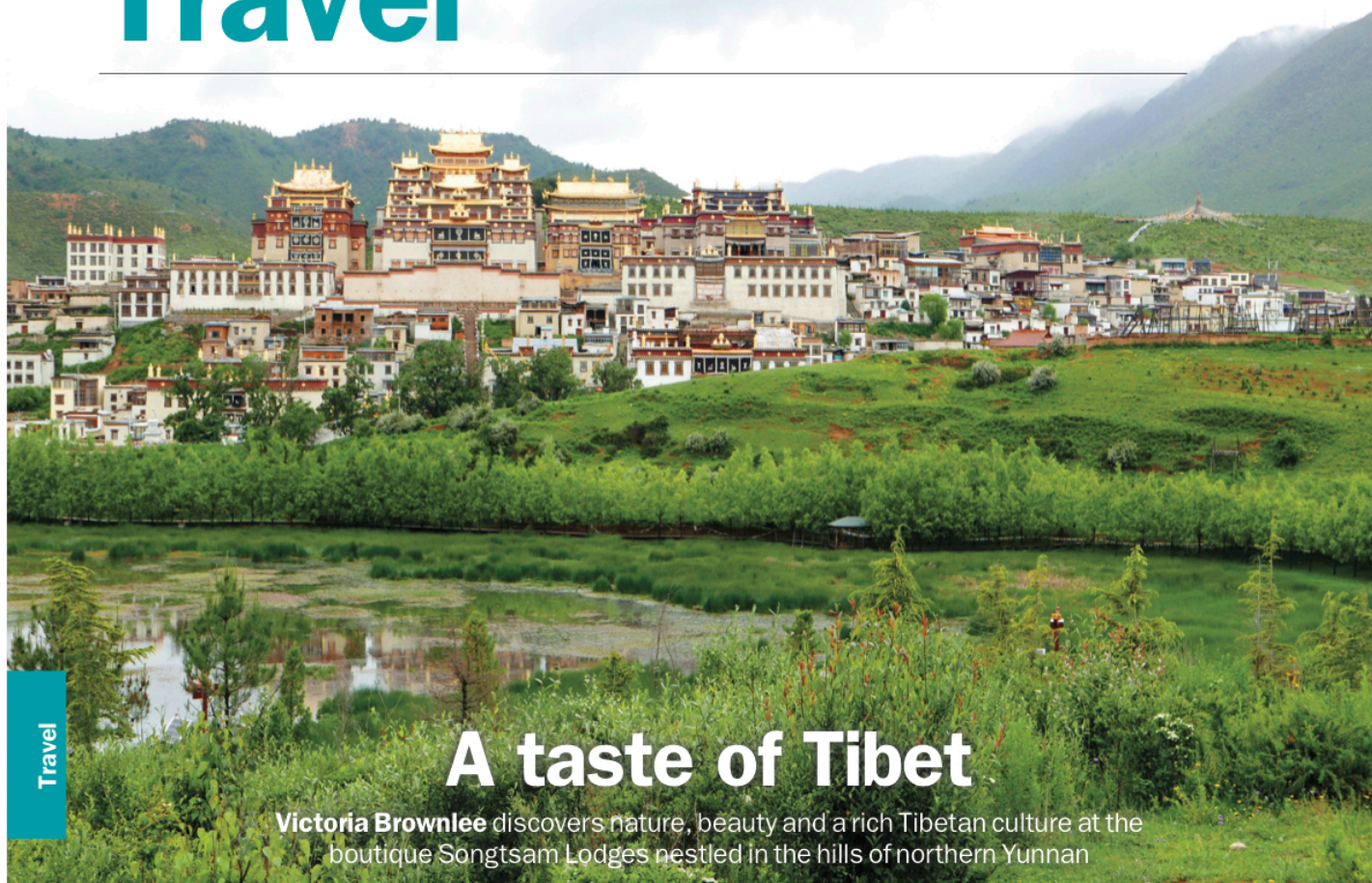


Travel



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A taste of Tibet

Victoria Brownlee discovers nature, beauty and a rich Tibetan culture at the boutique Songtsam Lodges nestled in the hills of northern Yunnan

Hidden in the hills of northwest Yunnan, in southwest China, among snowy mountain peaks and lush green valleys, is a set of boutique lodges unlike anything we've ever stayed in before, seamlessly mixing Tibetan culture and hospitality with vibrant colours and beautiful local furnishings. The Songtsam Lodges were set up by award-winning CCTV documentary film director and Shangri-La native Baima Duoji, who had a desire to share his love for his home region and Tibetan culture with the world.

Since the first lodge opened in 2001, Duoji has opened in an additional four locations, with plans for properties in Lijiang, Lhasa and Linzhi, allowing guests to enjoy travel between Yunnan and Tibet in maximum comfort and Songtsam style. A stay with Songtsam can be completely personalised, from a one-night stop in the Shangri-La lodge to a multi-day trip covering the current Songtsam circuit.

We begin at Songtsam Shangri-La, the brand's first lodge with 22 guestrooms situated at an altitude of 3,300m. It is located in a small village bordering Shangri-La, the former city of Zhongdian that was

given the name of James Hilton's fictional location in 2001. The area, known to Tibetans as Gyaitang, is also home to the resplendent Songzanlin Monastery and picturesque Lamuyangcuo Lake. When we arrive, the sun is setting and infusing the area with a golden glow, made even sweeter by the welcome offering of ginger tea and homemade biscuits.

Up the hill is the much larger Songtsam Retreat – with 75 guestrooms, a spa and more dining options – which offers 'Tibetan breathing classes' and yoga in the morning, plus cultural dance ceremonies and butter-tea-making demonstrations in the evenings.

Although we could imagine staying happily ensconced in the Shangri-La lodge for days, weeks, or even months, we venture out with our local driver and guide to explore the villages, landscape and lodges that lie beyond. The area is surrounded by the Yangtze, Mekong and Salween rivers, and we

feel immediately refreshed by the abundance of trees and wildlife, the clean air and the crisp, clear water.

Heading northwest towards the Benzilan Lodge, we drive past the peaceful Napa Lake, where our guide tells us that Songtsam can arrange for guests to go horse riding and enjoy a picnic lunch. Also en route, guests can arrange a

visit to Nixi village, where they'll learn how to make black pottery items before feasting on a luscious and warming Nixi chicken hotpot cooked in the area's traditional black pots.

After the 80km drive, we fall immediately in love with the Benzilan Lodge (at a more manageable altitude of 1,900m). With ten guest rooms, and located in a village of only 17 families, we feel completely at peace in this isolated spot.

From here, we head out on an easy two-hour hike, walking paths surrounded by trees and packed with leaves that crunch underfoot. We pass by cows and yaks, eat wild



A Tibetan family welcome us into their home





the way. Our guide, Ring, who spent a year working at Meili, and two at Benzilan Lodge, knows the area and locals like he has been there his whole life. It's this knowledge that leads us to meet local incense makers in a tiny village (translated as 'Village 11' in English). The artisans allow us into their workshop, handing us off-cuts of juniper wood to sniff, while showing us how they lay tray after tray of incense sticks.

Similarly, in Meili, Ring introduces us to a local Tibetan family of farmers, who welcome us into their home and offer us butter tea, yak cheese and *tsampa* (a traditional staple of roasted flour). Although this kind of visit would normally feel like an imposition, our affable guide makes these interactions fun and relaxed, and the family is warm and chatty before sending us upstairs to help hand print *lung ta* (prayer flags) in their prayer room.

Travel in this part of northwest Yunnan may conjure up images of rough and ready hostels and guesthouses, but after even a few nights staying in the wonderfully comfortable Songtsam Lodges, it's hard not to feel at home with the warm hospitality, big smiles and kindness that oozes from the staff who are scattered throughout these wildly scenic and remote locations.

Essential info

A one-night stay in the Songtsam Shangri-La Lodge starts from 1,380RMB including breakfast and afternoon tea (with a discounted rate available for multiple night stays). A one-night stay at Songtsam's Tacheng, Cizhong, Meili or Benzilan Lodges starts from 2,180RMB, including breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner (again, with a discounted rate available for multiple night stays).

Tours can be arranged from two days to a full nine-day circuit, with prices starting at around 4,800RMB for two people for a two-day tour including all meals and activities, plus transfers and a local guide. Contact info@songtsam.com for more details regarding customised tours.

GETTING THERE

There are flights to Lijiang from Shanghai daily, starting from around 1,500RMB return on Ctrip.com. Indirect flights to Shangri-La stop in Kunming, and are available from Shanghai from 1,500RMB return on Ctrip.com. Songtsam can arrange for transfers from both cities. For more information on the Songtsam Lodges, visit songtsam.com, email info@songtsam.com or call +8688782888886.



Down from the mountains (Clockwise from main) Songzanlin Monastery, Tibetan prayer flags, a Nixi craftsman, a room at the Meili Lodge and the original Songtsam Lodge.

strawberries and drink fresh water from the local stream. At the end of the walk we are met by the Benzilan staff who have arranged a picnic for us among the trees.

From Benzilan, guests can continue on to the Meili Lodge, located at an altitude of 3,600m in the tiny village of Gujinong and with views over the Meili Snow Mountain Range. This even more remote setting provides the perfect opportunity to disconnect from the rest of the world and embrace local village life and the epic natural surrounds.

All the Songtsam lodges offer freshly cooked meals and afternoon teas, so eating well is never an issue. Expect a delicious mix of yak, chicken or pork meat, accompanied by fluffy white rice and heaving plates of local vegetables (the Benzilan Lodge even has a large vegetable garden that provides organic produce). And don't skip a bottle of the surprisingly balanced and moreish locally-made Shangri-La Altı wine.

Although an optional extra, the benefit of a guide comes with the serendipitous encounters you'll have with the locals you meet along