

YOSEMITE ASSOCIATION

VISITING CHINA'S SISTERS

By Jeannie Tasker

After two years of planning, seven members of the Yosemite Association joined Resident Naturalist Pete Devine on a hiking trip through Yosemite's two sister parks in China.

The two parks, Huangshan and Jiuzhaigou, have partnered with Yosemite because they not only are World Heritage sites, but also share many of the same issues as Yosemite. Both are popular destinations for Chinese vacationers, placing a burden on park staffs to balance tourism with preservation of the natural resources. And, each park's gateway communities depend heavily on tourism for economic survival.

Huangshan, or Yellow Mountain, is located in southern Anhui province, west of Shanghai and the resort town of Hangzhou. It was accepted into the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1990 (Yosemite was accepted in 1984), and features peaks of tall, craggy, granite rock. At an elevation of about 6,500 feet, these peaks are shrouded much of the day by ever moving clouds. Four hotels are located at the top of the mountains, and occasionally a camper can be found sleeping in a rented tent on the hotels' grounds. Most visitors, predominantly Chinese, hike the trails at the top of the mountains.

For the hardy, a thirteen mile hike into the Xihai Grand Canyon provides breathtaking views of the granite formations and fall season colors. Unlike the trails of Yosemite, Huangshan's trails are cultured, cement and stone sidewalks and stairs – miles and miles of stairs. Where we would cut a trail with switchbacks, the Chinese have laid a set of stairs straight up the hill, and hung a sidewalk along the edge of a mountain cliff. The engineering of the trails, alone, was mind boggling.



Jeannie on cliff trail into Xihai Grand Canyon, Huangshan.

The scenery in the canyon was dazzling, especially when combined with the serenity of being only the few who visit the bottom.

En route to the second sister park, the group visited two additional World Heritage Sites, Honcun, an historic village, and Huanglong, a mountainous park with cold limestone pools and streams that resembled Yellowstone's hot geyser pools. Here we walked about six miles on boardwalks and wooden steps along and over the streams to a cluster of bright blue pools in the stream cut canyon.

Located outside the city of Chengdu, from which we flew to Jiuzhaigou, is China's panda breeding center. Since there are only about 1300 pandas in the wild, China actively breeds pandas to ensure that they will not become extinct, and to give as gifts of goodwill to nations around the world. San Diego Zoo has a panda from this breeding center. There are two types of pandas – the "giant" panda and the "lesser" panda. The giant panda is the classic large "Teddy bear" with black and white markings, considered by many to be a distant relative of our black bear. The lesser panda is small, mostly red, with a striped tail, and looks very much like our raccoon. It is, in fact, a distant relative of the raccoon.

Yosemite's second sister park in China is Jiuzhaigou, or Valley of Nine Villages. This park is located in Sichuan province, almost a three hour flight west from Huangshan. The culture in this area is primarily Tibetan, with little villages scattered throughout the park. Jiuzhaigou's mountain peaks (over 14,000 feet) resemble the Rockies, but the park is renowned for its waterfalls and brilliantly blue lakes.

Like Yosemite, Jiuzhaigou sports a Mirror Lake, but with lots of crystal clear, placid, reflective water. Most visitors, again predominately Chinese, walk a series of boardwalks and stairs along the lakes and past the waterfalls.

The crowds in this area of the park reminded us of the Vernal Falls trail in July. The scenery was spectacular, well worth seeing, and well worth being protected for future generations. However, the highlight of the trip for us was a six mile hike with park staff into Zaru Valley, an undeveloped and seldom visited stream cut valley, where we camped in pup tents for the night. At an elevation of about 8,000 feet, it was brisk, but totally serene, as we were the only people in this valley. The park is open for general visitation during the daylight hours only, and there are no hotels or campgrounds within the park. Therefore, those wishing to visit for several days must pay an entrance fee of \$28.00 per person per day.

A portion of this entrance fee supports the Tibetan villagers who reside within the park, and who also produce many of the handicrafts available for sale within the park. Visitors wishing to explore the wilderness may hike with staff from Jiuzhaigou's new eco tourism organization, which interprets the park and teaches environmental protection.

At both parks we were welcomed as Yosemite ambassadors, often being honored by park staff joining us for dinner. They were eager to share their experiences in dealing with balancing tourism, critical to their region's economic survival, with preservation of their extraordinary landscapes. They look forward to visiting Yosemite and sharing both information and manpower with us, while we look forward to more opportunities to experience first hand, the grandeur of their parks and the friendship of their people. For information on future YA trips to Yosemite's sister parks, visit Yosemite.org.



Pete and Jonathan presenting a gift from Supt. Dave Uberuaga to Mike Wei, Huangshan's Director of International Relations



The Gift of Winter Learning in Your Park

Yosemite Association's winter Outdoor Adventures course catalog is available now; pick one up at the Valley Visitor Center, find it at www.yosemite.org or call the Association to have them mail you one.

If you know someone who'd like to get out into the park on a naturalist adventure, gift certificates are available for these programs. These fun field seminars are a great way to deepen one's Yosemite connection now that the snowy season has arrived. Take a look at the snowshoe, photography, moonlight, and other courses on YA's website, and plan a trip for yourself or someone you know deep into the Sierra winter. YA's naturalists are excited to have snow on the ground now and look forward to more coming – for you and your friends. Call Holly at 209.379.2321, x17 to purchase an Outdoor Adventures gift certificate in any amount (most programs start at \$70 for YA members).

Lodging is already reserved for our field course participants, camping and park entry are free. www.yosemite.org