

CHINAJIUZHAIGOU

Losing the Crowd

Graham Bond journeys to Jiuzhaigou and gauges the effect of mass tourism on Sichuan's stunningly colourful nature reserve





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t the wheel of his new Fiat Palio, and on the road again, Chengdu artist Luo Fahui can't resist a bit of nostalgia. "When I travelled in west China 20 years ago, I could buy a donkey for 20 *yuan*," he says with a smile. "A cart only cost 20 more and I would sleep in the back."

We are in Sichuan province, bound for Jiuzhaigou, one of China's most eulogised natural splendours. Tibetan villages are racing past, though I suspect the new highway may have ripped the heart out of the donkey trade. As a young man, it took Fahui four days to travel the 450 kilometres to the valley reserve. Today the same trip is scheduled to take a mere ten hours. If we had been so inclined, we could have taken a plane.

Twenty years may mean little to the magnificent snow-peaked mountains that dwarf our car, but in that time worlds have collided, seas have parted, cells have divided and China has been reborn. *Lonely Planet's* 2000 edition of its China guide wryly remarked that until the authorities "level a mountain or two" to build an airport, a bumpy road was the only means of reaching the park. Given that mountain-moving has become second nature for the nation's planners, it was a brave pun. In September 2003, the airport duly opened and two luxury five-star hotels have since been added.

From the back of the car, I listen to Fahui reminisce. In the early '80s, tourism had yet to take hold. Tucked away awkwardly in the Minshan mountains, Jiuzhaigou was still a place for pioneers, tough to explore but hugely rewarding. Straw meadows and swathes of pine were home to abundant wildlife, *takins*, monkeys and pandas. The ribbon lakes were the colour of emeralds and sapphires. For an artist it was pure inspiration and, fortunately, Fahui had remembered to bring his brushes.

We both wonder whether, with highways, airstrips and hundreds of thousands of annual visitors, Jiuzhaigou will still be the alpine vision he recalls.

The five-star Jiuzhai Paradise resort, 20 kilometres south of Jiuzhaigou, provides a perfect introduction to the pros and cons of progress. After a long drive through the stunning but desolate landscapes of central Sichuan, the hotel is a welcoming sanctuary. It nestles in a basin of thick pine forest amid towering mountains. The enormous domed perspex roof of the lobby stretches, like cellophane, over trickling water features, arched wooden bridges and restaurants and bars.

China's years of growth have paved the way for luxury accommodation, but they've also introduced the notion that nothing and nowhere is beyond a bit of healthy market competition. Accordingly, Jiuzhai Paradise has its very own 'newly discovered' nature reserve, combining the mountain scenery of Jiuzhaigou with the stunning terraced lake formations of nearby Huanglong (the flyer says). I arrive at Shenxianchi by tour bus the



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Peaks and Depths: (this page) Wuhua (Five Flower) Lake is one of 114 stunning lagoons in Jiuzhaigou. According to legend, these represent the shattered pieces of a heavenly mirror that fell to earth after some celestial quarrelling. Decaying logs have added to the underwater textures and the algae selectively absorbs sunlight, contributing to the stunning colouration; (opposite) Jiuzhaigou is at its most colourful in autumn when the forest foliage is awash with reds, yellows and ochres. Shuzheng Valley is the best place to view the full spectrum of shades and also offers spectacular views of the distant snow-capped mountain of Ge'erna, which soars to 4,764 metres

next morning. More than half of the site is closed, the lakes are iced up and the herd has only 90 minutes to look around. Someone has already complained they are hungry and lunch is waiting for us back at the hotel. It's a desperately disappointing trip.

As an 'AAAA Tourist Attraction' and a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site, Jiuzhaigou National Park should be above crass one-upmanship. In 1984, the late Zhao Ziyang sealed the valley's reputation by declaring the scenery "even tops Guilin's". The next day I head to Jiuzhaigou proper to discover if this is still true.

Things begin badly. The road to the gate of the park is lined with hotels, apparently enough to accommodate 20,000 tourists. Perhaps mindful of the sheer scale of tourism, the authorities have begun to discourage the once-popular habit of staying at one of the Tibetan villages inside the park. A sign at the ticket office declares visitors must vacate the valley by 5.30pm. Wandering away from the marked paths is prohibited and camping is completely out of the question.

Despite the warning, I have brought a three-day supply of clothing. There's a rumour that staying inside the park is still possible, and with Fahui's tales of adventure still fresh in my mind, I am determined to try.

A small fleet of minibuses waits on the asphalt. It's more than 30 kilometres from the gate to the farthest extremity of the park. Over that distance, the road rises more than 1,000 metres, to a high point of 3,060

metres above sea-level. In Fahui's heyday, exploring the length of the three Y-shaped valleys would take weeks. Now shuttle buses whisk you to any of the scenic points in minutes. They set off at ten-minute intervals, dropping and collecting passengers at stops along the route. The size of the wooden queuing mazes indicates demand is high.

I disembark at Shuzheng, one of the nine original settlements that gave Jiuzhaigou – Nine Village Valley – its name, and head into one of the homes advertising food. After a few perfunctory questions about the menu, I ask about the possibility of staying the night. A hush descends. The red-cheeked girl beckons me up a narrow flight of wooden stairs. A curtain is pushed aside and we are suddenly in a long corridor filled with empty guestrooms. "Things are better now," says my host, referring to the recent changes to accommodation rules. "We don't have to clean up as often."

In the sunshine outside, I wander down to the water's edge, where Tibetan prayer wheels turn in the current. To my left the river tumbles gently through a forest, swirling hypnotically around roots and trunks. To my right is an impossibly blue pool, one of Jiuzhaigou's 114 stunning lakes. The legendary colour of Jiuzhaigou's water has a scientific explanation, but talk of short-wave radiation, water dispersion and algae detracts from the hypnotic magic of staring into the depths.

The four seasons of Jiuzhaigou are each said to have distinct merits. Spring is alive with birdsong and peach blossom. Summer, though >>



Shuzheng is one of three Tibetan villages that are easily accessible from the main road through Jiuzhaigou. The houses have been renovated since the 1980s and the gaudy new exteriors are very different from the understated brown wood facades of the original settlements. Despite the obvious advent of air-conditioning machines and motorcars, fresh water still needs to be fetched from the river each day

crowded, is lush and verdant. Autumn marks the coming of dazzling yellow, brown and ochre forest foliage. Winter has an icy beauty. Giant icicles hang from rocky precipices and billowing threads of mist string themselves around mighty mountain peaks.

As I head for a wooden boardwalk I had spotted by the lake, I find a makeshift barricade declaring the path is closed between November and May due to fire risk. It's the same story on around 80 per cent of Jiuzhaigou's network of walkways. Though the boardwalks never stray too far from the main roads, they allow visitors to meander through the forests, flank the lakes and get close to the waterfalls. But not today. Late



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Cattle graze in empty meadows. Birds fly low over the river reeds. The peace is awe-inspiring.

autumn and winter may be the time to come to avoid heaving crowds but it's certainly not ideal for stretching one's legs.

And so back onto the bus. I head to Jiuzhaigou's gorgeously colourful western branch, Rize Valley, and follow the road back down the hill. Just beyond Jianzhu Lake, I cup my hands to the river and take a swig, one of the few developed areas of China where this is still safe. At the mighty Nuorilang waterfall, a huge boulder of ice breaks free and crashes onto the rocks below. It's now 4.30pm and the park is deserted. Cattle graze in empty meadows. Birds fly low over the river reeds. The peace is awe-inspiring.

It's not until dinner that I finally stop feeling like a fugitive. As I huddle around an electric hob, taking extra warmth from the local firewater, *qingke*, the family patriarch of the guesthouse tells me the park rangers don't give them a hard time. "They know it's not fair to take away our main business. They might not like people staying here but they accept it."

The following day, I tramp along 24 kilometres of asphalt to Long Lake, the farthest point of Jiuzhaigou's eastern branch, Zezhawa Valley.

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The lakes are sparse here, but the mountains are steep and dramatic. My long and lonely uphill walk is punctuated every 20 minutes by a passing bus. As it rumbles past, the passengers turn to stare. Through the steamy windows, I momentarily glimpse their curious and confused faces. Yesterday I felt like a fugitive; today I feel like a freak.

Firecrackers disturb the tranquility back at Shuzheng that night. When the cacophony ends, the only sound in the whole of this vast valley is the timeless flow of the river. I listen in the darkness, before putting on my

thermals, heading to my frigid room and creeping under the duvet.

I drift off to sleep, thinking about Fahui. I picture him back in the '80s, striding through long grass, easel in hand. I imagine him now, making sketches while lounging in a steamy spa a few miles down the road. Twenty years has changed China and Jiuzhaigou. Independent exploration is tough, hiking seems a forgotten habit and pioneers are no longer welcome. But progress has its perks too. Most importantly, the valley is still as pretty as a picture. Just ask Luo Fahui. He's got the paintings to prove it. 

Essentials

Go by...

Bus or plane. Fly from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou to Chengdu with Air China (800 810 1111; www.airchina.com.cn) for RMB 1,720 return, RMB 1,940 return and RMB 1,560 return. Buses depart from Chengdu's bus stations, Xinnanmen (once a day) and Chadianzi (four times a day). Tickets cost RMB 96 and RMB 97 respectively and the journey takes around 10 hours.

There are daily flights between Chengdu and the new Jiuhuang Airport (40 minutes, RMB 700 one-way) and a new route has been added from Chongqing (RMB 750). There's an onward journey of 83 kilometres to the park, but thanks to the excellent road the drive takes only an hour. Though air passengers save time, they miss out on the spectacular scenery of central and northern Sichuan.

Stay at...

Giuzhai Paradise Resort

This self-proclaimed 'five-star plus' resort opened in September 2003 and is easily the most luxurious option in the region. The sprawling complex includes one of China's most unique lobbies – a huge perspex dome – and the rooms have views of the surrounding forests and mountains. There's a stunning indoor spa and swimming pool, though entry is not included in the RMB 1,000-plus price of the rooms. A taxi ride to Jiuzhaigou costs RMB 50 and takes around 25 minutes.

(+86 (0)837 778 9999; www.jiuzhaiparadise.com)

Sheraton Jiuzhaigou Resort

Jiuzhaigou's other five-star resort is only two kilometres away from the entrance and is the most convenient hotel option for visitors who want to maximise their time inside the park while enjoying top-notch comforts.

(+86 (0)837 773 9988; www.starwoodhotels.com)

Though staying inside the park is now prohibited, guesthouses at the park's three largest Tibetan villages – Shuzheng, Heye and Zechawa – do still put up hikers. Don't expect accommodation to be advertised, and make your enquiries discreetly. One ranger told *Asia and Away* that they tacitly allow a limited number of guests to stay at these former guesthouses. It's by far the best way to commune with the environment, and dawn and dusk are wonderfully peaceful. However, expect to rough it – heating and running water are rare.

Eat at...

Your hotel. Though the sheer number of hotels and guesthouses constitute a conurbation of sorts, there is no Jiuzhaigou 'town'. Accordingly, don't expect too many supermarkets, souvenir shops or independent restaurants.

Entry costs...

Jiuzhaigou's peak season runs from April 1 to November 15. A day pass costs RMB 220 and there is an additional RMB 90 charge if you want to use the buses. In the low season, entry is just RMB 80 plus RMB 80 for the bus. There's a discount if you visit the park two days in a row.

Go in...

All four seasons have their merits, though many visitors complain that summer is infuriatingly crowded and overly expensive. To see Jiuzhaigou at its most colourful, visit in autumn. Perhaps the best time to go is after the October National Day holiday rush when the weather is mild, the walkways are still open and the crowds have thinned out.

PS...

For more information on Jiuzhaigou Nature Park see www.jiuzhai.com.

SHERATON JIUZHAIGOU GETAWAY PACKAGE

1 Nov '05 to 31 Mar '06 RMB810 net per person
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Sheraton Jiuzhaigou Resort, the first international five-star resort in China's leading scenic spot, is situated in the North Western Sichuan Plateau, with an elevation of 1,800 meters above sea level. It is nestled amongst the green mountains and blue water next to the Jiuzhaigou World Heritage Park.

* The Resort features striking Tibetan architecture and is only 1.5 km away from the park entrance. * Access is easy from any origin as it is also situated only 80 km from the newly-built Jiuhuang Airport. * Other nearby attractions include the White River Golden Monkey Natural Reserve. * Conveniently located and well-appointed, the Resort is the first choice for holiday-makers, conference guests and incentive groups.



Package Includes:

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Package is sold subject to room availability

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