

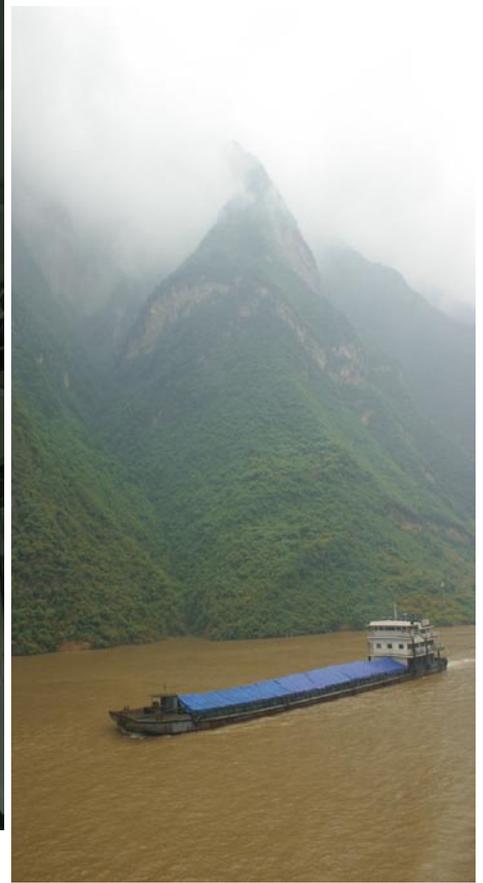
# CHINA | YANGTZE

**GRAHAM BOND JOINS A NEW LUXURY THREE GORGES CRUISE AND**



# on the RISE

FINDS IT PAMPERING, PLEASANT AND SLIGHTLY DISCONCERTING



W

hen it comes to working with water, China knows a thing or two. Two of the world's six longest rivers are contained entirely within its borders. China has the longest and oldest canal on the planet. Its most celebrated explorer, Zheng He, was building ocean-going fleets while the

Portuguese were still paddling around in the shallows. And let's not forget philosopher Lao Zi, who based the central tenets of Taoism on the idea of ebb and flow.

Chinese waterways have been crucial to the nation's spirit, history and economy, making it all the more ironic that they have rarely provided its people with a great deal of fun. Chairman Mao famously took a dip from time to time, but thanks to the catastrophic floods, the swirling whirlpools and dangerous rapids, Chinese rivers have traditionally been feared rather than enjoyed.

There is, however, one spot where leisure gets a look in. The Yangtze also has its fair share of hazards – as one cruiser discovered last month when it ran aground near Chongqing – but the mesmerising beauty of the Three Gorges has proved irresistible nonetheless. Accidents like the one that befell *Galaxy II* in September are now rare, thanks partly to construction of the world's widest dam, which allows a degree of control over the water level's fluctuations. The cramped rust-buckets of old have been usurped by slick cruisers advertising hotel-quality facilities. And now one of the west's most established river operators, Viking Cruises, has sailed serenely into the fray.

**Thanks to its proximity to the dam, Yichang**, a medium-sized Chinese city at the heart of Hubei province, has replaced Wuhan as chief launching pad for up-river cruises. The local authorities have therefore tidied up to showcase it for visitors. The highways are silky

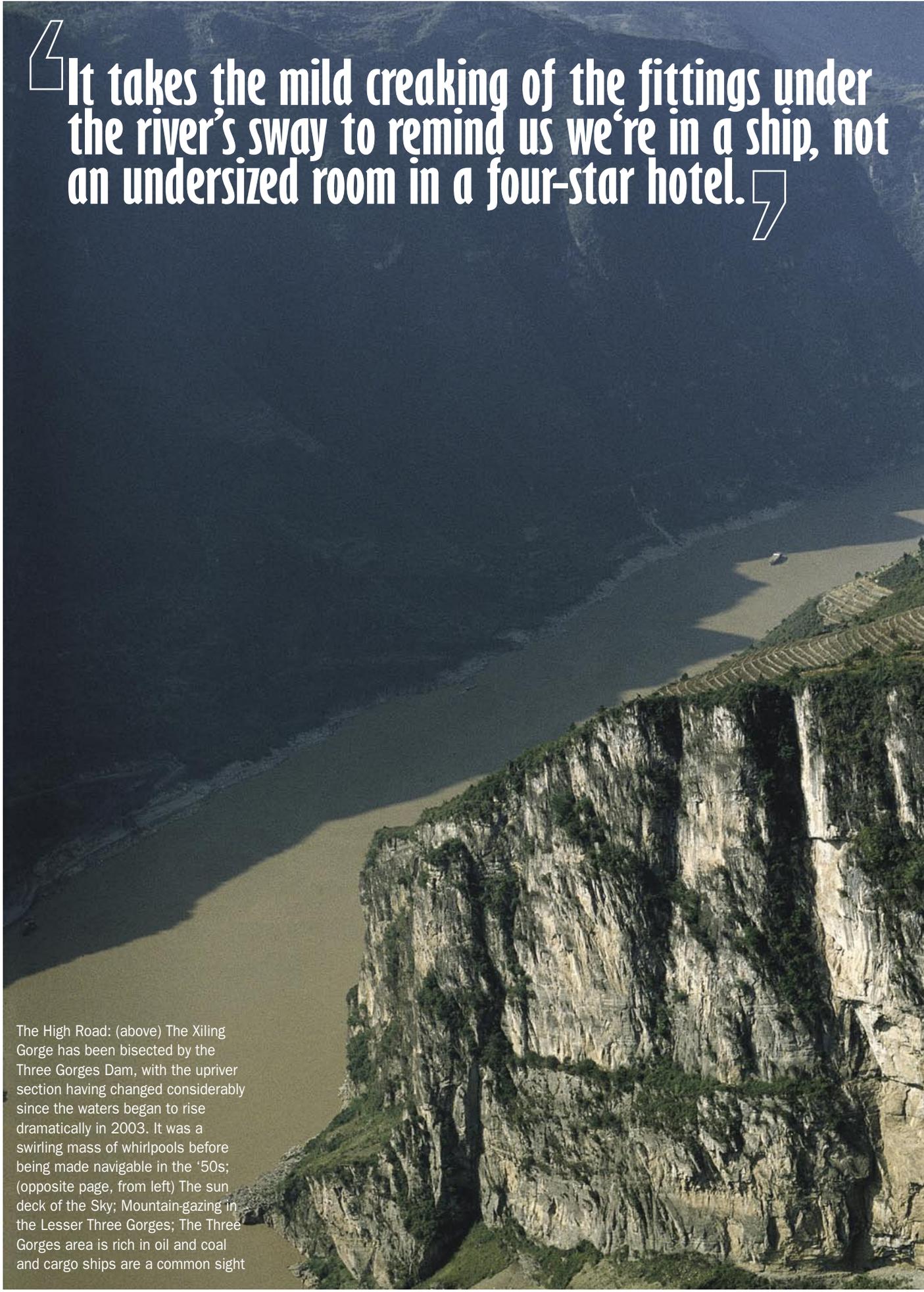
smooth and lavish lawns and giant flowerbeds abound. Down by the water, the scene is more traditional. Portside hawkers noisily compete for customers and wiry old men sling bags over shoulders and across gangways. Enveloping the whole soggy scene is mist, lots of mist.

The world's third-longest river is used to big things. Big bends, big gorges, big dams and, now, big boats. The *Viking Century Sky*, the newest and largest vessel on the Yangtze, is 126 metres long and six storeys high. Each of the 153 cabins has a small balcony and the adjacent 20 square metres manages to accommodate two beds, a sofa, writing desk, cosy bathroom and a tiny TV with HBO and BBC. The carpet is soft and the sheets are pristine white. It takes the mild creaking of the fittings under the river's sway to remind us we're in a ship, not an undersized four-star hotel room.

At the door of the restaurant, Italian F&B manager, Florian, greets each guest as he would a long lost uncle. "How *are* you? Sleep well, I trust? Ooh, we have a treat at lunch today." After a hybrid breakfast of pancakes, smoked salmon, waffles and baked beans, we are beckoned to the lobby by a delightfully soothing ding-dong announcement. "Today's temperature is 26 degrees and the weather is overcast," informs the tour manager in dulcet tones. It's time for our first shore excursion. And we haven't even left port yet.

**The Three Gorges Dam** project exhibition hall looks like it has been airlifted directly out of a Silicon Valley business park. Up at the front, our guide talks figures. Each time he mentions a number or name, his diction slows and his face assumes a grave expression. He obviously suspects we may not have heard of the "Threeeee Gooooorges Daaaaaam" or be aware that it is the largest water conservation project "IN... THE... WORLD".

And what a dam: 354,000 tonnes of reinforced steel bars and 900 million cubic feet of concrete spanning the two-kilometre river width. By the time it is fully operational in 2009, it will produce a colossal 84.7 billion kilowatt hours from the 900 billion tonnes of water that buffet it each year. Sun Yat-sen first dreamt up the project 86 years ago and, since 1994, his ideas have been becoming reality. In my own dreams, the Three Gorges Dam was a mythical gateway strung between two mountains, stretching up to the clouds. I am colossally wrong. In today's gloom, it's barely distinguishable >>



It takes the mild creaking of the fittings under the river's sway to remind us we're in a ship, not an undersized room in a four-star hotel.

The High Road: (above) The Xiling Gorge has been bisected by the Three Gorges Dam, with the upriver section having changed considerably since the waters began to rise dramatically in 2003. It was a swirling mass of whirlpools before being made navigable in the '50s; (opposite page, from left) The sun deck of the Sky; Mountain-gazing in the Lesser Three Gorges; The Three Gorges area is rich in oil and coal and cargo ships are a common sight



Expect to be dwarfed by mile-high mountains for the entire length of a four-day cruise, and you'll be disappointed.

Mark Up: (above) Scores of signs throughout the entire length of the Three Gorges indicate the progress of the rising water level. From the first stage of dam construction, finished in 1997, to the completion of the project in 2009, the water will rise a total of 110 metres; (below) Just 8 kilometres in length, Qutang Gorge may be the shortest of the three gorges, but it is arguably the grandest, with perpendicular cliffs and mighty mountain peaks



from the water and sky – a cold, flat piece of engineering brilliance.

It's possible to climb a cone-shaped tower and look down onto both the dam and the two sets of locks. Over the last two months, the dam authority opened the crest to 1,000 tourists daily, though this privilege expires on October 1. A path has been built at the base of the dam where flamenco guitar music plays over the PA system, harmonising awkwardly with the crash of silt and water gushing from the run-off chute.

It takes three hours for the Sky to navigate the five huge steps of the lock. Taking it in from a reclining chair up on the expansive sun deck is an oddly pleasing experience. As the stained granite wall recedes and the grey sky slides into view, I sip on a strawberry margarita. There's a constant industrial whirring and a faint whiff of petroleum. And then there's me, cocktail glass in hand, on holiday in the middle of the concrete beast.

**Much tourism has, unfairly, been marketed** around seeing the Three Gorges 'before it's too late'. The rock faces have indeed been kneecapped since 2003, when the Yangtze was dammed across its entire width and the waters rose suddenly by 52 metres. Nevertheless, they remain spectacular and will continue to do so, even when the high watermark is reached in 2009. By then, of course, some 1.3 million people will have been displaced. Signs mark out which bits of land – and which homes – will be submerged. Cameras click; tourists sigh. It's true that, within a few years, this peculiarly melancholy experience will be denied visitors. But the truly enduring attraction is beyond the mortal realm; it is the magnificent fusion of mountain, water and sky.

The three gorges – Xiling, Wu and Qutang – are best described as the spiritual home of the traditional Chinese misty-mountain watercolour. The sun doesn't belong here and rarely makes an effort to argue the point. Instead, great threads of mist snake between the enormous peaks. Mountain tops are disconnected from the earth by low-lying fog. This is the land of imagination, evidenced by the stories of dragons, devils and goddesses that Steven, the cruise manager, spins in fluent English. There are also more recent tales of children scampering up cliffs and hiding

in caves to dodge one-child policy inspectors. Remote villages have miraculously stood for centuries in this stunning but desolate landscape. I'm glad we are just passing through.

Possibly the best place to savour both the melancholy and heavenly aspects of a Yangtze cruise is the Daning River, the second of our three excursions. This narrow tributary is home to the Lesser Three Gorges where sheer limestone cliffs soar out of the green-brown water. The tight river bends and 90-degree angles make for a truly dramatic spectacle. High up in the rock faces, 2,000-year-old 'hanging coffins' are visible in their hand-carved resting places. Down on the ground, deserted settlements are lapped by the water's edge.

In total, it takes around 24 hours to sail through the 124 kilometre combined length of the three gorges. Expect to be dwarfed by mile-high mountains for the entire length of a four-day cruise, however, and you'll likely go home disappointed. The dramatic scenery comes in three, short bursts. In between, guests aboard the Sky can enjoy more traditional cruise ship pleasures.

Like the music. Zoltan and Lily provide much of the evening entertainment and belt out 'oldie-but-goodie' tunes' using the classic cruise ship arrangement of keyboards, microphones and dodgy hairstyles. Lovers of the quiet life can retire to the glassed-in bar on the sun deck. There are board games and English magazines in the library, a small internet bar, gymnasium, massage room and sauna. All is extremely comfortable, and pricey.

**"Ding-dong. Today's temperature is 25 degrees** and the weather is... overcast. It's time for your final excursion." By the time we arrive at the 16th-century Shibaozhai pagoda, three other boats have already anchored. To get to shore, the foreign contingent walks through the narrow, smoky corridors of an adjacent vessel. On the right, there's a squat toilet, to the left, a crowded dormitory. It's worth being reminded that the Sky is not the way most people experience the Yangtze river.

It has been a peculiar journey – modern and ancient China meeting over all-American breakfasts, European luncheons and a universal cabaret schedule. As more boats like the Sky start operating, the leisure business on China's waterways can only go the way of the Yangtze's rising tide. Up.



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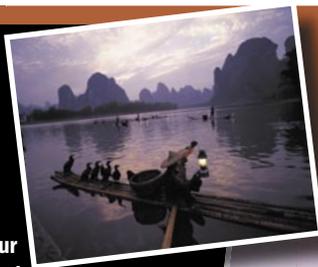
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## Other Water Ways

China is crisscrossed by a web of waterways. Yet despite its cruising potential, options remain extremely limited. Mighty rivers like the Huang (Yellow) He are unnavigable for most of the year, and river trips have often been abandoned in favour of faster bus links. The Yangtze and the Grand Canal are the only places where tourists can spend a night or more on the water. Even the number of boats travelling the whole of the navigable part of the Yangtze - Shanghai to Chongqing - have dwindled in recent years, though Viking's other China boat, the Star, still makes the trip. Shorter boat trips include:



Scenes from the Li River around Guilin



**1** The Li River between Guilin and Yangshuo is the Yangtze's closest rival for breathtaking and easily accessible river beauty. A boat trip is one of the best ways to view the area's world famous limestone karst landscapes, as pictured on the reverse of the RMB 20 note. Boats depart Guilin at 8am and the return trip costs RMB 500, including lunch.

**2** Departing from Hong Kong's China Ferry Terminal, it's possible to travel up into Guangdong by one of several sleek catamarans. These super smooth cruises are practical transport links, so expect neither tour guide commentaries nor outdoor access. The landscapes here are industrial, but still fascinating. The longest inland trip is a four-hour journey to the city of Zhaoqing, 110 kilometres west of Guangzhou. Boats run daily.

**3** Wuyi Mountain, in the northwest corner of Fujian, is a stunning mix of rivers, crags and forests. It's possible to take a trip down the Jiuqu Xi (Nine Twists River) on bamboo rafts fitted with rattan chairs. The journey takes more than an hour and offers another chance to see some of China's oldest - and highest - coffins, placed up in the mountains.

**4** Jiangnan, an area south of the Yangtze River straddling Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, is famous for its water towns. The Grand Canal, a waterway with a history of more than 2,000 years, is the thread that connects them. It's possible to sail on the canal all the way between Hangzhou and Wuxi, though boats are cramped and the most luxurious accommodation is likely to be a four-berth cabin. Alternatively, spend a day or two paddling in towns like Wuzhen and Zhouzhuang.

## Essentials

### ➔ Go by...

Plane. From Beijing to Yichang with Hainan Airlines (+86 (0)898 950 718, 800 876 8999; www.hnair.com) for RMB 1,950 return. From Shanghai and Guangzhou to Yichang with China Eastern Airlines (+86 (0)21 95108; www.ce-air.com) for RMB 1,350 return and RMB 1,490 return.

### ➔ Go with...

Viking River Cruises typically targets the North American and European markets with all-inclusive package tours to China, including a Yangtze river cruise. China residents can book the cruise-only portion through the Beijing office at a special rate. A four-night cruise from Yellow Ox Temple (near Yichang) to Chongqing costs USD 599 (Sep 16-Oct 24) and USD 499 (rest of the season). These rates are only available to China residents, 30 days before sailing. (+86 (0)10 8518 8701; www.vikingrivercruises.com)

### ⓘ PS...

From next year, only cruise ships travelling all the way between Shanghai and Chongqing will be authorised to use the locks.