



There's a Chinese saying that goes, "Up in the sky there is heaven, down on earth there is Hangzhou and Suzhou". Whoever came up with that saying never had to spend their Spring Festival holidays in glorious fifty shades of grey, rainy and freezing-to-the-bones Hangzhou. I had just come back from a two weeks family trip to Russia (which is warmer in February than Hangzhou, just saying), and was greeted by the bleak spectacle of the completely empty suburbs and a construction site. Yeah, sometimes I forget I live in China and was surprised to see it.

I was shooting short zombie post-apocalyptic, Silent Hill inspired videos in my neighborhood, when my adventurous friend Cos Ty wrote me from Italy and made me an offer I couldn't refuse: to join her on a trip to Yunnan to visit her friend F Ra. "Go on a road trip", they said. "It will be fun", they said. After a quick gaze into the white nothing behind my window, it all became clear: I definitely wanted to go to Yunnan to see elephants, colors, birds, people, and just feel alive.



Another option was to start from the backdoor: from Kunming fly to Jinghong for the elephants (Aww, flight prices will be around 300 RMB, we thought, ooh so expensive... if we'd only knew how much money would evaporate from our Alipays later), Rice Terraces-Jianshui, a bus from Jianshui to Nansha and back to Kunming.

As February 25th, the start of our trip,

A very clear (very!) travel plan was created (fine, it was only Cos Ty who was working on it, I was feeling like I should buy a red claw hummer and go hunting “Half-life” style around my building). It sounded easy, simple and elegant: Kunming - Rice Terraces, spend two days in the Rice Terraces to catch both sunset and sunrise, then see the elephants in Xishuangbanna and return to Kunming. For those who travel around China – you know, it was a very chic plan.



Very steady

PLAN

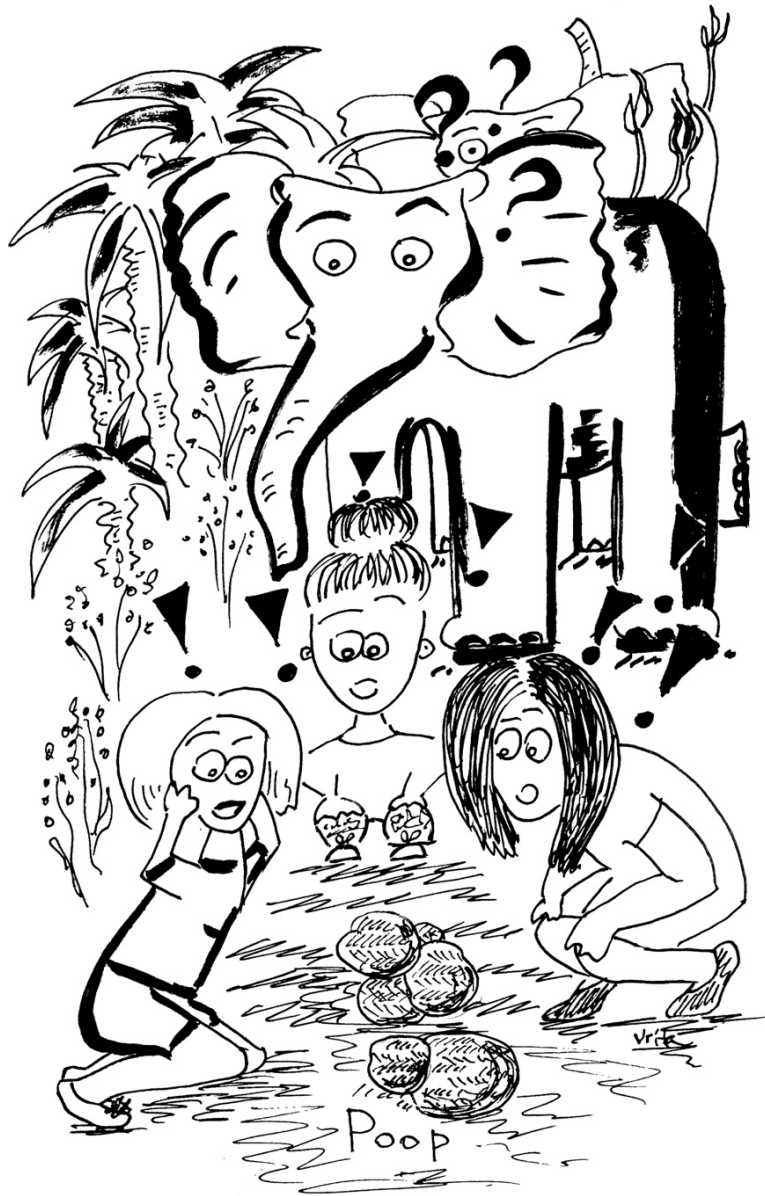
approached, we realized a few things. First, February had 28 days. We completely forgot.

Second, booking buses online is impossible. The only way is to go check directly at the bus station and improvise. I was thanking all the gods that Cos Ty and F Ra know Chinese much better than I do and we actually wouldn't get lost. Okay, of course it should work.

Me and Cos Ty, filled with hopes and morning *baozi*, went to the airport. There a giant cow greeted us from the side of our airplane. The interior of the cabin was also quite picturesque, with paintings of cows soaring in the sky. Who said cows can't fly?



F Ra joined us in Xishuangbanna. In Russia we have an expression that roughly translates as “blowing in your mustache”, which means “not worrying about a thing”. None of us gals had mustaches, but if we did, we wouldn't have blown in them at all. Vacation mood conquered us, and the Rice Terraces were completely forgotten. We visited the Primitive Forest Park, saw enough peacocks to make Katy Perry jealous, touched butterflies and snakes. Next day we went to the Gajah Liar Valley to see the elephants.



Did we see them? No! Better! We did see pictures of the elephants! And quite a lot of elephant poop. Training our feet on elevated wooden platforms, we kept our eyes peeled, hoping to catch a glimpse of a shy elephant making its way through the trees below. At the end we became proper pathfinders and were trying to assess the “freshness” of the traces. Now I wonder if by doing so we missed any

real elephant, farcically standing behind us *à la* Tom & Jerry, surprised at why we were examining its stools.

Time flies, and we had to think about our trip to the Rice Terraces. There was now only one night to spend in the village of the Terraces, called Yuanyang (February, why are you so short??). This meant we had one chance to catch both sunset and sunrise. We confidently strode into the bus station to buy tickets for the day after, and we discovered it would leave at noon and it took 9 hours. No sunset for you, gurls! Cruel world, so cruel. Ok, was there any bus to Jianshui, the closest city to the Rice Terraces? Yes, but long story short, that wouldn't work either! So, we held a brainstorming session, tried checking online for all possible bus routes, airplanes, boats, donkeys... If only we had a car...

Suddenly, an epiphany came upon us.

The magical Didi app! Driven by desperation, we launched our S.O.S. into the ether: was there any *shifu* who would take us from Pu'er to Yuanyang?

We tried again and again, asking to be driven from various places to the Yuanyang Rice Terraces, hoping that a slightly shorter route would be more appealing. And then we received a call from *shifu* Gre At.

- Yes, I can take you to Yuanyang, I'll be travelling north anyway. But when do you want to leave from Mojiang? Because I'll be leaving from Pu'er.
- What?! We can totally meet you in Pu'er!

The Didi gods were smiling upon us. We met *shifu* Gre At. A sweet middle-aged man, he was a good driver with a comfy car, perfect for a pleasant seven-hour ride to Yuanyang Nansha. *Shifu* Gre At was ready to drop us off at the bus station, where we would look for a minivan to our hostel in Xinjie, up in the mountains. Then he took a good look at our puffy, sleep-deprived faces. Gre At was too polite to tell us, but it was clear that he was worried we wouldn't make it to our destination. These *laowais* need to be saved. So, this sweet man decided to take us not only to the town where we had to change horses, but to stay with us to the very end.

- Are you sure you don't want me to take you to your hotel? – recklessly suggested Gre At.

We looked at each other for a split second, turned to him with our best creepy smiles and were more than happy to accept.

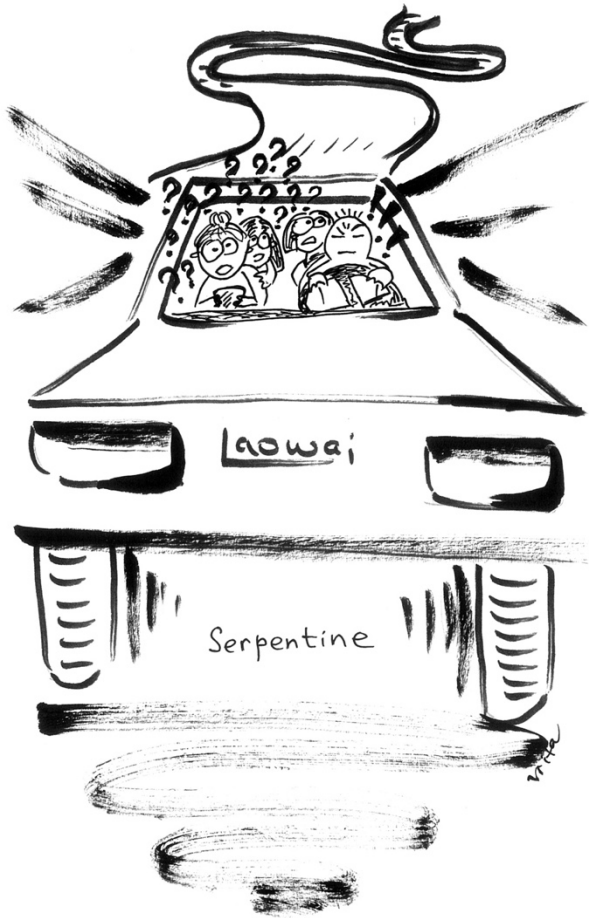
It took about an extra hour to get from Nansha to Xinjie. None of us girls are psychics, but we didn't need any special gift to read the

regret written all over *shifu* Gre At's face. With every narrow bend he took, the light in his eyes would grow dimmer. We could imagine him swearing to himself he would never drive a *laowai* ever again. To add insult to injury, Cos Ty's stomach gave up and she loudly barfed into a paper bag.

But *shifu* Gre At was a doll to the very end and drove us to our hostel. Despite the astronomical fare, we parted ways with a smile. Have a safe ride home, sweet prince.

Jumping on the stairs carved around the mountain houses, we rushed to our hostel,

squeezed in a minivan and drove to the best spot for looking at the sunset! Just in time!... To admire the backs of all the tourists taking



pictures with their huge professional cameras and drones. Here is a lifehack for you: climbing on a trash can was a great idea.

The rest of our trip was slightly more relaxing. Slightly. I got really sick during the night. The morning after we woke up at six (as you do on vacations) and walked to a less touristy spot to see the



sunrise. It was magnificent and freezing to death. Totally worth it by the way, no jokes.

Then we dragged ourselves to the meeting point we had arranged with a local driver. He promised he would be there at 7. He showed up at 7:30. He said it will be only us. He managed to cram in his tiny minivan his wife and two toddlers (one strategically tied to her back), two dudes with huge suitcases, a Korean tourist carrying professional photography gear and what looked like a ski set and a snowboard.

Speeding at about 100 km/h through traffic on this narrow, winding mountain road, our driver would turn his head to speak with his wife, greet friends on the road and drink. No seatbelts, but why would you need them in such circumstances?

We finally got on the bus to Kunming, and after 6 hours made it to the Spring City. I was dead, so I collapsed on my bed right after checking in.

We all resuscitated the morning after, so the three of us went out for brunch to a French café, met wonderful hippies, saw birds, life and colors. It was a sunny, warm day. Lazily strolling around Cui Hu, I thought to myself that people were not lying. Kunming really was a lovely place. I was glad I would be able to enjoy. For one. Whole. Day.