China (Yunnan) - A Plant Hunter’s Paradise

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1  Depart London
Day 2  Kunming
Day 3/4  Fly Lijiang; transfer Yuhu
Day 5  Daju
Day 6/9  Zhongdian
Day 10  Langdu
Day 11/12  Riwa / Yading
Day 13  Daocheng
Day 14  Xiangcheng
Day 15  Wengshui
Day 16/17  Zhongdian
Day 18  Kunming/Hong Kong
Day 19  Fly London

Departs
May

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code CHN03) or brochure

Grading
Grade B/C. The walking on this tour is moderate rather than strenuous, but travelling in this part of China can be demanding

Focus
Botany, though birds and the rich local cultures will not be ignored

Highlights
- Stunning flora
- Wonderful scenery
- Fascinating Tibetan influenced culture
- Home of many now familiar garden plants
- Adventurous itinerary to areas little visited by Westerners
- Meadows full of Primulas, slipper orchids & blue poppies
- A plethora of Rhododendron species
- Large altitudinal range
- Led by expert botanist John Shipton

Rosa sp. courtesy of Phillipe de Spoelberch

Incarvillea mairei courtesy of Phillipe de Spoelberch

Aster souliei courtesy of Phillipe de Spoelberch
NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

**Introduction**

This is an adventurous 19-day holiday to a botanist’s paradise, the mountains of north-western Yunnan, following in the footsteps of such pioneering plant-hunters of the last century as Kingdon-Ward, Forrest and Wilson.

The province of Yunnan lies in the far south-west of China, and borders Vietnam, Laos, Burma and Tibet. It contains a mosaic of ethnic groups, but its north-western corner is Tibetan, once part of the ancient Tibetan province of Kham. School atlases show the extreme altitude of the great Himalayan range and the Tibetan plateau in purple, spilling untidily south-eastwards into China. Here, three great Asian rivers – the Yangtse, the Mekong and the Salween – emerge from the heart of Tibet and forge their way towards the sea, carving their way through the highest mountains in the world. In south-eastern Tibet and Yunnan, they chart a close and parallel course, separated by mountains that rise to 6,000 metres and more, before going their separate ways: the Yangtse in a dramatic bend to the east to fertilise one of the greatest of all civilisations, the Mekong into Laos and Vietnam, and the Salween into Burma.

This dramatic region has always been considered remote by the Chinese, let alone Europeans, and it wasn’t until late in the nineteenth century that intrepid Westerners first penetrated the wild region of Kham. Amongst these explorers were some of the great plant-hunters, who came in search of one of the richest temperate floras in the world. In particular, the cool, temperate climate of the Yunnan highlands, together with plentiful summer rainfall, made plants from this region ideal for establishing in British gardens. The plant-hunters, Ernest Wilson, George Forrest and Frank Kingdon-Ward, therefore found rich pickings. Trees, shrubs and herbaceous perennials hitherto unknown to science were brought back in abundance following their adventurous journeys in the early years of the twentieth century, and today provide many of our classic garden plants.

This exciting and pioneering trip is not only an introduction to a botanical paradise, but to some of the most spectacular and fascinating country in the world, still barely travelled by Westerners.

**Day 1**

**Saturday**

**In Flight**

We depart London Heathrow today on our scheduled overnight flight to Hong Kong.

**Day 2**

**Sunday**

**Kunming**

Arriving at Hong Kong airport this morning, we transfer to our onward flight to Kunming, where we will settle in to a comfortable hotel for an overnight stay.
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Tour Itinerary

Day 3  Monday
Fly Lijiang; Transfer Yuhu

Today we fly onward from Kunming to Lijiang, in the west of Yunnan, where we begin our adventure. This is the ideal place to start for, situated at a relatively low altitude (2,000 metres) a couple of days in the region will allow us to acclimatise before we explore the higher country to the north. Lijiang is a world heritage site and home to (and the capital of) the Naxi, a colourful ethnic minority with a matriarchal society and a Tibeto-Burmese language – one of the many ethnic minorities of south-west China. The ancient city of Lijiang is a delightful maze of cobbled streets, old wooden buildings and gushing canals. We will stay in a nearby village beneath the beautiful snow-covered peak of Yulong Xue Shan, the Jade Dragon Mountain, where our comfortable lodge provides an ideal base from which to explore the lush countryside and unwind after the long journey. Here we will also begin to sample the region’s botanical delights and absorb the exotic scenery. It won’t be long before our plant-hunting begins to reveal all sorts of surprises!

Day 4  Tuesday
Lijiang

This morning we will explore the charming villages such as Yuhu and get a feel for this remote part of China and its ethnically diverse people. We will explore the country on the southern slopes of Yulong Xue Shan, including hopefully a visit to the new Lijiang botanical reserve just set up by the Kunming Botanic Garden.

Day 5  Wednesday
Daju

Today we drive north and, skirting around the slopes of the Jade Dragon Mountain, we reach the Yangtse River at a point after which it has made its great bend to flow into central China. A few kilometers north of Yuhu we pass the limestone gorge of Dong Bu with a spectacular wealth of both herbaceous and woody plants. As we travel round the east side of the mountain we can make several plant stops through the day featuring meadows of Roscoe, fields of Primula spp and banks of Iris. After a final pass where we may find our first Cyprepedium we reach a point with views over the Yangte gorge 1000 metres below. Here the river is flanked by Jade dragon and the 5500m Haba Shan to the north. We then drop down to near sub tropical Daju, a Naxi village near the river. We stay in a family guest house with views towards the famous Tiger Leaping Gorge.

Day 6  Thursday
Daju to Zhongdian

This morning we walk down 500m to the banks of the Yangtse. Here we cross on a local ferry and walk up the other side of the gorge to be met by our drivers and the 4x4 vehicles we will be with for the rest of the trip. We drive round the slopes of Haba Shan, passed the picturesque Haba village, home of some of the Muslim Hui people, where we may catch a glimpse of the snow summit. As we continue north toward the Zhongdian plateau will again make several wonderful plant stops through the day stopping for lunch in the Yi village of Jo Long. We then climb over a 4000m pass and enter the region the Chinese government has recently dubbed Shangri La. It is certainly this for anyone remotely keen on plants having its very special and extremely rich flora. In the evening we will arrive at our hotel next to the thriving Songtsam monastery.
Day 7

Zhongdian - Napha Hai

Zhongdian is the focal point of our journey and capital of this Tibetan area, a beautiful forested country interspersed with villages of unique and beautifully ornamented timber houses. Not only did this vernacular architecture come through the Cultural Revolution unscathed, but the traditional style is being used to build new houses. The area is furnished with glades full of Nomocharis lilies, large stands of Podophyllum hexandrum and the great slipper orchids, Cypripedium fields of massed Primula secundiflora mixed with Primula sikkimensis, and sheets of multi-coloured Pedicularis.

Zhongdian is a small regional capital that sits on a 3,000-metre plateau surrounded by tranquil farmland, forests and mountains, and dotted with villages of splendidly built and ornamented wooden houses. Its Tibetan inhabitants, however, still call their town Gyalthang rather than Zhongdian the old official name. We will stay for three nights just outside the town, near the restored Tibetan Buddhist Songtsam Monastery, now replete again as a functioning institution of the Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) Sect of Tibetan monks. This will be our base from which we will explore the surrounding valleys, lakes and hills. Here, whole meadows are brim-full with primulas, Pedicularis, carpets of Incarvillea and the large flowers of slipper orchids; rocky banks are covered with the blue poppy Meconopsis horridula. We will have time during these two days to visit the town of Zhongdian. The modern part is somewhat unprepossessing, though still intriguing for those not used to travelling in China, but the old Tibetan section is charming and well worth exploring, as are the various markets. Today we visit Napha Hai. Within a stone’s throw of the hotel we can walk nearby hillsides covered in stands of various beautiful Euphorbia species and the wonderfully scented Stellara chaemajasme. By driving for a few kilometres we can reach the point at the head of the Zhongdian plateau which affords fine views over Napha Lake, a seasonal lake extensively grazed by pigs, dzos (cattle-yak hybrids) and horses. Here we will find blue Meconopsis on the dry banks, mixed with the brilliant red of Androsace bulleyana. Working our way around the lake we will find both Cypripedium tibeticum and Cypripedium flavum, a host of Anemone species, Morina alba, and much else growing beneath Deutzia, Syringa and Daphne aurantiaca. We will walk up to a little pass, through forests of mixed Rhododendron species (including Rhododendron yunnanensis), to get a view into the verdant country beyond that runs towards the holy mountain of Xe Ka which towers 2,000 metres above the surrounding hills. Time permitting, we may walk up a magical little valley to the north of the town, entered through a small limestone gorge, where there is a simply breathtaking array of primulas, sheets of Pedicularis, as well as Meconopsis, Incarvillea and Podophyllum.

Day 8

Zhongdian - Tien Bao Shan

Today we drive south of Zhongdian and then turn east towards the little visited limestone peak of Tien Bao Shan. Passed a small monastery a small track takes us into the forested valleys, meadows and streams full of all kinds of plants and shrubs. Primulas abound in the moist ground by the streams and we should find our first Rhododendron wardii in flower. We will picnic here in between wandering the valleys under spectacular crags, then back to our hotel in Zhongdian.
Day 9  
Zhongdian Tien Chi Lake

Today we drive through forests full of *Nomocharis forestii* and passbanks of several Rhododendron including *R. wardii* and many species of Primula, with views back across the plateau to Tien bao Shan. After many plant stops we will reach the 3800m holy lake of Tien Chi. We will have a picnic surrounded by botanical wonders such as *Lilium soulei, Cremanthodium campanulatum* and *Rheum alexandre*. After an afternoon exploring the rich moist meadows around the lake we will make our way back to Zhongdian.

Day 10  
Langdu

Today we leave Shangri la for a loop into the mountains to the north. First we drive through the village of Geza where we may visit Tibetan friends and so have a chance if we haven't done so already of seeing inside one of these amazing Zhongdian houses. We then travel through forests and across two high mountain passes with spectacular vistas across truly wild remote country with a plethora of special plants. After an exciting day of mountain travel and plant hunting we stay near the small community of Langdu in a guesthouse which also has its own cheese factory.

Day 11  
Riwa/Yading

Today we travel down a steep valley through rich forest passing the village of Langdu. Then after crossing into the province of Sichuan cross we climb the 4000m pass of Udzu La carpeted with flowers from where we have spectacular views of the triple peaked Yading mountain with its glaciated summit, a mountain holy to Tibetans.

Day 12  
Riwa / Yading

Today we have the day to explore the slopes of Yading Shan. We have the chance to explore two valleys and investigate the flora in what has become a national park. Given good weather this is a spectacular place and with the mountain and glaciers above us we will walk the meadows below with a host of alpines and shrubs to find.

Day 13  
Daocheng

Today we climb onto the Tibetan plateau proper, a completely different environment. Climbing over the 4000m Bowa La over open pastures rich is alpines we travel north to the very Tibetan town of Daocheng, passing Za Wu monatery perched on a mountain side. Beyond wide valleys and plains all above 3300m stretch towards Lhasa.
Day 14  
Daocheng / Xiancheng

Today we travel across high grasslands, and make several plant foraging stops to explore this new environment. At Sangdui we may stop to visit the special Kagyupa monastery as well as looking at the flora in the valley nearby and then climb to Haizi or stone sea, which is an enormous area of granite, a remnant of tectonic activity early on in the current Himalayan orogeny. In amongst the massive granite outcrops is a host of alpine plants many of which await proper research and cataloguing. After lunch in Sangdui, a tiny Tibetan village, we climb over the 4600m pass of Emir Shan La with more unique alpines before descending a Yangtse tributary arriving in the evening in the bustling outpost of Xiancheng.

Day 15  
Wengshui

Today we leave Xiangcheng and climb up to the Big Snow Mountain Pass, Da Xue Shan La (4300m), crossing back into Yunnan Province. Given good weather the slopes of Da Xue Shan are spectacular. The Pass is covered with Rhododendron roxianum and the mass of pink bloom goes very well with the incredible views. We will find a plethora of alpine gems on the pass including hopefully Meconopsis lancifolia and Lloydia delavayii, lots more Primulas, Pedicularis, Corydalis and much else. We then descend nearly two thousand metres through forests of Rhododendron yunnanensis and R. wardii to stop in the tiny Tibetan village of Wengshui at 3000m.

Day 16  
Wengshui /Zhongdian

Our hotel is at the bottom is at the bottom of the impressive Birang gorge which we will explore in the morning. Now little visited it is full of an array of shrubs and herbaceous plants. After lunch we travel up through forest to over Xiao Xue La, Little Snow Mountain Pass another 4000m pass. With spectacular views of the mountains to the north we look back on the Big Snow Mountain where miles of unspoiled forest reach up to jagged limestone peaks and ridges, before descending to the Geza valley. We now complete our loop and head back onto the Zhondian plateau.

Day 17  
Zhongdian

Today we have another opportunity to take in the Zhongdian plateau and one way to appreciate it is to ascend the 4000m limestone peak of Xe Ka which stands above the plateau. If the weather is good, we will be able to take the cable car to the top. This passes up through the forest flanking the mountain to the rocky pastures on the summit. Here we should find more Meconopsis, Androsace and Diapensia and much else. For those who are energetic enough, paths can be found leading down to the base of the mountain. In the evening we return to our hotel and our farewell meal in town.
Day 18
Kunming

Leaving Zhongdian in the morning, we fly back to Kunming and may have time to visit the old centre of this historic Chinese provincial capital before flying to Hong Kong and an onward connection to London Heathrow.

Day 19

We arrive back in London early morning

Grading

This tour is graded B/C, as it is a botanical ‘adventure’ rather than a genteel and luxury holiday! The walking that we will do will generally be moderate rather than strenuous, and much of our travelling will be done by vehicle, enabling you – to a large extent – to do as little or as much walking as you want. The countryside of Yunnan is so rich in flora that hundreds of different plants can be found within a stone’s throw of the road, but it is also made for walking and roaming which can be done as time allows. Travelling in China needs energy and endurance, hence the relatively high grading. We will be travelling in remote mountain regions where the roads are often unsurfaced and, shall we say, ‘exciting’! Hotels in Kunming, Zhongdian, Xiancheng and Deqin will be comfortable; however, lodges in the villages, although charming, will require some adaptability. The meals will be as good at lodges as in the towns, giving us the chance to sample Chinese culinary delights. Much of the journey will be above 3,000 metres, with rises to a maximum of 4,500 metres, but altitude should not be a problem as we will have acclimatised well during our time in Kunming and Lijiang.

Weather

June is the best month for seeing Yunnan’s rich flora in flower. Apart from in Lijiang, Daju and Benzilan (which are at 2,000 metres and therefore much warmer than all the other areas that we will be visiting on this holiday) you should expect the sort of weather brought during the course of an early summer in Britain, hence the suitability of the region’s plants to the British garden. It will be changeable, hopefully with a balance between fine weather and light showers, rather than too much heavy rain. In Lijiang, the weather will be something like that experienced by the south of France in summer but, as we climb onto the Zhongdian plateau, the temperatures will range between 16 to 24 degrees C during the day. Higher up in the mountains, especially on the Baima La, it will be that much colder, and at night temperatures will drop to 5 degrees C, with the possibility of cool winds and rain, so a rugged attitude and warm clothing are needed here!

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. The best available hotels and lodges (some simple but clean), are used during the course of this trip.
How to book your place

In order to book your place on this tour, you will need to read the Naturetrek booking conditions carefully and then complete and return a booking form, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you wish to take out insurance with us please also include this with your booking. Should you have any questions about the tour, please call us on 01962 733051.