



# Beyond the Great Wall

Away from the bustling cities, tourists see a China still primitive and undeveloped

PHOTOS AND STORY BY JIM DETJEN



**X**FAN, CHINA—INSIDE A DUSTY CAVE AN elderly Chinese peasant sleeps on a board next to his cow, not far from the home-made coffin he has built for himself. Inside another cave a family watches soap operas on a small black and white television that has been ingeniously hooked up to the cave's only electrical outlet.

Many thousands of Chinese peasant farmers live inside primitive caves like these that have been carved out of mountains half an hour northwest of this city, China's ancient capital. The caves provide inexpensive housing with natural air conditioning and heating; the interior of the caves remain cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

During the past five years an increasing number of tourists have

come to visit these cave villages to witness how peasant farmers eke out a living in rural central China. "I want to show visitors how the real people in China live," says Clarence Guo, a tour guide who regularly drives western tourists to see these cave dwellers.

Guo's tours appeal to visitors who want to experience first hand what life in China is really like. Other tour guides take westerners on bike rides or rock climbs through the spectacular mountainous scenery near Guilin in southern China; on treks to see giant pandas at the Wolong Nature Reserve in southwest China; or on hikes to see the 3,000-foot deep Tiger Leaping Gorge in Yunnan Province.

These tour guides are part of a still

tiny but rapidly growing niche of the Chinese tourism market known as ecotourism. There are no hard figures on the size of this market here because Chinese officials keep no statistics on this fledgling field.

"Ecotourism is quite small and has a long way to go in China," says Professor Li Tianyuan of the tourism department at Nankai University in Tianjin, China. "But there has been growth in the ecotourism industry, particularly in scenic regions such as Tibet, Inner Mongolia and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in Northwest China."

While information about ecotourism is hard to come by in China, statistics about the rapid growth of the tourism industry in China are not. During the past quarter century



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as China has opened up to the outside world, the tourism industry has grown rapidly.

Chinese tourism officials say that the amount of dollars spent on tourism soared 26 times from \$617 million in 1980 to \$16.2 billion in 2000. The number of international visitors to China has grown more than 25 times during the same period from 5.7 million people in 1980 to 83.4 million people in 2000.

China is now the fifth most popular tourism destination for international visitors, according to Chinese travel officials, and by 2020 will surpass both France and the United States to become the world's most popular travel destination.

Interest in China is expected to increase dramatically during the

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next decade as a result of China's entry into the World Trade Organization and the selection of Beijing as the site of the summer Olympics in 2008.

But while China's economy is growing rapidly, it is still a developing country and faces many hurdles in attracting tourists. Only a small percentage of hotels meet western standards and the nation's basic tourism

infrastructure of highways, airports, toilets and other facilities are still far beneath the standards expected by many tourists.

In addition, China's violations of human rights, press censorship and a lack of democratic institutions also frighten away some westerners who are fearful of traveling in a country with a long history of suspicion of foreigners. ▶



Giant pandas, such as this one at the Shanghai Zoo, are a major tourist attraction.

Bicycling is an important form of recreation in Yangshuo, China. Tourists flock to this region to view the dramatic landscape.

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According to the International Ecotourism Society, ecotourism is defined as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people.”

While that goal is laudable, is it really possible to attract tourists to pristine natural areas and not affect the environment or lifestyle of local people?

For example, a small number of visitors to see the cave dwellers near Xi’An may have relatively little impact on the rural community. But if busloads of tourists come to see these tiny villages, more and more peasants will stop farming and spend their time selling postcards and other wares to tourists, experts fear. As a result, the agricultural way of life will decline.

“More and more tourists will change the people’s lifestyle and their culture will be lost,” says Professor Li. “This is especially true in many of the most scenic areas of southern and southwestern China where many minorities live.”

But Professor Li says that this is not necessarily entirely bad. “People should have a right to obtain a better life and develop their local economy. The problem comes, however, when a local culture is so changed that its community traditions are destroyed.”

Another concern is that an

increased number of visitors and the expansion of the tourism industry will harm the local environment. For example, some rice farmers in the Guilin area of southern China have complained that bicyclists and rock climbers have damaged their fields. More tourists have also increased the amount of litter and their cars have created more air pollution in some scenic regions, officials say.

Increased tourism may have already affected one of China’s most famous inhabitants—the giant panda. According to a study published in *Science* magazine in April 2001, increased tourism has contributed partially to the loss of panda habitat in the Wolong Nature Reserve in Sichuan Province in southwestern China.

Only about 1,000 giant pandas remain in the wilderness and 10 percent of them live in the Wolong reserve, which was created in 1975. The wild panda population in the reserve plummeted from 145 animals in 1974 to just 72 in 1986. The researchers say that this dramatic loss is partly due to the loss of panda habitat as a result of an increase in the number of people living in the area since the reserve was established.

Human activities that have harmed the panda habitat include increased harvesting of wood for fuel,

increased farming, housing construction and tourism.

Jinguo Liu, a researcher at Michigan State University and one of the authors of the study, says that trees in higher elevations of the reserve were cut down as a result of more people living in the area. The destruction of trees in these higher elevations affected the pandas because this is where many pandas have traditionally lived.

But researchers at another university, Charles Sturt University in Australia, said last year that increased tourism has helped increase the population of giant pandas at the Qinlin Nature Reserve Group in Shaanxi Province in southern China.

During a 13-year period the number of tourists to this reserve increased from almost none to more than 600,000 a year. When this area of the province was proclaimed as a protected area, the main source of income for people in the area—logging—came to an end. Since that time 20,000 hectares of bamboo has been regrown, improving the habitat for pandas and increasing their numbers. At the same time a thriving tourism industry was developed, providing income for the loggers who had lost their jobs, according to Johannes Bauer, a wildlife ecologist at Charles Sturt University. 🌐