



China's Chinese Theme Park

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Lijiang's historic kitsch is the perfect escape from modern China.

If I had better language skills and more of a Peace Corps sense of adventure, I would have ridden for days in cramped minivans and slept on straw beds to find an authentic slice of Old China. After all, on the road, experiences are collected like paychecks—you have to earn them. But during a yearlong trip through Asia, I sometimes needed a vacation from authenticity. That's why I headed to Lijiang.

Lijiang, in China's southern Yunnan province, is something of an Old China theme park, where the overworked residents of China's bulging cities come to recharge in the familiar comfort of traditional China.

The city was built toward the end of the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD), and for centuries it was a major trading center on the Silk Road. But in 1996 Lijiang suffered a massive earthquake that killed more than 5,000 people. As if to provide living proof of the old Chinese maxim that crisis and opportunity are opposite sides of the same coin, the government rebuilt [Lijiang's Old Town](#) in genuine Song style and marketed it as China's best ancient village experience.

Old Town is every picture you've ever seen of an ancient Chinese village—a cobblestone maze of narrow streets lit by glowing red lanterns; rushing canals and bubbling wells for washing clothes, babies, or lettuce; brick buildings and lattice shutters topped by moss-covered tile roofs that swoop and dive in unison; and a parade of leathery old villagers hobbling on canes and grooming long gray beards. It also offers every modern convenience: "Visa Accepted" signs, gift shops, cell phones, gift shops, tour buses, fancy coffee, travel agencies, and still more gift shops.

What saves Lijiang from unbearable tackiness is the adaptability of its majority ethnic inhabitants, the Naxi, who peddle traditional crafts and cuisine to the tourists. If you wake before the daily tour group invasion, the narrow streets and chaotic food market are as misty and magical as the day they were first built. I spent eight days in Lijiang, and I completely lost track of time.

