

## Climbing Trip Report: China Version '16 (Nov-Dec)

SEAN HIBLE

It's been awhile since I've seen an all-encompassing climbing trip report so I wanted to create one for my past month and a half climbing around China. The first page is just an all around guide for anyone who wants to go to China in terms of general know-how (what I've gathered from my stint here) while the next couple pages are my personal climbing report. Read what you want or not fools!

### China General Know-how

1. China is the center of the universe...when you're in China. Few things are in english unless you're in a big city where signs (mainly for tourists) can be in Chinese characters and english words.
2. The Great Chinese Firewall- You will NEED a VPN client if you're going to do anything on the net in China. Most/all (.com) sites are blocked including Google, Facebook, etc. The only english search engine I found that works is Yahoo. Download a VPN before you enter China (pay for one...it's worth it) on both your phone and laptop so you aren't stranded in the airport asking everyone if they speak english so you can get where you need to go.
3. Don't count on finding currency exchanges. Exchange money into the local RMB (local slang is pronounced "yuan" or "kwai"...they mean the same thing) before leaving the States or take money out of an ATM. Most banks have ATM's like in the States, however the only ATM that worked for me was the national bank: The Bank of China. After visiting seven other banks my first two days trying to get local currency from my card, I finally got this saving grace piece of info.
4. Memorize and plan everything to the last detail when it comes to travel. Because everything is in chinese characters, you can't BS your planning. For example, if you get to the train station and have to get to a city, you can't read the signs and figure out which ticket to buy from noticing the word "Yangshuo." It'll instead look like this
5. Download translation apps like Pleco or Google Translate. Paying for the apps is worth it to get all the features so you don't get screwed if you need to use a feature in a pinch that isn't included in the free version.
6. You won't have access to service with an american SIM card. Plan accordingly. WiFi is available in many places (hostels, restaurants, bars, etc...especially western-gearred ones) but in other places (airports, government institutions, etc.) you might need a chinese phone number to get online because your american sim won't work there.
7. "WeChat" is the nation-wide application for everything under the sun in China from anything social like Facebook-ing, to paying people, to ordering meals the day before at a restaurant. It's crazy. For communication with other people while in China, use it. Instant Messaging is great for organizing trips, meeting up with friends, and finding places to stay, even if only applicable when you have WiFi.
8. Buy a scooter if you're going to be in one area for a while. Scooters can cost anywhere from \$80-\$200+ for keeps. Totally worth the price for getting around without a taxi, walking all the time, bus, etc. Sell the scooter to a friend or back to the mechanic for a bit less at the end of your stay. Having the freedom to get around whenever you want is priceless. Other options are renting pedal bikes.
9. Learn basic words. Numbers up to 10, food items (eggs, meat, buns, etc.), and things like "I don't want" "Do you have?" "too expensive" and the like. Because Mandarin is a tonal language, certain words can have many meanings so practice beforehand or learn a bit online before heading out.
10. Don't plan on bargaining too much with locals. Chinese will often charge westerners more than Chinese. Can't really get around it too much except to accept it or go buy elsewhere. They may even charge you more one day than another or vice versa. It's because we have money and the difference in a few RMB for us isn't much and they know that. Especially in tourist spots.
11. Flights, train, bullet-train, and taxi are the main forms of transport in China. With those you can get pretty much anywhere you want. Buses are a bit confusing
- 12. Traveling is an adventure! Go for it and have fun!**

## Part 1: Yangshuo

**Geography and Geology:** Yangshuo is a city within the Guangxi region of China. This region lies on the southern border of China's mainland with the ocean. The place is off the walls with scenery. Giant formations called "Karsts" are everywhere. This type of landscape runs for hundreds of kilometres. Impressive to say the least. And yes, you climb them...a lot.



**Travel:** Fly into Guilin or Guangzhou. From Guilin...take a DiDi (Chinese Uber), taxi, or bus to Yangshuo proper. From Guangzhou, take the subway to the Guangzhou South Train Station, then a bullet train to Yangshuo Train Station, then two buses to the city proper. China has really nice high-speed railways. Take advantage of them if it's cheaper.

### Where to Stay:

1. Stay at the Climbers Inn if staying in Yangshuo for a short time. The owner's name is Lilly and she's a sweetheart and speaks English. She can help you out with everything under the sun from renting a bike/scooter, advising you on places to climb in sun/shade, and arranging taxi's to and from the climbing areas. This is also the gathering spot for climbers in the morning (circa 10am) to organize where to go with whom. Although kind of located in an alley, it's a fairly inexpensive spot to stay where you can make a ton of connections.
2. For longer stays, check out "yangshuocrashpad.com" for an apartment. After staying a few days and getting settled in Yangshuo at the Climber's Inn, I moved out to an apartment building owned by a woman named Julie. She is also a sweetheart and even helped navigate through the chinese web when booking train and flight tickets to another area of China. Apartments cost between \$100-\$150 per month depending on which room you get (they all have different dimensions, bathroom styles, etc.) See what she has available and decide on it. You pay for a week, two weeks, three weeks, or a month at a time. For extended stays longer than a month, you can get deals as well.

Staying in an apartment was ideal when living in Yangshuo. Not only did it save me cash, but it let me spread out, do laundry, have my own bathroom, have my own heater/AC, and put me on the same floor as some people who became my climbing crew for the next month and a half.

**Scooter-ing Details:** Ask around for where the gas station is. You can walk from anywhere you stay in town and if you continue past the gas station on the main road you'll see a ton of scooter shops...some new and some used which are mechanic shops most likely. In my first week I went with a friend and a piece of paper that said "I want a scooter for \$800 (in RMB ~ \$120 USD)" on it in Mandarin and went around to shops that looked like mechanic shops with lots of dinky scooters in front until one of them agreed and sold me a bike. #Moto4Life This thing lasted me the entire time I was in Yangshuo and despite a wreck, the only thing I had to fix was a new battery (\$20 USD) and a fixed gas line (\$2 USD). At the end of my trip I sold the moto for the same I bought it for to a girl I found on the local's WeChat group. All in all, buying a scooter probably saved me \$100 USD between the costs I saved from taxis and other transport.

**Food:** Food was pretty great by my standards. Breakfast consisted of WonTon soup at a place near the Climbers Inn or oatmeal I bought at the supermarket and bananas/passionfruit I got at one of the hundreds of fruit stands around town. It was all super fresh and tasted awesome. Lunch turned into either steamed pork buns...or steamed pork buns. When they cost 30 cents each you can't really beat them. Dinner was almost always stir fry. Lots of places let you pick your own veggies and you get rice when it's all stirfried together...all for like \$3 max. Needless to say, I ate a ton while I was there because I fucking love food and this stuff was **prime**.

If you go, make sure you get the scoop on 10 RMB stir fry from Lilly. If you go with a bunch of people you pick a bunch of dishes and have family-style dinner. I can proudly say I went there too often.

**Water:** Yea, don't drink the tap water. I never got sick because I bought bottled water and there was a kettle in my room where I boiled the tap water and let it cool to refill my bottles. Other options are to get a huge drum of water with a spout to refill bottles each day. It wasn't bad and boiling the tap water in Yangshuo was fine.

**Hang out Spots:** There were pretty much four different climber/westerners bars to go to after climbing for the day. Most of them have foosball tables and a couple have other things (bouldering wall, pool table, darts, etc.) Rock Abond bar is owned by one of the strongest sport climbers in China and has the bouldering wall in it. They've got cheap beer, a great scene, and a super nice owner although whenever I went there I was with some more white people. The usual hang outs for me was the white climber bar "Rusty Bolt", and the westerner bars "Bad Panda" and "Mojos." The last two can sell you some green but it's expensive even by American standards.

Not too much of the booze is strong and certainly not any of the Chinese stuff. Tsingtao is the local cheap beer around. I drank my fair share but I preferred some of the foreign beers like Beerlao. On nights when you want to get weird, ask for the Bijou. Still don't know what kind of alcohol it is, but put it in a jar and infuse it with random shit. Anything from snakes, scorpions, birds, roots, and more can be sitting in the jar with the alcohol. Don't think about it though, just drink up!

## **THE CLIMBING**

Yangshuo is home to a stupid amount of climbing at any of the thousands of karsts sitting around. The guide uses the French System for grading so get used to things labeled "7a" as 11d. Also the entirety of the area is bolted so no need for the cams or other trad gear. Bring your draws, rope, and try hard. Areas like White Mountain (home to China's hardest sport route at 5.14d), Moon Hill, Lei Pi Shan, Dragon City, and Riverside are where you can find a lot of the harder climbs that are in the area. Also because they've got tons in the 5.11-5.12 range, they're where I spent much of my time when it wasn't raining. An english guidebook for the area exists but isn't very good. By the time anyone else goes Yangshuo, a new guidebook will be out by a friend a met there who's been developing there for around 10 years. It'll hopefully have better topos, directions for crags, and descriptions than the last book.

Altogether, I stayed in Yangshuo exactly one month and for the first time in my life spent it projecting routes trying to get really strong. I kind of regret it because I couldn't experience the total variety of Yangshuo's climbing scene, but I accomplished some pretty awesome goals of mine and climbed at what many say are the best crags

(which I listed above.) During my stay, I was able to send my very 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th climb rated 7b (5.12b) and got my first send at 7b+ (5.12c). Moonhill and Lei Pi Shan are hands down the best sport crags in the entire area in my opinion for climbs in the 7a-7c range (5.12 range). Moonhill not only for the climbing but also for the aesthetic beauty of it. A huge arch on top of a hill with stalactites and 3D overhung climbing isn't something that you get everyday! Although I was there for so long, it did rain about ½ the time. Sure you can climb in the rain at the overhung crags, but getting there would be a slog and then you'd freeze. That said, most rain days were spent training on a bouldering wall next to my apartment building, drinking, watching movies, drinking, and sleeping. Oh and drinking.

One of the super cool things I got to do while in Yangshuo was meet Killian Fischhuber, one of the most recognized world class competition climbers of all time. He was there with a crew of Austrians and they were absolutely crushing. I not only got to see him work Spicy Noodle (5.14c), but got to hang out with him and Abond (owner of the bar and badass climber) as they bolted some insane looking routes at a new area my friend Andrew brought us to. These lines were heinous looking and expected to go somewhere in the 5.13+ or 5.14 range. It was impressive and inspiring to see them piece together sequences on walls with no holds on them.

#### **Routes to get on:**

Over the Moon, Moonhill (7b) - Pumpfest on stalactites across the arch of Moon Hill. Amazing  
Red Dragon, Moonhill (8a+) - A Todd Skinner route. The hardest climb in China for nearly 20 years. Can be done to the top of pitch 1 at 7b and inspiring as fuck.

Yangshuo Hotel, White Mountain (7b) - Another pumpfest with many distinct cruxes. 35m of overhanging fun!

Grandfathered In, Tuo Bei Shan (6b) - I never did this route but I heard it's one of the best multi pitches in the area with 6 pitches. Goes through a sick prow and tops out on a karst formation.

Tunnel Vision, Treasure Cave (6c+) - Sweet 3D climbing on stalactites through a huge cave.

Waiting for Sophy, Lei Pi Shan (7a) - Possibly my favorite climb in Yangshuo. Follows an angling crack with crazy lay-backing and cruxes that make you think!

Singularity, Lei Pi Shan (7b) - Stellar slightly overhung technical climbing through pinches to huge tufas. Complete with knee bars, no hands rests, and even finger locks at the top!

Thunder, Lei Pi Shan (7b+) - This thing is long, sustained, and amazing. Hard, thin crux in the middle that takes a minute to figure out and then sustained crimping to a heart-breaking finish.

Yangshuo has all kinds of routes of all kinds of grades. From 4 (5.7) to 9a+ (5.14d), single-pitch to multi-pitch, technical to jug hauls, overhanging to vertical, this to that, but altogether great to great. I can't wait to get back there now and experience more of the rock for a longer period of time. I'd like to return for at least two months next time I visit and try to experience more variety than I got while I was there this time projecting. For climbers of any strength or experience, Yangshuo is the place to go. And like me, if you go there partner-less there are no shortages of people to hook up with.

## **Part 2: Li Ming**

**Geography & Geology:** Li Ming is located in the Yunnan province, which borders Myanmar in Southwestern China. The park lies in a valley with giant sandstone formations littering the top. While not exactly cliffs or monoliths, they still extend upwards of 300m bottom to top and contain a ridiculous amount of climbing. Bring your tape gloves though...you'll need them to jam your way up these desert-like cracks. At a higher elevation the weather is usually cooler so be sure to bring your warm clothes, hats, and gloves.

**Travel:** Get yourself to Lijiang somehow, the city with the nearest domestic/international airport to Li Ming. You can fly here internationally or domestically. Check out the option of flying into Kunming first, then Lijiang if it's cheaper. Next take a shared taxi, bus, or other wheels to the town of Li Ming. Once in town, there's one road that goes through and all the hostels, shops, and restaurants are along this road. Getting back to Lijiang on your return is a bit trickier because you'll have to take a bus that leaves at 7:30am, or overpay for something else, and then walk to the airport shuttle. **Travel tip:** If your flight leaves the following morning, you'll have to get an airport hotel. Don't get kicked out of the Lijiang airport for trying to sleep overnight like I did. This particular airport doesn't allow for it.

#### **Where to Stay:**

1. The Faraway Hostel. This hostel is located on the main road and very distinguishing from the painted doorway. The bossman of the hostel is awesome, speaks a bit of english, and has decked the place out in handmade items and widgets. Two dogs live here: Jerry and Dingdong. Jerry is the biggest dog in town and has to stay on the leash because he once killed someone's goat. Other than that he's super needy and always needs to be petted. At the end of a week you'll want to throw burning logs at him to make him shut up. I like dogs but he was a giant pain in the ass. Dingdong is a little white dog who'll follow the first one out of the hostel in the morning to the crag. Feel free to take Jerry out with as well. Don't have to ask the bossman, he doesn't really care. Rooms range from \$3-20 per night. You can pick from an assortment of double rooms with attached bathrooms, dorm-style, or luxury rooms if you've got money to spend.
2. The Youth Hostel. This place is within the tourism building and has similar amenities to Faraway. Although not centered around the climbing scene nearly as much, it does have similar amenities and gets sun earlier in the morning which is a HUGE DEAL. Difference in sun means a difference in below freezing temps and

hanging out with a T-shirt on. You don't get the nice wood burning stove/furnace to hang out around like at Faraway as well.

I never stayed here and opted for the Faraway hostel instead. I enjoyed the atmosphere and dirtbag-feel of it and also had a nice rooftop to hang out on when it was sunny and I was on a rest day. Moreover, there were a few times when we got pretty rowdy at night and got the bossman to pour us some homemade bijou. He even helped me arrange return travel and didn't mind when we switched rooms to cheaper options when they became available. There's also a "new route" book there that has a ton of info on routes not in the current guide-book.

**Food:** There's a few places to eat in town but we really only went to two of them. The Wagon Wheel is owned by a super sweet little chinese lady and she cooks amazing soup, called "tong." Go with a small group after a day of climbing and for 20 RMB you get an absolutely massive pot of soup with tons of veggies, and a bowl of white rice (costs 10 RMB if you don't get meat). Anyone who knows my appetite can attest that I eat a lot and even I had trouble finishing this meal some days. The Yak Shack is located next to the school and paired with a mini-market. This is the place for noodle soup and fried rice. Also the Yak has the better breakfast in town making their own buns (monto). Pair the buns with a fried egg and you've got yourself a McMuffin-rural chinese style. Take something with you from the restaurants for lunch or get some preserved eggs for easy and cheap protein (1 RMB ea.) from a convenient store.

**Water:** Purchase water at the store or boil it yourself at the hostels with kettles. At Faraway, the bossman has big thermos' of hot water he boils all day long so feel free to use those as well. Refilling my plastic bottles was still the best way I found to store water and stay hydrated.

**Hang Out Spots:** Hah. good luck finding those. Come 10:00pm, the town shuts down and the cold eats everyone's souls away. Go to the Faraway if you want anyone to hang out with around the fire. Dali beers cost 2 RMB each at the stores...but they're 2.5% abv. Otherwise get some Jin Jao for something harder at 36 RMB per bottle. I never drank too much cuz I was low on funds but it didn't seem like I missed out a lot. Li Ming is for dirtbags and dirtbags only. When you aren't climbing and only 2% beers are available...chances are you'll just go to bed and say screw it.

## **THE CLIMBING**

Li Ming is a flashback to my past experiences climbing in the Utah desert. Take bits and pieces from Indian Creek, Moab, other desert towers...mash them together and out pops Li Ming's sandstone cracks. This is the spot for your trad gear...and bring tons. **And for god's sake somebody bring a #5 and #6.** Lots of the routes here need big gear although you'll rarely have to do too much offwidth technique (but there are definitely some you'll grovel up). There's no gear store in the area so bring lots of tape or jammies for your hands. If you need gear, there's always the option to buy gear from someone who's leaving the area and doesn't want to travel with it anymore. Multi-pitch routes are almost as plentiful as single-pitch routes and range from 2-9 pitches in length at all difficulties. You can buy a paper copy of the guidebook from the bossman at the Faraway hostel, or you can purchase an online and consistently updated copy as a PDF from the author. You'll need some sort of book to get around for sure however because you can't count on people always telling you where stuffs at...there just isn't that many. Li Ming is surprisingly new as well with the first ascents going up in the last 10 years. However over 1,300 routes make up this trad climbing mecca which spans countless areas. In short...trad climbing in china = Li Ming. Period. Oh! And they use the YDS grades so you don't need to worry about converting French grades to understand anymore. And the grading is really soft so don't be afraid to push yourself!

I traveled here and climbed for two weeks with my buds I met while in Yangshuo. Luckily, they all had racks so my lack thereof was no biggie. I'd say that's the strategy: go with people who have the gear so you don't have to bring your own. I can safely say as well that two weeks in Li Ming was nowhere near long enough to even get a taste for the areas. Out of my nine or so actual climbing days, seven of them were spent at the same area climbing different routes each day. Part of the reason for this was the ease of access and quantity of stellar routes. These

areas were the Pillars and Primitive areas which are accessible by foot from the hostels. You've just gotta be willing to hike up the 646 stairs to the base of the cliffs. Personally, I'd take steps over the dirty and steep trails to many other crags but that's just me. For farther away areas, the bossman has a passenger van and can drop you off wherever you'd like for a small cost. Areas like the Guardian and Dinner wall host a multitude of climbs of all difficulties.

During my time here, I was able to send my first 12a on gear and flailed on a variety of other difficult routes. Furthermore, we met a group of guys who had been living in Li Ming for the past two months and establishing new cracks. When we got to Li Ming they had just completed a perfect 70' dihedral seam at the Primitive area and I was able to nab the 2nd free ascent of it. Going at 10d, this thing was stupid cool, and utilized tons of stemming because much of the seam was too small to use. The absolute best climb I attempted while in Li Ming by far. Named "Lajiao" for spicy red pepper. The final climb I did while in China was one of the best multi-pitches in Li Ming and called "Back to the Primitive" and goes at 11d. Although it was the softest 11+ I've ever attempted, the climb reached the top of the Primitive area formation and had tons of variety throughout. From delicate fingery sections to easy offwidth to smeary slab at the top the route had it all. It was definitely worth the time for a nice, chill day at height.

#### **Routes to get on:**

Faraway Corner, Pillars Area (5.10b)- A fingers lieback corner for 50'. Smeary and burly but there's tons of great locks for ya!

Clamdigger, Pillars Area (5.11b)- Grovel up this acute corner with a crack in the back. Chimney and knee scum to the top 25m up!

Funky Dan, Pillars Area (5.12a)- Super thin fingers dihedral that leaves you super pumped at the easy top portion! Bring seven #.3s

Back to the Primitive, Primitive Area (8 pitch 5.11b)- Amazing multi that gets you high, and has tons of variety. A must do before leaving.

The Raven, Primitive Area (5.11a)- Terrific hands crack going through a short roof

Scarface, Primitive Area (5.10b)- Beautiful arching hands to wide hands crack for 70'

The Lorax, Primitive Area (5.11d)- A wildly overhung fingers and hands dihedral crack 5 pitches up. Climbs a 5.10c super fun multi to reach the crack. This thing was amazing!

Lajiao, Primitive Area (5.10d)- The best gear climb in all of Li Ming.

Ding Dong's Crack, Dinner Wall (5.12a)- Slowly widening crack into off-width before it pinches down to fingers and off fingers at the top. Short but so pumpy!

Nosferatu, Uncensored Wall (5.11d)- One hell of a climb. 30m of fun with some run outs, a big layback roof, heinous start making good use of knee jams, and a techy sport-style finish.

While Yangshuo is the sport climbing mecca of China, Li Ming is for sure the gear climbing mecca. Climbers of all backgrounds and skill levels will be able to climb here for any amount of time. I don't think an entire year would be enough to even reach all the different areas in Li Ming let alone climb as much as you'd want to. Hopefully I'll be able to visit this place again when I'm stronger and try more things in more areas. Two weeks just wasn't enough....and I can't wait to go back and eat some more Tong. Holy crap that stuff was delicious.

## **Other Places of Interest in China**

**Keketouhai**- This place is big granite trad climbing. "The Yosemite of China," I'd love to go here and experience what it's all about. What I've heard is that it's amazing and has potential all over the place for FA's. Check it out.

<https://www.mountainproject.com/v/keketouhai/108223977>

**Zhangjiajie**- I don't know too much about this place except my friend (Ting, featured in the video on the link) is from a nearby town and its rock formations are what those floating rock pillars from Avatar are based on. That alone makes me want to see it next trip. It looks sick!!!!

<http://www.behindmagazine.com/mag/rock-climbing-zhangjiajie/>