

# Diqing – Plateau Wonderland



Local Tibetans dance at the foot of Meri Snow Mountain.

By WU MEILING & LI ZHUOXI

**D**EEP in the snowy mountains of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, legend recalls, is a blessed valley in the shape of an eight-petal lotus. Spectacular snowcapped mountains, steep gorges and alpine meadows sprinkled with wildflowers are found here. It is Shangri-La in Yunnan Province's Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

Diqing, or Deqen, sits in the transitional zone between the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau and the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Its ancient history, distinctive landforms, mysterious religions and diverse ethnic groups lend a great appeal to this faraway land.

The Gedeng Neolithic Site in Weixi County attests to human habitation as early as 7,000 years ago. And inscribed slates unearthed in the region reveal a thriving civilization dating back 2,400 years.

Located on the ancient Tea-Horse Trail, also known as the Southern Silk Road, Diqing is an intersection of exchanges between China's east and west, north and south. In addition to Tibetans, who account for one third of the local population, it is home to 25 other ethnic communities, including the Lisu, Naxi and Bai. They all live in concord with each other, while retaining their respective cultures, which have converged and co-developed over

the past generations.

The Ganden Songtsen Ling Monastery, Dondrup Ling Monastery and the Dongba pictographs are among the most iconic manifestations of Diqing's diverse and mysterious folk traditions, which add brilliance to the region's scenic panorama.

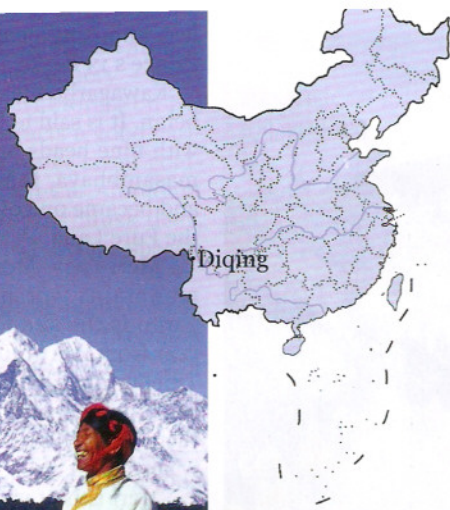
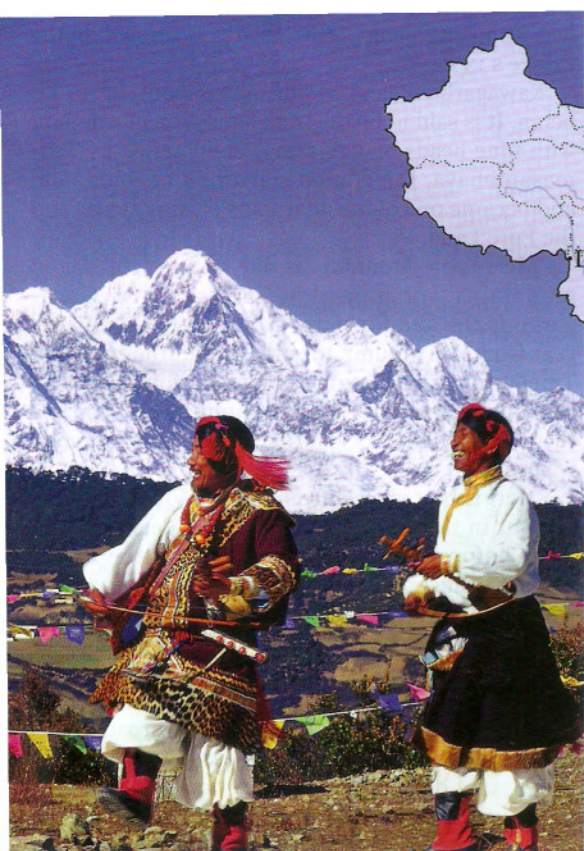
Diqing remained unknown to the outside world until 1933, when English writer James Hilton wrote *Lost Horizon*, which describes an isolated but pleasurable valley called Shangri-La whose residents of different ethnic backgrounds enjoyed peace and longevity. The novel was made into a film in 1937, and the theme song "Beautiful Shangri-La" then spread across the world.

The book was thought to present Shangri-La as an imaginary place. The exact location could not be identified, though a number of countries around the world have claimed it is on their territory. Now 60 years of research provide sufficient evidence that Diqing is none other than Shangri-La.

The English "Shangri-La" sounds like it originates in the Tibetan dialect spoken in Zhongdian, capital of Diqing. In the Tibetan language, the word means "moon in one's heart." Moreover, the folklore and natural environment depicted in the novel bear a strong resemblance to Zhongdian. In 2001, the region officially changed its name to Shangri-La.

Diqing boasts a wide diversity of landforms – mountains, lakes, glaciers, karsts, meadows – and

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climate zones, owing to its peculiar geographic location, complex geological structures and sharp altitudinal differences. What's more, the region is rich in biodiversity. Almost all plants that usually grow in the tropical, temperate and frigid zones of the northern hemisphere can be found here. The region is thus treasured as a botanical gene bank.

### The Ganden Songtsen Ling Monastery

Shangri-La is about 200 km from Lijiang, an ancient city inhabited by the Naxi people. Heading north from Lijiang, the scenery changes dramatically with the increasing altitude. The sight of wildflowers bathed in glorious sunshine and cows and sheep grazing on the meadows lightens the heart.

No visitor to Shangri-La should miss the Ganden Songtsen Ling Monastery, known as the soul of Diqing.

Built in 1679, at the order of the fifth Dalai Lama following an augury, it is the largest Tibetan Buddhist shrine in Yunnan Province. Rising along a hillside, this majestic complex, with its towering roofs of gilded brass tiles gleaming in the sun, along with vermilion walls, white windows and black curtains standing out against a clear blue sky, evokes a heavenly aura. This design wins it the renown of "minor Potala Palace."

Ganden Songtsen Ling was significant for the seventh Dalai Lama Kelzang Gyatso. Before the sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyasto (1683-1708) passed

away, he predicted, "The white crane will not stay afar. Someday, it will return from Litang." It turned out that his soulboy was indeed found to be born in Litang, now a county in Sichuan Province.

Unfortunately, the boy's life came under threat due to a Mongolian clan leader who had faked a reincarnation for political gain. The monks had to send the true soulboy to the Ganden Songtsen Ling Lamasery for refuge. As soon as he arrived in Shangri-La, he proclaimed: "This is the land I have been dreaming of. I am indeed blessed to see this land myself." Years later, he was recognized by Qing Emperor Kangxi as the genuine reincarnation, and formally became the seventh Dalai Lama.

Kelzang Gyatso was deeply obliged to the lamasery and threw his full support behind it. The bronze statues of the fifth and the seventh Dalai Lamas are enshrined in the front and back halls. It was their contributions that developed the lamasery into the most significant Tibetan Buddhist temple in Yunnan.

Ganden Songtsen Ling not only boasts imposing architecture, but also a large collection of antiques such as the eight gold-plated figures of Sakyamuni made in the period of the fifth and seventh Dalai Lamas, palm-leaf manuscripts, and gold butter lamps. The frescos on its winding corridors are also exquisite and stunning.

### Meri Snow Mountain

*Lost Horizon* depicted a tranquil realm where canyons are embraced by snowy mountains and a

The Ganden Songtsen Ling Monastery.





Pastureland in autumn.

pyramid-like snowcapped peak. Kawagarbo, the summit of Meri Snow Mountain, is the peak described in the novel.

Snowy mountains are among the major scenic attractions in Diqing. Apart from Meri, the Baimang, Haba, Balagengzong snow-covered mountains tower in this region. Among them, Kawagarbo, the highest peak of Meri, one of the eight holy mountains in Tibetan Buddhism, is the most mysterious and formidable. Over the past years, many mountaineers and explorers have striven to reach its summit, but none have succeeded. This inapproachability has a powerful appeal for mountaineers and tourists.

Feilaisi, a quiet village at the foot of the mountain, has become busy receiving visitors from China and abroad. From the village, you can observe this white mountain standing right in front of you. With its pureness and magnificence, the mountain resembles the dwelling of celestial beings.

Meri Snow Mountain is also known as Prince Snow Mountain. French writer Mader Davis was the first to use the name Meri in his 1908 book *Yunnan*. The massive mountain range stretches north to south. Meri is the name of the northern part, while the middle and southern parts are called Prince and Biluo. Meri, however, generally refers to the northern and middle sections.

The mountain range consists of more than 100 peaks, of which 27 rise to over 4,000 meters above sea level, 20 are over 5,000 meters above sea level and six over 6,000 meters. At 6,740 meters above sea level, Kawagarbo is the highest point in Yunnan Province. It is surrounded by 12 lesser but no

less imposing peaks. This cluster is known as the Prince's 13 Peaks.

Kawagarbo means "white snow mountain" in Tibetan. It is said to be the transfiguration of a demon with nine heads and 18 arms. Enlightened by Padmasambhava, the demon converted to Buddhism and became one of the guardians of King Gesar and the Pure Land.

Meri Snow Mountain is one of the eight sacred mountains worshipped by Tibetans, and Kawagarbo is the site for many religious rituals. Every year from late autumn to early winter, thousands of Tibetan pilgrims circumambulate around the peak to pay homage. They chant scriptures and express their reverence to holy spirits, expressing their good wishes to all life.

Meri is best viewed from Feilaisi Village. Standing out in the open, the Prince's 13 Peaks ascend right before your eyes. Among them the lovely shaped Miancimu is said to be Kawagarbo's wife.

Down the Kawagarbo Peak, cirques (steep bowl-shaped hollows occurring at upper ends of a mountain valley, especially forming heads of glaciers or streams) and glaciers wriggle their way like huge white dragons. The 8-km-long 500-m-broad Mingyong Glacier is the most spectacular among them, undulating down from an elevation of 5,500 meters all the way to the forest zone at around 2,700 meters above sea level. It is rare to find permanent glaciers at such low latitudes where the temperate is comparatively mild. As people describe it: "It is chilly to sit beside the glacier, yet flowers are spread all over the banks."

On the southern side of Kawagarbo Peak is the fabulous Yubeng Waterfall, whose water is deemed holy by Tibetans. Plummeting from a breathtaking height of 1,000 meters, the cascade produces a torrential flow of water that splatters on the rugged rock face to produce a dense mist and splendid rainbows in sunny days.

## Potatso National Park

Potatso is the first national park on China's mainland. In Tibetan, the name means a lake that delivers all living creatures from suffering to the other shore of the sea of bitterness. Located at the center of the "Three Parallel Rivers" world natural heritage site, the park stands out with its sublime natural scenery, rich wildlife and many places of cultural interest.

Potatso National Park includes Shudu Lake in the north, Bitahai Lake in the south, Luorong Village in between, and a large expanse of alpine meadow laced with primeval forests. These four scenic sites are linked by a 69-km figure-8-shaped road, which allows only green-fueled vehicles.

Shudu is a Tibetan word. *Shu* refers to yoghurt and cheese, while *du* means picking up. Together they indicate that on this land, abundant in water and grass, residents can raise large herds of animals and hence live a bountiful life.

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One can trek the 2.7-km-long boardwalk around the lake to enjoy the picturesque scenery – clear water to one side, a dense primeval forest on the other. Sapphire blue, the lake attracts a good variety of wild ducks. In the limpid water swim gold-colored fish only found in Shangri-La. Abundant wildlife inhabit the forest, including musk deer, bear, leopard, Asian golden cat and diverse species of birds.

Bitahai in Tibetan means a place blanketed in fallen oak leaves. The Bitahai Lake is the most famous glacial erosion lake on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Along with aquatic plants, the marshy pastures on the northern, western and southern banks of the lake constitute its wetland vegetation.

Visitors can either walk along the 4.2-km-long boardwalk by the shore or take a boat to sightsee. The lake abounds in fauna and fish resources. Various species of plants float on the water, turning the lake into an aquatic botanical garden. Schools of multi-lip fish swim around boats. A primitive species harking back to the Ice Age 2.5 million years ago, this fish with three lips is found only in Bitahai Lake.

When rhododendron bushes on the bank come into blossom in June, fish that accidentally swallow petals that have fallen into the lake may be seen floating belly up, for the flower is slightly toxic. But the fish are not actually poisoned, as the loss of consciousness is only temporary.

### Baishuitai, a Frozen “Waterfall”

Baishuitai, or White Water Terrace, another famous tourist attraction, lies in Baidi Village, 100 kilometers from Shangri-La. From afar, Baishuitai appears to be a waterfall of many layers. On closer examination, you find it is a limestone terrace.

Through decomposition caused by sunlight, calcium bicarbonate in water breaks down into calcium carbonate. Through deposition, solidification and crystallization over 200,000 to 300,000 years, the minerals in the water have accumulated to form a marble-white terrace-like carbide physiognomy.

Baishuitai is cradle of the Naxi people and their Dongba religion. This ethnic minority group lived in the region as early as 20,000 years ago, leaving behind cliff paintings which display the formation of Dongba hieroglyphs. Legend recounts that the founder of the Dongba religion was attracted by the beauty of Baishuitai, and settled here to preach. Also on the mountain is a cave where the second-generation religious leader meditated.

### Tiger Leaping Gorge

The Jinsha River flows side by side with the Lancang and Nujiang rivers down from their source, Mt. Tanggula at the border of Qinghai and Tibet. In Yunnan’s Lijiang, however, the Jinsha deviates from the others and turns eastward. It then passes between the daunting duo – the Yulong and Haba Snow Mountains – unleashing all its energy to

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create one of the world’s deepest canyons – Tiger Leaping Gorge.

The landscape around the Tiger Leaping Gorge is truly stunning. Steep peaks are aligned in close vicinity on both banks, at many points reducing the sight of the sky into a narrow slot. Below them the river resembles a dragon in the rapids splashing through the rocks with a deafening roar.

The gorge is divided into three segments: the upper, middle and lower “Tiger Leaps.” The first section is the narrowest, with the entire river confined to a 20-meter width. In the middle of the water rises a 13-meter-high monolith. Folklore says that a tiger used this rock as a stepping stone to leap across from one side of the river to the other – hence its name. In the rainy season the river pours down the rock and forms a waterfall, whereas in the dry season the rock divides the flowing water.

The Jinsha River represents the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, which flows through 11 provinces and municipalities. The longest river in China and the third longest in the world, the Yangtze nurtured the Chinese civilization together with the Yellow River. ◼

Spring on the plateau.

