

# Bradt travel guides

**Stephen Fabes**

## **Friends indeed**

There were times, as I cycled through China, that I was a treat to behold.

Old men as stooped and attentive as surgeons around marathon games of Mahjong peered up to find me bearing down on them, apocalyptically: a huffing and hirsute creature, in sweat-slicked spandex, making antenatal noises.

But sitting aside my touring bicycle one evening, in the outskirts of Yangshuo, I was feeling cheerfully vindicated. A bus had parked and avalanched tourists to the pavement. They clomped around the roadside with bent backs and knitted brows, resuscitating dead legs. I began to wonder if the coming months would involve a full body cast, an orthopaedic surgeon and the words 'I'm so sorry Derek, there's just not much more we can do for you now.'

Cycling was easier. Exhausted or not, I had leg space. I had wind-thrown air and whole metres to the armpits of strangers. No glass incarcerated me.

I unpacked my tent and began scouting for a camping spot behind a feeble disguise of bushes that the disgorged travellers had used as a rest stop; the grass about me was strewn with toilet paper. On the road, the soft outline of a cyclist grew from the gloom.

'You sleep in these... bushes?'

It was impossible not to notice the en suite amenities.

'Maybe'

'I think' he began, with teacherly precision, 'you should come with me.'

We pedalled off together, car headlights sending him to life, a young bespectacled Chinese man on a mountain bike with two panniers, scarlet go-faster stripes streaking the night with the fire and flourish of roman candles.

His name was Liyan, and he could find hotels, read road signs and order from menus; in China my sole faculty was a goofy grin which setup a stumbling confession that I couldn't speak Chinese. 'Wo bu hui shuo Putonghua!' I brayed into the anguished face of anyone who innocently asked my name or nationality.

We were a dream team.

The next day we pedalled north along a road edged by trains of leafless elm, the sky above was a hopeful blue, busy with magpies switching trees. At intervals the road became crowded by brooding podiums of limestone, fluted with foliage. I imagined these karst peaks snapping to life: twin domes of rock became a monstrous maw, eating through the earth, mouth to sky, gulping the sun into an unseen vale like a raw egg. In this mounting dusk Liyan rode in front, head bowed, poncho wind-snapped and wizard-like. Lose the bike, I thought, grab a broom and Asia had its own Harry Potter.

Bandages covered Liyan's left hand - in fractured English and mime he recalled an altercation with a car. It was a reminder of the perils of Chinese roads, until I studied him cycling. Without a glance he would plunge through red-lighted interchanges, or swan about looking absently upwards, as if pondering the name of a second cousin. The injury was beginning to look less like poor luck, and

more like the lucky escape from something much worse. I began to take the lead. Perhaps I could help him survive China too.

When a blizzard struck the next day, Liyan was in good voice. 'Too cold for praetorium!' he pronounced through spasms of snow dense enough to delete juggernauts, my own feet and all resolve. He meant 'tent', the translating app on his iPhone had gone rogue and the Nylon tat tethered to my bike rack had become a General's tent within a Roman encampment. 'We should stay in guesthouse. Rest. To chop tree quickly, spend twice the time sharpening your axe!' Proverbs for Liyan were wielded like throwing knives, and as hard to argue with.

We left the hotel once that day to pound the ice of the one-street town, past a straggle of hardy vendors touting pigs' heads flaked with snow. We staggered back clutching new ear muffs like they were air tickets to Hawaii and Liyan boiled Coca-Cola and ginger in the kettle. 'Keep feet warm in night and live long life' he muttered, so side by side, swinging our legs off the bed like toddling brothers, we bathed our feet.

'I worried about you' he said from the door of our hotel room as we said our goodbyes, off on different snow-coated roads.

'Don't be worried mate, I'll be fine.'

He left with a bow, but I harassed him down the hall with questions. 'Liyan, how do you say rice? Liyan, what time is check-out? Liyan!'

Alone in China, again.

I consoled myself: despite the odds, we had been a dream team, serendipity fanned both ways. I was armed with proverbs now. I had a toilet instead of a shrubbery. Perhaps I would dust the snow from my panniers, pack up my praetorium, and learn some Chinese.