

## Yak Tea and Buddhas: Discovering the Yunnan

By [Becca Hensley](#) | September 3, 2014 | [Destinations](#), [The Jet-setter](#) | [No comments](#)



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Abercrombie & Kent China specialist Gerald Hatherly has friends in high places—literally.

We meet some of them in the snow-peppered, altitude-busting, Valley of Ringha along the border of Tibet in China's Yunnan Province. After a trek up the sacred mountain known as Dabaosi—and a clockwise walking meditation around the Temple of the Five Wisdom Buddhas at its summit—we're in need of refreshment. Led by Gerald who knows everything about China, we follow a path abundant with draped, fading prayer flags that flap in the cool wind like colorful bird's wings. Pine trees scent the chilly air and the faraway rhythm of rural villagers at work sounds like nature's solemn hymn. Stones carved with ancient mantras (Gerald says "hundreds of years old") mark our now downward trail in irregular stacks. Goats and chickens flit across our track in spurts—and we meet numerous Khampa Tibetans, all enrobed in embroidered, multi-hued work wear, most sporting bright pink hats. Some carry bags others bear immense baskets strapped to their backs.



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When at last we reach an elaborately carved, two story farm house, it's like finding the gingerbread cottage in the woods. Little piglets scurry by, yak look at us with dubious eyes, and a dog barks at us suspiciously. Suddenly, an affable woman, regaled in a fuchsia swirl of a hat emerges. She greets Gerald as an old friend—and invites us in for some soul fortifying Yak Butter Tea. Warming up around a roaring fire, we also sample creamy Yak cheese and barley-based flat bread reminiscent of naan. (Barley is a staple here and everything from wine to bread hails from it). Gathering with other multi-aged members of the extended family who live in this typical farm house, we ask questions—translated effortlessly by Gerald—about their daily life. We compliment the savory fare we've been served and meet our hostess's tiny, fairy-like infant. As well as her son—so rambunctious he reminds me movingly of my own.



*Photo Credit: Becca Hensley*

It's just another typical afternoon on our bespoke Abercrombie & Kent tour to some of the lesser visited regions of China. But that's not all we've managed to experience today. In the morning, we walked the streets of Zhongdian's old town (also known as Shangri La), visited Songzangling, the largest Tibetan monastery in the Yunnan province, were blessed by its Living Buddha, admired the world's biggest prayer wheel, and had a reflexology treatment at a local massage school. I had booked this journey in the hopes of discovering a China beyond Beijing and its tenor of nouveau riche urbanity. I wanted something more authentic than global brands and homogenous Westernization. Even if today were the only day of my visit, our adventures would have left me enchanted and deeply satisfied.

Abercrombie & Kent is particularly skilled at evoking sense of place. One day in another part of the Yunnan, we set off on bikes down a bumpy, dusty road. In the distance Jade Dragon Mountain, the highest peak in the area and part of the Himalayan Mountains, rivets our attention. Sacred to the local populace, the Naxi people, a Chinese minority thought to have descended from Tibetan nomads, the mountain exudes something mystical. Almost absurdly, it looks like the living illustration from a book of Chinese poetry or something painted on porcelain ala chinoserie. This, combined with anachronistic sightings of men working the fields with yak and yokes, the Naxi-style houses with their roofs that suggest the extended wings of birds in



flight, and myriad vendors selling saffron and other wares, make the trip seem like a surreal foray into a make believe place.



*Photo Credit: Becca Hensley*

In this frame of mind, I arrive with my group to the ancient village of Baisha and park my bike. Now sleepy, composed of a few cobble-stoned alleyways, all filled to bursting with vendors catering to locals—tiny beauty salons, vegetable markets, tofu sellers—, the place nevertheless attracts tourists for two reasons: the Baisha Murals and the so famous he’s nearly infamous, highly regarded, Dr. Ho.

First, we visit the murals, a wonderful melding of beliefs dating to the 14th century. Here in a rather humble Buddhist temple, Chinese Daoist, Tibetan Buddhist, Confucian and Naxi animistic beliefs roll into one. The conglomeration of philosophies here shows how the Naxi people incorporated other beliefs, while retaining their own, a characteristic of openness that continues to define them today. I keep that attitude of open mindedness when I meander toward the down-trodden clinic of Dr. Ho. Here, this marvel of an octogenarian has served hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world entirely free of charge. His clients range from celebrities such as John Cleese to local villagers. Wizedened but moving with the agility of a Russian ballet dancer, the tiny bearded man urges me to take a seat. He checks my tongue, my pulse, looks into my eyes and says, “Ah, good. Very good. Except—do you have insomnia?” You know what—I do. So I admit it and Dr. Ho digs into some vats of herbs culled from Jade Dragon Mountain. Wrapping them in rice paper, he writes instructions with a calligraphy brush and tells me to drink the herbs as a tea three times a day. “Never miss,” he makes me promise. “It’s important for your chi.”

And in the end, chi is what this trip is all about. Like the Buddhist monks we see scrambling the hill in their tennis shoes for early morning prayer, I sought something in China—and thanks to Gerald—I found it.

If You Go:

**Outfitter:** It’s easy to get lost in China. To make life easier, consider, as I did, Abercrombie & Kent. They offers both a compendium of pre-planned trips, as well as bespoke, personalized tours of China. Our trip began in Shanghai and also included a three day cruise down the Yangzi River on the Sanctuary MS Yangzi Explorer (which can be booked independently as well). Guide Gerald Hatherly (Canadian ex-pat,

resident of Hong Kong, fluent speaker of Mandarin) has received myriad awards, including one from Conde Nast for Best China Travel Specialist. Tours begin at around \$7,190, while more bespoke trips start at \$10,070 per person. Book via Virtuoso, see [virtuoso.com](http://virtuoso.com) for details.

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**Fly:** To China, I am a fan of Cathay Pacific Airways. You'll go via LA to Hong Kong first—but this is a chance to stop over before discovering the mainland.

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### Becca Hensley

Austin-based Becca Hensley has never met a stranger. Award winning, this travel and lifestyle writer, poet and essayist can't resist the unexplored alley, that glass of champagne in an unknown bar or taking the train far beyond her planned destination. An ebullience addicted curiosity seeker, a peripatetic globe trotter, an expert in all things luxe, her work has appeared in hundreds of magazines and newspapers and on myriad websites. She dishes on hotels, food, drink, spas, art, design, people and nature. Read her monthly dispatches in Austin Monthly and San Antonio Magazine. Find her frequently in Washington Flyer, National Geographic Traveler, Toronto Star, Organic Spa, Bridal Guide, Travel Channel, Destinations, Weddings & Honeymoons, Austin American Statesman, Fodors and Virtuoso Traveler.

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