



Sustainability Centre Pty Ltd

ABN 38 097 837 002

PO Box 521, Epping NSW 1710, Australia

Phone: +61 2 9801 2976

Email: mark@sustainabilitycentre.com.au

Web: www.sustainabilitycentre.com.au

Ecotours to South-West China

What is an Ecotour?

We consider an ecotour to be a tour of a site that is biologically and culturally diverse, while touring in a manner that has low impacts on the environment and local cultures. However, it must be acknowledged that even ecotours have some adverse local and global impacts, especially those resulting from greenhouse gases and other emissions from air travel.

Why South-West China?

This region has a wide range of physical environments -- high mountains, clear rivers, naturally coloured lakes and forests -- which are the homes of many unique species, such as the giant panda and the golden monkey. It features World Heritage Areas and national parks. The region is also the home of many different minority ethnic cultures --including Tibetan, Qiang, Naxi and the matriarchal society of the Mosuo -- as well as the dominant Han Chinese culture. It has much beauty and much biological and cultural diversity.

Unlike Tibet or Nepal, it is not necessary to trek for a week in order to reach an exciting area. In south-west China, a single day's bus journey from the provincial capital brings one to an unforgettable site, such as Jiuzhaigou or Siguniang Mountain in Sichuan Province, or Dali in Yunnan province.

Although South-West China attracts many Chinese tourists, most of the region is little known to western tourists. Some places, such as the valleys around Mt Siguniang, have only been recently opened up to tourists and are not accessible by regular public transport.

Last, but not least, one of Sustainability Centre's tour leaders was born and bred in Sichuan province.

Distinguishing features of Sustainability Centre's ecotours

- Ground travel in our own hired bus, with expert driver, reserve driver where required, and local tour guide. Our coach does not carry other passengers, nor does it stop at 'tourist traps' -- such time-wasting and potentially expensive stops are a disadvantage of ordinary tours in China.
- On the coach we carry bottles of purified drinking water and also supplementary oxygen for anyone who needs a swig when we cross a high altitude mountain pass.
- Tours are accompanied by our own professional interpreters and our own environmental scientists.

- We cater for a range of interests, ages and fitness. When hiking, we may split the ecotour party into 'energetic' and 'relaxed' groups. On our first (2002) ecotour, ages ranged from 33 to 81. However, our tours are not designed for children.
- We try to engage with and learn from local indigenous peoples.
- Maximum ecotour group size is 20 persons.
- We stay in 3-star hotels and yet achieve moderate prices through our local contacts.

How it started

In September-October 2002 Sustainability Centre organised and guided a 12-day ecotour to outstanding World Heritage environmental and cultural sites in the province of Sichuan, south-west China. The tour group of 15 people with diverse backgrounds and ages was accompanied by Sustainability Centre's then cross-cultural manager/interpreter, Lydia Feng, and director/environmental scientist, Dr Mark Diesendorf. The tour was so exciting and the group 'vibes' so good, that we are now planning more tours to South-West China.

Ecotour in 2005: Sichuan, 14 days, departing in June

As in our first ecotour in 2002, we will fly from Australia to Chengdu, capital of Sichuan Province. After visiting some of the temples and markets of Chengdu, we will take our coach via Mianyang and Nanping to Jiuzhaigou (Nine Stockade Gully), widely regarded as one of the most beautiful valleys in the world. After 3 days of hiking on excellent trails in this region, we will drive, via the ancient town of Songpan, the Min River valley and Wolong, to Rilong, near Mt Siguniang (Four Maidens' Mountain, altitude 6250 m) where we will spend 2 days hiking and exploring this newly opened region.

Both these destinations feature extensive easy hiking paths in stunning areas with snow-capped mountains, forests in their Autumn glory, clear rivers, naturally coloured lakes, waterfalls, and Tibetan and Qiang villages.

Other highlights of this tour include:

- Delicious Sichuanese food.
- The drive from Songpan to Chengdu along the Min River valley, which contains ancient, still inhabited villages of the Qiang people, an ancient wall and a wild river.
- The Giant Panda Breeding Research Reservation at Wolong Nature Reserve, designated by the UN as an International Biosphere Reserve.
- In Chengdu, the Fu River project, which won a UN Environment Program Award, temples, traditional housing, an artists' colony, an antique market and a street market.
- The breathtaking drive over Balang Mountain pass, altitude 4,500m.

We recommend this introductory tour especially to people who have not as yet travelled to south-west China.

Price being negotiated with local tour operators. We expect the ex-Sydney price to be about AUD 3,800 twinshare, covering: economy class international and domestic air travel in shoulder season; airport/flight taxes; airport transfers in China; coach travel in China; all accommodation in China which will be in 3-star hotels; all meals (except lunch on the free day); all entrance fees (except on the free day); and purified drinking water on the coach. Single room supplement AUD 600. If you wish to join the tour in Chengdu: POA. Tour subject to sufficient numbers registering.

Advance notice: possible ecotour to Yunnan, 14 days, departing in June 2006

We plan to fly from Australia to Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province. After a day exploring Kunming, we will take our hired coach to visit:

- The old town of Dali, with its cobbled streets and wooden buildings, and with its beautiful backdrop of Erhai Lake and high mountains. Around Dali we will visit the villages of minority peoples.
- The old Naxi town of Lijiang.
- Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, where we will take a chairlift to 4500m and have glacier views (weather permitting).
- Tiger Leaping Gorge, depth 3000m and only 30m wide at its narrowest point, carved out by the wild upper Yangzi River. Here the party will split into two, with one group undertaking the challenging two-day walk through the gorge, while the other group views the gorge from lookouts and then visits fascinating local villages.
- The matriarchal society of the Mosuo at Lugu Lake, on the border between Yunnan and Sichuan.

Price being negotiated with local tour operators. We expect the ex-Sydney price to be about AUD 3,800 twinshare, covering: economy class international and domestic air travel in shoulder season; airport/flight taxes; airport transfers in China; coach travel in China; all accommodation in China which will be in 3-star hotels (except for the overnight in Bendiwan Village in Tiger Leaping Gorge); almost all meals (except lunch on free days); all entrance fees (except on free days); and purified drinking water on the coach. Single room supplement AUD 600. If you wish to join the tour in Kunming: POA. Tour subject to sufficient numbers registering.

Further reading

See *Lonely Planet Guide to South-West China*, January 2002, and other guidebooks published after 2000.