



From left: Giant karst caves in Zhangjiajie, Hunan province, are a stunning showcase of natural wonders. The Liusha Waterfall in Dehang Grand Canyon in Zhangjiajie. Wing-suited daredevils take it to the extreme in Zhangjiajie.
PHOTOS BY YANG YANG/CHINA DAILY

Rocks and rivers cast a spell

Western region of Hunan province promises a vast visual feast of natural landscapes that took millions of years to form. **Yang Yang** reports

They sit in lush vegetation against a clear blue backdrop, a feast for the eyes and the soul. So it is hardly surprising that this region is a magnet for tourists, particularly hikers.

We are in Xiangxi, western Hunan province, and the “they” are soaring mountains that are as ubiquitous here as skyscrapers in any big Chinese city.

At the peak of summer in Zhangjiajie, my first stop on a seven-day trip to Xiangxi, I am dragged from my sleep by a blaring alarm, and I stumble out of bed with all the life of a zombie. But as I draw the curtains open I am suddenly wide awake, my heart skipping a beat as Tianmen Mountain stands starkly in the distance before me, a pitch-black silhouette that resembles a giant paperweight anchored to the Earth.

As I gaze at the mountain it strikes me that if all this were happening millions of years ago, what I would be surveying would be a marine landscape, for these colossal rocks were once submerged in the sea. Is it any wonder that Chinese, their huge numbers making them little more than specks in an ocean of humanity, have great reverence for these timeless mountains?

Indeed, for the people of Xiangxi, Tianmen Mountain is a sacred place. Zhangjiajie, originally known as Dayong, was once governed by the Wu Kingdom (222-280). During that time, Tianmen Mountain, then called Songliang Mountain, was already a site of great interest.

However, in the year 263 something happened that underlined the fact that even grand monoliths are not immutable: a 1,300-meter-high cliff collapsed, unveiling what observers called a gateway to heaven. Hence the mountain's change of name to Tianmen (heaven's gate).

Reinforcing the idea of immutability, our driver, Xu Chuang, 39, said Tianmen Mountain is in a constant, subtle state of change, gradually shifting its orientation to the west.

About 70 years ago a giant cave was visible from an area called South Wharf, which was then the most bustling area of Zhangjiajie. To see the cave today you need to travel to Dayong Bridge, four kilometers away, which has since become the city's most vibrant hub.

“Wherever the mountain points, prosperity follows,” Xu said.

Tianmen Cave, now 131.5 meters high, 57 meters wide and 60 meters deep, is said to be the highest natural karst cave in the world. Reaching it unaided by technology is no easy feat for anyone who lacks stamina: the path consists of 999 steep steps. For the less fit there are escalators that run through the mountain.

My plan is to follow the East Route to explore the mountaintop before descending to the cave.

After taking the 7.6-km cable car ride, one of the longest of its kind in the world, I reach the 1,500-meter-high summit. There I only manage to visit the Davidia Garden, home to 150 specimens of my favorite dove trees, and walk along the 60-meter-long glass walkway that clings to the cliff.

On the glass walkway, a little girl



The 3,000 sandstone pillars in Zhangjiajie are often shrouded in cloud, giving the illusion that they are floating in the air. LIU YING/FOR CHINA DAILY

cries as she cautiously moves along the edge closest to the mountain, guided by her father, despite the thick fog obscuring the view of the chasm below.

On such an oppressive day the mountaintop offers a refreshing respite. Many tourists are relaxing in the shade of the trees, sipping water or enjoying snacks. I dash to the entrance of the mountain-penetrating escalators, expecting them to take me to the other side of the mountain where I can explore the remaining eight attractions on my route. However, the escalators lead me directly down to the cave instead. My ticket does not allow another escalator ride back to the mountaintop.

From the cave to the cable station, where another ride takes people back to the foot of the mountain, I have to choose between taking several more escalators or descending 999 steps by foot. With an I-didn't-come-this-far-to-quit attitude I decide to tackle the steps.

After accomplishing that feat I head to a post office to send postcards to friends. On hearing of my steps triumph, a staff member suggests, “Why don't you climb back up the 999 steps? Otherwise, this will be the end of your visit to Tianmen Mountain.”

My clothes are drenched in sweat, my calves are beginning to ache, and it's already 3 pm, but I heed her advice.

Negotiating those 999 steps takes me just 18 minutes, my heart rate of 170 beats a minute showing how physically challenging the climb has been. Once again I find myself among a crowd of tourists taking photos of the view below. It's a gorgeous sight, to be sure, but is somehow eclipsed by that of the sandstone peak forests the day before.

Following a throng of tourists, I climb up and down steps that are supposed to lead to the most popular view in Zhangjiajie, the floating mountains that inspired the Hallelujah Mountains in the 2009 James Cameron's film *Avatar*.

However, at every stop I encounter signs pointing toward Mihuntai, which translates as mesmerizing platform. I eventually decide to consult my phone's map app.

A few minutes later the legendary sandstone pillars come into view — upright, unfathomable and spectacular, like giant stone bam-



The Aizhai Bridge spans across the Dehang Grand Canyon, a picture-perfect site in Jishou, Xiangxi Tujia and Miao autonomous prefecture. YANG YANG/CHINA DAILY



From left: The Tianmen Mountain in Zhangjiajie resembles a colossal gateway to heaven. Zhangjiajie is a haven for wildlife, where visitors can get up close to monkeys. PHOTOS BY YANG YANG/CHINA DAILY



If you go

Getting there: You can fly to Zhangjiajie or take a high-speed train from most major cities in the country. From the airport or train station to the city center, a taxi costs about 30 yuan (\$4).

Transportation: The city center of Zhangjiajie is close to Tianmen Mountain, about a 10-minute taxi ride. It takes about 50 minutes to travel from the city center to Wulingyuan scenic area, with options including buses and ride-hailing services.

Accommodation: If you plan to visit Tianmen Mountain, you can stay near the lower station of the Tianmen Mountain Cableway. You might also consider staying near the bus station for a cost-effective option.

Cuisine: • *Tujia sanxia guo*, a signature dish of Zhangjiajie, features a spicy and savory stew of cured meat, tofu, and wild vegetables, costing

around 50 yuan per person.

• *Suan tang yu* (sour soup fish) is worth trying, seasoned with chilies, with tender fish meat, costing about 60 yuan per person.

• *Haozi baba* is fragrant and soft steamed cake made from glutinous rice, available at roadside stalls for 5 yuan each.

Activities:

• Explore natural attractions: Enjoy Zhangjiajie's stunning peaks and waters. Experience the world's longest mountain cableway at Tianmen Mountain, challenge yourself on the glass walkway, and climb the 999 steps to Tianmen Mountain.

• Watch performances: In Wulingyuan, the *Eternal Love of Zhangjiajie* show presents local culture through large-scale song and dance. *The Charming Xiangxi* performance also offers a glimpse into the rich folk customs of western Hunan.

boo shoots that have burst through the earth with astonishing force and speed.

I have seen photos of them many times and had supposed they could not possibly be as stunning as they are made out to be, but standing before them I am mesmerized by these strange, vertical pinnacles. The only thing missing is a layer of clouds to make them appear as though they were truly floating in the air.

There are more than 3,000 sandstone pillars throughout Zhangjiajie, 1,000 of them soaring above 200 meters. This uniquely concentrated and pristine landscape was recognized by the geological world in 2010 as the Zhangjiajie Landform.

About 380 million years ago Zhangjiajie submerged beneath the ocean. Tectonic forces eventually lifted the oceanic bedrock above sea level, transforming the area and leaving behind a 500-meter-thick layer of quartzite sandstone.

Over millions of years, water erosion sculpted the sandstone into towering pillars, deep ravines, and canyons. This process was accelerated by the subtropical climate, characterized by high humidity and heavy rainfall. In addition, wind and temperature fluctuations contributed to the cracking and erosion of the rock formations.

Moreover, tree roots and other plants penetrated deeply into the sandstone, aiding its breakdown and further influencing the park's unique terrain.

Among more than 500 ligneous plant species in the region, the Wuling pine is the most prevalent. The challenging natural environment of the peaks shapes its identity — quartz sandstone retains little water, and the steep slopes hold minimal soil. To endure these harsh conditions, the Wuling pine has adapted by limiting its growth to conserve energy.

Its short, bristly needles withstand low temperatures, and its exposed roots work tirelessly to absorb every drop of moisture, from drizzle to mist.

Over millions of years, water erosion has crafted the sandstone pillars into a sanctuary for the Wuling pine and its fellow inhabitants, both flora and fauna, which together create a natural wonder.

Traveling southward from Zhangjiajie to the Xiangxi Tujia and Miao autonomous prefecture re-

veals a tapestry of natural wonders. Among these, the Dehang Grand Canyon in Jishou, the region's capital, is particularly impressive.

Our guide talks of an attraction called Tianwentai (platform where questions can be posed to the heavens). It is said that here the great poet Qu Yuan composed his famous work *Tianwen* more than 2,000 years ago. (Later I discover that this may not be exactly where *Tianwen* was written. Nevertheless, given the canyon's exquisite beauty, the idea of such magnificent poetry being inspired here is not entirely fanciful.)

Heavy rain has just ceased, leaving a white mist that drapes the mountains. In this mist, a white circular platform is nestled, embraced by the mountains. A winding staircase leads down to the platform.

This scene is so mystical that any deity you care to name would probably feel perfectly at home here. In fact, it is a sacred site where the Miao ethnic people perform rituals to worship their deities on special occasions.

On the final day of our journey I wake up in a damp tent perched atop Bamian Mountain in Longshan county, part of the autonomous prefecture. The 1,416-meter-high mountain features an expansive summit that stretches over 20 kilometers and is 4 kilometers wide. I had planned a session of stargazing followed by watching the sunrise there but the idea is blown away by fierce winds.

After breakfast we set off for the train station, 130 km away.

Feeling crestfallen, I stare out the car window, lost in thought. Was that really seven days that flashed by? However, Zhangjiajie, with its ability to mesmerize, is not done with me yet. As we navigate the serpentine mountain roads, a breathtaking panorama suddenly unfolds before me: a vast sea of dark green mountains punctuated by wisps of white clouds. At the first opportunity I clamber out of the car at an observation deck, keen to capture the scene on film.

What makes Qu Yuan's *Tianwen* stands out is that it consists of 172 unanswered questions.

As I survey the stupendous scene before me, the question is whether I will come back to Xiangxi again. It is a question that of course can have but one answer.

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