

NOMADPHOTO
EXPEDITION

Yunnan Photographic Expedition 2027

DOCUMENTARY PORTRAITURE ACROSS YUNNAN'S ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

YUNNAN, CHINA

11 DAYS / 10 NIGHTS



Introduction

This photo tour in Yunnan, China weaves documentary portraiture together with the history, architecture, and geography that shape Yunnan's ethnic communities. In addition to the many surprises in the way, dedicated photographic sessions bring us face to face with local communities, in their homes, markets, and villages, set against a backdrop of dynastic history, sacred architecture, and living tradition.

And throughout these eleven days, carefully chosen historic restaurants, charming boutique hotels, and antique family residences turned into places to stay carry us in comfort between one encounter and the next, part of the unhurried, attentive atmosphere that defines every Nomad Photo Expeditions journey.

We begin in Kunming, the City of Eternal Spring, with Qing-dynasty costumed portraits and the UNESCO-listed karst towers of the Stone Forest, before traveling onward into the terraced highlands of Yuanyang, home to the Yi and Hani peoples.

From there, the ancient trading towns of Jianshui, Xizhou, and Shaxi reveal centuries of Silk Road and Tea Horse Road history, their Qing-dynasty bridges, Confucian temples, and merchant houses standing alongside Bai artisans, indigo-dye workshops, and portraits taken within family homes.

Deeper still, the Three Parallel Rivers reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site protecting three of Asia's legendary rivers, leads us to Tongle, a three-hundred-year-old Lisu village of wooden muleng houses, and to Tacheng, home to Tibetan and Lisu farmers and the endangered golden monkey.

We close in Lijiang's UNESCO-listed old town, its canals fed by the permanently snow-capped Jade Dragon Mountain, sacred symbol of the Naxi people.



What Are We Going to Experience

The Yi and Hani photographed among rice terraces carved over centuries and within the Hani's distinctive "mushroom houses" of Azheke village, while in Jianshui, a Qing-dynasty bridge, the country's second Confucius Temple, and the preserved Zhu family garden house, once home to the city's governors, frame our portrait session with Ming-costumed models.

In Xizhou and Zhoucheng, a former tea-merchant residence and an ancestral indigo-dyeing workshop introduce the Bai people, while Shaxi's thousand-year-old Tea Horse Road streets, once a hub for tea, textiles, and Tibetan goods, host our final Bai session.

The Three Parallel Rivers reserve carries us to Tongle's ceremonial Lisu welcome and Tacheng's Tibetan farmers and golden monkeys, closing in Lijiang, a UNESCO city built around Naxi tradition and the sacred Jade Dragon Mountain.



Itinerary

DAY 1

Arrival in Kunming



We arrive in Kunming, set at 1,800 meters on the Yunnan plateau, and gather this evening in a historic restaurant near Green Lake Park, a neighborhood built around willow-lined waterways and pavilions.

Inside, young hosts appear dressed in Qing Dynasty costume, giving us our first opportunity to photograph traditional Chinese dress against the restaurant's antique interior — carved screens, lanterns, and old wooden beams offering an atmospheric setting for portraiture.

A welcome dinner follows in the same restaurant, marking the start of our photographic journey through Yunnan.

 **Photographic Opportunities:** Qing Dynasty-costumed hosts moving through lantern-lit rooms invite portraiture rich in color and texture; carved wooden screens, antique furnishings, and softly lit interiors offer atmospheric backdrops for close-up detail shots, candid dinner-table moments, and environmental portraits.

 **Meals:** — / **Accommodation:** Kunming JEN Hotel By Shangri-La, 4* Sup. (or similar)

DAY 2

Kunming - Stone Forest - Kunming



This morning we wander through Zhuanxin Market, Kunming's largest and most varied daily market, where vendors, produce stalls, and everyday transactions offer unscripted street photography and candid portraits of local life.

By midday we travel to Shilin, the Stone Forest, a karst landscape inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage list in 2007 and considered one of the world's great geological references. A local guide from the Sani ethnic group leads our visit, offering context on the formations and striking angles for landscape and silhouette photography.

In the evening, we attend Impression of Yunnan, a celebrated performance on the region's ethnic minorities, directed by renowned artist Yang Liping (activity included) — a chance to photograph costume, movement, and stage lighting in full production.

 **Photographic Opportunities:** Market vendors, produce stalls, and unposed daily transactions at Zhuanxin; karst pillars and Sani guide portraits at Shilin; stage lighting, costume detail, and dynamic movement during the Impression of Yunnan performance.

 **Meals:** Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / **Accommodation:** Kunming JEN Hotel By Shangri-La, 4* Sup. (or similar)

DAY 3

Kunming -
Yuanyang

We depart Kunming for Yuanyang, a six-hour road journey climbing to 1,800 meters into a landscape defined by Asia's most impressive and extensive rice terraces. Along the way, the plateau gradually gives way to layered, water-mirrored slopes.

On arrival, we transfer directly to our hotel in Yuanyang. A dedicated photo session has been arranged with the local Yi ethnic group — colorful, warm, and open to the camera — set either directly on the terraces or inside their homes, offering portraits different from previous visits to the region.

Photographic Opportunities: Yi ethnic portraits in vivid traditional dress, set against terraced rice paddies or within home interiors; wide terrace panoramas at golden hour; candid interaction between hosts and travelers during the arranged session.

Meals: Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / **Accommodation:** Oness Resort Hotel, 4*

DAY 4

Yuanyang



A full day is spent among the Yuanyang rice terraces and the local market, where daily commerce and terraced farmland offer complementary rhythms — one intimate and human, the other vast and geometric.

We arrange a photo session with the Hani ethnic group, whose dress is more sober and reserved than the Yi's, photographed inside their homes. These are the distinctive "mushroom houses," named for their rounded shape and known for dim, atmospheric interiors. We also visit Azheke, a remarkable Hani village.

Photographic Opportunities: Hani portraits in muted traditional dress within dim mushroom-house interiors; terraced rice-paddy market scenes; the thatched silhouettes of Azheke village, offering architectural and documentary studies of Hani daily life.

Meals: Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / **Accommodation:** Oness Resort Hotel, 4*

DAY 5

Yuanyang -
Shuanglong (Two
Dragons) Bridge -
Jianshui

We leave Yuanyang for the town of Jianshui, pausing en route at the magnificent Shuanglong, or Two Dragons, Bridge, built during the Qing Dynasty and regarded as a masterpiece among China's historic bridges.

Jianshui sits on the ancient Southwest Silk Road, also called the Tea and Horse Road, from which travelers heading toward Vietnam were once controlled, making it a major political and military center by the thirteenth century. Today the town functions as a living museum of historic architecture.

We visit the Confucius Temple, the country's second most important, set within a beautiful park, then the Zhu family garden house, home to the Qing-era governors of Jianshui. Every corner of this magnificently preserved residence invites the camera, and two young women dressed in Ming Dynasty costume join us for a portrait session inside the garden house.

Photographic Opportunities: Stone architecture of the Shuanglong Bridge; temple courtyards and gardens at the Confucius Temple; Ming-costumed portraits framed by carved doorways and garden corners within the Zhu family house.

Meals: Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / **Accommodation:** Hanlinyuan Hotel

DAY 6

Jianshui - Xizhou



This morning we travel roughly six hours to Xizhou, a town set between the towering Cangshan range, averaging 4,000 meters, and Erhai Lake. The area has been home to the Bai minority for some 3,000 years, and Xizhou preserves much of their traditional architecture intact.

We settle into a characterful hotel housed in a beautiful old residence that once belonged to an important tea-trading family. A photo session with the local Bai community is arranged within the hotel itself, allowing relaxed, unhurried portraiture in an authentic architectural setting.

📷 **Photographic Opportunities:** Bai ethnic portraits within the tea-merchant courtyard house; carved wooden architectural details; mountain and lake light filtering through traditional Xizhou courtyards during the arranged session.

🍽️ **Meals:** Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / **Accommodation:** Sky Valley Heritage Boutique Hotel or Linden Center

DAY 7

Xizhou - Zhoucheng
- Shaxi

We begin at the local market in Xizhou before continuing to Zhoucheng, where most residents practice indigo batik dyeing, following an ancestral process passed through generations. A photo session captures the pigmentation process itself, with artisans in traditional dress working inside a small workshop set in an old house.

From here we continue roughly two hours to Shaxi, an old town in the southeast of Jianchuan county that once served as a major trading post on the Tea and Horse Road during the Qing and Han Dynasties, and as a communication hub linking Sichuan, Yunnan, and Tibet since the Tang Dynasty. Tea, brown sugar, textiles, furs, and other Tibetan goods once changed hands here.

Though the trade route no longer functions, Shaxi retains its cobblestone streets and traditional houses much as they stood a thousand years ago. We transfer to our hotel and explore the old town on foot.

📷 **Photographic Opportunities:** Indigo-stained hands and fabric mid-process at the Zhoucheng batik workshop; artisan portraits in traditional dress; Shaxi's cobblestone lanes and centuries-old timber façades at ambient afternoon light.

🍽️ **Meals:** Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / **Accommodation:** Holiday Hotel (Mooncreek Hotel)

DAY 8

Shaxi



A day dedicated to Shaxi itself, timed where possible to coincide with the Friday local market, when the old town fills with trade and daily activity.

We walk the town accompanied by two young Bai women in traditional dress for a dedicated photo session set against Shaxi's historic streets and buildings. The overlap between everyday market life and the arranged portrait session allows for both candid documentary images and more considered, composed portraiture within the same ancient setting.

📷 **Photographic Opportunities:** Friday market trade and produce stalls along Shaxi's cobblestones; Bai portrait session in traditional dress against timber façades; contrast between candid market life and composed street portraiture.

🍽️ **Meals:** Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / **Accommodation:** Holiday Hotel (Mooncreek Hotel)

DAY 9

Shaxi - Tongle - Tacheng



We enter the Three Parallel Rivers Nature Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2003 spanning 1.7 million hectares across northwest Yunnan's mountains. Eight protected zones trace the upper courses of the Yangtze, Mekong, and Nujiang rivers, running north to south for over 170 kilometers through gorges up to 3,000 meters deep, flanked by peaks above 6,000 meters. The Yangtze and Mekong lie 66.3 kilometers apart; the Mekong and Nujiang, just 18.6.

We continue to Tongle, one of Yunnan's oldest Lisu villages, over 300 years old, with roughly a hundred preserved wooden "muleng" houses built without nails, animals below and living quarters above, framed by wooden fences hung with drying corn — locally a sign of a good harvest. The Lisu are known for singing and dancing, particularly achimugua, the "goat dance," performed unaccompanied or with flute at weddings, funerals, worship ceremonies, and for honored guests. The entire village welcomes us in costume with drink and dance before a portrait session with individual community members.

We continue to Tacheng, home to Tibetan and Lisu farming communities amid orchards, wheat fields, vineyards, rice terraces, and the endangered Yunnan golden monkey, *Rhinopithecus bieti*.

📷 **Photographic Opportunities:** Tongle's entire village in festival dress, welcome drinks, achimugua dance, and individual Lisu portraits; muleng wooden houses hung with drying corn; Three Parallel Rivers gorge and peak panoramas along the route.

🍽️ **Meals:** Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / **Accommodation:** Buda Hotel

DAY 10

Tacheng - Lijiang



At dawn we visit the Golden Monkey National Park, aiming to arrive by 8 a.m., when the endangered Yunnan golden monkeys descend to feed and photography is at its best. A photo session with the local Tibetan community follows, set inside a traditional house.

We then travel roughly four hours to the old town of Lijiang, its cobblestone lanes, centuries-old houses, and small canals fed by pure, icy water from the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, at 5,550 meters the permanently snow-capped symbol of the Naxi people who call Lijiang home. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999, the old town remains fully intact, and we spend the afternoon exploring it on foot.

Lijiang is highly touristic, yet this brings its own photographic value: young Chinese visitors dressed in costumes from various dynasties and ethnic minorities pose throughout the old town, adding a playful layer of street photography.

📷 **Photographic Opportunities:** Golden monkeys feeding at dawn; Tibetan household portraits; Jade Dragon Snow Mountain framing Lijiang's canals and rooftops; costumed local visitors adding candid, playful street photography throughout the old town.

🍽️ **Meals:** Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / **Accommodation:** LUX* Tea Horse Road Lijiang

DAY 11

Lijiang - Departure



At the agreed time, we transfer to the airport for our onward flight, bringing our Yunnan photographic journey to a close.

Across eleven days we have moved from karst stone forests and mirror-bright rice terraces to indigo workshops, tea-merchant courtyards, and a Lisu village welcome, closing among the snow-lit rooftops of Lijiang's old town.

📷 **Photographic Opportunities:** Final departure views of Lijiang's old town rooftops and streets en route to the airport, offering a last opportunity for candid travel and cityscape photography.

🍽️ **Meals:** Breakfast / **Accommodation:** —

Activity Highlights

Impression of Yunnan

Yang Liping's ethnic-minority stage production in Kunming, a rare fusion of choreography and costume staged with full access for photographers.

Azheke Hani Village

A mushroom-roofed settlement preserving centuries-old Hani architecture, its dim interior spaces rarely opened for outside photography.

Zhoucheng Indigo Batik Workshop

An ancestral Bai dyeing process, documented hands-on inside a working artisan household rarely accessible to outside visitors.

Yunnan Golden Monkey, Tacheng

A critically endangered primate, photographed at dawn in its native forest during its brief morning feeding window.

Yuanyang Rice Terraces

Asia's largest, most dramatic terraced landscape, shared with Yi and Hani communities whose home-based portrait sessions are granted to few travelers.

Zhu Family Garden House, Jianshui

A Qing-era governor's residence, magnificently preserved, staged with Ming-costumed portrait subjects inside its private courtyards.

Tongle Lisu Village Welcome

An entire village in festival dress, performing the rare achimugua 'goat dance,' extending a ceremonial welcome reserved for honored guests.

Hotels Used

Kunming JEN Hotel By Shangri-La, 4* Sup. (or similar)	KUNMING	2 NIGHTS
Oness Resort Hotel, 4* (or similar)	YUANYANG	2 NIGHTS
Hanlinyuan Hotel (or similar)	JIANSUI	1 NIGHT
Sky Valley Heritage Boutique Hotel or Linden Center	XIZHOU (DALI)	1 NIGHT
Holiday Hotel (Mooncreek Hotel)	SHAXI	2 NIGHTS
Buda Hotel (or similar)	TACHENG	1 NIGHT
LUX* Tea Horse Road Lijiang (or similar)	LIJIANG	1 NIGHT

Final hotels will be shared 30 days before departure

Photographic & Cultural Activities

- Qing Dynasty-costumed portrait session, Kunming welcome dinner restaurant
- Zhuanxin daily market, Kunming
- Shilin (Stone Forest), UNESCO karst landscape with Sani guide
- "Impression of Yunnan" ethnic minorities performance, directed by Yang Liping
- Yuanyang rice terraces
- Yi ethnic portrait session, Yuanyang
- Hani ethnic portrait session and Azheke mushroom-house village, Yuanyang
- Shuanglong (Two Dragons) Bridge
- Confucius Temple and Zhu family garden house, Jianshui
- Xizhou old town and Bai architecture
- Bai ethnic portrait session, Xizhou
- Zhoucheng indigo batik dyeing workshop
- Shaxi old town
- Shaxi Friday local market
- Bai portrait session, Shaxi
- Three Parallel Rivers Nature Reserve
- Tongle Lisu village welcome and achimugua dance
- Tacheng Tibetan and Lisu farming communities
- Yunnan golden monkey, Tacheng
- Lijiang old town and Naxi culture
- Jade Dragon Snow Mountain
- Costumed street photography, Lijiang

What Are We Going to Experience

Qing Dynasty-costumed portrait session, Kunming welcome dinner restaurant

On our first evening in Kunming, an antique restaurant near Green Lake Park becomes our opening studio. Young hosts dressed in Qing Dynasty costume move through lantern-lit rooms of carved wood and old furnishings, offering an immediate, atmospheric introduction to Chinese historical dress. The setting's warm light and textured interiors reward both close portraiture and wider environmental frames, while the welcome dinner provides relaxed, candid moments as the group settles into the journey ahead.

Zhuanxin daily market, Kunming

Kunming's largest and most varied daily market unfolds each morning with produce stalls, vendors, and the unscripted choreography of everyday commerce. Zhuanxin offers unposed portraits, hands at work, and the textures of regional food culture, all within a compact, walkable area. It is an ideal warm-up for street photography before the journey moves into more remote territory, capturing city life at its most authentic and least performed.

Shilin (Stone Forest), UNESCO karst landscape with Sani guide

Inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage list in 2007, Shilin's karst towers rank among the world's most extraordinary geological formations. Limestone pillars rise in dense clusters, creating natural corridors and dramatic silhouettes ideal for landscape photography. A guide from the local Sani ethnic group leads the visit, adding cultural context to a place that is as much a living Sani landscape as a geological landmark, deepening its documentary value.

"Impression of Yunnan" ethnic minorities performance, directed by Yang Liping

Directed by celebrated choreographer Yang Liping, Impression of Yunnan stages the province's ethnic minorities through movement, costume, and music in a large-scale evening production. It offers dense color, dynamic gesture, and stage lighting rarely available in daily life, condensing Yunnan's cultural diversity into a single, highly visual performance and providing a strong counterpoint to the documentary style of the villages still to come.

Yuanyang rice terraces

Among the largest and most dramatic terraced landscapes in Asia, the Yuanyang terraces spread across the hillsides in mirrored, water-filled tiers shaped by generations of Hani and Yi agricultural tradition. Shifting light throughout the day transforms their surface from silver to gold, making them a defining subject for landscape photography, while the surrounding villages and markets extend the story from land to the people who continue to work it.

Yi ethnic portrait session, Yuanyang

A dedicated photo session introduces the Yi community of the Yuanyang terraces, known for colorful, elaborate traditional dress and an open, welcoming manner toward the camera. Sessions take place directly on the terraces or inside family homes, varying from previous visits to the region. The combination of vivid costume against the geometry of the rice paddies, or intimate portraiture within domestic interiors, offers two distinct, complementary photographic registers.

Hani ethnic portrait session and Azheke mushroom-house village, Yuanyang

The Hani community presents a more reserved, understated style of dress than their Yi neighbors, photographed here inside their homes — the distinctive "mushroom houses," named for their rounded thatched form and known for dim, atmospheric interiors. Azheke, one of the finest surviving Hani villages, adds an architectural dimension: a cluster of these thatched dwellings that together form one of the region's most striking and photogenic settlements.

Shuanglong (Two Dragons) Bridge

Built during the Qing Dynasty, the Shuanglong Bridge is considered a masterpiece among China's historic bridges, its stone arches spanning the waterway en route to Jianshui. As a brief stop within a longer travel day, it offers a concentrated architectural subject, its symmetry and craftsmanship reflecting the same era of engineering and governance visible later in Jianshui's Confucius Temple and Zhu family residence.

Confucius Temple and Zhu family garden house, Jianshui

Jianshui's Confucius Temple, the country's second most important, sits within a beautiful park and reflects the town's long history as a political and military center on the ancient Tea and Horse Road. The nearby Zhu family garden house, home to the Qing-era governors of Jianshui, is magnificently preserved down to its smallest corner. Here, two young women in Ming Dynasty costume join our group for a portrait session inside the residence's private courtyards.

Xizhou old town and Bai architecture

Set between the towering Cangshan range and Erhai Lake, Xizhou has been home to the Bai minority for roughly 3,000 years and preserves much of their traditional architecture intact. Our hotel occupies a beautifully restored residence that once belonged to an important tea-trading family, itself a piece of local history. The town's courtyards, carved woodwork, and lakeside light provide a calm, architecturally rich setting for both portrait and interior photography.

Bai ethnic portrait session, Xizhou

Held within our hotel's own historic courtyards, this session introduces the local Bai community in traditional dress, photographed against the same carved wood and tea-merchant architecture that defines Xizhou. The relaxed, unhurried setting allows for considered portraiture, close study of costume detail, and quiet interaction between travelers and hosts, offering a gentler counterpoint to the more public sessions elsewhere on the route.

Zhoucheng indigo batik dyeing workshop

In Zhoucheng, most residents practice indigo batik dyeing, an ancestral process passed down through generations of the Bai community. A dedicated photo session documents the pigmentation process itself inside a small workshop set within an old house, artisans in traditional dress working dye vats and patterned cloth. It is a rare hands-on look at a living craft tradition, rich in texture, color, and process-driven documentary storytelling.

Shaxi old town

Once a major trading post on the Tea and Horse Road during the Qing and Han Dynasties, and a communication hub linking Sichuan, Yunnan, and Tibet since the Tang Dynasty, Shaxi traded tea, brown sugar, textiles, furs, and other Tibetan goods. Though the route no longer functions, its cobblestone streets and traditional houses remain much as they stood a thousand years ago, offering an intact historical townscape for architectural and street photography.

Shaxi Friday local market

Timed where possible to coincide with Shaxi's Friday market, this visit brings the old town's cobblestone streets to life with trade, produce, and daily transactions. The market provides an unscripted counterpart to the town's arranged portrait sessions, an opportunity to document everyday commerce against a backdrop of centuries-old timber façades and stone paving that have changed little over a millennium.

Bai portrait session, Shaxi

Two young Bai women in traditional dress accompany us through Shaxi's streets for a dedicated portrait session, set against the town's historic buildings and cobbled lanes. Walking the old town with local subjects allows for a natural blend of posed and candid photography, pairing costume and craftsmanship with the architectural backdrop that has defined Shaxi since its days on the Tea and Horse Road.

Three Parallel Rivers Nature Reserve

A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2003, this 1.7-million-hectare reserve spans eight protected zones across northwest Yunnan, tracing the upper courses of the Yangtze, Mekong, and Nujiang rivers as they run north to south for over 170 kilometers through gorges up to 3,000 meters deep, flanked by peaks above 6,000 meters. Its scale offers sweeping landscape photography en route to Tongle and Tacheng.

Tongle Lisu village welcome and achimugua dance

One of Yunnan's oldest Lisu villages, over 300 years old, Tongle preserves roughly a hundred wooden "muleng" houses built without nails, animals housed below and family quarters above. The entire village welcomes us in traditional costume with drink and the achimugua, or "goat dance," performed unaccompanied or with flute at weddings, funerals, and for honored guests. A portrait session follows with individual community members, a rare, ceremonial level of access.

Tacheng Tibetan and Lisu farming communities

Tacheng is home to farming communities from the Tibetan and Lisu ethnic groups, set amid a temperate climate of orchards, wheat fields, vineyards, and rice terraces. A dedicated photo session introduces the local Tibetan community inside a traditional house, offering an intimate domestic setting distinct from the village-wide welcome experienced the day before in Tongle.

Yunnan golden monkey, Tacheng

Tacheng and its surrounding forest are home to the critically endangered Yunnan golden monkey, *Rhinopithecus bieti*. At the Golden Monkey National Park, we arrive by around 8 a.m., when the monkeys descend to feed, offering a narrow but valuable window for wildlife photography in a natural forest setting rarely accessible to outside visitors.

Lijiang old town and Naxi culture

Fully intact and declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999, Lijiang's old town is built around cobblestone lanes, centuries-old houses, and small canals fed by pure, icy water from the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, whose permanently snow-capped summit, at 5,550 meters, serves as the symbol of the Naxi people who call Lijiang home. Despite its popularity, the old town retains striking architectural and documentary depth.

Jade Dragon Snow Mountain

Rising to 5,550 meters above Lijiang, the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain remains permanently capped in snow and holds deep symbolic meaning for the Naxi minority. Its presence defines the town below, feeding the canals that run through the old town and anchoring wide landscape compositions across the Lijiang valley.

Costumed street photography, Lijiang

Lijiang's popularity brings an unexpected photographic layer: young Chinese visitors dressed in costumes from various dynasties and ethnic minorities pose throughout the old town. This playful, contemporary use of historical dress adds a candid, documentary counterpoint to the town's architecture, capturing how Lijiang's heritage is reinterpreted by its present-day visitors.