

Trip Report: Northern Yunnan June 14-28, 2026

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OCA Organizer and Representative: Mary Gerritsen (California)

Driver: Yang-Gang Zhang

June 14: Several members of the group arrived a day or two early. Wenqing arranged a tour for those early arrivals to visit the orchid collection at the Kunming Botanical Garden, where our orchid guide, Dr. Jiang Hong, has his laboratory and impressive orchid collection. Notable orchids in flower the collection included the very rare tropical *Cypripedium* from southern Yunnan, *Cyp. lentiginosum*.

Later in the day, the group met in the lobby of the Best International Hotel, and traveled by several vehicles (provided by the restaurant) to a nearby restaurant where we enjoyed a multiple course dinner and had the chance to meet most of the participants (a few arrived later that evening).

It was an early evening as we all to get up early (4 am) to catch a flight to the ancient city of Lijiang the next morning.

June 15: Lijiang

The group met very early—4:00 a.m.!—in the hotel lobby and transferred to the airport, where we caught an early flight to Lijiang. Our longtime bus driver, Mr. Zhang, met us at the airport and had everyone at the hotel in no time. Mr. Zhang has driven us on many of our previous trips through Yunnan and Sichuan, and it was wonderful to see him again. He is an exceptionally careful and skilled driver, and it is always reassuring to have him behind the wheel as we navigate the winding mountain roads of this part of China.

We spent much of our first day recovering from the long journey and adjusting to the time change, while also exploring the shops, narrow lanes, and old buildings of Lijiang. Some of the buildings are original, while others are carefully reconstructed

reproductions—a reminder that these traditional wooden towns were particularly vulnerable to fire and have suffered repeated destruction over the centuries.



Chiloschista yunnanensis (Photo by Ron Parsons)



Paphiopedilum hangianum (Photo by Ron Parsons)



Paphiopedilum rungsuriyanum (Photo by Ron Parsons)



Dendrobium moschatum (Photo by Ron Parsons)



Bulbophyllum sp. (Photo by Ron Parsons)



Plant name

Photos taken at the Yunnan Academy of Forest and Grassland (adjacent to the Kuning Botanic Garden)



Cypripedium lentiginosum (Photo by Ron Parsons)



Acanthophippium, striatum (Photo by Ron Parsons)



Hong showing his prized plants
of *Cypripedium lentiginosum*
(Photo by Ron Parsons)

Lijiang, in northwestern Yunnan Province, is a historic mountain city best known for its beautifully preserved Old Town, which has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997. From the 12th century onward, Lijiang flourished as an important trading center along the ancient Tea Horse Road linking Yunnan, Sichuan, and Tibet, while developing a distinctive culture shaped particularly by the local Naxi people.

We enjoyed wandering through the Old Town's cobblestone lanes, canals, courtyards, and traditional wooden houses, and had an opportunity to learn a little about Naxi music and customs. We also sampled some of Yunnan's excellent locally grown coffee and browsed the many shops for souvenirs before returning to our hotel. That evening, we finished the day with dinner at a nearby restaurant.



Lijiang (Photo by Ron Parsons)



Lijiang (Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Lijiang (Photo by Ron Parsons)

June 16: Jade Dragon Snow Mountain

Yulong (Jade Dragon) Snow Mountain is a magnificent chain of snow-covered peaks, glaciers, forests, and alpine meadows, with its highest summit reaching 5,596 meters. A typical visit—which we did not do—involves taking a cable car high into the mountains

for sweeping views of the glaciers and rugged peaks, followed by a visit to the turquoise waters and dramatic scenery of Blue Moon Valley. Even from the lower valley, however, the views of the mountains were magnificent.

Our bus climbed steadily from Lijiang, eventually reaching a much cooler, more alpine environment. It was also another example of Chinese mass tourism, with numerous tour buses and fences in many areas to keep visitors on designated paths and roads. We passed several wedding parties and photography sessions, both on the drive up and within the park itself.

Our first surprise came when we discovered that the area we had planned to explore had recently been fenced off, and the authorities would not allow our group to enter. Hong had visited the site many times before, so this was a new restriction. We quickly moved to Plan B and began exploring along the river, where Hong knew of other locations for some of our target species.

Almost immediately, we began finding interesting plants. Along the river we encountered several species of *Arisaema* (Araceae), as well as the orchid *Herminium ophioglossoides* and several *Primula* species. We then followed a rough trail above the river, where the diversity increased considerably. Among our finds were more *Arisaema ciliatum*, *Thalictrum* (Ranunculaceae), *Iris collettii*, *Calanthe delavayi*, *Calanthe tricarinata*, *Cypripedium margaritaceum*, *Cyp. tibeticum*, and *Cyp. flavum*, *Epipactis mairei* (not in bloom), *Anemone* sp. (Ranunculaceae), and several gentians (Gentianaceae). We also found a few *Cypripedium flavum* growing in the same general area.



Roscoea humeana? (Photo by Ron Parsons)



Cypripedium margaritaceum
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Travertine pools at Yulong Snow Mountain
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Calanthe delavayi
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Arisaema ciliatum. (Photo by Ron Parsons)



Roscoeae humeana? (Photo by Ron Parsons)

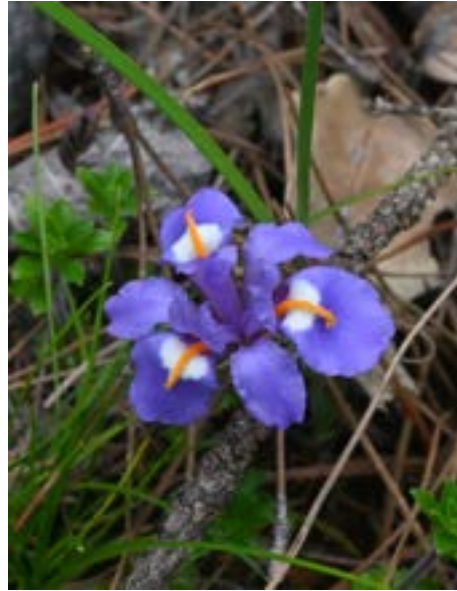


Cypripedium margaritaceum
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Herminium ophioglossoides

(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Iris colletti

(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Primula sp.

(Photo by Ron Parsons_)

Eventually we made our way back to the bus, stopping to photograph several *Ligularia* sp. (Asteraceae) that had been planted along the roadside. When we returned to the hotel, another surprise was waiting for us. Wenqing had arranged a birthday celebration for Ron Parsons, and our impromptu party was a wonderful way to end the day—and included two particularly delicious birthday cakes!



Ron Parson's birthday party (Ron in the hat)

June 17. Tiger Leaping Gorge and Haba Snow Mountain

We departed Lijiang for the famous Tiger Leaping Gorge, northwest of the city. This spectacular canyon was carved by the rushing Jinsha River—the upper reaches of the Yangtze—as it cuts between the towering Jade Dragon Snow Mountain and Haba Snow Mountain. According to legend, the gorge takes its name from a tiger that escaped a hunter by leaping across the river at its narrowest point. Today, it is one of the region's most popular scenic destinations, drawing visitors to see the turbulent river far below, the sheer cliffs rising on either side, and the breathtaking mountain scenery.

As we stopped to enjoy the remarkable views, one of the local vendors told us that there are plans to dam the river, which would dramatically alter the character of the gorge. It was a sobering thought that such a magnificent landscape could someday be changed so profoundly, and we could only hope that it might somehow be preserved.

After passing through the gorge, we began climbing a seemingly endless series of switchbacks up Haba Snow Mountain, eventually reaching a small village high on the mountainside. After a quick noodle lunch, Wenqing and Hong went off to arrange several 4WD vehicles to take us farther up the mountain to an area where *Cypripedium lijiangense* occur.



The spectacular Tiger Leaping Gorge
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



The mountains above the gorge
(Photo by Ron Parsons)

Exploring the site was somewhat challenging, as there were essentially no trails and much of the terrain consisted of steep slopes. Nevertheless, most of the group managed the climb. Much of this side of Haba Snow Mountain is composed of marble and limestone, providing the calcium-rich habitat favored by many orchid species. On one side of a small valley, we found about a few flowering *Cypripedium lijiangense*, along with spent plants of *Cypripedium plectrochilum*, which had bloomed several weeks earlier. On another slope, even more challenging to climb, we encountered many more *Cypripedium lijiangense*, as well as *Cypripedium tibeticum*, a *Calanthe tricarinata*, and several plants of an unidentified *Habenaria* sp. that were just coming into spike.



Cypripedium lijiangense
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



The group after a successful climb up Haba Snow Mountain and finding multiple colonies of *Cypripedium lijiangense*! Mission Accomplished!



Calanthe tricarinata
(Photo by David Livermore)



Habaneria sp.
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Cypripedium tibeticum
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

We eventually made our way back down to the village, transferred to our bus, and retraced our route through Tiger Leaping Gorge. From there, we turned onto a different highway and continued to our destination for the night—a lovely hotel with an open, airy design and beautifully appointed rooms. As we turned onto the new highway we had an amazing view of one of the bridges over the Jingsha river.



Wenqing had arranged dinner at a nearby restaurant that was quite an attraction in its own right. The striking building was surrounded by beautiful gardens, creating a spectacular setting in which to end another memorable day.

June 18. Departure for ShangriLa

Today we began climbing to much higher elevations as we entered the Tibetan region of northwestern Yunnan. The landscape and architecture gradually changed, and we soon began passing broad alpine meadows filled with distinctive high-elevation plants. Among them were *Iris barbatula* (Iridaceae), *Thermopsis barbata* (Fabaceae), *Stellera chamaejasme* var. *chrysantha* (Thymeleaceae), *Incarvillea zhongdianensis* (Bignoniaceae), *Euphorbia stracheyi*? (Euphorbiaceae), gentians (Gentianaceae), *Anemone* (Ranunculaceae), and a *Pedicularis* species, likely *siphonantha* (Orobanchaceae).



Incarvillea zhongdianensis
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Iris barbatula
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Thermopsis barbata
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

We also learned about the bian, a cattle-yak hybrid raised by local Tibetans in this region. Along the way we encountered numerous Tibetans in their distinctive traditional dress, some inviting tourists to ride their beautifully decorated ponies.



A Tibetan Pony
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Stellera chamaejasme var. *chrysantha*
(Photo by Ron Parsons)

Shangri-La lies on the southeastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau and offers a striking combination of Tibetan culture, high-altitude landscapes, and remarkable biodiversity. Formerly known as Zhongdian, the town and surrounding region are characterized by broad alpine meadows, forests, lakes, snow-covered mountains, and traditional Tibetan villages. The historic Dukezong Old Town provides a glimpse into the area's long cultural history, while the impressive Songzanlin Monastery, founded in the 17th century, is the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Yunnan.

As we traveled farther north, it was striking to see how much had changed since our last visit, about ten years earlier. There were many more buildings, a greatly improved highway, and tracks for the new high-speed railway. Shangri-La itself had grown enormously and was almost unrecognizable in places.

Our botanical destination for the day was a nearby valley surrounded by high mountains and steep scree slopes. We followed a narrow, single-lane road for perhaps 30 km before reaching a point where we had to leave the bus and continue on foot. Even the valley floor was at an elevation of more than 3650 m, and climbing the loose scree slopes at that altitude was challenging. Fortunately, the botanical rewards made the effort worthwhile.

The lower slopes were filled with wildflowers, including *Primula sikkimensis* (Primulaceae), *Iris bulleyana* (Iridaceae), *villea zhongidanensis* (Bignoniaceae), *Pedicularis* (Orobanchaceae), *Bistorta* (Polygonaceae), gentians (Gentianaceae), and several *Rhododendron* species (Ericaceae), although most of the rhododendrons had already finished flowering. While many of the group then climbed the scree slope, Ron Parsons explored the lower slopes more thoroughly, and was rewarded with a few *Meconopsis* sp., a *Cyp. tibeticum*, *Acanthos delavayi* and *Corydalis curvifolia* (?).

Higher on the slopes we began finding orchids, including *Cypripedium bardolphianum*, *Galearis spathulata*, *Neottia lihengiae* (a species discovered and described by our guide, Hong). *Cyp. flavum*, and a few *Cyp. tibeticum*. On other parts of the slopes we found additional *Pedicularis* (Orobanchaceae) as well as *Pinguicula alpina* (Lentibulariaceae). John McCallen climbed even higher and was rewarded with a larger colony of *Cypripedium flavum*, as well as several beautiful *Meconopsis* poppies (Papaveraceae).

On our way back we found several additional orchid species growing on the adjacent slopes and road banks, including *Cephalanthera longifolia*, a *Cypripedium tibeticum*, several plants of *Oreorchis nana* and an attractive white lousewort *Pedicularis monbeigiana*, *Roscoea* sp. (Zingiberaceae).

We then continued on to Shangri-La, where we spent the night.



Meconopsis sp.
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Pedicularis siphonantha
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Yellow *Rhododendron wardii*
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Primula sikkimensis
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Iris bulleyana
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Incarvillea zhongdianensis growing
with *Oreorchis nana*
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Acanthocalyx delavayii
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Corydalis curvifolia?
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Galearis spathulata
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Cypripedium flavum
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Cypripedium bardolphianum
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



A lovely clump of *Cypripedium flavum*, high on the scree slope
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Neottia lihengiae
{Photo by Mary Gerritsen}



Hemipilia monantha
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Pinguicula alpina
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Pedicularis siphonantha?
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



The lower slopes had masses of flowers, including the abundant *Primula sikkimensis*, shown here. Photo by Ron Parsons



Cephalanthera longifolia
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Cypripedium tibeticum
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Oreorchis nana
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

June 19. Balagezong National Scenic Area

The group was definitely beginning to feel the effects of the altitude. Many of us had trouble sleeping, woke frequently during the night, or developed headaches as we adjusted to spending our days at elevations around 3,650 meters (12,000 feet).



Balagezong Scenic Area



Balagezong Scenic Area

Our destination today was the spectacular Balagezong National Scenic Area, northwest of Shangri-La in Yunnan's Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Balagezong is a dramatic landscape of sheer-walled canyons, rushing turquoise rivers, forests, alpine meadows, and snow-covered mountains. Its highest summit, Balagezong, or Gezong Snow Mountain, rises to approximately 5,545 meters (18,190 feet), creating remarkable changes in vegetation and scenery from the canyon floor to the high alpine zone.

Visitors can explore the Shangri-La Grand Canyon, follow walkways constructed along—and sometimes seemingly suspended far above—the river, visit the traditional Tibetan village of Bala, and see the remarkable natural rock formation known as the Shambhala Stupa. The mountain formation resembles a Buddhist stupa, and its religious significance adds another dimension to the already extraordinary landscape.

Balagezong's modern history is almost as remarkable as its scenery. Bala Village was once extremely isolated, and reaching Shangri-La required a journey of several days on foot along narrow mountain trails. One of the village's former residents, Sina Dingzhu, eventually left the area and became a successful businessman. He later returned with a determination to reconnect his birthplace with the outside world, investing much of his fortune in building a road through the surrounding cliffs and ravines. The road



Cliffside walkway



Cliffside walkway

transformed access to the village and ultimately helped open the region to tourism and new economic opportunities. Today, Balagezong is therefore remarkable not only for its immense natural beauty, but also for the extraordinary determination of one man to reconnect and revitalize his remote mountain home.



Gentiana sp.
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Cypripedium farreri
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Impatiens sp.
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Cypripedium wardii
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Cypripedium wardii
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Acanthocalyx alba
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

Gentiana sp.
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

Calanthe delavayi
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

For us, however, Balagezong held another attraction: orchids. At the park entrance we change to a smaller park bus. On a prior trip we had accidentally discovered a colony of tiny cypripediums (not in bloom), identified by Hong and Wenqing as *Cypripedium wardii*, a charming little species that is listed as endangered and vulnerable by the IUCN. This time we had deliberately returned later in June, hoping that the plants would be in flower. We were not disappointed. We found a large colony, with most of the plants at or near peak bloom. *Cypripedium wardii* is native to southeastern Tibet, western Sichuan, and northwestern Yunnan.

At the same location we also found a few plants of the equally exciting *Cypripedium farreri*, along with a few *Calanthe delavayi*. Across the road, several *Cypripedium flavum* were flowering high on a cliff above us. Other plants in the area included *Arisaema* (Araceae), columbines (*Aquilegia*, Ranunculaceae), a tiny blue gentian as well as a yellow one, (Gentianaceae), *Anemone* (Ranunculaceae), and even a *Daphne* (Thymeleaceae).

We then returned to the bus and continued upward (over a total of 108 switchbacks) to the top of the pass, at about 4,200 meters. Here we spent some time exploring the alpine flora, finding *Androsace* sp. (Primulaceae), *Bergenia*

purpurascens (Saxifragaceae), *Corydalis* sp. (Papaveraceae), *Meconopsis* sp. (Papaveraceae), and edelweiss (*Leontopodium*,



Pedicularis oederi
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Pedicularis sp.
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Spongiocarpella polystichoides
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Hemipilia chusua
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

Asteraceae) and *Pedicularis oederi*. We also saw four species of cushion Rhododendron still in bloom.

Descending to a meadow below the pass, we explored further and found *Hemipilia chusua* (formerly *Ponerorchis chusua*), a small cushion pea plant *Spongiocarpella polystichoides* (Fabaceae), marsh marigolds (*Caltha*, Ranunculaceae), a large *Anemone* (Ranunculaceae) and *Polygonatum hookeri* (Asparagaceae). Sharing the meadow was a least one white yak, colorfully saddled, washed and carefully combed, for tourists to pose with for photographs.

On our way back over the pass, we stopped about halfway down the valley to walk along one of Balagezong's extraordinary elevated walkways, which snake along the face of the almost impossibly steep cliffs. I have no idea how they managed to construct these—they seemed truly death-defying. At one point we reached a large glass-

bottomed viewing platform projecting out over the canyon. Before stepping onto it, everyone had to put protective covers over their shoes. A few members of the group bravely walked



Wenqing Perner bravely poses on the glass bottom platform



The gang gathers for a photo op on a sturdy wooden platform overlooking the Balagezong valley below

straight across the glass; I was considerably less courageous and crept around the edges, firmly holding onto the handrails. The views, however, were magnificent.

We eventually returned to Shangri-La, where we spent another night.



Elegant Yak available for photoshoot



Anemone sp.
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

June 20. In and around Shangri-La

After checking out of our hotel we headed for a low, hilly area just outside Shangri-La. We first crossed a broad meadow to reach the hills behind the city, finding quite a few plants of a *Habenaria* species in spike along the way, as well as several *Meconopsis* (Papaveraceae) still in bloom. Once we reached the low hills, we began to find our target species, *Cypripedium yunnanense*. Although we were nearing the end of its flowering season, we still found several attractive plants in reasonably good condition,

including one particularly lovely clump. After everyone had a chance to photograph the orchids, we crossed the meadow again and returned to the bus.



A nice clump of *Cypripedium yunnanense*
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Flower filled meadows around the lake
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Cypripedium yunnanense
(showing variability)
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Meconopsis sp.
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Cypripedium yunnanense
(showing variability)
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

Plant name

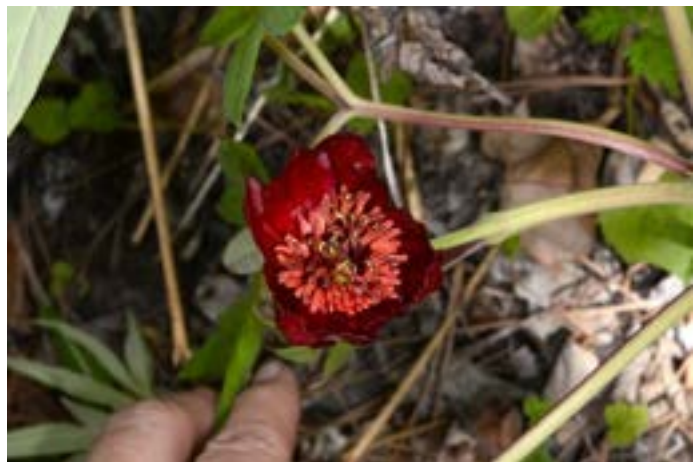
From there we continued around Yamulancuo (Napa) Lake, a large lake surrounded by beautiful flowering meadows. The area had changed considerably since our previous visit. Both the lakeshore and the surrounding hillsides were now fenced off, making it much more difficult to get close enough to photograph the flowers. Eventually we found a place where it was possible to crawl under the fence, and several members of the group took advantage of the opportunity to get closer views of the wildflowers, including numerous *Pedicularis* (Orobanchaceae).

Our botanical excursion did not last long. The local authorities soon appeared, first calling out in Chinese for everyone to get out—an instruction that, unsurprisingly, we did not understand. The rangers quickly made their meaning clear, however, and we retreated to the road and boarded the bus.

Continuing around the lake, we reached an area crowded with hotels and other buildings, where some sort of festival was apparently underway. The narrow roadway was packed with people and badly parked cars, and it took some exceptionally skillful driving by Mr. Zhang to maneuver our large bus through the congestion and eventually get us back onto the main road.



Paeonia delavayi
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Paeonia delavayi (red form)
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

Our next stop was a small road that branched off the highway near the top of a pass above Shangri-La. There was nowhere for the bus to park, so we all quickly scrambled out and headed up the road on foot, and Mr. Zhang parked the bus further down the highway. On a previous visit, about a month earlier in the season, we had found abundant *Paeonia delavayi* (Paeoniaceae), in both red- and yellow-flowered forms, as well as *Cypripedium guttatum*, *Cyp. tibeticum*, *Cyp. flavum*, and several other terrestrial orchids.

This time, most of the peonies had finished flowering, although a few remained. We also found a few *Cypripedium tibeticum* and *Cypripedium flavum* (high up above the road), together with some particularly nice clumps of *Calanthe delavayi*.

After returning to the bus, we crossed another pass and descended into the much drier Jinsha River valley. We eventually turned up a side valley toward a site where Hong knew that a *Holcoglossum* species could be found. He warned us that we were probably several weeks too late for peak flowering, but hoped that a few plants might still be in bloom.



Holcoglossum sp.
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Corallodiscus lanuginosus
Photo by Mary Gerritsen



Orthostachys japonica
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

We did manage to find one lingering plant in flower, although it was growing far enough away that photographing necessitated a good telephoto lens. The area also produced several other interesting plants, including *Orostachys japonica* (Crassulaceae), an attractive succulent, and a wonderful *Corallodiscus lanuginosus* (Gesneriaceae).

After another full day of orchids, wildflowers, mountain passes, and changing landscapes, we continued on to Weixi (Tacheng), where we spent the night.

June 21. The Weixi Snub Nosed Monkey Reserve

Hong had to leave the group and return to Kunming for a meeting, but the rest of us continued on to the *Rhinopithecus bieti* National Park, located within the forests of the Baima Snow Mountain National Nature Reserve. The park protects the rare Yunnan, or black-and-white, snub-nosed monkey *Rhinopithecus bieti* (an endangered primate found only in the remote mountains of northwestern Yunnan and adjoining Tibet.)

Remarkably well adapted to life in cold, high-elevation forests above 3,000 meters, these monkeys live in complex social groups and feed extensively on lichens growing on old fir trees. At the Xiangguqing viewing area, we were able to watch family groups grooming, feeding, and moving through the forest—an unusual opportunity to observe one of the world's most distinctive and little-known primates in its natural habitat. The experience, however, was quite different from our previous visit several years earlier. This time we were restricted to a viewing platform, and there were considerably more tourists, so we were unable to get the close views of the monkeys that we had enjoyed before. Fortunately a few in the group had great telephoto lenses, and were able to get some great shots! On our earlier trip, we had also been able to continue farther up the mountain on a trail above the viewing platform. There we had seen, an abundant stand of *Calanthe tricarinata*. That trail was now closed to visitors as well.



Snub nosed monkey *Rhinopithecus bieti*
(Photo by Ron Parsons)



Snub nosed monkey *Rhinopithecus bieti*
(Photo by Ron Parsons)

Unfortunately, this seemed to be a recurring theme throughout the trip: increased tourism had brought more regulations, fences, and restrictions on access to many of the places we had previously explored more freely.

Back at the area where we would board the shuttle buses for the return to park headquarters, we discovered a small souvenir stand that also sold surprisingly excellent coffee—although each cup was prepared at a painstakingly slow pace. Most of the group happily waited for coffee, and several of us also picked up a few monkey souvenirs before continuing.

In the afternoon we spent a few nearly fruitless hours searching two different roads for blooming plants of *Hemipilia flabellata*. We found quite a few beautifully marked leaves, several with the beginnings of flower spikes; finally after some searching (and climbing up a very steep bank), our tour mountaineer, John, finally found a plant in bloom. The climbers in the group were able to get some nice photos, while the rest of us watched from the bottom of the embankment.



Hemipilia flabellata

(Photo by Chizuko Tsurumi)



John McCallen scrambles up the embankment

(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Beautiful leaves of *Hemipilia flabellata*

(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

On the way back to Tacheng John spotted a lovely roadside field with hundreds of a bright magenta *Primula* species, possibly *P. poissonii*. We spent 15 minutes or so photographing them.



Photographing the attractive Primula in a field by the highway



Primula poissoni ?
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

We spent another night in Tacheng.

June 22, An old Catholic Church, Chinese Wine tasting and traveling to the high mountain town of Deqin

We headed down the valley and eventually crossed into the Mekong River drainage, following the Lancang River—the upper reaches of the Mekong—as it rushed through the deep mountain valley. It was an impressive river, but also a somewhat frightening one, with fast-moving water confined between steep, rugged slopes.

As we continued through the river valley, we made another botanical stop, following a road above one of the tributaries where we hoped to find *Cymbidium serratum*, *Coelogyne*, and a *Bulbophyllum* species known from the area. Unfortunately, Hong was no longer with the group. Although we had his GPS coordinates for the site, we searched thoroughly for several hours without finding the plants. A few *Cymbidium* plants (not *Cym. Serratum*, more likely *Cym. lowianum*) had been tucked into rocks above the village, but otherwise our search was unsuccessful. Perhaps the wild plants had been collected; in any case, it was certainly not for lack of looking!

Continuing down the valley, we stopped in the small village of Cizhong, home to one of the most unexpected sights in northern Yunnan: the Cizhong Catholic Church (茨中教堂), also known as the Sacred Heart Church of Cizhong. Set above the Lancang River and surrounded by Tibetan villages and vineyards, the church combines a European-style façade with a distinctly Chinese pavilion-like bell tower.

French missionaries of the Paris Foreign Missions Society established a Catholic mission in this part of Yunnan during the 19th century. The first church was built nearby in 1867, but it was destroyed during an anti-Christian uprising in 1905, during which



The Catholic Church in Cizhong



The vineyard

several missionaries were killed. The mission was subsequently moved to Cizhong, where the present church was constructed in the early 20th century. Its architecture is particularly interesting because it combines Western Romanesque elements with Chinese and local Tibetan influences.

The missionaries also introduced grape growing and winemaking to the valley, initially because they needed wine for the celebration of Mass. Viticulture gradually became part of village life, and vineyards still surround Cizhong today. Local families continued making wine long after the French missionaries had gone, preserving a tradition that began with the production of sacramental wine and eventually helped establish this part of the upper Mekong Valley as one of China's more unusual wine-growing regions.

The church also has a remarkable political history. Following the Communist takeover, the last foreign priests were expelled in the early 1950s and public religious practice largely ceased. The church itself, however, survived. Ironically, its conversion into a government school probably helped save it from destruction during the Cultural Revolution, when many other religious buildings in the region were lost. During those years, local Catholic families continued to practice their faith quietly in their homes, preserving prayers and hymns through memory and oral tradition.

Religious life gradually returned after Mao's death, and the church was eventually returned to the Catholic community. Regular Mass resumed, and the village preserved a particularly fascinating tradition of Tibetan-language Catholic chants dating from the missionary period—a remarkable blending of Tibetan culture and Catholic worship. Today the church is also recognized as an important historic and cultural monument.

The changes since our previous visit were astonishing. On our earlier trip, the church had stood largely by itself, surrounded by broad open fields. Now an entire town had grown up around it, and the area was almost unrecognizable. Fortunately, the church and its grounds remained lovely, and we were delighted to find the same priest we had met on our previous visit.

The group enjoyed a wine tasting and some excellent coffee, and several people purchased bottles of the local wine. The vines trace their origins to French grape stock introduced many decades ago, and the priest and local community have carefully maintained both the vineyards and the winemaking tradition.

We then continued along the long, winding mountain road toward Deqin, a remote town at an elevation of more than 3,650 meters (12,000 feet). Deqin is renowned both for its birdlife and for its spectacular views of Meili Snow Mountain (elevation 22,500 ft). Unfortunately, low clouds covered the mountains when we arrived, hiding the famous peaks from view.

We spent some time exploring the town and shopping for souvenirs before heading to our hotel. Built on extremely steep mountain slopes and filled with tiny shops and narrow streets, Deqin was fascinating to explore—and literally breathtaking at that elevation. Many of us again had difficulty sleeping as our bodies struggled to adjust to the thin air.

The following morning brought more clouds, and once again Meili Snow Mountain remained hidden from view.

June 23. Travel from Deqin to Bingzhongluo

Today Hong was scheduled to rejoin the group, so we had a quiet morning in Deqin while he made the long bus journey from Kunming. Around noon we met him at a gas station in town, loaded up, and began heading back down the valley. Before long we turned onto a branch road toward Gongshan and the Nu River Valley.

We made several botanical stops along the way. At one site we photographed *Liparis fargesii* growing on ledges above the road. Nearby was an impressive clump of an unfamiliar *Hoya* (Apocynaceae), which Hong did not recognize. He collected a small sample for further study at the Kunming Botanical Garden.

The road soon began climbing through a seemingly endless series of switchbacks. Progress came to a halt for some time because of road construction, but eventually we were able to continue, crossing the mountains and descending into yet another great river valley. This was the Nu River, which becomes the Salween River after flowing south into Myanmar. It is the westernmost of Yunnan's famous "Three Parallel Rivers"—the Nu/Salween, Lancang/Mekong, and Jinsha/upper Yangtze—which flow almost side by side through the deep mountain gorges of northwestern Yunnan.

The Chinese name 怒江 (*Nù Jiāng*) can literally be translated as "Angry River," and the description certainly seems appropriate. Confined within an exceptionally deep and narrow gorge between high mountain ranges, the river can be extraordinarily powerful and turbulent, particularly during the summer rainy season. Its brown, churning water rushes through rapids and around enormous rocks, producing a roar that can be heard well above the river.

There is, however, an interesting linguistic twist to the name. "Angry River" may not have been its original meaning. The valley has long been inhabited by the Nu people, and some accounts suggest that *Nujiang* originally meant simply "the river of the Nu." When written in Chinese, however, the character 怒 (*nù*) also means "angry." Whether coincidence or not, it is difficult to imagine a more appropriate name for such a wild and powerful river.



Coleogyne taronensis
(Photo by Radek Horvath)



Dendrobium aurantiacum var. *denneanum*
Photo by David Livermore



Coelogyne taronensis
(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)

Before we reached the level of the river, we passed through a beautiful forest filled with large, old, moss-covered trees. Wenqing spotted a *Coelogyne taronensis* high in one of the trees, and everyone gathered below to photograph it, although a good telephoto lens was definitely required. Andreas Werner had noticed another plant growing in a pot outside a local house farther up the hill, and several members of the group climbed up for the opportunity to photograph it at close range.

Coelogyne taronensis, also known by the synonym *Coelogyne weixiensis*, is a species of conservation concern. Although it has not been formally assessed for the global IUCN Red List, it has been classified as Endangered on China's threatened-plant lists, with over-collection and habitat loss among its principal threats.

Continuing along the road, Hong spotted a colorful *Dendrobium aurantiacum* var. *denneanum* growing on a large rock behind a house just off the highway. Naturally, the bus stopped and our group "invaded" the family's yard—with permission, of course. Getting a good photograph of the plant was still challenging, but while we were trying, Hong discovered two different *Bulbophyllum* species as well as *Dendrobium* (*Epigeneium*) *rotundatum* on the same rock

We continued down the valley, stopping to explore several other locations along the river. At one point an old bridge crossed the Nu, but it was now closed, forcing us to look for another way across. Fortunately, another bridge was not far away. We crossed on foot and began following a trail beside the river known as the "Ancient Post Road."

The trail ran only about six to ten feet above the churning Nu River, providing a rather dramatic walk. In the trees along the river bank we found several orchids, although most were not in flower, including *Gastrochilus calceolaris* and *Coelogyne ovalis*. We also encountered the colorful *Bletilla formosana* and *Lilium lancifolium* (Liliaceae) in bloom, while the damp rock walls supported additional *Corallodiscus* (Gesneriaceae).



Multiple bridges crossing the Angry Nu River



Walking along the "Ancient Post Road"

After a long and fascinating day of mountain roads, forests, orchids, and the spectacular Nu River, we spent the night in a small town along the river.

June 24. A change in plans...

After an early breakfast, we set off toward the Gaoligong National Scenic Area. It was a beautiful drive, and near the entrance to the park we spotted *Coelogyne* (*Pholidota*) *articulata* growing on a ledge above the road.

Once again, however, we were met with an unexpected change of plans. At the entrance we were told that buses were no longer permitted on the road and that only vehicles carrying a maximum of nine passengers could continue. The restriction may have been related to extensive road damage, as torrential rain the previous night had triggered a number of landslides in the area. Wenqing and our driver had a quite heated discussion with the park authorities, particularly since the Chinese navigation system that drivers are required to use had indicated that the road was open and gave no warning of a nine-passenger limit. Whether this was a newly imposed local regulation or something less formal was impossible to know, but in the end, there was no choice—we had to turn around.



Showing the habitat (Bamboo grove) of
Cypripedium subtropicum



Carefully guarded plant of *Cypripedium subtropicum*,
in bud.

Poor Wenqing and Hong were suddenly faced with redesigning the final several days of the tour. This meant finding accommodations for a group of twenty people, no small challenge in a region of mostly small villages and towns, while at the same time identifying alternative botanical sites for us to explore.

As a result, we visited one of our planned destinations several days earlier than expected: one of only two known sites where *Cypripedium subtropicum* occurs in the wild. *Cypripedium subtropicum* is classified as Endangered (EN) on the global IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Known as one of the rarest and most unique lady's slipper orchids in the world, it is on the verge of full extinction in the wild. In China, it is heavily prioritized under the *National Conservation Program for Wild Plants with Extremely Small Populations* (PSESP) due to its critical rarity. Because of its unique look, large multi-flowered trait, and immense scientific value, poachers have targeted nearly every known wild population. It has already been driven completely extinct in several counties across China.

We left the bus at the bottom of a hill above the river and walked about a kilometer up the road to a small farm. From there, we climbed a series of extremely steep—and very slippery—steps to reach a large bamboo grove where the *Cypripedium subtropicum* grew.

The plants had been roped off for protection and were being monitored by Hong's group in Kunming as well as by the local farmer on whose land the plants were found. There appeared to be only about six plants at the site, two of which were in bud, but unfortunately none had open flowers. Perhaps our unexpected schedule change had brought us there a little too early. Even without flowers, however, it was a privilege to see such extraordinarily rare plants in the wild, especially knowing how few individuals are believed to remain. On the way up to the site, numerous plants of *Impatiens arguta* (Balsaminaceae) and some *Henckelia pumila* (Gesneriaceae) were also spotted.

The descent proved almost as challenging as the climb. Several people slipped on the wet steps, and Ales sustained a nasty gash, while the others escaped with little more than bruises. After cleaning Ales' wound and liberally applying disinfectant, we continued farther down the river valley.

Our next excursion took us up a steep, winding road into the Yaping Valley, where Hong had once collected a new *Bulbophyllum* species. As we climbed higher—our driver once again astonishing us with his skill on the narrow mountain road—we saw numerous *Dendrobium hookerianum*. Many were growing in pots beside houses along the road, although we were pleased to see a few plants still growing in the wild. We also encountered a massive specimen of the Yunnan form of *Bulbophyllum odoratissimum*.

At the end of the road, we reached a beautiful forest of enormous, towering trees. There were ruins of a small village that had once occupied the area, but because it was very close to the Myanmar border, the settlement had apparently been abandoned. The border was marked by high fencing topped with razor wire. The old trees looked as though they should have supported an abundance of epiphytic orchids, but despite our searching, we did not spot anything in flower.

We eventually returned to the Salween River valley and continued along Highway 219, once again marveling at the spectacular—and somewhat intimidating—views of this extraordinary river and its deep gorge.



Dendrobium hookerianum
(Photo by David Livermore)



Searching the ancient trees near the Myanmar border for orchids

Later we turned onto a road leading up to Laomudeng Village, climbing high into the hills above the valley. Wenqing had managed to find a small hotel with enough rooms for everyone, although we unfortunately discovered that one or two of the rooms were equipped only with squat toilets. This prompted a quick reshuffling of room assignments! The inconvenience was more than compensated for by the setting: our rooms looked out over the magnificent river valley far below, providing a beautiful end to another unexpectedly adventurous day.



Magnificent view from our hotel rooms

June 25. Exploring Laomudeng, a tea plantation, and traveling further south to Lushui

After a leisurely start, we headed to a site above the hotel where a large tea plantation covered the surrounding slopes. A trail followed the ridge to an area where local villagers had carefully protected a population of *Paphiopedilum armeniacum*. Unfortunately, none of the plants were in flower, but it was encouraging to see them being so carefully protected in their natural habitat.

In the same area we found an *Oberonia* species, and several *Cymbidium lancifolium* were growing in the surrounding forest. We also spotted *Dendrobium devonianum* growing on a tree in a garden.

After our walk, the group was treated to some locally grown tea and walnuts, and many of us purchased tea to take home as souvenirs. We then drove down into the town below. It had once served as a county seat, but much of the old town had since been abandoned, giving parts of it a rather deserted appearance. There were still a few souvenir shops, a coffee shop, and an especially interesting little store selling rocks and fossils collected in the surrounding mountains.



A lovely specimen of *Dendrobium devonianum*

(Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



John McCallen finds a few *Cymbidium lancifolium* in the woods near the trail (Photo by Mary Gerritsen)



Cymbidium lancifolium
(Photo by John McCallen)

Leaving the village, we continued south along the Nu River, eventually reaching Lushui. Wenqing had arranged a special fish hot pot dinner for the group. We began by filling small bowls with a delicious assortment of condiments—chiles, radishes, herbs, onions, soy sauce, and other seasonings—to create our own dipping sauces.

The centerpiece of the meal was enormous catfish from the Nu River, cooked at the table in a bubbling broth. Mushrooms, potatoes, seaweed, lettuce, lotus root, and other vegetables were gradually added to the pot as we ate. The result was absolutely delicious and a wonderful way to finish the day. After returning to the hotel, we had a surprise birthday party for Catherine Rostron! More cake!



Catherine and Ben Rostron
with Catherine's Birthday cakes



Enjoying the fish hot pot



Photo op in Lushui
LR Zoe Bejar, Anita Ambs, Ron
Parsons, Catherine Rostron

June 26. Attempts to find *Paphiopedilum armeniacum*

Today we headed to Laowo, a town where there were still a few *Paphiopedilum armeniacum* plants, high on a hill above the highway. This species is strictly listed under Appendix I of CITES, and is classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. In China, it is designated as a First-Class Key Protected Wild Plant and is included in the national registry of *Plant Species with Extremely Small Populations* (PSESP). We had seen 3-4 plants in bloom here nearly 10 years ago, but the area was now very overgrown and an extremely difficult climb. Several of the group climbed up the hill, finding the plants but alas, no flowers. The trip down the hill was even more difficult. A few of us, not wanting to try the climb, walked up the road from the bus, finding a few interesting plants on the shoulder of the road, the most unusual being a *Ceropegia* sp. Up on a ledge, Ron Parsons spotted a nice colony of *Bletilla formosana* in bloom.

Somewhat frustrated, we set out for Dali, It was a long drive, and we had been invited to view an orchid museum and join the Dali orchid society banquet. Several of the group were pretty dirty (from sliding down the hill on their bottoms) and we were quite the motley crew. However, the museum was a living collection, with many of the highly collectable (and incredibly valuable) Asian cymbidiums represented, as well as an



Carefully descending the steep slope



Partial success! At least the plants were still there



Climbing up to find the *Paphiopedilum*

Incredible display of orchid “art”-vases, pots, tea sets, plates etc. with paintings of orchids on them. There was also a lovely garden The museum was set in a formerly private home, originally owned by the man who had collected the artwork and orchids. After this we traveled to a nearby hotel for the Dali orchid society meeting. They had already begun their banquet and were dressed to the “nines” while we straggled in, sweaty and dirty. Despite our appearance we were warmly welcomed. Mary was asked to give a short talk about why the OCA was visiting Yunnan, and there were several singing and dancing demonstrations. Andreas Werner gave a surprise solo presentation of a German song. The food spread was highly diverse, and included many unusual delicacies such as tongue, and chicken feet favored by the locals. Unfortunately, there was almost nothing for the vegetarians in our group. There was lots of alcohol including a wine that was 42% alcohol. The crowd was getting quite rowdy. After exhausting all the toasts they could give, we returned to our hotel which featured a “talking toilet and wonderful showers.

June 27. Dali Old Town and return to Kunming.

Dali is one of Yunnan's most historically and culturally interesting cities, beautifully situated between the Cangshan Mountains and the shores of Erhai Lake. It has long



Amazing collection of orchid art



Living museum of Asian Cymbidiums, Dali



Tea ceremony table at the museum



Close up of some orchid art

been an important center of Bai culture and was associated with both the Nanzhao Kingdom and, later, the Kingdom of Dali, which ruled much of this region before the Mongol conquest. The present Old Town largely dates from the Ming Dynasty and retains its old city gates, traditional architecture, and grid of narrow streets, all set against the dramatic backdrop of the Cangshan Mountains.

We had a leisurely morning to explore Dali Old Town and do a little last-minute shopping. There was certainly no shortage of tourist "junk," but tucked among the souvenir stalls were some excellent coffee shops, tea shops, restaurants, and even a chocolate factory. It was a pleasant way to spend our final morning, giving everyone a chance to wander through the old streets, shop for a few last minute souvenirs, and enjoy one more taste of Yunnan before beginning the journey home.



Mary speaking at the Dali Orchid Society Banquet, explaining what the OCA does



Enjoying the feast at the Dali Orchid Society Banquet



Zoe Bejar, Old Dali



The old buildings and streets in Dali

Later in the morning, we boarded the bus for the long drive back to Kunming. That evening we returned to the same restaurant where, twelve days earlier, we had shared

our introductory dinner at the beginning of the tour. It seemed a fitting place to bring our Yunnan adventure full circle.

We also said goodbye to Mr. Zhang, our remarkable driver, who would now begin his own long journey back to Chengdu. After so many miles of narrow mountain roads, endless switchbacks, construction zones, landslides, and crowded towns, we were enormously grateful for his skill, patience, good humor, and careful driving throughout the trip.

June 28. The tour ends and the return home

For most of the group, it was time to say goodbye and begin the journey home. Some stayed a few extra days in Kunming with plans to visit the Stone Forest and other tourist destinations. For six of us, along with Wenqing, the adventure was not quite over. This small group set off on the next chapter of our journey—Tibet!