

China (Yunnan) - A Plant-hunter's Paradise

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 May - 7 June 2017



Paraqualegia microphylla Baima La



Primula chionantha Abu Ji



Cypripedium flavum Napha Hai



Rhododendron edgworthii Pianma L

Report & images compiled by John Shipton



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Introduction

For this year's tour, considerable changes were made to the previous Yunnan tour itineraries, prompted by several factors. Rapid changes taking place in China, particularly in country tourist expansion, have made many areas lose their previously pristine environment which made plant hunting and travel an exciting and unique experience. Lijiang and its environs, Yading mountain and now even more parts of the Zhongdian (now named Shangri La by the authorities) have sadly succumbed to massive new developments aimed at bringing in massive numbers of visitors from the great cities of China. John therefore constructed an itinerary based on previous years' travels, to include the region still little visited by travellers and tourists, where three of the greatest rivers in the world, the Salween, Mekong and Yangtze, drain the Tibetan plateau, and in Yunnan run parallel, cutting great valleys between high ranges at the eastern edge of the Himalayas. The itinerary was aimed at not only introducing some of the most dramatic and exciting country on the planet, but also an even greater range of the world's most diverse temperate flora. Our tour still finished on the Zhongdian plateau with its very special environment.

It is thought by John that on this trip we did catch a glimpse of the botanical richness, despite often heavily adverse weather which hampered our exploration of Pianma and Dulong passes and precluded our crossing the Salween/Mekong divide. A bizarrely late season which produced snow on Baima La, unheard of previously in June, meant the Zhongdian plateau did not reveal its full botanical glory. Despite all this, we did achieve some great botanical highlights. The team of Gonpo, Tsebho, Adong and Nongbu were, as usual, magnificent, getting us through a range of difficult situations with calmness, and added enormously to the trip with their enthusiasm for the plants we had come to see.

Day 1

Saturday 20th May

Flight from London

Andrew R, Primula, Alison, Peter and Henny met John at Heathrow for a flight to Hong Kong.

Day 2

Sunday 21st May

Kunming

At Hong Kong we transferred to an onward flight to Kunming. Gonpo met us at the airport and we were transported to the Grand Park Hotel where we found all the others: Birgit, Heinz, Andrew H, Kathleen and David, who had all arrived from various directions.

In the evening, we all gathered and Gonpo took us out for our first meal together at a restaurant by Cui Hu, the Green Lake. Some of us went to the Mandarin Bookshop, but we had a crack of dawn departure in the morning.

Day 3

Monday 22nd May

Tengchong

An early flight to Tengchong meant an extremely early start to the airport. On checking in, there were some bizarre bureaucratic errors with passport numbers but Gonpo, with his usual charm and patience, got us all checked in. We had a nice clear 45-minute flight to Tengchong across the Mekong and Salween rivers, and were met by the great team of Tsebho, Adong and Nongbu. They had organised a delightful Han breakfast for us at a nearby family homestay.

After checking in at a hotel in town, we headed out for a little journey to the west side of Gaoligongshan. The object of today's excursion was to get a view of this piece of country on the edge of China and right on the Burma border, in the Irawaddy watershed. Crossing the Long Cuan river, we approached the entrance to the Gaoligong Reserve. Although we couldn't enter the reserve, we explored the edge of the mountain forest at 2500 metres altitude. Right at the entrance we found *Cardiocrinum giganteum* in flower, and following paths into the bush, dominated here by *Taiwania cryptomeroides*, our Primula found her first Primula, *P. prolifera* in flower. Working our way past a friendly beekeeper's house, we had plenty of time to explore the plant life on the forest verge at the base of the mountain; an almost subtropical environment sporting great trees such as *Mangletia insignis*. In flower we also found *Hydrangea paniculata*, *Lyonia ovalifolia* and treasures such as the shrubby milkwort yellow flowered *Polygala arillata*, and below *Disporum calcaratum* and *Ophiopogon bodinieri*.

We emerged from the forest in time for tea from the vehicles. After pacifying the park guard with cigarettes, we drove back through the tobacco plantations and Tengchong countryside to our hotel. Adong and and Gonpo found us an excellent restaurant for dinner before we collapsed gratefully to bed.

Day 4

Tuesday 23rd May

Tengchong - Bai Hua Ling

Andrew H had a mission to show us the old British Consulate in Tengchong, preserved by the Japanese during the war, and now by the Chinese government as a symbol of their resistance. We made it a mission to find this old building, still pock-marked by machine gun bullet holes. Our next task was to find our way out of the rapidly growing town of Tengchong and the old road over Gaoligongshan we had used on previous journeys.

We were soon climbing into the rich vegetation as we headed east. Soon after passing a great stand of *Catalpa fargesii* in flower, Alison spotted a meadow below the road lined with *Cardiocrinum giganteum* in flower. We explored the ground further with riches of ferns, *Arisaema consanguineum* and shrubs festooned with *Clematis montana*, and a 10-metre tall *Decaisnea insignis* in flower.

Staying on the cobbled road, we crossed over a low pass and stopped for lunch at the sleepy crossroads hamlet by the Longcuan river. A friendly wayside kitchen cooked up an elaborate lunch. It was a pleasant place to be but the meal took rather a long time. Finally getting going again we climbed up over the 2400-metre pass into more temperate forest with hints of Rhododendron, some Maddeni section from past travels, and *R. arboreum*. On the pass we took in the views over the Salween valley and found a ruined border post and two different, rather spectacular Zingerberaceae we failed to identify (*Hedychium*, *Cautleya*?). On the descent to the great river and below 2000 metres, we soon came across *Melastoma malabathricum* lining the roadside along with what John had

previously taken to be *Schizophragma* but Heinz corrected as *Mussaenda*; an entirely different family of course. Some of us, but Heinz not unfortunately, also saw *Schima wallichii*.

By evening we were down on the Salween river and after driving north a few kilometres, we turned west again, climbed through coffee plantations up onto the eastern slopes of Gaoligongshan; to the village of Bai Hua Ling and our homestay. Plied here with fresh coffee, we enjoyed a splendid dinner overlooking the great Salween valley.

Day 5

Wednesday 24th May

Bai Hua Ling; Southern Gaoligongshan

Our host successfully acquired a pass to enter Gaoligongshan reserve; by normal channels a procedure that takes months. After breakfast, including the finest coffee, we drove up into the forest and at 2500 metres to a location where John had previously found a great stand of *Cardiocrinum giganteum*. It was still there, and in glorious display along with enormous *Arisaemas*, probably *A. franchetianum*.

Driving further up onto a ridge, we disembarked and started a walk towards the crest of Gologongshan. The forest here is pristine and untouched. A path had been established from an old trade route to presumably bring in visitors, but the original project has been shelved for some reason. We spent the day walking, and the uphill gradient proved a little too much for some, but half the group reached the two-hundred-year-old bridge at 2500 metres before the final ascent to the ridge. The richness and variation of the forest was truly impressive; a glorious melange of the subtropical mixing with the temperate. The path also revealed evidence of the terrible battles fought here in the great Sino-Japanese conflict of the last century that raged over this area.

Although there was not a great deal in flower, we did see the Gesneriad climber *Aeschynathus sp* in flower, and higher up, Gonpo managed to find the bright red *Rhododendron facetum*. A very heavy afternoon shower finished off the day but we all returned safely, and not too soaked, to the vehicles. There followed a pleasant evening at our "Paris" Guesthouse, so named we found out, by the recent, and in our view disastrous, collection of Paris species for Chinese medicine.

Day 6

Thursday 25th May

Bai Hua Ling - Pianma

After breakfast our hostess took us into the village of Bai Hua Ling to see some of the silk production that has been the traditional industry here, and re-established in the last few decades following the massive turbulence of war and revolution of the last century.

We then drove back to the Salween and followed the river through the rapidly growing town of Lushui, before turning west again and climbing back over the Gaoligongshan again, to Pianma La, the 3100-metre pass to the Chinese enclave on the western and Burmese side of Gaoligongshan. In previous years the road had been very busy ferrying timber and ore pillaged from Burma. But today it is quiet, and we could make stops to inspect the fabulous flora, which includes the richest diversity of *Rhododendron* species on the planet. Most spectacular was the population of *Rhododendron sp*, Falconera Section, which was in full flower and dotted the mountain side.

The trees were festooned with epiphytic Rhododendrons, often more than one species. Glorious pink *Deutzia* species lined the roadside.

Cloud set in as we crossed the pass to the western side, but dissipated on the way down allowing us to explore the understorey that revealed treasures such as *Primula sonchifolia*, *Streptopus* and *Maianthemum* species. In the evening we reached Pianma, the small town at the foot of Gaoligongshan, and a mere two kilometres from the Burmese border. It is now a sleepy place, and has the atmosphere of a forgotten third world town, but it does boast a reasonably comfortable hotel. Adong and the team found and chose another excellent meal.

Day 7

Friday 26th May

Pianma - Lao Mu Den

We had a fascinating breakfast in a small dumpling and noodle house next to the little bustling market which was just opening. Our party then split, the majority heading back up towards the pass to carry on exploring. Andrew H had been urging some of us to visit the local museum. Here on display was the resurrected American plane shot down in 1944. From bases in Burma, the Americans had been supplying the Chinese Kuomintang in their war against the Japanese. This plane had been resurrected by a compatriot of the dead pilot, and was reverentially displayed here. Above was an anti-British museum portraying the dastardly British attempt, at the beginning of the last century, to oust the Chinese from this enclave on the Burmese side of Gaoligongshan.

We soon caught up with the others busy exploring the forested mountainside. They had already assessed *Magnolia* species and identified *Magnolia rostrata* in flower. We found them at 2800 metres pondering on a red flowered Rhodi, probably Trifoliate section. The great foliage of *Rhododendron sino-grande* was much in evidence, particularly as young plants along the roadside. We had time to photograph various aspects of the R. Falconera section blooms before rain drove us back into the vehicles and we crossed the pass to the western side.

From near the pass we started walking down the road, and this proved an excellent way to look at the flora. Most spectacular was *Enkianthus chinensis*, a gorgeous plant, and the bullate leaved *Rhododendron edgworthii* in full flower, exuding wonderful fragrance. We discovered an *Androsace* John had never seen before, with umbels of white flowers on tall scapes, and a four-foot *Meconopsis* in bud, possibly in the same group as *M.integrifolia*.

For lunch, we moved down to 2500 metres where a track left the asphalt road. After a swift meal we explored a forest track. *R.sinogrande* seedlings were everywhere, and across the track we found a branch covered in epiphytes. These included a *Rhododendron maddenii* in full flower, as was the orchid *Coelogyne corymbosa*.

We had now to get to our accommodation. We decided to drive a little further along the Salween than originally planned and spend two nights at our homestay in the village of Lao mu Den. This is a Nu minority village 600 metres above the river, but on its western shore. This would act as a base to make a foray into the Nu Shan, the mountain ridge opposite Gaoligongshan. From the quiet, friendly village we had glorious views of the great Salween valley below, and the peaks of Gaoligongshan opposite.

Day 8

Saturday 27th May

Lao Mu Den

After breakfast, we drove up to the ex district capital Zhiziluo, and then took a forest track into the hills, climbing eventually to around 2600 metres. We were very soon rewarded with exciting plants. Several stops at 2200 metres gave us *Deutzia calycosa* and *Philadelphus delavayi* in full flower, a backdrop of Magnolias and then exciting Rhododendrons: *R. maddenii*, *R. microphyton* of the Azaleastrum (Tsutsusi) section, and best of all yellow flowered *R. xanthostephanum*. Below was the yellow Helleborine *Cephalanthera falcata*, along with *Roscoe tibetica*. We then had to move rocks by hand to get higher.

After a picnic lunch we reached a summer settlement, where giant *Arisaema* species grew randomly in cultivated meadows. From here we walked higher, passing the unusual orchid *Cremastra appendiculata*. Young *R. sinogrande* lined the track, and higher again with views through young *Schefflera* foliage, across the cloud enveloped hillside John found bright red flowered *R. Neriiflorum*.

Returning to the vehicles for tea, we descended again, picking up Kathleen, Peter and Henny, who had elected to stroll down hill. On the way, we did find a *Primula* for our *Primula* but not in flower, and we could only place it in the *Petiolares* section.

Back at Zhiziluo we explored the town. The population here is of the Lisu minority, and like other villages and towns in this section of the Salween river, including the Nu village of Lao M Den where we were staying, had been converted to Christianity by missionaries in the late 19th century. The church remains, along with odd buildings put up when this was a district capital. Here too was more evidence of the pillage from the forest of Paris species taken for Chinese medicine. Shade tunnels protect plants taken and heeled in to be grown on and sold.

Back at our homestay for dinner, we are regaled by our hostess with Nu, Lisu and oddly reflected Christian songs.

Day 9

Sunday 28th May

Lao Mu Den - Gongshan.

After breakfast we strolled around the village pond next to the church, perched dramatically overlooking the spectacular vista of the Salween valley, just as the villagers were leaving the church. On the way down to the river, we paused for *Lilium brownii* in flower on the roadside. Somewhat resembling *Lilium regale*, it is reputed to have been grown for the bulbs as food.

Today we completed our journey up the Salween to Gongshan, the last major town up the valley before the border with Tibet. Our first stop en route was the viewing point of the Shi Yue Liang or Moonstone, a dramatic feature on the peaks along Gaoligongshan. We then had lunch in Shi Yue Liang town in a charming restaurant run on an island on fishponds. Next, we made a diversion up the Nu Shan to see if we could find a stand of *Davidia involucrata* John had discovered several years before. Unfortunately, the road up was being constructed, a very typical situation in China today, and we couldn't go high enough. We elected to stroll down to the river, and

were rewarded with finds of *Corallodiscus lanuginosus*, Sheffleras growing in amongst *Alpinias* with bright orange basal flowers, giant bamboos and a special *Corydalis*, *C. ophiocarpa*.

We reached Gongshan in the evening and checked into a town hotel overlooking the river, which was somewhat jaded and with sadly battered carpets, but with most things functioning. Some rooms overlooked the river and the restaurant downstairs was good.

Day 10

Monday 29th May

Dulong Jiang

Our next objective was Dulong Jiang, and again crossing the Salween/Irawaddy watershed and encroaching the western Burmese side of Gaoligongshan again. Now we were at the very northern end of the range, and coming up against the TAR (Tibetan Autonomous Republic). The government had recently built a six-kilometre tunnel through the pass, a massive effort, and seems mysteriously out of proportion considering that the tiny Dulong minority only number a few thousand. However, this had left the old road and from there one can go on foot to meet the new road again on the other side of the pass. This year, however, this old road had suffered land slips, and very late snows meant snow drifts across it, and eventually we discovered snow blocking the tunnel. Our journey was complicated at this point by Tsebho's vehicle springing a leak in the radiator. Luckily, we had only just started climbing up to the pass and Adong, as he usually does, had a friend he could rely on in Gongshan, who could loan a vehicle for the day. Tsebho's car was towed back to the town and a new radiator ordered from Kunming, so that we could continue our journey and get Tsebho's car fixed the next day.

We drove up to the new tunnel along the old road as far as we could before a land slip stopped us. We then set off to walk the rest of the distance to the small tunnel. The distance proved more than John or the team estimated, and our three-kilometre walk turned out to be more like ten. But the walk provided fantastic views over wild country around the pass. The late season meant that *Rhododendron* species were particularly well in flower. All along the road the large *Falconera* section *Rhododendron arizelum* showed great trusses of white and then pink flushed blooms. Some of these trees were festooned with epiphytes, including *R.edgworthii* and *Vaccinium* sp. This was made more colourful with the odd Firetail Sunbird flitting through.

Lower down we passed a yellow flowered which David reckoned *R. brachyanthum*, while Peter, later with further identification from Cox himself, believed to be *R. Sulfureum*. Near the end of our walk the deciduous *R. mekongense* was just coming into flower. Other prominent *Rhodi*s included *R. campylocarpum*, and a prominent orange flowered form of *R. neriiflorum*.

The unseasonal weather had held back the *Primulas*, but our intrepid *Primula* found a good stand of *Primula dryadifolia* and we did come across a few *P. Agleniana*, but only in bud. Other treasures later included the *Diapensia* relative and very unusual *Berneuxia thibetica*.

On finding our little watershed tunnel blocked we had to turn back, and luckily Gonpo's radio could contact the vehicles to stop them going round to the rendezvous on the other side of the pass. Getting back to the cars as the sun set, we drove through the new tunnel and dropped down to the small town of Dulong Jiang. A brand new hotel welcomed us, and over a great dinner we were regaled with songs from a mixture of Dulong, Lisu and Bai minority young people, intrigued to meet Lao Wai, white foreigners in this remote place.

Day 11

Tuesday 30th May

Dulong Jiang – Dumalo

Our karma with the weather gods was not in a good state. Rain fell heavily overnight and continued throughout the morning. We set off back up to the pass, pausing to view the rich rain forest; such a contrast to the valley bases of the three great rivers to the east. The Dulong river disappeared in the mist below us as we climbed back up to the new tunnel. Here we turned back onto the old road where we would have emerged the day before, if plans had worked out. We drove a couple of kilometres before land slip prevented further progress. We were rewarded with some wonderful alpinists. *Pedicularis*, *Anemone*, *Aletris* and *Cassiope* sp carpeted the banks of the stream we stopped at, and best of all a good stand of the fabulous pink cupped *Primula agleniana*, still nearly unheard of in cultivation back in the west.

We then drove back through the six-kilometre new tunnel, and winding down from the pass at 2600 metres, we came across a spectacular stand of *Rhododendron nutallii* in full flower. The *Maddenia* section *Rhodi* exuded magnificent scent even in the pouring rain. We then had a damp picnic lunch at a layby overlooking the forest, dripping with epiphytes of all descriptions. Pausing briefly in Gongshan to fill our borrowed vehicle with fuel, we crossed the Salween and climbed to the Tibetan village of Dumalo, perched 700 metres above the west bank of the river.

John's intention was to use the homestay as a good starting point in making the Salween/Mekong crossing, but the homestay itself was a miscalculation. It was far more run down than he remembered, and could only provide basic accommodation and one outside shared toilet and shower. Arriving in the rain didn't help as it was hoped to explore the slopes above, although some of us did get a walk to the church of this unusually Christian Tibetan village. The team had to go into town to hopefully retrieve Tsebho's car and return the borrowed vehicle. Fortunately, we had a case of wine to go with our supper which eased the discomfort of the homestay.

Day 12

Wednesday 31st May

Dumalo - Liuku

The team arrived back from Gongshan at 3am with Tsebho's car thankfully fixed; the new radiator having arrived on a bus late in the evening. However, the rain continued overnight and was even heavier in the morning. Our chances of crossing the pass were receding fast. Vehicles had crossed without problems yesterday but the overnight, and continuing, rain was turning the road into a river. We drove a few hundred metres up, but had to turn back at a check post as it was becoming rapidly obvious we couldn't proceed. Sadly, our only option now was to return down the Salween to Liuku and cross over to the Mekong there. This would mean losing a whole day, but there was nothing else to be done.

Our plan was then, having crossed to the Mekong, to drive up its banks all the way to Deqin. However, the continuous rain was already causing new blockages on the road. John felt that in these conditions, the drive up the Mekong, on an equally small and poorly maintained road, would be both exhausting and fraught with possibilities of more hold ups. The team agreed that the best thing would be to reach Liuku today and, having crossed the watershed, head on the big new roads and new motorways via Dali and Lijiang for a safer, relatively easy ride up to Zhongdian, arriving there a day early. From there we could recover some ground lost, including a journey up to Baima la, the Mekong/Yangtse divide.

We stopped again at Shi Yue Liang, the moonstone village, for lunch by the fishponds, and then made the long drive back down the Salween with brief stops on the way to walk across a bridge and catch our breaths. We arrived in Liuku at 9.30pm. The hotel was rather splendid; very welcome after our travails. Except for Primula and Kathleen who retired exhausted, we all went out for a splendid barbeque beneath glittering coloured lights by a benign looking Salween.

Day 13

Thursday 1st June

Liuku – Zhongdian

Fortune had not been kind in regard to the weather, but she had shone on us in perhaps more important respects. We heard in the morning the road we had driven down yesterday had suffered major landslips, and we were extremely lucky not to have been trapped.

Today the sun shone, and leaving the Salween, we climbed over the Mekong/Salween watershed. Just after Caojian we paused by paddy fields to view a gorgeous pastoral scene as the rice was being planted. Roadside flora also provided colour and distraction. Crossing the Mekong, which looked savagely disfigured by the damming both up and downstream, we reached the motorway network that took us past Dali to Lijiang. We passed Dali lake to the east, on a road only completed three years ago. In the distance to the west, we could make out Cang Shan above Dali, the site of so much exciting plant collecting both early in the last century and more recently. Dali itself seemed to have grown immensely since John was last there a decade ago.

From Dali, the new super highway passed over tranquil and traditional villages of first the Bai minority and then the Naxi. Just before Lijiang we left the motorway to drop down to the Yangtse, which we crossed a few kilometres after the Great Bend. We then left its banks just upstream of Tiger Leaping Gorge. From the Yangtse the road climbed steadily up from 1800 metres and eventually emerged onto the Zhongdian plateau at 3300 metres. We arrived at 9.30pm in the now renamed Shangri La. Our luggage was carried to the recently rebuilt old town and a brand-new hotel. We had time though for a Tibetan meal just next door.

Day 14

Friday 2nd June

Zhongdian – Abuji (Tian Bao Shan)

After a rather protracted breakfast, we met the team in the parking area outside the old town and drive south for 20 kilometres, and then west towards the limestone massif of Abuji, which John had always known by its Chinese name Tian Bao Shan. Before turning off, the grasslands were covered with *Rhododendron racemosum* and *Stellera chaemejasme*, ubiquitous residents of the Zhongdian plateau. After the gompa, the dirt road climbs into meadows with the hillsides covered with *Rhododendron yunnanense* in flower.

We made a first stop to examine the yellow flowered Daphne which Peter is particularly keen to identify as either *D. aurentiaca* or *D. calcicola*. We come to varying conclusions. David and John at first felt the possibility that both species were growing in tandem would be somewhat unlikely. However Peter, and later David agreed, felt that on examining various plants' morphology and habit, both species were present, often together: a fascinating example of divergent evolution. Along with *R. yunnanense* there was a wonderful display of what we now considered to be *R. Vernicosum*, although on previous visits John had put it down as *R. decorum* var. Trees varied

in colour from white to rich pinks. Hidden at the base of some of these we found our first *Cypripedium flavum* and *C. tibeticum*.

This year the season showed its lateness for early June by the splendid display of *Rhododendron*, but by the same token the *Primulas* were late. But our *Primula* was soon in her element as we wandered the stream side. *Primula secundiflora* and *P. sikkimensis* were just getting going, as was *Iris bulleyana* and *Incarvillea zhongdianensis*. Further on these were joined by *Daphne tangutica* and a third *Primula* for *primula*, *P. poissonii*. It was not too early for the white *P. chionantha*, and as we approached the limestone towers of Abuji we encountered great drifts of them mixed with the occasional purple form.

We had lunch in a meadow off the track, and here *Podophyllum hexandrum* was emerging all around. After lunch, we crossed a stream and walked up through woodland to a higher alpine meadow under Abuji, with an as yet unoccupied cattle keeper's house at its centre. The edges of the meadow and stream gorge were interspersed with *Rhododendron rubiginosum* and at the end *R. wardii*. In the forest we also came across a fine stand of *Omphalogramma vinciflora*.

We came back to the vehicle in time for a welcome cup of tea and headed back down the valley, stopping for a nice little stand of *Primula chungensis*. It was indeed a satisfying day, and for once the weather was kind to us. Back in Zhongdian we finished things off with a gorgeous Tibetan meal at a place Gonpo found for us.

Day 15

Saturday 3rd June

Zhongdian - Napha Hai

Today John had planned for a trip south, and then onto the western margin of the plateau up to the lake Tian Chi, which had always provided a treasure trove of scenery and flora. Meeting the team again by the vehicles, he was shocked by the news that the authorities had just closed the road and were planning to turn Tian Chi into another tourist board walk trap. Therefore we decided to circle Napha Hai, a wet season lake area at the northern end of the Zhongdian plateau, which could be described, as David pointed out, as a "polje" with drainage through karst formation "swallow holes", in evidence right at the end of the plateau by Napha village.

The edges of the lake had always been rich in diverse flora, but this has been marred in recent years by the construction of roads. We weren't disappointed, and on the banks which we clambered up we found great stands of *Cypripedium flavum*, *C. guttatum* and *C. yunnanense*. Again the late season held back a lot of things, but *Androsace spinulifera* was just getting going with *Maianthemum* and *Polygonatum* and *Corydalis* sp. Bonuses were *Oreorchis erythrochrysa*, and even a *Schisandra rubriflorum* which John had never seen here before.

Further round the lake *Primula* was rewarded with *P. polyneura*, made rather inaccessible by road construction, but our '*P. intrepida*' made it up to see her relation. Past the swallow holes, the limestone bank was resplendent with *Androsace bulleyana*, surely a lodestone for any Alpine gardener. We had lunch by the now defunct "botanic garden" that the authorities had started a decade ago, and which had succeeded in wrecking the ground on which it was built. Our lunch knoll though had great views over the plateau, and for once the sun shone, and we were surrounded by interesting shrubs and plants: *Daphne calcicola*, *Vincetoxicum forrestii*, *Polygonatum stewartianum* and even an Edelweiss, *L. dedekensii*.

After lunch, we repaired to John's magic valley, a little limestone gorge tucked away and hidden from the depredations of quarrymen and road builders. Arranging for the team to meet us after a three-kilometre loop, we walked up through the gorge entrance where finally we found *Meconopsis prattii*, the blue poppy of the Zhongdian plateau. Again, the late season had held back its flowers elsewhere but here it was in full flower. In the valley itself, John's "magic" epithet justified itself. The valley was carpeted *Podophyllum hexandrum*, and set off wonderfully by the Euphorbias, *E. jolkinii* and *E. stracheyi*. By the stream *Trollius yunnanensis* juxtaposed itself with Anemone species and *Iris bulleyana* in flower. Sadly the Pedicularis were yet to emerge but we did have the purple *P. siphonantha* to join in the show. Our climb over the little pass to return to the road yielded more of floral interest, as well as views over the plateau. The hills were covered in *Rhododendron yunnanense* and *R. vernicosum*, and other highlights were *Rhodiola yunnanensis* and *Corallo-discus*, and carpets of annual Gentians. Gathering our group together proved a little tricky as the paths down to the road was easily lost and there were so many distractions.

Back in town, Gonpo chose an interesting place to eat: a hotpot, only with individual hot plates, which proved somewhat difficult to operate for the less tech savvy amongst us.

Day 16

Sunday 4th June

Zhongdian - Baima La

Today we planned an early start to recover lost ground by crossing the Yangtse and climbing onto Baima La, The Yangtse/Mekong divide. The weather did not look auspicious with rain all night, and still coming down as we left the hotel. Roadworks, which are now a continuous feature of "Shangrila", made the team late, but eventually we set off over Nixi La, and made the 1500-metre descent to the Yangtse gorge. The new road meant we could complete the descent in less than two hours, a journey that used to take all day a few years ago.

We paused for coffee for our first views of the gorge, and found *Incarvillea arguta* which lines the road, along with other plants such a Indigofera sp that populate the increasingly drier zones of these great river gorges. Crossing the river by the Sichuan border, we climbed 2000 metres and entered the newly built tunnels that have just been built and cut right under Baima La. Emerging from the tunnels, we were on the Mekong side of the watershed. From here we climbed onto Baima La at 4300 metres.

We made a couple of stops early on in the ascent, for good stands of *Primula chionantha* ssp *sinopurpureum*, but also to take in the sweeps of *Rhododendron phaeochrysum* in flower covering the hillside. In the rain we found various *Primula* species in bud, such as the Muscaroides section *P. deflexa*. Things looked grim on the pass. The ground was covered in snow hiding all the plants and sweeps of *Rhododendron* covering the mountainside. For June, this was seriously unseasonable weather.

We drove on along the old road over the pass, and stopped for lunch a little lower down where the snow cover had diminished. This was the point we knew should reveal *Paraqualegia microphylla*, growing on the limestone crags. We had hit the correct spot, and after a roadside picnic, fortune began to turn in our favour. The sun came out and revealed Baima Shan, the 5500-metre mountain to the south, and the staggeringly beautiful peaks above us to the north. There, on the rocks, were wonderful pockets of *Paraqualegia*. Shrubs in flower included *Rhododendron primuliferum*, *Caragana jubata*, and *Spongiocarpella (Chesneya) yunnanensis*. Other *Primulas* were just coming into flower including *P. zambelensis*, and a range of *Anemone* sp including one that had the floral attributes of a *Pulsatilla*, but the foliage betrayed it as another *Anemone* sp. Other alpinines included *Draba*

involucrata and *Polygonatum bookeri*. Without the snow we could admire the sweep of high altitude Rhodis, dominated by *R.hippophoides*, *R.rupicola*, *R.russatum* and other Lapponica section species covering the mountainsides.

As we drove round the two Baima La passes we made further stops and short walks to explore the hillsides and admire the views. The late season meant we were disappointed with *Lilium lofbophoron* and *Fritillaria cirrhosa* which are a feature here. Meconopsis was only in bud, but we did find the first Pedicularis, if only *P.oederi*, and pretty stands of *Trollius yunnanensis*, *Caltha palustris* and *Anemone obtusiloba*. John managed to pick out *Rhododendron roxieanum* from the *R.phaeochrysum* and *R. rubiginosum* which were in glorious display.

By evening we were ready to head home. The massive road works of the last decade have unfortunately wrecked what used to be happy plant hunting ground. Just above the river we stopped to look down on the iconic bend of the Yangtse gorge. Just below the road, David found the very interesting little Thymelaeaceae, (Daphne family) *Wikstroemia scytophylla* and Heinz identified *Dodonea viscosa*, another resident of this dry low altitude habitat. Arriving late back at the hotel, we elected to have dinner in the Tibetan restaurant next door. Gonpo was to leave us the next day so we gave our heartfelt thanks for his fabulous company with speeches and gifts.

Day 17

Monday 5th June

Zhongdian -east side of Zhondian plateau

We had devised various plans for the day. We ruled out the chair lift up Xe Ka, as we felt the much tighter controls on the board walks at the top would destroy our plant hunting. However, Kathleen elected to go up on her own and had an enjoyable day. Another plan was to drive to Geza, Nongbu's home to the north-east, but roadworks on this road meant that stops again would be difficult. We therefore decided to head east on Haba road, to the pass where the road leaves the plateau.

Again, the late season meant our plant hunting was a bit of an anti-climax. The pass yielded good displays of *Rhododendron hippophaeoides*, *russatum*, *vernicosum* and *yunnanense*, but heavy snow on the plateau meant the Primulas were yet to emerge, and the ground was sparse and overgrazed with only a few *Androsace spinulifera* and *Oxygraphis glacialis* showing. We tried a walk down through the Picea forest on the southern side, festooned with the red flowered mistletoe *Taxillus delavayi*, but the forest flora was again grazed out.

We tried exploring various valleys on the way back to town. At least the sun was now shining and we had a pleasant picnic lunch in one foray. After lunch Peter and Henny went back with Adong for a relaxing afternoon. The rest of us explored more valleys, finally finding a single *Nomocharis aperta* in bud. We were rewarded later when John found his *Thermopsis barbata* spot, and here the rich dark, almost black flowered legume was in full flower. On the other side of the road farmers were hard at work cultivating fields surrounded by rich flower meadows. We then climbed up to a little monastery with a great flower tent next to it, overlooking the peaceful Zhongdian plateau below.

In the evening, we had our last meal in our favourite Tibetan restaurant, and gave our formal farewell and thanks to the team Tsebho, Adong and Nongbu.

Day 18

Tuesday 6th June

Zhongdian to Kunming

We had an early start to arrive at the airport for our flight back to Kunming. Our farewells to Tsebho, Adong and Nongbu were marred by bizarre passport problems. Thankfully, and to our great relief, Tsebho managed to resolve the issue, and we flew back to Kunming in clear skies. Some of us got a fabulous view of Yulong Xue Shan, Jade Dragon mountain, as we fly over its summit.

In Kunming we said farewell to Kathleen and David, whose flights were the next day, and then Heinz and Birgit whose flight was later than the rest of us. We had an uneventful flight to Hong Kong, where we had a long wait, made not too intolerable by downing a couple of beers with the beer money John had left over.

Day 19

Wednesday 7th June

Flight back to the UK

We arrive back at Heathrow in one piece and another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

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Primula agleniana Dulong Jiang Pass



Dulong Jiang Pass road