Over the Horizon

MAJESTY AND MYSTICISM IN THE MOUNTAINS OF CHINA'S YUNNAN PROVINCE. PLUS, A MYSTERY

BY **SCOTT WALLACE**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MICHAEL YAMASHITA**

"Might this be him?"

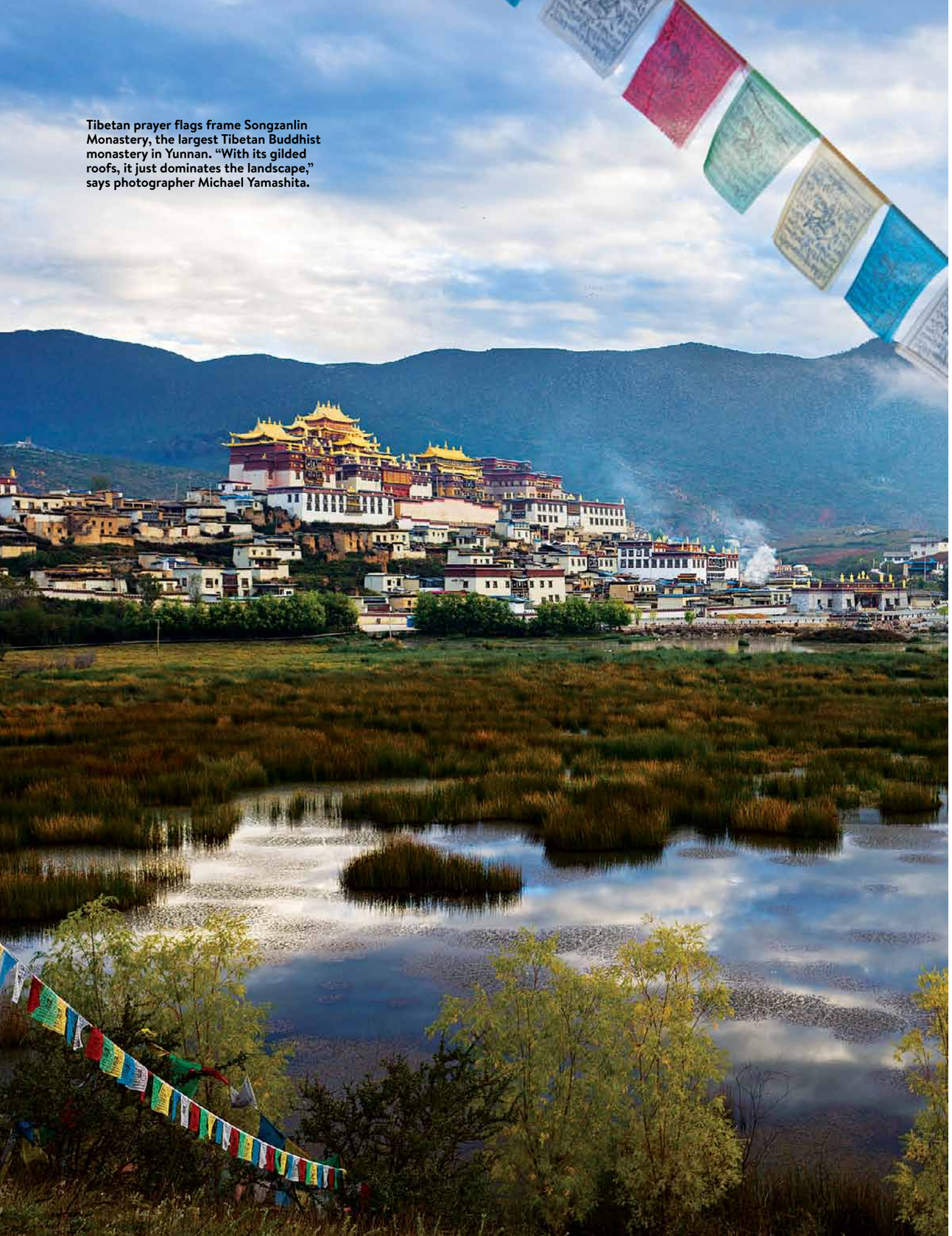
asks Na Niu, a temple caretaker in Tong Dui, a hamlet in China's rugged Yunnan Province. His gnarled hands unwrap a silk scarf to reveal a blurry black-and-white photograph creased with age. The edges have a scalloped border, customary in the 1930s, about the time my wayward maternal grandfather wandered these borderlands where Yunnan's mountains push up against Tibet.

I peer into the photo. Five faces stare back from across the decades, emissaries from a lost world: three Buddhist lamas in robes and two Westerners in suit jackets. To my dismay, neither Westerner bears much resemblance to my grandfather, Francis Kennedy Irving Baird. Somewhere here, amid the peaks and gorges of the eastern Himalaya, Baird claimed to have discovered a "lost tribe" in 1931, presaging the fictional utopia of Shangri-La that James Hilton would depict in his novel *Lost Horizon* two years later.

Little was known about Baird as I grew up—and little was said. My mother did keep a photo of him among family portraits on my parents' bedroom wall. I'd steal into the room to study that image of my handsome, shaggy-haired grandfather posing on a mountain in what I imagined to be a very remote corner of the world. I was spellbound by the riddles the portrait held. Where was it taken? Under what circumstances? Was my grandfather a hard-bitten explorer—or a charlatan? Was it my imagination, or did he look like a man so seized by wanderlust that he felt boxed in by conventional life?

My mother wasn't yet five when she waved goodbye to him on a Hudson

Buddhist monks of the yellow hat sect file into centuries-old Dongzhulin Monastery (right). Another monk (below), in the small village of Tong Dui, holds a photo that would startle the author. Opening pages: Windows at the Songtsam Tacheng lodge look out on terraced fields and mountain peaks.



Tibetan prayer flags frame Songzanlin Monastery, the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Yunnan. "With its gilded roofs, it just dominates the landscape," says photographer Michael Yamashita.

River pier as he boarded an ocean liner bound for Asia in 1930. He promised to come back rich and famous. He did not return.

My mother never knew what became of him, not where, when, or even if, he'd died. But she'd remark, as I came of age and embarked on travels to ever more distant lands, that I'd indeed inherited her father's genes. Whether Baird did lay eyes on a lost tribe remains a question, but my own journeys eventually led me to a similarly isolated indigenous group deep in the Amazon. How to fully comprehend these odd parallels between my life and that of a man I have seen only in old photographs: our shared love of the open road, our reluctance to settle down, our respective flirtations with "lost tribes"? What was it about the Himalaya and the Tibetan Plateau that beguiled him and led him so far from home and family? To what degree has he shaped my own strivings? Hoping to find answers, any answers, I've come to this distant corner of southwest China.

I HAND THE OLD PHOTO back to Niu. Not my grandfather. Still, this hamlet, with its Buddhist shrine, has the mystical quality I imagine he was after. Perhaps the image of Baird in my parents' bedroom was taken where I stand right now, looking down on terraced fields of wheat and, beyond, the snowcapped Hengduan Mountains, which recede like waves into infinity. The scene could have inspired a passage I recall, in *Lost Horizon:* "Far away, at the very limit of distance, lay range upon range of snow-peaks, festooned with glaciers, and floating, in appearance, upon vast levels of cloud."

My grandfather BOARDED AN OCEAN LINER BOUND FOR ASIA IN 1930. HE PROMISED TO COME BACK RICH AND FAMOUS. HE DID NOT RETURN. WHAT ABOUT THE TIBETAN PLATEAU BEGUILED HIM SO? I NEEDED ANSWERS.

As I thank Niu and turn to leave, he speaks. "The foreigners' airplane crash-landed in the mountains. They eventually came here to the monastery." I stop in my tracks. My guide, Liming Jia, interrupts her translation of Niu's Chinese and stammers, "He is talking about *Lost Horizon*! They've never heard of the book here, but it has become part of their story. Incredible!"

Hugh Conway, the main character in *Lost Horizon,* survives a plane crash in the Himalaya and treks through the mountains to a secluded lamasery called Shangri-La. Enlightenment and harmony reign in this mythical realm where residents enjoy extraordinary longevity. Niu's words resonate because a kind of Shangri-La seems to have been what my grandfather was seeking before Hilton's version transfixed the world. Francis Baird claimed, in a 1931 *New York Times* dispatch, that the tribe he'd discovered likewise lived in harmony and drank from a fountain of youth, enabling them to live well past the age of 100.

MY SEARCH FOR MY GRANDFATHER had begun a few days earlier, in the community that now calls itself Shangri-La. (The name was changed from Zhongdian in 2001, after local leaders lobbied the central government for the switch.) A multi-tiered monastery rises on the outskirts, like a scaled-down replica of Lhasa's Potala Palace, and the historic district's streets are lined with refurbished wood-frame houses. Spruced-up shanties, teeming with shops bearing names such as "Thousand Joy Supermarket," now cater to an influx of tourists.

Convinced that a more authentic Shangri-La—and Baird's own trail—lay elsewhere, I'd set my sights on the little-explored northwest reaches of Yunnan Province. Not a Mandarin speaker and unfamiliar with the area, I arranged to travel with Songtsam, a company with five cozy lodges strategically situated in out-of-the-way hamlets.

My itinerary will take me north into one of China's wildest landscapes: the Three Parallel Rivers National Park, where the Salween, Mekong, and Yangtze Rivers thunder off the Tibetan Plateau and cut through the mountains of Yunnan as they funnel into gorges twice the depth of the Grand Canyon. Most of my route lies within a 9,000-square-mile district called the Deqen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Well into the 1930s, this once unruly region harbored ancient and isolated cultures—an ideal location for my grandfather's lost tribe.

"For Tibetans, Shangri-La is not a real place but a feeling in our hearts," says Baima Dorje, 48, the founder of Songtsam Lodges, on my first night in Yunnan. We're downing steaming bowls of pork soup in Songtsam's flagship property, on the outskirts of today's Shangri-La. "Everyone needs a personal Shangri-La."

I felt I'd stepped into Hilton's novel the moment I entered the lodge. Pine-scented incense filled the air. Upstairs, floating candles blazed in water-filled urns. Liming Jia, thin, with almond eyes, had handed me a cup of ginger tea. "It helps adjust to the altitude." Now Songtsam's executive manager, she's an experienced guide. "We're almost at 10,000 feet here."

I recalled how *Lost Horizon* protagonist Conway marveled at the mix of Western luxury and Eastern attention to detail that greeted his arrival at the refuge: "So far, the appointments of Shangri-La had been all that he could have wished."

Eager to experience the traditions that drew my grandfather to this far-flung land, I jump at an offer the next morning from Tupton, a Songtsam guide, to visit his parents' home.

"Just call me 'Top Ten,'" he shouts, laughing, as we bounce out of town in the hotel's Land Rover. Woodsmoke drifts in the frigid December air around shingled rooftops glistening with frost. We round a Buddhist shrine rising like a giant chess piece in the middle of a traffic circle, and sail out across fields studded with new, boxy homes; a surge of wealth seems to be flowing into Yunnan these days. But life remains a challenge to many here, as evidenced by old women stooped under loads of hay, and beat-up tractors hauling carts packed with grunting pigs.

We pull up outside a mud-walled compound where colorful prayer flags snap in the breeze. Top Ten's parents huddle next to a cast-iron woodstove in a spacious upstairs room. The walls are brightly painted in Buddhist motifs, including a dharma wheel circling the yin-yang symbol. Top Ten's father, Nanjie, rises to greet us. His mother, Bancong, feeds logs into the fire; with her high cheekbones and blue head wrap, she looks as if she just walked in off the Asian steppe. Nanjie passes me a cup

A villager walks past bronze prayer wheels lining a wall of Fei Lai Shi temple, a Buddhist shrine in Yunnan's snowy backcountry.

Old ways prevail in Yunnan mountain communities such as Yalang (above), where women still tend their barley fields by hand. Her head wrapped in a warm red scarf, Ga Pong Chu Jui (opposite) enjoys a laugh behind hands attesting to a lifetime of manual labor.

of thick yak butter tea. Baird apparently enjoyed similar scenes of tranquillity. He wrote in *Sipa Khorlo: The Tibetan Wheel of Life,* a book published years later, "I believe there are thousands of people in the Western world who would willingly give all their worldly possessions for a few days of the peace and happiness experienced by these care-free Himalayan tribes."

It wasn't so tranquil here during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. "We had to destroy religious symbols," Bancong remembers, "and keep portraits of Lenin, Marx, and Chairman Mao on the wall." Now we bask in the warmth of friendship beneath the eight auspicious symbols of the Buddha, just as surely as my grandfather did in Tibetan homes like this 80 years ago. With the upheaval of Mao's time receding into memory, a sense of well-being has returned. "We want for nothing," Bancong says. As I take my leave, Nanjie wraps a white *kata,* or ceremonial scarf, around my neck. "For good luck," Top Ten explains. "It's our way to wish you a good life."

THE GOOD LIFE seems to be what Francis Kennedy Irving Baird had in mind as he ventured into the Himalaya and the Orient. But it wasn't a life of material rewards, and certainly not one dictated by a sense of duty to family. "He forsook the study of medicine for the pursuit of knowledge and adventure in hitherto unexplored and inaccessible regions," reads Baird's biography in the introduction to *Sipa Khorlo,* which he co-authored with travel companion Jill Cossley-Batt, an explorer in her own right who remained a shadowy figure in our family lore.

My pursuit of knowledge has taken me to the village of Tong Dui, where Jia has someone she wants me to meet.

"This is where a master makes black pottery," she tells me. "It's unique to this region." She leads me up log steps and into a dark room, where potter Sun Nou Qiling is removing a pair of freshly fired dove-shaped pitchers from glowing embers.

"They are for serving barley wine," says Qiling, 64, a slight, balding man of stooped posture. He kneads a lump of clay and forms one of his works of art, then demonstrates how he turns it black by burying it in wood ash.

"My family has been doing this for five generations." This means his forebears were plying the trade when my grandfather traveled these parts. Might he have stopped in here—and left with a souvenir? Who knows; my mother inherited nothing. Determined to pass down something more tangible to my own children and grandchildren, I ask Qiling to wrap up the two pitchers. He does so with evident pleasure, then envelops my outstretched hand in both of his and says, "Come see us again."

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Yunnan, China

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If Shangri-La really did exist in physical space, it wouldn't take much imagination to place it in the Meili mountains. At the start of the fifth day of my journey, I look out on five colossal snow-covered peaks—part of the Meili Snow Mountain Range—in the dim dawn light from the Songtsam Meili lodge. Jia is warming her hands by a coal brazier. She points to the highest peak. "Kawagebo, a sacred mountain to Tibetan Buddhists."

Its grandeur makes me think of Karakal, the icy peak in Hilton's *Lost Horizon:* "It was an almost perfect cone of snow... so radiant, so serenely poised, that he wondered for a moment if it were real at all."

The Meili range marks the northernmost point of my trip; on the far side of Kawagebo lies Tibet, where grandfather Baird also roamed. Fortified with a breakfast of barley pancakes and wild honey, Jia and I take leave of the friendly lodge staff and head south toward the Upper Mekong Valley, which will serve as our corridor back to the urban centers. Our road takes us past an overlook punctuated with 13 gleaming stupas, one for each of the Meili peaks. It will be our last unobstructed view of the sawtooth mountains rising white and brilliant. We duck into a kiosk for incense and pine boughs to placate Kawagebo. As I slide my offerings into a ceremonial oven set beside the stupas, I say a prayer for my grandfather, hoping he found the inner peace he was looking for in this remote mountain realm.

Two days later I bid farewell to Jia and continue on to the cobblestoned town of Lijiang, once a celebrated stop on the caravan route linking the tea plantations of southern Yunnan with the cities of Lhasa and Kathmandu to the west. Its ancient Naxi architecture and stone bridges crossing a lattice of canals have made Lijiang's Old Town a World Heritage site and an ever more popular destination for Chinese tourists. But I've come to pay homage to the eccentric Austrian-American botanist and explorer Joseph Rock, a recluse who lived for nearly 30 years in the tiny village of Yuhu, about a half hour's drive out of town.

I find his home, now a museum, tucked away in a warren of narrow streets lined with mud-brick walls in the shadow of snow-capped Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. It's a stone and wood structure with a shingled roof. During the 1920s and '30s, Rock sallied forth from here to explore Yunnan's remarkable diversity of landscapes—from warm subtropical valleys to chilled subarctic heights—in search of exotic plants and local cultures he documented for *National Geographic* magazine. James Hilton, by his own admission, found inspiration for *Lost Horizon* in Rock's writing and images.

Did those reports also act as a trumpet call for my grandfather? I think of a letter that Baird had written home from these mountains, telling of his recent purchase of pistols and hinting at the dangers that lay ahead. The lost tribe he sought may have inhabited an idyllic community of harmony and longevity; navigating the broken landscape was another matter.

On our final afternoon together, Jia had quipped that she was

Yak butter tea, a staple of Tibetan diets, finds takers in the village of Gezinong.

taking me to a "lost tribes" village, the sort of place grandfather Baird would have gotten wind of. Our vehicle followed a track carved along the wall of a gorge, the roar of the creek below us drowning out the gear-grinding ascent. The track had leveled off at a ten-foot-high wooden cylinder spinning inside a scarlet pagoda. "It's a prayer wheel," Jia had said. "The water makes it spin." A narrow ditch was funneling rushing water beneath the wheel, where small paddles kept the auspicious symbols of the Buddha in constant motion.

I stood by that relic from the deep past, when our forebears still felt awe at such simple things as the changing of the seasons or the blooming of a flower. A time almost, but not quite, lost. A soft bell pinged with each revolution of the wheel and blended with the laughter of children from a schoolhouse up the hill. The sun was beginning to set, throwing long shadows across the glen.

I cast back to my very first night in Yunnan, when I sat with Baima by the roaring fire.

"I believe that lost tribes could still exist in these places," he had told me.

As I turned toward our vehicle, it occurred to me that he may have been right, that a lost tribe could be just beyond the ridge, in the next valley over. And maybe, just maybe, my grandfather is there with them, having discovered in this mysterious land the harmony and the unity in which he so desperately wanted to believe.

SCOTT WALLACE is the author of *The Unconquered: In Search of the Amazon's Last Uncontacted Tribes.* Veteran photographer **MICHAEL YAMASHITA**'s books include *The Great Wall: From Beginning to End* and *Zheng He.*

THE INSIDER

Yunnan, China

LAND OF PEAKS, valleys, and monasteries, Yunnan is home to the largest number of ethnic groups in China. The gateway towns of **Shangri-La** and **Lijiang** showcase area traditions and cultures, but many interesting sites lie in the countryside.

WHEN TO GO

Yunnan is known for its localized climates. Shangri-La is best visited from late spring through summer, when days warm into the 80s F. Kunming, to the south, has been dubbed "spring city" for its mild climate year-round. Regional temperatures can dip, however, so bring warm clothing.

WHERE TO SLEEP

Songtsam Lodges operates five cozy properties in Yunnan in a variety of settings, including Shangri-La, that reflect the region's diversity. Travelers may stay at one lodge or choose a circuit package that visits multiple lodges with guides for an easy introduction to this fairly remote and rugged part of China.

Laomadian Lodge, in the town of Shaxi, offers rooms in a gracefully converted inn and stable on the ancient Tea Horse Caravan Road. Its **Karma Cafe** dishes up regional fare—and brownies. Another interesting option in Shaxi is the evocative **Olde Theatre Inn,** an eco lodge that occupies a restored courtyard building complex.

Zen Garden Hotel, in the historic town of Lijiang, mixes antique furniture with modern conveniences and will arrange tours to local Naxi sights.

PHOTO TIP

PEAK PERFORMANCE

"A ritual in the Meili mountains is to rise early to see Kawagebo, Yunnan's most sacred peak," says photographer Michael Yamashita. "Usually, Kawagebo hides in a sea of clouds, so a photographer needs luck. I have visited three times and snagged shots on each trip. This is my favorite, with the first rays of sun highlighting the snowy peak and leaving the foreground and clouds in shadow."

Kawagebo, ringed by clouds

Zhongdian, is both a county and a town; attractions include Yunnan's largest Tibetan Buddhist lamasery, Songzanlin Monastery, known for its remarkable frescoes and its resemblance to Tibet's multi-tiered Potala Palace.

The venerable trading city of **Shaxi,** with its peaked wood roofs, ranks as one of the most authentic caravan towns along the storied tea route; its Friday market deals in everything from livestock to tea.

Visitors flock to **Lijiang** to see its old town, a World Heritage site. Also a highlight: performances by the local Naxi Orchestra, which plays nightly.

Near the scenic mountain village of Shiyi lies **Dongzhulin Monastery,** home to monks of the yellow hat sect—and artfully restored prayer halls. This part of Yunnan is famed for its **black pottery,** which is baked directly in a pit fire. Master potter Sun Nou Qiling crafts his black pitchers, pots, and more in the village of Tong Dui.

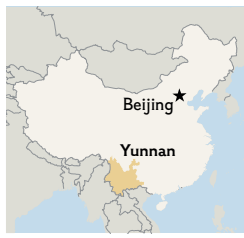
WHAT TO SEE

Shangri-La, formerly

WHAT TO READ

Forgotten Kingdom, by Peter Goullart (1955), is a memoir by a Russian-born explorer who advised Chinese industry in the 1930s and '40s, and gathered his insights about both Chinese and Yunnanese culture and thought in this must-read volume.

ATLAS



One of the most complete fossil deposits ever found is in Chengjiang, outside Yunnan's capital, Kunming.

Yunnan is considered China's mushroom capital, with some 600 mushroom species, many edible.

Women rule in segments of Naxi society, thanks to an old matriarchal tradition.

INTERNATIONAL MAPPING

REPORTED BY
Scott Wallace