

## TIANBAOSHAN, June 2014

Scratching the dirt with our feet, we uncover cobblestones. No doubt, we are standing on what once was the main square of old Shangri-La. It is now a desolate, barren land; the old town was burned to the ground five months ago. One may wonder whether a legendary name carries with it a legendary fate... Zhongdian was officially chosen in 2001 to be Shangri-La in an effort to boost tourism. Thirteen years later, its massive Tibetan houses, narrow streets and yak hotpot places are all gone. Ironically, all that is left is the fake stupa at the top of the hill.



The next morning we resolutely turn our backs on the former old town, en route towards the celestial treasure of the Tianbao mountain range, 30 kilometers and five days of trekking away. The chartered van drops us off on the roadside in the middle of nowhere. Mobile phones left behind, walking sticks stretched to proper height, backpacks strapped on, GPS out, Yang Xiao our guide couldn't feel better. "This way", he grins, a huge smile on his face.

We leave the pavement without a thought and hit the trail. After an hour of walking straight up, the first reward: we are going through an age-old forest. Is it the moss hanging from the branches, the contorted



the minute.

tree trunks or the dim sunlight that pierces through the forest cover? Whichever way, the atmosphere catches on all four of us; we are on the lookout for fairies and elves. Not having encountered any, we catch our breath on the first juggling highland. everything



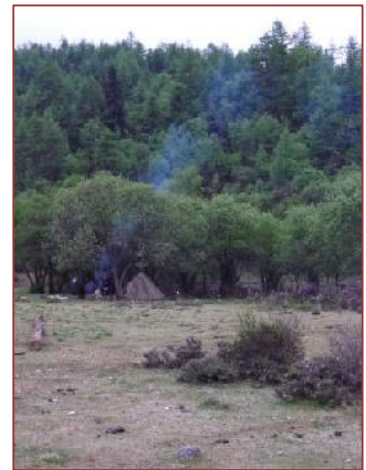
pasture we come to. Frank takes his balls for a private show on the grass. We are a million miles away from human; our hearts grow more quiet by



The timing of the trek was carefully planned by Yang Xiao to coincide with the blossoming of flowers. No doubt, he knows what he is doing: we feel like we are walking through an English garden at its best. In these places where only herders and their cattle go, nature has a way of arranging life more harmoniously than any thoughtful gardener would.



The wide trail going through this magnificent primeval forest leads us to the first day's campsite and the cabin of Xiao Sha, who brought his cattle to the pasture only a few days ago. He welcomes us with yak butter milk and a huge smile; Yang Xiao reciprocates with a gift of ultralight cooking gear he has thoughtfully packed for his friend.



At night, squatting around the camp fire which Yang Xiao deemed safe enough to light, we wait for the moon to rise. In two days it will be full, we watch in silence as the moonlight appears to enchant the forest around.

The next day takes us through a series of flowers again rival to attract our sight of our camera lenses: they don't



of high pastures, whose attention. Loggers react at first want to be photographed,

their activity is mostly illegal, Yang Xiao explains.

Day after day, I observe my friend in these mountains. He has been here countless times; this trek is to him rather like a stroll in his neighborhood. He knows every pasture and every hut, every herder and all the villages they come from down in the valley. He knows exactly where flowers grow, where water comes out of the ground, where to pitch the tent. Yang Xiao is from a faraway province, yet he seems to know the place better than the locals themselves do.



With such a companion, as next day we start our ascent into the mineral world under heavy rain, I feel utterly safe. In complete fog, Yang Xiao leads us across a mountain flank where yaks watch us in bemusement. We can't see ten meters away yet, sure enough, he leads us straight to the highest pass of our journey, 4,400 meters above sea level. "Asolo!", Yang Xiao shouts the traditional mountain greeting while turning

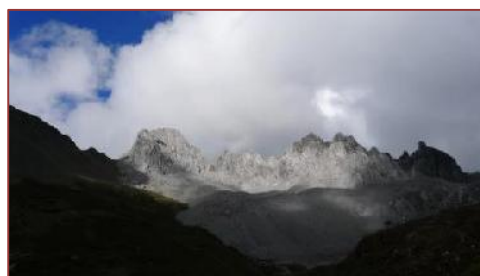
around the cairn and depositing a stone.

Under our feet, lake Abuji is invisible in the mist. As we climb down to its shores, the lake suddenly reveals itself, emerging from the clouds below us. We are awe-stricken by the majesty of this blue spread of water crowned by towering mountains.



Yang Xiao warns us : "No shouting here, it's a matter of respect for the lake". We set up camp under the rain, anxious to put on dry clothes and sip hot chocolate with a touch of Brandy. "Could anything possibly feel better?" I ask myself, while reflecting on this thought we shared earlier: how could one possibly be unhappy in such an environment? We are not quite on top of the world, yet this is precisely how it feels. Nothing seems to matter, the worries of daily life slip away from our renewed souls, we feel at one with mountains and rain.

A lonely wild duck crosses the lake quacking, telling us it is time to come out again and go check out those blue poppies Yang Xiao hopes to find near the natural dam. In vain: only one of them stands, dead. Yang Xiao connects this unfortunate finding with the fact that the campsite has been spoiled by somebody who came and cut down trees for firewood.



By morning, the atmosphere has cleared up enough that we all start to hope for decent weather. Little do we know that the next two days will be spent under the rain, going through more pastures where semi-wild horses roam freely, their foals

at their heels.

Before we know it, the trek is over and we are back to what is still called civilization. The van driver whom we flagged down to make our way back to Shangri-La makes it abundantly clear: he pulls up the world cup app on his smart phone to ask us whether we will be watching the games tonight. I silently retire myself from the conversation, to try and hold onto the feeling, just a little longer. Let it be quiet, as vast and perfect inside as it outside, just a little longer. Shangri-La.



Dani, Yunnan, Dali, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014