

Xishwangbanna is the region where China meets Southeast Asia. In the far south of Yunnan province the region hugs the Chinese border at the point where Laos and Burma meet. This area was long ruled by the Dai people, related to the Thais. A relation that is seen in the strong similarity of their respective architecture and Buddhist practices including having their children live temporarily as saffron robed monks. This is also where the Chinese tourists go to “go to Thailand” without leaving China. Jinghong the capital of the region is my final stop before making my way across the border into Laos. The city is certainly a tourist town, with a vast number of hotels primarily catering to the domestic tourist. But in addition to these, a few cater to Western budget travelers with cafes and cheap guesthouses where English is spoken. The city of Jinghong sits on the banks of the



Mekong River, along the section where I trekked south of Jinghong

Mekong River, known in China as the Lancang, and thus offered me my first glimpse of the river I intend to follow off and on until its delta at the southern tip of Vietnam. The city however, is not the attraction; it is the sounding hills and villages that make the region worth a stop. I generally like to stay away from the tourist trap phony villages and tamed elephants that the Chinese tourists seem to love. I found that the best way to accomplish this is to go somewhere a tour bus can't get too, i.e. walk. And

that's how I wound up hooking up with a British guy and girl for a two day guided trek along the Mekong and through Dai and Aini (another ethnic group in the region) villages. As this is the later half of the dry season here the temperatures are getting very warm during the day and the extended lack of rain makes everything very dusty. This dryness limits the visibility due to a smoke (from villagers burning dried brush) and dust invoked haze that blankets the region. In fact, along routes where the



Dai village, with typical homes.

roads are not paved, bus drivers wear surgical masks to keep the dust out. So these conditions (which I will also have to endure in Laos) made the walking a little more difficult. We did stop for an extended lunch in a village during the hottest part of the day. This was also where I got a chance to see if I had completely lost my basketball touch yet. Every city, town, and village seems to have a basketball court in varying states of usability. Judging by the age of some of the courts it's not necessary a post Yao Ming thing, but I'd guess that post Yao Ming the courts are getting a lot more use, as basketball has certainly gained popularity in China. Some of the Dai village kids were shooting around making use of their particular somewhat dilapidated court. I joined in and found I still had a decent enough shot to impress these kids, for what that's worth. At night we slept in a Dai house which is raised one room house



Some of the kids I played basketball with.

on wooden posts with the chickens and pigs below. The floor and grass filled mattresses were surprisingly comfortable, if a bit firm, although its tough to sleep much past dawn when you are surrounded by roosters around and beneath you. No matter as the early start helps avoid walking in the hottest part of the day.



Dai village kid showing off his gun.

After a four days in the region I feel I've gotten a taste of Xishwangbanna life and am ready to move on to Laos leaving China behind me for now.



Aini woman weaving



Monk in a tree, doing his “Crouching Tiger Leaping Dragon” impersonation.



Bus driver in rear view mirror with mask over his face to filter out dust from the bumpy dirt road.