

## 15 THE THREE GORGES

It is my opinion that there are some places on earth where you must physically be in the place to understand it and appreciate it, because words will not capture its essence. The Stockholm Archipelago is one such place and the Three Gorges is another.



The overcast skies in no way diminished our appreciation of the spectacular nature of the Three Gorges. If anything, the fogginess in the air enhanced the ethereal beauty of these green waterways. We entered the 47-mile-long Xiling Gorge, at 1:30 pm that first day. Our guide said, “The Xiling is considered the most interesting of the gorges. Navigation on Xiling Gorge was dangerous before 1988. Then the dam made the water level rise. It is now 300 feet higher than it used to be, so it is now easy to go through. The water level is now 155 and will soon go to 178 meters.”



Our guide continued, “We will have the opportunity to engage with the full beauty of these spectacular gorges. We will disembark from the riverboat and take a ferry up one of the tributaries to see the wildlife and plants of the gorges, and then we will take a sampan to go further up the tributary. On Saturday we will take a moon boat to the ‘wild’ Yangtze, and on Sunday we will take an excursion up the Daning River on a ferry to see Dragon Gate Gorge, that most magnificent place on the Wu Gorge. The Mini Gorges on Madu are truly paradise.

Throughout our excursions you will see holes in the high cliffs. These are coffin holes from 2000 years ago. No one knows how the ancient Ba people got the coffins into those high holes. The ancient Ba people placed their coffins high in the mountains. Some of these coffins are one ton in weight, made of very special wood that still survives today. Was the water level higher then? Or did the people use ropes to lower the coffins into the holes? In 1979 an archeologist found a coffin holding a 14-year-old boy and a 16-year-old girl. Maybe the girl was sacrificed to be buried with the boy, who died from a disease. The

girl had a hole in her head. The Ba people thought that if they put the coffins high, the dead person could go to heaven. It is still a puzzle how they did it 2000 years ago. There are three theories: 1) They used ropes; 2) Maybe the people built a walkway and then destroyed the walkway; 3) Maybe 2000 years ago the water level was high. This section of the gorge used to be 1-2 meters deep and is now 156 meters deep.”



We saw people walking on the mountain paths. Our guide said that some of the people we saw were students coming down the mountain to meet the water taxi. It might take them two hours to come down and three to go back up; so they would go home from school only every month or every semester. “The government needed to relocate one third of the people living in the gorges,” said the guide. “In 1980 they planted cypress trees to help prevent erosion. Coal mining is the most important industry in the gorges. It is done in the mountains with simple tools and open mines. There are hiking paths here, and you will find some bed and breakfast places for hikers, and the largest limestone cave in the world.”

At 4:30 pm that day we entered the Wu Gorge in the Wu Mountains, the highest on the Yangtze, called Witch Gorge because Wu means witch. Our guide said, “Wu Gorge is in my opinion the most beautiful of the three gorges. There are high cliffs and the famous Twelve Peaks, including the most famous, the Goddess Peak. Wu Gorge is 27 miles long, and they have 45 inches of rain a year here. It will take us two hours to sail through this gorge.”



Our guide told us that Goddess Peak is the last peak in Wu Gorge, 3000 feet above sea level and the most famous peak in Chinese history, with a lot of magic and stories connected to it. It is said that if you look upon the Goddess Peak, you will remain young forever. At that news, Myrtle turned her face to the mountain with a look of what I can only call idiotic bliss. Sigh. While the Goddess Peak is the most famous peak on the river, other peaks are also eternally breathtaking, including Scissors Peak and Immortal Peak. I said to her, "Why don't you look at Immortal Peak?" She ignored me.



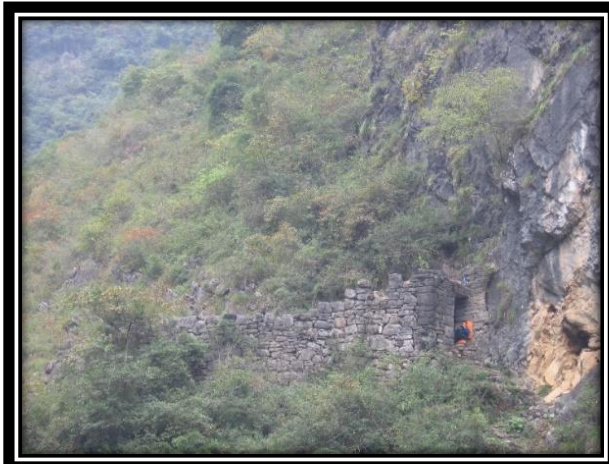
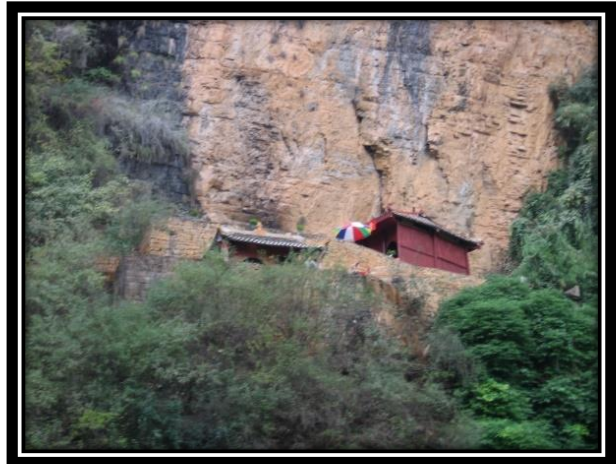
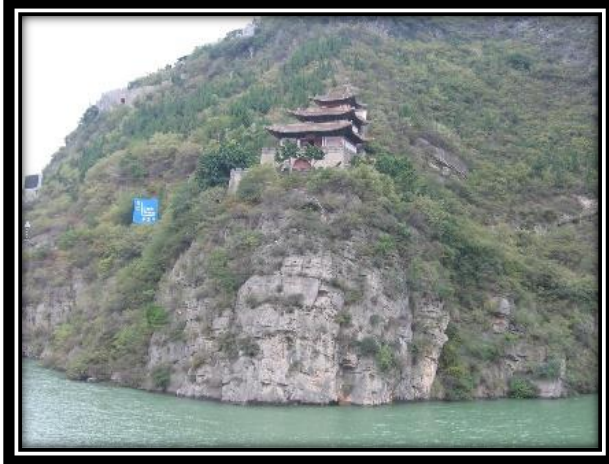
We enjoyed watching the brightly-painted river boats and imagining where all the people on them were going, but the scenery usually took first billing for us. Sometimes a vista was so perfectly beautiful that it almost seemed fake. Despite the everlasting fog, the colors of the land and foliage were vibrant.



The local people used to keep goats in these caves, but now the water is covering the caves, and soon they will all be under water. Misty Gorge Cave could hold 1000 people. People believe in fairy caves.



Bacon is a staple for the people who live in the gorges. They use cypress trees to smoke pork to make the bacon. The houses here, with their terraced gardens, will all eventually be underwater. As we cruised the waterways, we saw many dwellings built into the mountainside, some that we could see would soon be underwater, and some high enough that they would be safe from the water. Even then, the lives of the people in these houses would change, sometimes dramatically, adjusting to the new levels of the water.



In the Emerald Gorge we saw monkeys jumping around in their caves near the water and in the trees. I wondered how many animals in these mountains were being displaced by the waters of the dam. We saw Mandarin ducks in the water, their gorgeous plumage harmonizing with the green water of the gorge. Our guide said, "You will see a lot of orange trees in the gorges. Oranges are a very important crop. Last year Three Gorges produced 100 million tons of oranges."



Then it was time to switch to a sampan for our trip on the Madu River in Mini Three Gorge. The Madu River area, our guide reminded us, is paradise, even though, as we saw, there will be families whose homes will be flooded permanently by the waters of the dam. Our boatman and guide sang a local folk song that echoed in the canyon. Several times local farmers played instruments or played and sang for us as we moved through the gorge. "The boat company pays the local farmers to sing and play as our boats pass by," said the guide.



When the boatman and the guide had completed their songs, Myrtle suddenly jumped up and asked, with her thousand-watt smile, if she could use the horn. The guide was startled but passed the horn to her. Myrtle cleared her throat dramatically, took a firm stance, grabbed my hand to pull me up next to

her, and began belting out what you, my good reader, would remember only if you were, pardon me, as old as these hills. What she started to sing, and gave my arm a good poke until I squeakily joined in, was nothing less than (Drum Roll) *Aba Daba Honeymoon*. Yes, you heard me right. *Aba Daba Honeymoon*. And for your delectation, dear gentle reader, I will even include here the lyrics of this amazing song, courtesy

<https://www.lyricsondemand.com/miscellaneouslyrics/childsongslyrics/abadabahoneymoonlyrics.html>

"Aba, daba, daba, daba, daba, daba, dab,"  
Said the Chimpie to the Monk,  
"Aba, daba, daba, daba, daba, daba, dab,"  
Said the Monkey to the Chimp.  
All night long they'd chatter away,  
All day long there were happy and gay,  
Swinging and singing in their honky-tonkey way.  
"Aba, daba, daba, daba, daba, daba, dab,"  
Means "Monk, I love but you."  
"Aba, daba, dab," in monkey talk  
Means "Chimp, I love you, too."  
Then the big baboon one night in June,  
He married them and very soon,  
They went upon their aba, daba honeymoon."

Well, dear gentle reader, I will leave it up to your imaginations how this splendid example of American cultural ingenuity was received that day on the Madu River. The boatman and our guide erupted in giggles; our boat mates sat in various stages of disbelief, embarrassment, hooting, and clapping, and a few of them even joined in on the chorus. I, unfortunately, decided that if I were destined to make a complete fool of myself, I might as well do it up right. So in seconds I was belting out that tune and wriggling my hips and throwing my arms around and leaning in to that horn like a professional fool. The cliffs around us were ringing with the singing (or racket, if you choose to side with ObOff). I noticed that some people on shore were standing in front of a house we were passing, and one of them dashed inside and hurried back out and began taking photos. Well! I felt like a rock star! Myrtle grabbed my hand and we took some deep bows and gave each other a high five. Honestly, what else can you do when you make such a spectacle of yourself?

We made it back to the riverboat, had lunch, and were soon sailing into the last gorge, Qutang Gorge at 2:35 pm. Our guide told us about an important archaeological discovery here, Daxi Village. "It is a very important discovery," she said. "It's a Neolithic settlement from 5000-3300 B.C. Half of the village is already under water and archaeologists are fighting against time to save what they can of this cultural treasure. The whole settlement will be lost forever if they can't get the work done quickly."

The guide continued, "This is the deepest gorge with the highest mountain peak in the gorges. That peak is close to the west entrance to Qutang Gorge, at 4600 feet in height. The mountains in this gorge are very steep and very few people live here. There is a very famous island, White Emperor City, with valuable Chinese wall writing, very old. Qutang Gorge is the most spectacular of the gorges. It will take us only twenty minutes to go through. Unfortunately, it is also a solemn and fearful place for many



Chinese because so many trackers fell to their deaths here, trying to tow junks of tremendous weight, some of them over 100 tons. If you look closely at the steep mountainsides, you can still see a few trackers' paths not yet submerged. Soon all the remaining sections will be under water.



Soon we were out of the Qutang Gorge and again sailing on the Yangtze toward Chongqing, our port of debarkation. "Those gorges! They were beyond awesome!" sighed Myrtle. Amen.



We had a cocktail hour with the captain that evening, which was lighthearted and fun, not at all the formal stuffy thing I expected. During dinner we were treated to a fashion show featuring the thousand hands dance and costumes from three different dynasties: the Han Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty, and the Ching Dynasty.

That evening after dinner our guide told me and Myrtle that the captain wished to see us in the library.

Oh, Oh! My antennae started vibrating madly. Were we being called on the carpet for our impromptu sampan concert? This did not sound good. Myrtle, usually unshakeable, whispered urgently to me, "That was your idea, you know, not mine." The little rat! And she slunk behind me as I followed the guide to the library. We took seats at the center table and waited. My mind whirled with lurid headlines: "Inebriated Tourists Heavily Under the Influence Disturb the Serene Peace of the Chinese Sacred Gorges by Bellowing Offensive Words into a Horn. Chinese Experts Struggle to Interpret the Messages, Fearing They are Spy Communications." Yikes, Yikes and Double Yikes!

The captain soon appeared, followed by his steward. They bowed briefly to us and took chairs across from us. The captain was holding in his hand a telegraph paper, which he proceeded to lay on the table before him as he spoke.

"Good evening, honored guests."

Myrtle came to life, flashing her megawatt smile and simpering, "Nihao, Honored Captain, Nihao!" And she bowed a little. The Rat! Trying to get into his good graces and paint me the villain! I mumbled "Nihao," but my gracious bow turned into a strange head jerk. "Oh, great!" I thought. "Now they will think I have a nerve disease or something and deport me so that I do not start an epidemic here. Oh, Myrtle, you little rat."

The captain took up the paper and said, "This message was addressed to me in Cantonese, with instructions that I was to read it to you in English. "To the esteemed Mutt and Jeff, salutations for your health and prosperity. It has come to our attention that you performed a memorable exhibition of vocal acrobatics while cruising the world-famous Wu Gorge of our great country, the Republic of China. I am authorized to offer you a contract for your continued performance as voice-over actors in the employ of our company, the premier cartoon animation company in all of Asia. When we are in receipt of your agreement, we will send a contract."

The room was frozen to immobility, and I noticed for the first time the faint throbbing of the engine below us. All I could think was "Mutt and Jeff? Mutt and Jeff?" Myrtle broke the silence by turning to me and saying, "I am Jeff. You are Mutt." That threw me off balance and I started to splutter, "But wasn't Jeff the tall one?"

"No, he was not, and anyway, I cannot be Mutt. I have never been a mutt in my life, and I do not intend to be a mutt now. I am a thoroughbred. A *thoroughbred!*" she stated with determined emphasis.

The captain, who had been watching this interchange with confusion, blinked several times, swallowed, and cleared his throat. Before he could say anything, Myrtle flashed those baby blues at him, leaned toward him and said in her sweetest, softest voice, "Captain, you know that I cannot be a Mutt. I am a thoroughbred."

Our guide spoke up helpfully, "A horse. A thoroughbred is a horse."

At this, the Steward leaped from his chair with a squeak of astonishment. There issued forth from his mouth a shout of “Ding ding hao!” and a rapid-fire volley of frenzied exclamations, expostulations and gesticulations. Our guide seemed to be trying to keep up, mumbling, “Man Mo Temple . . . fortune sticks . . . a horse . . . yes, the fortune sticks foretold that for this man, a horse will appear in his field and if he does not claim and mount that horse, he will be forever poor.”

The steward meanwhile had come around the table and stood before Myrtle, bowing deeply and spewing another excited volley of words that were probably something along the lines of how he would honor her and cherish her and take care of her for all his days and she would bear his children and they would establish a new dynasty of voice actors. Bear his children?!

The captain sat with his mouth slightly open and his eyes blinking rapidly. The guide seemed to be too flummoxed and flustered to do or say anything. My brain spun on steroids trying to extricate us from this new disaster.

“Ah,” I cried, “Ah! This thoroughbred horse wandered into the wrong field, yes, that is right, she wandered into the wrong field. She is always looking for the greener grass, you see, and so this is a simple case of her wandering into the wrong field. Ouch!” Myrtle had given me a swift kick under the table.

But, like the true hero I prided myself on being, I overlooked the pain and plunged on. “She has never been good at respecting boundaries, you see, and this is simply another good case in point.” That phrase joggled my brain with a brilliant thought, which I immediately voiced before Myrtle got her foot into kicking position again. “We must discuss this with our agent, of course. No self-respecting voice artist works without an agent. Yes, we must discuss this with our agent.”

That pronouncement stopped the forward momentum of this demented proceeding. The captain, having quickly understood that the cumbersome American legal system was being brought into play, tapped the Steward on the shoulder, bade us a good evening, bowed, and left the room, the Steward trailing morosely behind him, looking back at Myrtle with such sadness I almost pushed her to go with him.

Our guide took a deep breath. Myrtle sat with a dreamy look on her face. I discreetly checked to see if I had peed my pants at the stress of all of this. Finding I had not, I, too, breathed a big sigh of relief and said brightly to our guide, “All is well.”

She only looked at me, and there was a significant lack of bonhomie, I thought. But I forgave her. It is not every day one must deal with the crises of my Myrtle, I thought with a bit of self-satisfied generosity.

On the way back to our room, Myrtle was mumbling to herself. “In China, the horse symbolizes power, beauty and freedom. I rather like that. I think I shall ask to be reincarnated here as a horse.”

To be continued . . .