



Karst in stone

The peaks of Yunnan provide a spectacular backdrop to the colourful locals, writes **Carol West**.

"Food without spice is like life without love," remarks our guide as yet another lazy Susan spins in front of us. We've been in Yunnan province for just four days but it's already starting to blur with each rotation of the twice-daily banquets. Forget the gourmet specialities of provincial France, each prefecture, town and county in Yunnan is hot to trot out their local delicacies, along with the region's natural heritage and cultural highlights – and it's quite a menu.

Over a bowl of egg custard, slender circles of fried goat's cheese, crispy-skinned duck and a noodle-thin melon and capsicum salad, conversation turns to what the Chinese modestly call the "No 1 grand spectacle on

Earth", the Yunnan Stone Forest. And, as stone forests go, it probably is. A geological marvel created when the Himalayas shrugged 60 million years ago, the lofty grey karst columns first stumbled upon by travellers in 1383 surround our airy restaurant at the entrance to the Stone Forest tourist park.

The 78-kilometre drive from Kunming, the provincial capital, was a smooth ride with light traffic. Most locals stay off the new highway, travelling along the old roads to avoid paying tolls. Kunming's densely packed urban landscape soon ceded to Yunnan's rich agricultural lands and blue skies before the scenery became speckled with pale grey karst stones.

Open to the public since 1978 and attracting five million visitors a year, the "forest" resembles a vast ghostly city looming out of a lush landscape, a jaw-dropping spectacle in which jagged peaks have morphed into giant swords, pagodas, chess pieces and mushrooms. Navigating through this outdoor museum means sticking to the tour path. We wind past majestic stone walls before searching out a steep, narrow pathway up Bushao Hill. As the clamour of the tour groups recedes, the sounds of soft birdsong and cascading water take its place.

Squeezing through tight crevices, we locate stone stairs thoughtfully cut into the rock and ascend for a postcard vista: rugged, pleated and phallic, vast blocks and folds of stone sprout among lush green trees across an area covering 1,000 square kilometres. It's a view that inspires reverence and awe, as though you're standing amid the ruins of an ancient abandoned civilisation.

This is the Yunnan Plateau, the secluded land of the Yi people, one of 26 culturally rich minority groups inhabiting the province. The Yi hold fast to their language and belief systems, which they eloquently express through their spirited folk songs and smiling eyes – at the ancient Alu Cave in Luxi, colourfully costumed drummers beat out a joyous welcome.

Discovered by chance in 1638, when a shepherd boy scrambled into a chasm to retrieve his lamp, today this ancient cave is a neon-lit fantasyland. Two hundred and seventy million years in the making, what was previously an ocean is now a subterranean world of stone curtains, flowers, grottos and pillars of stalactites and stalagmites. The moist air creates a misty sense of enchantment.

Ignoring the sign advising visitors to "fall down carefully", we climb and wander along three kilometres of