



walkways to the roof of the cave. The view is theatrically spectacular and with a river flowing below, we pass chambers of exotic hanging gardens, where the stone forest becomes underground woodland reflected in vividly illuminated pools.

The sun is squinting above the horizon as we leave the caves, travelling past neat squares of arable land and gently terraced fields. The balconies and flat rooftops of the Yi's mud-brick houses are festooned with corn cobs drying in the sun.

It's late and we've covered a lot of ground through Yunnan's vast forested hills and empty spaces but tiredness evaporates in the warmth of the welcome at Keyi village, in Xisan township, Mile county. Seven hundred people live in this 400-year-old traditional Axi village, farming tobacco, corn, maize, rice and walnuts. This is an ancient animist culture governed by agrarian pursuits and tourism is a new concept that comes with strict criteria.

"Villages must be near the mountains with beautiful views and clean, good-looking young people living a traditional life," says our guide. The Axi in Keyi tick all the boxes and we're about to discover their "unbridled love of dance, song and hospitality".

Seated on low stools on the edge of a rectangle courtyard framed by a two-storey meeting house, the obligatory eight-course banquet of locally grown organic food is brought from the communal kitchen by beaming villagers. Before we can raise chopsticks to sample dishes of boiled pork, dried fried walnuts and bitter cabbage with bacon and beans, strikingly good-looking couples come around with pottery flasks of lethal corn wine (38 per cent proof) for a welcoming toast. It could strip paint but it's obviously a great lubricant for the vocal chords as the toast is accompanied by a spirited folk song and much laughter.

In larger towns, cultural performances at dinner-and-show venues are sometimes less than charming but this one appears to be fairly authentic. Brandishing long shakers, there are flashes of turquoise and red legs as women twirl, shake and prance to the infectious rhythms the men generate on the *yueqin*, a moon-shaped lute. With hair ribbons flying and hands clapping, there's no doubting the Axi's love of singing and dancing, particularly the exuberant, high-stepping finale. Elderly villagers gather around the perimeter shyly looking at the visitors while enjoying the free show.

The moon fills a licorice sky and, holding burning

Clockwise from far left: the Yunnan Stone Forest; Alu Cave, in Luxi; a pagoda near the entrance to the Stone Forest; members of the Axi clan entertain visitors.

torches they call "fire gods", we follow the villagers outside. Hand in hand, we join in a primal, mysterious dance normally reserved to celebrate harvests or weddings around the bonfire, our faces glowing in the firelight.

Back in Kunming, it is again time to eat. We await the arrival of cross bridge rice noodles, a speciality. A bowl of soup is accompanied by a dish of ingredients and a strict cooking order. Reviving memories of tragic fondue parties, raw meat and a quail's egg are stirred into the soup ahead of vegetables and rice noodles. Chilli sauce is passed around for those wanting to tickle their taste buds, a spicy metaphor, perhaps, for Yunnan's unique ethnic diversity.

Getting there: Dragonair (www.dragonair.com) flies daily from Hong Kong to Kunming. A number of agencies conduct guided tours of Yunnan from the provincial capital.