

# STEEPED IN HISTORY: THE ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM OF THE TEA-HORSE ROAD

Himalayan mountain passes traversable just a few weeks each year. Torrential rains and blizzard conditions. Poisonous snakes, toads, and mushrooms.

These were just a few of the challenges encountered by porters along the historic Tea-Horse Road. Known as the “Southern Silk Road,” this trade route connected tea sellers in China’s southwestern Yunnan Province with Tibetan and Indian horsemen. Since the 14th century, the path has acted as a conduit for the exchange of goods, ideas, and culture. Along the treacherous trek through Yunnan, traders sought refuge in market towns, many of which still thrive today. Each of the Tea-Horse Road’s most significant cities developed a distinct character colored by local materials and construction techniques. **Today, these towns serve as models of sustainable, multiethnic coexistence within the framework of traditional architecture and human-scaled urbanism.**

While following the Tea-Horse Road, we intend to document five of the route’s most important market towns with measured drawings, observational sketches, and photographs. By dissecting the sense of place in contemporary Yunnan, we can extrapolate what it would have been like to experience the most cherished parts of China’s built environment in a bygone era. Rigorous study will allow us to decipher what sets largely-undocumented Yunnan apart, as well as what links the province’s identity with that of greater China.

Along with its architectural variety, twenty-five of China’s fifty-six recognized ethnic groups reside in Yunnan, making it the country’s most diverse province. Though media reinforces the ways in which our differences divide us now more than ever, Yunnan excels as a model of shared public space and civic life. The towns of the Tea-Horse Road have accommodated the needs - material, spatial, spiritual - of many groups of people in harmony for centuries. As the Chinese government continues to move citizens from disparate rural areas into newly-constructed urban centers, seeking precedent in successful multiethnic communities like Yunnan’s will become increasingly important.

Thanks to its isolated location, Yunnan was spared much of the damage wrought against the built environment during the Cultural Revolution, making it one of few places where modern Chinese can interact with their architectural history. Today, Chinese tourists flock to Yunnan to experience this shared heritage. The town of Lijiang, for example, receives six times more tourists annually than it has citizens. **As development pushes westward into Sichuan and Yunnan, the scale of the Tea Horse Road’s well-loved mid-size towns will provide an ever more relevant alternative to the ubiquitous Chinese high-rise ghost city.**

From Gyalthang, a Tibetan outpost of timber and rammed earth, to Dali’s stuccoed pagodas, location-specific and resource-dependent architecture is at the heart of Yunnan’s built environment. Though each is unique, the province’s most significant towns are linked by the Tea-Horse Road’s common thread. The unified Yunnanese identity forged by interaction along the path persists to this day. **In our study of Yunnan, we will document the exemplary elements of the Tea-Horse Road’s built legacy that can serve as precedent for future design work and great city building, in China and beyond.**



## Budget (Two Travelers)

International Airfare (2 x NYC>PVG>KMG)	\$1,800
Domestic Airfare (KMG>DIG)	\$400
Ground Transportation	\$200
Chinese Visa (1)	\$150
Accommodations (2 x \$35/day)	\$1,000
Food (2 x \$30/day)	\$850
Museum Entry	\$150
Travel Insurance	\$100
Research and Documentation Materials	\$100
Incidentals	\$150
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$4,900</b>

## Gyalthang (Zhongdian): Days 1-4

- Historic gateway town between Yunnan and Tibet
- Document new rammed-earth and heavy timber reconstruction of portions of Old Town destroyed by fire in 2014
- Measured drawings of Old Town Market Square, Guishan Temple, and 100 Chickens Temple
- Sketch Gandan Sumtseling Monastery
- Sketch and photograph “villas” outside of town in Napa Hai Meadow



New heavy timber construction, Gyalthang

## Lijiang: Days 5-9

- Yunnan’s primary domestic tourist attraction and a major stopping point along the Tea-Horse Road
- Measured drawings of squares in historic district along Lijiang’s unique urban waterways
- Visit Li Xiao Dong’s Water House, example of his theory of New Regionalism
- Sketch at White Horse Dragon Pool, a public space wrapping a source of clean water for Lijiang’s residents



Historic district waterway, Lijiang

## Shaxi: Day 10-11

- One of the Tea-Horse Road’s main trading posts; still functions as a market town for the greater Shaxizhen area
- Measured drawings of Old Theater and Market Square
- Sketch plans of Ouyang Dayuan, an outstanding example of Bai three-in-one residential typology
- Sketch and photograph Bai masonry residences at Nuodeng Village
- Photograph frescoes at Xingjiao Temple



Old Theater and Market Square, Shaxi

## Dali: Day 12

- Hub of Naxi culture at the Tea-Horse Road’s southern tail
- Measured drawings of Old Town squares and sketched studies of storefronts on Renmin Lu, Dali’s main pedestrian street
- Sketch at Chongsheng Temple Complex, the site of Yunnan’s thousand year-old, 70 meter-tall Qianxun pagodas
- Sketch construction details and artwork at indigenous Naxi residences just outside of town



Qianxun Pagodas at Chongsheng Temple, Dali

## Kunming: Days 13-14

- Capital city of modern Yunnan
- Visit Yuantong Temple, Kunming’s largest Buddhist complex, and sketch unique water features
- Measured drawings of public space along Kunming’s Green Lake Park
- Sketch plans and sections of Kunming’s primary retail streets
- Visit the Yunnan Provincial Museum to learn more about indigenous architecture in the region



Yuantong Temple, Kunming

