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The River LESS TRAVELED *Experience central China's natural and man-made marvels* *aboard the SANCTUARY YANGZI EXPLORER*

By Paul Rubio

From the Amazon to the Irrawaddy, upscale river cruising is opening access to locales once limited to backpackers willing to rough it off the beaten path. In China, the Sanctuary Yangzi Explorer fills this niche, presenting a luxury-spiked voyage through the most scenic stretch of the 3,915-mile Yangtze River, the longest in Asia. Between the port cities of Yichang and Chongqing, the all-balcony, 38-cabin, 24-suite vessel snakes through the narrow canyons and mountainous splendor of central China's Three Gorges. And whether choosing the three-night itinerary upstream or the four-night itinerary downstream, both the destinations and the journey leave lasting impressions.

Throughout it all, travelers are exposed to the striking contrasts of today's China—the good and the bad. Start with an excursion to the Three Gorges Dam Project near Yichang. The world's largest hydroelectric power structure and its turbine, lock, and ship-lift excess is an



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igraphy demonstrations, the sounds of the Chinese zither, and *bian lian* (face-changing) performances that reflect a China of yore.

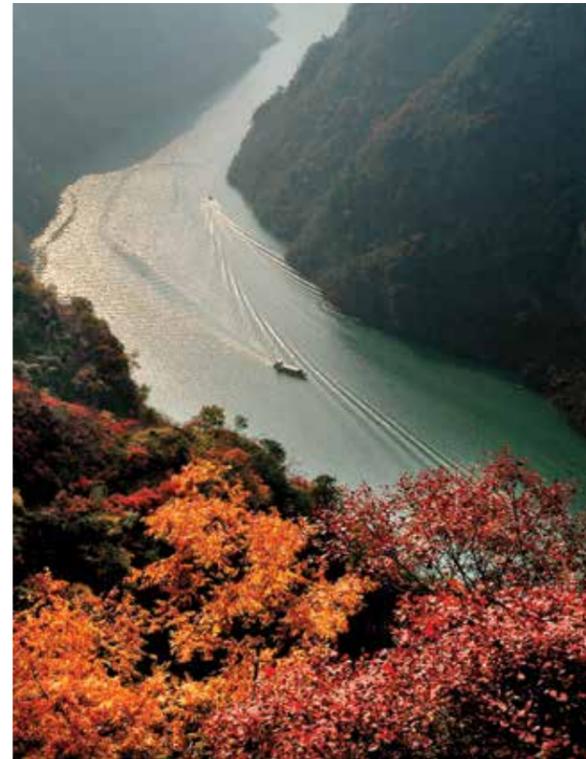
The journey, too, mirrors a theme of contrasts. With the largest room product on the river and a trusted-brand backing, the Sanctuary Yangzi Explorer is regarded as the most luxurious cruise on the China market. The ship was even

engineering wonder that makes the Hoover Dam look like child's play.

However, between construction and reservoir flooding, it has displaced 1.3 million people, forever altering the physical, cultural, and ecological landscapes of central China. This change is most palpable when ogling the juxtaposition of drab, Tetris-stacked monoliths comprising "new cities" against the sparkling bridges connecting both sides of the Yangtze.

On an excursion along the Shennong Stream, a smaller ferryboat ventures deep into *Avatar*-like scenery, where high among the mist-shrouded limestone cliffs lie hanging coffins of the Tujia people, an ethnic minority that calls this region home. A traditional *sampan* (open-air wooden boat) ride follows, led by the last generation of local fishermen who delight through song and storytelling in hopes of keeping their customs alive. Another day, cruisegeers are privy to a guided market tour in Fuling—try a hundred-year egg, if you dare—succeeded by a visit to a national library for a heritage-rich afternoon. Look forward to tea ceremonies, cal-

refurbishment to reflect modern Chinese design with textiles, artwork, and furnishings sourced from area vendors. While the refresh is most visible in the guest rooms and dining room, worn hallways, paint-chipped exteriors, and several dowdy common spaces reveal an incomplete facelift. Not to say this isn't the finest ship on the Yangtze—it is. But, it's nowhere near the league of the high-end river cruise products found in Europe, the Amazon, or the



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE PAGE: THE SANCTUARY YANGZI EXPLORER INTRODUCES PASSENGERS TO THE AUTHENTIC BEAUTY OF THE YANGTZE RIVER. EXCURSIONS AND ONBOARD EXPERIENCES INCLUDE TEA CEREMONIES, TAI CHI CLASSES, AND VISITS TO THE THREE GORGES DAM PROJECT, THE SHENNONG STREAM, AND THE DISTRICT OF FULING.

Mekong, so set expectations accordingly. In addition, the ship caters mainly to Chinese tourists, most of whom have booked on an à la carte basis. This can create some confusion for both staff and passengers who've reserved sailings marketed through the United States and Europe in which all meals, beverages, and excursions are included.

What the ship sometimes lacks in overall fitness, it makes up for with onboard programming. Rise and shine daily to tai chi lessons, make dumplings with the chef, and attend lectures on Chinese arts and crafts, foot reflexology, and traditional medicine. Opt for multiple treatments in the surprisingly affordable spa, where the therapists are remarkably dexterous.

Commentary is also excellent when it matters most. Guests are called outside for the separate breathtaking crossings through the Xiling, Wu, and Qutang gorges to learn about their historical importance while admiring the natural grandeur sandwiched between emerald cliffs. It's times like these that the ship's imperfections disappear, when the jaunt down this river less traveled begins to surface as one that makes the trek to the other side of the globe totally worth it. (sanctuaryretreats.com)



IN ADDITION TO ITS GRAND SUITES, THE PENINSULA BEIJING BOASTS WORLD-CLASS DINING IN THE FORM OF HUANG TING (ABOVE) AND JING. IT ALSO OPERATES EXPERIENCES WITHIN AND AROUND THE CITY, INCLUDING TOURS OF THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA AND THE HOU HAI DISTRICT, AS WELL AS A DEEP DIVE INTO BEIJING'S GROWING ARTS SCENE AND COMMUNITY (BOTTOM RIGHT).

BEIJING STOPOVER

Don't miss the chance to explore China's sprawling capital city on your way between the U.S. and Yichang or Chongqing. Book at The Peninsula Beijing and go into travel-planning cruise control, letting the in-house team map out an agenda that highlights the best of Beijing.

Spend your first day savoring the amenities at this all-suite beauty. The lobby—underscored by a colossal gold-trimmed, marble staircase—is a high-ceilinged architectural stunner peppered with intricate sculptures and colorful artwork. The spacious suites are kitted out in dark, handsome furnishings that channel au courant Chinese glamour.

Set in a replica of a nobleman's courtyard home and serving the apex of Cantonese cuisine, Huang Ting is quite possibly the superlative dining experience in the entire city. The only coequal for this accolade is the hotel's other restaurant, Jing, which specializes in contemporary French gastronomy with Asian influences.

Once jet lag subsides, venture beyond the hotel with excursions curated by The Peninsula Academy. A Window on Chinese Contemporary Art offers a taste of



Beijing's cutting-edge artsy pulse through stops at two studios and one-on-one time with rising artists. To indulge in classic Beijing, visit bucket-list juggernaut The Great Wall of China or take a guided rickshaw tour through the lost-in-time *hutong* lanes of the Hou Hai district. (peninsula.com) ◀

