

Huangshan Heritage

— Heights, History and Hangouts

◆ Text and photographs by Lowell Bennett

Standing very still at 1,810 meters above sea level, looking down into that vast granite vat stewing a billowy brew of cumulous clouds, breathing deeply of the thin cool air, beneath a crystalline-blue sky, you are unbound from earthly entanglement – you are rid of manmade matters; you are miles from metropolitan machinations; you are free of mechanized mass and momentum.

You're above it all – literally and figuratively.

Then, physically and spiritually satiated by quest and quiet, you descend from that peaceful perch. Far below you will enter the belly of one of those mechanical monsters of movement. Soon you reach a different state of nirvana – you sip a properly-made dry vodka martini; you are serene within sophisticated surroundings; you are made meditative by tasteful tunes.



Morning Cabbage – On the shores of Taiping (Peace) Lake.



Huangshan City, on the river at the foot of Old Street.



A New Perspective – A young artist honors the ancient Hongcun Village.

Huangshan City, and its pinnacle attraction, Huangshan Mountain (“Yellow Mountain”), are tucked into a particularly scenic section of Anhui Province, China’s central east, not quite on the coast. And within the green landscape between the civilized city and the massive mountain are nestled venerable villages aglow in charm and pristinely picturesque in structure and design.

Venerated Villages

A short drive from downtown Huangshan City, Hongcun is a notable must-meander for travelers who have been, or will be, on The Mountain another day. This hospitable village of 150 ancient residences presents a supremely sustained example of Ming and Qing community esthetics and architecture (so much so, here was filmed *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*). Situated by stream and lake, charming and well preserved, Hongcun is also well known for the many young art students who linger each day, painting and sketching the waterside scenery, narrow winding alleyways and centuries-old residences.

Also close to town and mountain is Xidi, another UNESCO World Heritage Site, dating back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279). During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), here the Hu family of merchants gained much wealth and prestige, and the village as a whole also prospered and gained fame. Notable are the 124 Ming and Qing era homes, all wood, inlaid with intricate and explicative carvings.

Major Mount

The natural star of the regional stage, “the loveliest mountain of China,” is Huangshan. Another of China’s long and growing list of UNESCO World Heritage sites, the mountain comprises many peaks, 77 of which top 1,000 meters above sea level. One of the tallest, and perhaps the most evocatively named, is Celestial Capital Peak, at 1,810 meters.

Far above the uppermost cable lift station and the much lower, more horizontal walkways, you will not be dodging the tour groups on your way to Celestial Peak.

The steps carved into the mountainside offer sure footing, but the climb is stridently steep and, at several twists and turns, genuinely precarious. A strong heart, good lungs, sturdy legs and cautious progress are requisite. Treading the downward trek, especially, your steps must be set carefully, and the side rope should be held at all times. Otherwise, a slip on the ice or a misstep and a stumble could deliver a fast, hard and lengthy tumble down the steep stone decline.

It's a long and arduous climb, but well worth the trip. World-class, ranking with the frozen high-altitude terrain of the Tibet Autonomous Region and the lush green slopes of North America's Sierra Nevada Range, Huangshan Mountain offers literally breathtaking vistas. The subject of poets and painters for thousands of years, the pointed

peaks, granite gullies and pristine pines are fantastical and distinctly Chinese in form.

Civilized Settings

Having meandered marvelous mountainsides and visited venerable villages, Westerners perhaps seeking a little flavor and flourish reminiscent of home can return to the city proper and drop by one or both of two places notable for libation and leisure – an unusual and notable attribute, for a small Chinese city in which temporarily reside only a handful of Western university students. On Old Street (the must-stroll antique and souvenir-laden pedestrian-only boulevard opening up to the city's riverside) is the Ying-Yang Pub. The English-speaking proprietor, "Ben," has expertly trained his staff in the ways of

Western barmanship, and snacks include pizza, sandwiches and fries.

A two-minute riverside stroll from the Ying-Yang takes one to a different sort of amiable atmosphere, Laura's (also known as: 停云馆), operated by a young woman of the same (English-adapted) name. Like the Ying-Yang, the Western background music and the liquor are shipped in from Shanghai, and the drinks are expertly crafted. But here are offered authentic Anhui-style snacks professionally presented and decidedly delectable. And while the Ying-Yang offers a casual and comfortable pub-like setting, Laura's would fit right in along the most sophisticated café boulevards of the EU and the US. The look is chic, sleek, clean and glossy, relics and fine art line the walls, and the ancient stone furnishings and ornaments inspired a



The Westerner-friendly Laura's and the Ying-Yang Pub.

A Tree Transcendent – At Celestial Capital Peak, 1,810 meters.



certain awe in this lingering laowai.

The range of accommodations in Huangshan City will satisfy any requirement of budget and luxury. The handful of hotels literally on the

mountain range from three to four stars (approximately). In-town rooms run the gamut; from tidy in-room Internet-equipped budget accommodations at less than 100 RMB, to five-star resorts wrapped around

hyper-plush spas and multi-level open-air terraces, upon which steam away myriad multi-themed and harmoniously hedonistic forms of hot spring pools (pricing on a par with equivalent upscale Western resorts). ■