



Two dragon patterns are created in the paddy rice fields around Shuitou village to celebrate the Year of the Dragon.

PHOTOS BY WANG JING / CHINA DAILY



D J CLARK / CHINA DAILY

Parahawking is more than the experience of just flying.

## Flying with the birds

By D J CLARK  
djclark@chinadaily.com.cn

It takes almost an hour to ride the taxi from the banks of Pokhara Lake in central Nepal to the summit of Sarankot Hill. That's almost an hour in an enclosed space with a 70-cm tall Egyptian vulture perched next to you if you have signed up for a parahawking ride with British-born Scott Mason.

"For me it's a spiritual feeling. I am obsessed with birds," he explains as we sit down in the garden of his home/restaurant/guest house/bird rescue sanctuary after one of his flights.

"To be in the air with them, to see the expression on their face, to predict their movement, to observe their behavior is like a dream come true for me. I try to pass that passion onto my passengers.

"It might only be a once-in-a-lifetime experience so I am determined to make sure they make the most of it."

**Video** Mason went to Nepal See [chinadaily.com.cn/video/](http://chinadaily.com.cn/video/) 10 years ago on a round-the-world travel break from running a graphic design business in London.

After taking a paragliding flight in the mountain city of Pokhara, he observed many birds of prey flying near him and had the idea to try and train one of them to fly with the paraglider.

That night he approached the company manager to pitch his idea. As Mason was about to leave Nepal he had a call about two black kites that had just been rescued and was asked if he wanted to try and train them.

"Within a blink of an eye, I changed my plans and decided to stay and that is how it all started," Mason recalls.

Standing on a small grass embankment on top of the hill, Mason and local pilot Damodar Parajuli prepare two guests with simple instructions on how to run, jump and grasp raw meat in a gloved hand.

Kevin, the white Egyptian vulture, sits on a handler's arm on top of the bank excited like a dog about to be taken on a walk.

With a "one, two, three" they all run and jump with the paragliders quickly taking them off into the air and Kevin gracefully following in full flight.

It's a magnificent view on a clear day, with the Annapurna snow-capped Himalayan mountains in a curve around the lake 700 meters below.

"The birds have eyesight 20 times better than us and they can see the thermals from a long way off," Parajuli later explains to me. "They move to them to climb up and catch insects caught in the dust. The birds show us the thermals so we can climb with them."

The half hour graceful flight strapped to the body of a professional pilot costs around 1,150 yuan (\$180). That's more than double the cost of a flight without the birds but Mason is quick to point out that this is far more than just the experience of flying.

"We don't buy, we don't sell, we don't breed birds. We rescue them. If we can't get them back to the wild, then we have to provide them a life in captivity where they are happy and enriched. Parahawking was born out of that concept," Mason says.

Vultures in Nepal, Pakistan and India are almost wiped out because of the recent use of diclofenac, a drug used on livestock that is highly toxic when consumed by the birds.

"It's not just about the flight, it's an overall experience promoting bird of prey awareness and conservation," he adds.

To any tourist visiting Nepal who has the resources and pluck to give it a go, flying through the Himalayas with a bird of prey right beside you, watching its every move and with an organization that has its sights set on conservation of the birds, is indeed a highly recommended experience.

From Kathmandu to Pokhara, you can either take a 30-minute internal flight with wonderful views of the Himalayas (\$100 one way) or a six-to-eight-hour tourist bus.

Accommodation and Parahawking flight packages start at about 2,150 yuan (\$337) for two nights at the Maya Devi village and one flight. Alternatively, you can book your own accommodation in Pokhara and just take the flight for about 1,150 yuan.

# Out of this world

Liu Xiangrui and Yang Jun check out Kaiyang county in Guizhou province and find an idyllic refuge for those seeking tranquility.

Kaiyang county, situated about 80 km northeast of Guizhou's provincial capital Guiyang, enjoys growing popularity with those who want to experience the peace of rural life.

With a combination of rural scenery, canyon landscape and ethnic Miao and Bouyei culture, the town has a lot to offer.

What's more, the splendid green mountains, clear rivers and agreeable climate are big attractions especially in summer.

By taking the most popular itinerary — "The 10-Mile Gallery" along the Qinglong River valley, we feast our eyes on the essence of Kaiyang's beauty during a two-day trip.

We first stop in Phoenix village, a Bouyei habitat built by the hillside and only connected by a suspension bridge over the Qinglong River. The waterway appears to separate the village from the rest of the world and provides an idyllic refuge for guests seeking tranquility.

The residences reflect the typical local style, with blue tiles and white walls half hidden in the greenery. Under the roofs are strings of golden corns and red chili — the fruits of the farmers' labor.

At the center of the village lies a lotus pond, while loquat, cherry and mountain peach plants decorate the surroundings.

As we approach neighboring Pingzhai village later in the day, singing voices greet us. They belong to farmers, who stand in threes and fives, crooning under some old trees in the village. We are told that the farmers are performing the traditional Yangxi Opera, an old art form to entertain themselves during leisure time.

Further on from Pingzhai village, about 5 km up Qinglong River, there is an old and huge stone arch bridge named Longevity Bridge. Even after more than two centuries, it still serves people on both banks as their main link.

The bridge is also an ideal starting point to raft down the river, another popular activity during summer. Or, be like the locals — plunge into the clear waters to swim with the young and old.

Not far from the bridge is Matou village, which has a 700-year-old history. It used to be the place where the rulers of the region, an influential *tusi*, or chieftain, family resided. The village has become a national heritage site.

The thoroughfare of the village is a stone-paved path, where more than 90 ancient buildings are scattered on both sides, with the earliest dating back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

Facing the river and flanked by mountains on three sides, these old buildings are mostly traditional courtyard houses bearing wooden structures, with delicate Bouyei carved patterns all over. Layers of gray roofs form a spectacular patchwork.

The Red Army of Communist Party of China (forerunner of the People's Liberation Army) once stayed here, leaving behind dozens of slogans on the walls — more than 20 of these are still recognizable.



Nanjiang Canyon, where the Qinglong River runs through, has plenty of waterfalls and is an ideal site for rafters.



Local residents perform a bamboo dance to greet guests to Shuitou village.

Further upstream, there is an even quieter Bouyei community called Shuitou village. At the village gate, villagers in traditional costumes greet us with home-made wine and invite us to join their traditional bamboo dance.

In Shuitou, we learn from locals about the ancestral method of making tofu and the distillation of rice wine.

We are also treated to fresh soybean milk

and glutinous rice cake.

A French-style countryside hotel situated on the slope by the babbling river, Indigo Lodge, is popular especially with foreign tourists. From the design, one can tell that a lot of thought went into the elegant accommodation, which skillfully combines ethnic elements with modern tastes.

There is a cafe in Indigo Lodge, serving simple Chinese and Western food, coffee and

### IF YOU GO

Visitors can take a plane or a train to Guizhou's provincial capital Guiyang.

The 10-Mile Gallery scenic spot, about 50 km from the city, is located in Efeng township in Kaiyang county and is not far from the Nanjiang Canyon Outlet of the Guiyang-Kaiyang highway. It takes about 1.5 hours from Guiyang to the site.

Visitors can also ride a bus from Guiyang to Kaiyang county, which departs every 20 minutes, and then hire a car to get to the tourist site.

The tourist area currently has no high-end hotels, but it has dozens of rural hotels, including the Indigo Hotel that is specially tailored for foreigners.



wines. Travelers can also sit around to read or surf the Internet.

The hotel, with only nine quaint rooms, is run by a local tour guide. Each year, more than 100 foreign tourist groups make the hotel their home.

We find the main courtyard an ideal place to chill in this valley with its picturesque view — a calm river flowing in front of us, with buffaloes grazing in the paddy fields just a short distance away and mountains in the background.

According to the villagers, the area is a sea of yellow as rapeseed flowers bloom in spring and rice field gets ready for harvest in autumn, giving the place the nickname "gold basin".

Before we head out for the nearby Nanjiang Canyon for a gorgeous bonfire party and lodging, we visit the highest point of the "gallery" — a tea plantation of some 333 hectares on top of the Baihua Mountains.

Qinglong River's origin is said to be hidden somewhere in the mountains, often wreathed in mist.

The acidic soil is suitable for producing good quality teas. Experts say that tea produced here is rich in selenium, a trace mineral believed to enhance immunity and slow down the aging process.

Tourists are invited to spend a day as a tea farmer, to experience picking and processing tea leaves themselves.

For us, we feel recharged just by looking out into the beautiful sunset beyond the mountain stretches, while savoring a cup of fresh tea in the old-styled pavilion. If there be paradise on earth, this is it.

Contact the writers at [luxiangrui@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:luxiangrui@chinadaily.com.cn) and [yangjun@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:yangjun@chinadaily.com.cn).