

Extract from:

Fishing for Mountains

A wizened old lady with the gentlest of smiles served me breakfast the next morning at a makeshift café beside the local market. After swishing a ladle of steaming noodles into an enameled bowl, her wrinkled hand dropped in a fistful of chopped spring onion and a frightening spoonful of fiery red chilli flakes. Chopsticks in hand, I pinched a long slurp of noodles, but lightening fast, she pushed a few bowls of pungent-smelling pickled vegetables my way. ‘These are the house specialty, you must try them,’ she seemed to be saying. I wasn’t so sure. Like a mini smorgasbord, a dozen or more of the strange condiments lined my rickety wooden table, their biting vinegar aroma bracing my nostrils. Hmm, pickled vegetables, not my first choice in breakfast food. I tentatively grabbed at a bowl of pickled green beans with my chopsticks, and then another of chilli spiced potato, tossing a few slivers into the noodles, as much to get into the spirit of things as anything.

Before downing too much of the meal, I pulled out my camera for a few quick snaps, trying not to make too much of a fuss. No chance. Bemused faces materialised from all directions, growing to a crowd, all eager to have a sticky-beak at the *waiguoren* (foreigner) and his strange camera. I struggled to set up a tripod on the lumpy dirt floor, making yet more of a spectacle, as my breakfast went cold. But the photos had to take priority over my gourmandising. I was, after all, on assignment. Playing to the audience, I settled into my role as the camera-laden, photographically obsessed foreign devil. Photographers will always be as much the observed as we are the observers.

After first course, I headed across the street to see what else was cooking. At an outdoor café, large pots of bean-laden broth were bubbling on cookers beside stacks of bamboo baskets that puffed wafts of steam into shafts of morning sunlight. A hungry crowd was seated along bench tables shaded by a tangled clutch of umbrellas. It seemed half the town called in here on the way to work. Some folk dressed in suits, others in Mao jackets and caps, chatting while wolfing down dumplings and broth, some shouting into mobile phones. Mothers fed noodles to their children with chopsticks, other parents shared their babies with friends, and drifts of steam continued to roll from the outdoor kitchen as bamboo lids, large and small, were lifted and replaced over the cookers.

Threading their way through the crowd, young girls with raven-black ponytails ferried food to customers, laughing when I poked my camera into their steaming baskets. After taking such liberties I could hardly depart empty-handed. Purchasing a small basket of crescent shaped *jiaozi* (one of China’s ubiquitous dumpling snacks – in fact the very same *jiaozi* that appear on the cover of this book), I squeezed onto a bench seat beside an old Mao-jacketed man. He gave me a nod and returned to slurping his soup, occasionally biting chunks from a fistful of *mantou* (steamed bread) clutched in one hand. The *jiaozi* were as good as they looked, small gifts for the mouth: delectable minced pork and chive filling in the most delicate of rice-flour envelopes. If, as the Chinese consider, a visit to a town is incomplete without a meal, I was beginning to know Yangshuo.