

## Hiking Yellow Mountain, Tiger Leaping Gorge

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Marc Kuo / AP

On a hike of Tiger Leaping Gorge, you'll breathe crisp air under a high-altitude sun, gaze at snowcapped mountains in the distance, and hear the churning, wild waters of the river somewhere below.

For first-time visitors to China, Beijing and Shanghai are the default destinations. But for tourists who like to mix city travel with outdoor experiences, two natural landmarks in China stand out: Yellow Mountain and Tiger Leaping Gorge. Both are among the country's most popular and significant attractions, akin to the Grand Canyon in the U.S.

Yellow Mountain – Huangshan – has been an icon in Chinese culture for centuries. Tiger Leaping Gorge, about 240 miles from the Tibetan border, is one of the deepest gorges in the world.

Here are details on visiting each.

### YELLOW MOUNTAIN

High atop China's Yellow Mountain, standing amid billowing clouds, you'll want to reach out and grasp the silvery wisps in front of you. Then the clouds part to reveal a stunning mountain range of yellow granite spanning as far as the eye can see. A moment later, the scene changes once again as clouds drift on to reveal a canyon filled with a sea of peaks. The peculiar crests jut out amid smooth boulders and tall Chinese pine trees appear rooted in the rocks.

Although the name Huangshan, which means Yellow Mountain, suggests a single mountain, it is actually an entire mountain range spanning 58 square miles in southern Anhui province, some 300 miles southwest of Shanghai. Set aside at least two days for a visit.

The cliffs first formed 100 million years ago when an ancient sea disappeared. During the Ice Age, glaciers carved out more than 70 remarkable peaks. The scenery has long inspired poets and painters.

There are two routes up: the western steps (a longer hike with spectacular views) or the eastern steps (shorter and scenic but not as striking). Either can be done on a daylong hike or via cable car (80 yuan, about \$12).

I rode the eastern cableway up with my baby-boomer parents. The new cable cars, built in

Switzerland, are efficient, but during the summer months, you may have to line up with annoying tour groups and their megaphone-wielding guides.

On foot, the climb can be a painful pilgrimage. On a different trip with friends, I endured a nine-hour hike up the western steps, stayed overnight at a hotel at the summit, then withstood a nine-hour trek down the eastern steps the next day. I found myself at times literally breathless while trying to admire breathtaking views. Make sure to bring clothing appropriate for the season – freezing temperatures in winter, rainy summers – and buy a wooden walking stick at the base of the mountain for just over a dollar. Your knees will thank you later.

While physically challenging, the hike is straightforward logistically. Over the years, tens of thousands of stone steps have been carved into the side of the mountains allowing for a steady, safe climb. There are well-signed maps, as well as public toilets and snack bars along the way. En route, you'll have to sidestep your way around porters who carry food and supplies to the hotels, balancing cargo on long poles on their shoulders and backs. If you can't carry your own pack up, you can pay a porter to help you. You can even hire a porter to carry you up for about \$64.

Keep an eye out for rocks and trees with peculiar names (the signs include English translations): Flower Blooming on a Brush Tip, Welcoming Guest Pine, and Mobile Phone Rock. Make sure you get the chance to tiptoe across Aoyu Bei – Carp's Backbone – a very narrow 30-foot arch with sheer drops on both sides.

Stay at least one night on the summit (the highest peak is 6,200 feet above sea level) and wake up to watch the sunrise. Huangshan's best-kept secret may be the secluded 5.9-mile hike down the Xihai (West Sea) Grand Canyon. The circular four-hour route is only for the physically fit, taking you down steps, up mountain trails, over bridges and through tunnels. Tour groups don't come down this way, though, so it offers awesome views without crowds.

Many English-language websites can help you plan a trip, including [www.chinahighlights.com/huangshan/](http://www.chinahighlights.com/huangshan/) and <http://bit.ly/dFljus>. Buses from Tangkou, the town at the base of Huangshan, run daily to and from major cities like Nanjing, Hangzhou, Shanghai and Wuhan. From Tangkou, you can take a shuttle bus to the mountain entrance.

Hotels can be found in five places on the mountain. Prices and availability vary by season; book ahead. Entrance fees to the mountain are \$30 for adults, and \$9 for students, seniors and children.

## TIGER LEAPING GORGE

As you hike the Tiger Leaping Gorge, you'll breathe crisp air under a high-altitude sun, gaze at snowcapped mountains in the distance, and hear the churning, wild waters of the river somewhere down below. You'll probably step in donkey poo, too.

But this is a frontier adventure. A little donkey dung wasn't going to stop me, not even on the infamous "24-bend path," a rough and rocky road that spirals upward at least 24 times before reaching flatter terrain.

Local men who rent the donkeys targeted the women in our group, telling us we'd be too weak to make it all the way up.

“Don’t put yourself through it. Just hop on,” they incessantly beckoned. But adrenaline and pride only goaded me forward and before I knew it, I had finished the 24th bend.

I stood 13,000 feet above the Jinsha River, hiked 18 miles on a rocky trail past cascading waterfalls, and climbed down rugged cliffs on worn but sturdy ladders. All the while, there were panoramic views of majestic green mountains dotted with the humble villages and terraced rice fields of the southwestern province of Yunnan. We encountered plenty of goats and oxen working the fields, but only a handful of other human beings on the way.

Tucked snugly between the Yulong Snow Mountains in the east and the Haba Snow Mountains in the west, the gorge is named for a tiger that is said to have escaped humans by leaping across the fierce waters where the canyon narrows.

Extreme caution by hikers is warranted. Half a dozen people have died hiking the dirt trails, which can give way after heavy summer rainfalls. I experienced a near-miss here, getting too close to the edge while hiking down in July. The path gave way and I lost my balance, tumbling about 15 feet down the cliff. I landed precariously in a large bush, the last bit of vegetation before a rocky, vertical drop to the rushing river waters below. My six travel mates scrambled to form a human chain and pulled me up.

If you make it down the gorge (in one piece), stand on the slick boulders and feel the water’s power as it rushes past.

Plan to spend at least two days in the gorge, staying overnight at a local guesthouse midway. The weather is mild year-round, so visits are possible any time of year. And while winter is considered offseason, the scenery will be just as stunning, without heavy rainfall and washed-out paths.

The Tiger Leaping Gorge, or Hu Tiao Xia, is most easily reached from the city of Lijiang, which is located across the country by plane or train from Beijing or Shanghai. It’s worth spending a day or two in Lijiang to see the picturesque old town with its maze of cobblestone streets and canals. It’s a two-hour bus ride from Lijiang to Qiaotou for \$2, where you can flag a bus or hire a cab to get to the gorge. Details at <http://bit.ly/gqzSBU> or <http://bit.ly/hvyw8d>.

The gorge has a number of guesthouses run by the local Naxi, an ethnic group with a distinct language and culture. Dorm rooms go for about \$3, double rooms with shared bath from \$7 to \$10, and rooms with private bath, \$45. It’s best to travel with a group; a few solo travelers have been assaulted on the trails. Bring water, sunscreen and lip balm as protection from the high-altitude sun.