



Travel

## Tackling Tiger Leaping Gorge

**Victoria Brownlee** clambers up and around Tiger Leaping Gorge to create this how-to guide for tackling the upper trail

**A**lthough the Shanghai landscape can get wild at times, it's the sort of urban madness that often leaves you craving something a little more nature-driven, with fewer people and fresher air.

It was this desire that encouraged us to jump on a plane to Lijiang, and then head a couple hours north to the epic canyon on the Jinsha River passing between Jade Dragon Snow Mountain and Haba Snow Mountain, that creates the gorgeous natural phenomenon Tiger Leaping Gorge.

The canyon is, of course, now quite well set up for tourism, with visitors by the busload arriving daily to see the gorge along the lower path

(a two-hour-round walk down to the river at the midpoint of the gorge).

The lesser-known upper trail, though, remains surprisingly sparse and serene. Perhaps because it's a much harder endeavour, and taking a solid nine hours for amateur hikers, is best attempted over two days. But it's worth it. Choosing to hike the upper trail's 20-or-so kilometres will reward you with unforgettable scenery, all in relative peace and quiet away from the nearby throngs of tourists.

To get to Tiger Leaping Gorge, you can go directly from Lijiang (a beautiful, but tourist-driven old town with rose cake, tea and drum shops lining the streets), or stay a night in Qiaotou at the base of the hike if you're keen for an even earlier start the following day. Regardless, if you plan to hike the upper trail, you'll want to set off relatively early.

We stay in Lijiang, and after a two-hour drive the following morning, arrive at Qiaotou town

around 9.30am, where we purchase entry tickets for the upper trail hike (65RMB) at the Tiger Leaping Gorge ticket office. We then head a few minutes down the road to Jane's Tibetan Guest House for some Yunnanese coffee, plus a traditional Tibetan breakfast of butter tea, bread and yak butter.

Hearty breakfast aside, Jane's is great for two key reasons: one, it's close to the beginning of the hike, and you can set off on foot (with one of their hand-drawn maps); and two, because they'll store bags and backpacks for a small fee, meaning you won't have to lug all your belongings up the mountain (it'll be the best 5RMB you've ever spent).

“  
**We come across steep inclines and some big scrambles up**



they are as awful as everyone has told us: big steps, plenty of puffing and increasingly stinging calves. This part of the walk is so tough that we pass a number of men encouraging us to hop on their horses and donkeys and be jostled up the mountain. We consider momentarily, but given the small path size and the adjacent cliff face, we decide we're probably safer on our feet. Kudos to those animals, though.

Hitting the top of the summit at around 2,670m is magical (and only slightly terrifying if you're fearful of heights), and the views are nothing short of awesome.

Thankfully, from here the walk becomes much easier, and we skip along the mountainside and alpine paths, giving our thighs a wonderfully restorative break. It's this section of the hike that makes the climb worthwhile. And, although photos can't do justice to the vistas and the feeling of peace and serenity we find at the top, they give a hint of the wonder.

As the day goes on and our legs get tired, we pass by plenty of guest houses that are clean, affordable and offer spectacular views over the mountains. We consider stopping at Tea Horse Guest House, which has a huge and inviting terrace, although given we're completing the hike over two days, we plod on another hour and a half to Halfway Guest House.

One of the bigger guest houses on the upper path, Halfway offers

dorms with shared bathrooms from 30RMB, but we recommend splashing out for a 200RMB double room with unobstructed views over Tiger Leaping Gorge. The accommodation is basic, but with a warm shower and flushing toilets, we don't complain. Also, the food is well priced and plentiful, the beers cold and refreshing, and the terrace welcoming and convivial.

The next day allows for more joyful ambles along the relatively flat cliffside for the first hour (keep an eye out for the amazingly nimble mountain goats, perched in the most precarious positions, munching their way through their daily greens), although soon enough, we begin the decline, which is as steep as the incline and is surprisingly hard on the knees and calves.

We're grateful when Tina's Guest House comes into view, signalling the end of the hike. This is a popular stop just off the tourist road, offering lunch and bus transfers back to Lijiang.

But if you've got some blood left in your legs, we recommend an additional half hour walk along the road to Sean's Guest House in Walnut Grove. The views are epic, the village beautiful, and Sean's offers great lunch as well as well-deserved Shangri-La beers. The staff here will also help arrange a private transfer back to the Lijiang airport for you, from around 500RMB.

Heading back to the airport, we feel proud of what we've achieved. And although the hike is more challenging than we anticipated (and at times a little hairy along the thin paths), it's definitely manageable for those with little walking experience. If you're not in a rush, we recommend taking your time along the way, and extending the walk to a couple of nights to best enjoy the views you'll work so hard for.

China is a big and beautiful place, and Tiger Leaping Gorge is an unmissable stop along the way for adventurers and nature-lovers. The hiking path and guesthouses are a little rough around the edges, but overall, they're a welcome change from those in more tourist-filled destinations. Go now and attempt the upper trail while it still remains off the beaten path.



Setting out from Jane's, we pass by the edge of town (not particularly interesting) and continue for around 45 minutes towards the start of the hike. If you can get dropped off at the beginning of the trail, you'll save some energy; otherwise, this stretch is a good warm up.

After passing the sign 'Tiger leaping gorge hiking high way thus into', the hike amps up the difficulty level, and we come across steep inclines and some big scrambles up. We won't sugar coat it; it's hard going. One of our group even considers turning back. But we persevere with plenty of breaks along the way and after approximately two hours, arrive at Naxi Family Guest House, where we stop in their flower-filled courtyard for cold beers and a simple but tasty lunch (don't skip the fried mint leaves with pork ribs).

Following lunch, we continue up and along the steep path before arriving at a clearing and starting the dreaded 28 turns. And yes,

## Essential info

### HELPFUL TIPS

For the first half of the hike, there are locals who set up small convenience stores with water, bananas, chocolate and the likes. Regardless, it's worth carrying some water and supplies. Also, carry a roll of toilet paper - you'll find out why. Finally, when buying tickets, make sure you're buying entry to the upper path, and not just access to the lower path.

### GETTING THERE

Flights between Shanghai and Lijiang start at around 3,000RMB return on ctrip.com. From Lijiang, you can get a private transfer to Qiaotou, at the base of Tiger Leaping Gorge, from around 300RMB.

For more holiday inspiration and travel advice, see [timeoutshanghai.com/travel](http://timeoutshanghai.com/travel)