

## **Turning 30 Years Old in China: Reflection and Adventure in Guilin, My Favorite Travel Destination in the Country**

**By Donovan Cosby**

I never thought I'd turn 30 years old in China. Heck, when I first arrived in China at the ripe age of 25 I knew there was the possibility that I'd stick around teaching English for at least 2 years, but I never imagined that I'd go 5+ years strong. I guess living abroad and loving the experience really does that to you.

And so, after taking on countless travels, adventures, and unique experiences across China over the years, I decided early on that I'd celebrate my 30th birthday in Guilin, my favorite tourist destination in China, with my friend Jill, and escape the hustle and bustle of Shanghai for some R & R, sightseeing, and much needed reflection as I entered this new chapter of my life. I mean, karsts hills, bamboo rafting, five-hour cruises, scenic bike routes, hiking trails, and the most beautiful natural scenery you can find across China? 'Forget about it!'

### **DAY 1**

It was December 19<sup>th</sup>. I started my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in Guilin, China with a prayer. I thanked God for His many blessings over the course of my life and prayed for more to come in areas of happiness, love, companionship, health, wealth, morality, spirituality, and safety.

I also expressed gratitude for my life-changing experience in China. I'd been having the time of my life living in a new culture, exploring regions of the world I'd only seen on TV and in magazines, making friends with expats from across the globe, and teaching English to kids in the region. I was truly appreciative of His guiding me along this monumental call to adventure.

Next, I'd pose in front of the mirror and take a few photos of my physique

at the start of a new decade. A few of my friends near 40yrs. old had joked that "life is all downhill from 30", so I made sure to take the pictures to compare how I'd like in 10 years' time.

And just like that, Jill and I arrived at Mopanshan Pier, the docking point for a 5-hour cruise down Li River, around 9:45am. Over the next 5 hours we'd hang out on the ship's rooftop deck and take in Li River's awe-inspiring scenery around us.

We saw lush green hills big and small—their karst formation still the most extraordinary natural marvel I've seen on this planet until this very day. Well, besides the Grand Canyon of course.

My favorite part of the Li River cruise was catching sight of the scenic spot printed on the back of China's 20 RMB. Everyone ran to the top deck, whipped out their 20RMB note out and took a matching picture. How cool is it to see a landmark that's printed on a country's currency!?

I did a little reflecting, too; after all, the reason I chose Guilin to celebrate my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday was to escape the city life and soothe the spirit while being surrounded by nature. And although China's got plenty of awe-inspiring natural landscapes, landmarks, and tourist attractions to choose, there's just something about Guilin's karst-ridden backdrop that truly evokes an overwhelming sense of bliss, peace, and unparalleled mysticism, like no other. It really is Heaven on Earth.

My thoughts centered on the usual items: career path, personal goals, family, friends, and my ongoing road towards entrepreneurship. By the end of the cruise my phone was overflowing with notes about how I'd confidently take on the next few years!

We arrived in Yangshou just before 3pm, checked into our hotel, and in less than another hour we were off on bicycles—provided free of charge by our stay—and cruising down a road adjacent to Yulong River.

Turns out we rode right into an abrupt rainstorm rain over Yangshuo, and so for the rest of the night we'd kickback, watch TV, chat, scarf down some mouthwatering local food that included rice, vegetables, and beef, and prep for a busy next day. What a great way to bring in my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in China!

## **Day 2**

Day 2 began with a savory breakfast, lots of time on Facebook and Instagram, and a short bicycle trip to our first adventure of the day: bamboo rafting down Yulong River.

Here's what I want you to do: Type in "China" on Google images and chances are you'll see exactly what I'm referring to. Yes, there it is! See the photo of an elder Chinese man donning an Asian conical hat, standing atop of a bamboo raft on a river and casting a fishing net in front of a karst mountain? Bingo!

Majestic, isn't it? Now *this* is China, and no wonder it was an activity I'd always wanted to do since moving to the region.

It's a funny thing, however. After boarding the bamboo raft we found ourselves being pushed by a young twenty-something year old rocking jeans and a sweater. I guess we were too heavy for tradition!

For the next 45-minutes we'd sail along sparkling green water, pass over small waterfalls, and sail through Yangshou's breathtaking karst landscape. Whether a solo traveler or traveling with friends, family, or as a couple, I highly recommend bamboo rafting on Yulong River in Yangshuo!

Next on our agenda was a scenic bike ride around Yangshuo, which led us to a hike up Moon Hill, renowned for its colossal natural archway.

The best part about hiking up Moon Hill was the incredible view of Yangshuo from above. It's one thing seeing the hills from ground level, but grabbing a 360 view of the karst ridden landscape from high up was much more of a mind-blowing experience.

Hours later we'd cap the night off with a trip to the local spectacle, the Yangshuo Impressions Light Show. Advertised as one of the hottest attractions in Yangshuo—per our driver, the largest water show in the world—it was no surprise that everyone in the city showed up for the event.

Over the next 90 minutes we'd experience a memorable catalog of songs, chants, dances, and performances carried out by hundreds of Guilin's local residents and ethnic minority over a large body of water. I always love to see cultural shows whenever I travel, and Guilin's Yangshuo Impressions Light Show did not disappoint.

By the day's end I was more than satisfied spending my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration in Guilin. After all, it was something I never imagined doing when I arrived in China as a young 25-year old. I took a scenic cruise, rode a bamboo raft, ate delicious food, watched a cultural show, enjoyed spending time with a dear friend, and most importantly, was able to reflect on life with a sense of gratitude and growing optimism. And you know what, I couldn't have asked for a better way to start a new chapter in my life!

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