

# A three day hike through Tiger Leaping Gorge

**Dylan Black**  
Contributing Writer

"It says this hike is for experienced hikers only," Glenn said as I layed on a boulder and caught my breath.

I hadn't expected this much of a challenge, but then I hadn't really thought about the altitude. Taking the highest path had seemed a grand idea, a surefire way to the most spectacular views of the gorge. I wasn't in the best shape of my life, and I should have known that China would surprise me again.

It became customary in the weeks that followed to blame Glenn for the hike,

but not in an unfriendly way. We called him "the tour guide from hell," which might have been partially true in that he specifically chose the gorge as our destination.

The Tiger Leaping Gorge is approximately 13,000 feet deep, and the peaks of the Jade Dragon Snow Mountains on its Eastern slope are more than 19,000 feet high. Though the trail on the western slope is well traveled, it remains a formidable trek for the casual hiker.

After a minute or two more on the rock, I was ready to stand

upright again. It's our second day in the gorge, and it's still early.

We'd just finished the 24 bends, which I assure you is just as fun as it sounds: 24 steep, rocky switchbacks that take you up to the high trail. We had raced the sun, which was still stuck behind the mighty eastern peak until several hours after dawn. Its eerie to see the daylight creep around and above the peak, stalking behind and illuminating the trail.

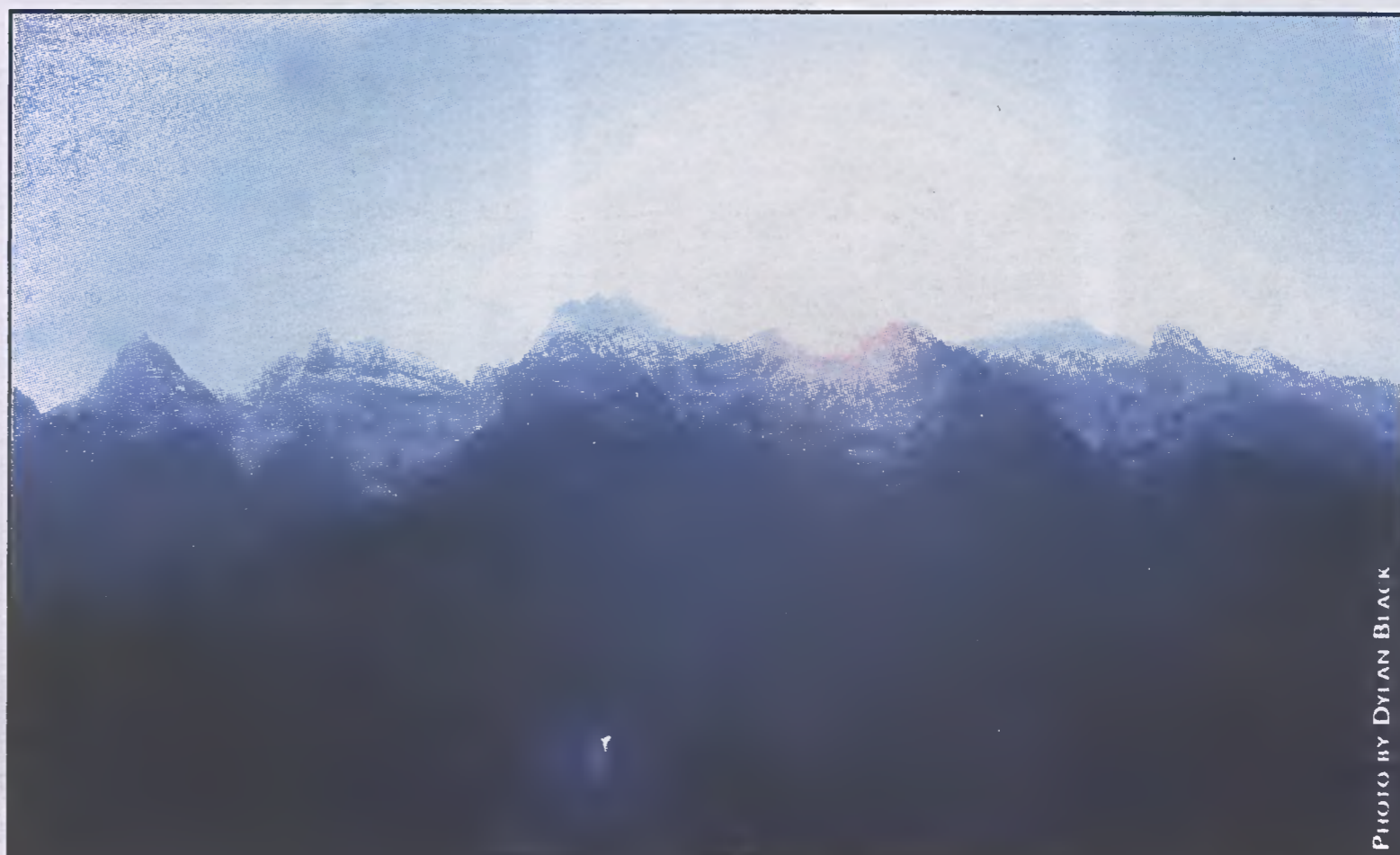
It was still quite cool, but I knew from the day before that the sun would make the hike much harder. We got to a small plateau above the bends just as the sun finally broke over the peak in earnest.

Our first day in the gorge was a bad one for me. We took a bus

from Li Jiang to the base of the trail where we bought tickets for the gorge. We then went to a guesthouse, featured prominently in our guidebook, where I checked my large bag and moved items I wouldn't need out of my pack and into the bag.

We started up the trail, and passed several small snack stands, farms, some small houses and a school as we slowly made our way up the base of the mountains.

I lost my wallet somewhere along the way, which I discovered when I nearly lost my passport as well. I managed to stay calm,



The sun shining on the Jade Dragon Mountains.

PHOTO BY DYLAN BLACK

which was relatively easy considering that we were thousands of miles from anyplace where I could do anything about it.

Our third day in the gorge was the shortest. We got up early with the express intent of leaving the middle-school kids behind us (who were staying at the guesthouse), was almost successful.

The last leg of the trail, at least the last one we hiked (we did close to 3/5ths of the trail) was mostly downhill and shaded, so the challenge of the previous day was present only in the lingering pain in my knees.

I was a wreck, winded and sore as an after-effect of the last day's hike. I had long since given up trying to shoulder my own pack;

Glenn had to carry it in front with his own on the back. I've never felt as weak or strained in my life as I did that day; a 4-hour basketball practice is nothing by comparison.

The kids caught us at the end, though by then I was too transfixed to notice them. We had reached not simply another guesthouse, but the Road. We had crossed it a few times, early in the hike, but this was the first time we'd seen it since the first day.

There were many beautiful

and serene moments in the gorge; the mountains and the people who live on them are equally impressive.

Plastic bottles and other trash lined a trail carved by an outsider while small boys darted along the gorge, crossing up and down the mail trail on mountain paths only the villagers know. There were old men herding goats, sometimes taking them through stretches barely wide enough for one person, let alone a herd.

The end of our gorge hike was a drive, long and somewhat treacherous, back down to where it began. The road is narrow and just high enough to be somewhat frightening. We roared along at

about 50 mph past rockslides and around blind corners, sometimes narrowly avoiding a truck coming the other way. We passed a large camp and store we had glimpsed from the trail, packed with tourists and villagers.

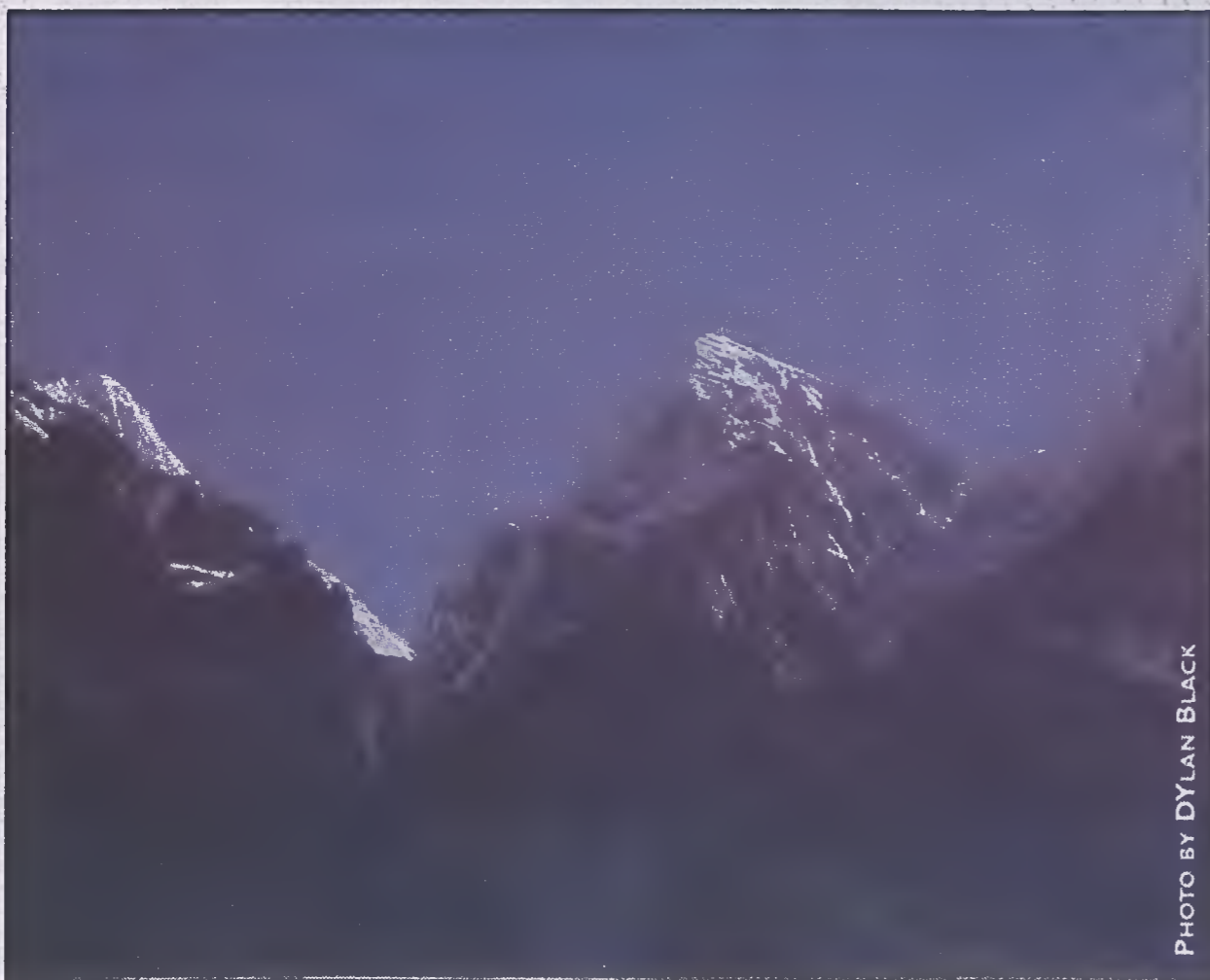
I was exhausted and angry - not about the wallet, but because we were leaving and had no clue of how we were going to do it.

When we finally discerned the location of the bus to Zhongdian, our next destination, I collapsed on the pavement like a boxer after the tenth round. I would spend the bulk of our remaining break recuperating in a posh hotel room, missing the mountains more with each day.☼



Base camp on the Yangtze River.

PHOTO BY DYLAN BLACK



The snow-covered Jade Dragon Mountains.

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Dylan and the group relaxing on the porch of the guesthouse.

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