

SNEAK PEAK The mountain-backed entrance to Lijiang's Hotel Pullman, right. Below: A villa bedroom at the same property.

YUNNAN EASE

Sizing up this southern Chinese province's two newest retreats.
BY RON GLUCKMAN



PULLMAN LIJIANG RESORT & SPA

One of China's most popular destinations, Lijiang has never lacked crowds, but luxury lodgings have been limited to just a couple of inns. Now, you can make that three. Designed like an ancient mountain village, the Pullman is a welcome addition to the scene both for its looks and its location, which is walking distance to Shuhe, the lesser visited and more atmospheric of Lijiang's heritage-listed Old Town areas.

The Pullman brand is meant to be a small side step from Sofitel, the Accor hotel group's premium category, with the same service standards, but not quite as luxurious fittings.

While that may be the case with its city hotels, this Yunnan gateway property pulls out all the stops and piles on the pampering.

There are only 120 rooms, the majority of which are massive private villas, all arrayed along stone lanes that wind around canals, ponds, and a lagoon crossed by an arched bridge. From the outside, the compounds appear austere, with tiled roofs tucked behind bamboo thickets and gray stone walls etched with Naxi tribal patterns. But there is nothing understated about the villas' interiors, which boast full-size living rooms with huge flat-screen TVs, plush master bedrooms, and gorgeous stone-floored bathrooms with big

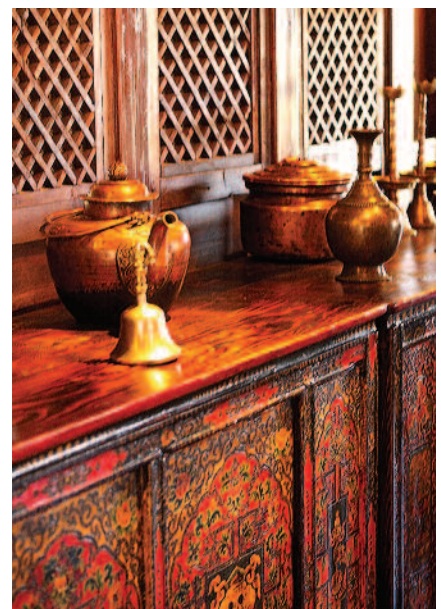
COURTESY OF PULLMAN LIJIANG RESORT & SPA

MAKING ROOM Clockwise from right: Inside one of Songtsam Retreat's 75 guest rooms; villa rooflines at the Pullman; Tibetan decor at Songtsam's restaurant; views of Songtsam from across a field of wildflowers.



tubs. Outside in the private courtyard is an even bigger tub for soaking under the stars, which are plentiful in Lijiang's nighttime sky.

The Mandara Spa is another highlight. It offers a menu of local and international treatments, of which my favorite was the Balinese scrub. I was wrapped in a mixture of yogurt and turmeric, then rubbed and scrubbed to a state of near nirvana. *Shuhe Old Town Entrance Rd.*; 86-888/530-0111; pullmanhotels.com; doubles from US\$260.



SONGTSAM RETREAT AT SHANGRI-LA

While mountain lodges are rare in China, this one is the real deal: a collection of stone cabins tucked into a fairytale setting some 3,400 meters above sea level. The location is north-west Yunnan's Zhongdian County, which was officially rebranded Shangri-La a decade ago. The name change is not without its merits. Gazing out on flowering meadows, alpine forests, and the citadel-like profile of the Ganden Sumtseling monastery, you feel like you've stepped into the pages of James Hilton's 1933 *Lost Horizon*.

A locally born Tibetan created Songtsam Retreat just over the hill from his childhood home. What began as a small guesthouse has evolved into an eclectic assemblage of 75 rooms, each outfitted in Tibetan antiques. The exquisite decor is part of the reason the retreat is now a member of the M Gallery Collection, another Accor brand, this time focusing on

small, distinctive properties.

Songtsam certainly qualifies on that account. General manager Patrick Druet, who roams around the grounds in a Tibetan robe, proudly notes that virtually all of the staff is local, and that few finished school. What they lack in experience, they more than compensate for in eagerness and warmth.

Yet this ambitious endeavor sometimes comes up short. The room decor is arresting, but amid all the Tibetan cupboards and cabinets, it would have been nice to have had a closet

to hang up a shirt. The platform beds, while big, could benefit from a bit more padding. And I'd happily exchange my hand-painted nightstands for a place to set up a laptop.

Still, the sun rises every morning over mesmerizing countryside. You can soak it all up on your private terrace, sipping yak-butter tea and listening to the sounds of cowbells chiming in the field. Even with a few rough edges, this one-of-a-kind getaway beckons the romantic adventurer. *Song Zan Lin Ka*; 86-887/828-5555; mgallery.com; doubles from US\$190. ©