

HOT SPOTS | MAVIS TEO

The Hidden Valley Resort, Shangri-la

THE RESORT IN AUTHOR JAMES HILTON'S FAMOUS UTOPIA? I'm afraid not. The Shangri-La in Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, about a lamasery ensconced in a remote mountain range where the inhabitants never age, is supposed to be in the Kunlun Mountains, in Tibet. The Shangri-La in which the Hidden Valley Resort stands was known as Zhongdian until 2001, when it trumped other Chinese counties to be associated with Hilton's nirvana, as part of efforts to boost tourism. This Shangri-La sits 3,300 metres above sea level on the Tibetan Plateau, in southwest China's Yunnan province, which is bordered by Tibet, Sichuan and Guizhou provinces, and Myanmar.

DOES IT LIVE UP TO THE SHANGRI-LA NAME? Yes, it is how you might imagine Hilton's utopia – fringed by crystalline alpine lakes, snow-capped mountains and dewy grassland, with animals grazing next to gurgling brooks and members of ethnic minorities in colourful dress practising age-old customs in quaint, ancient towns. This part of Yunnan province was once home to the tea horse route, 6,000km of tracks that wound through some of the world's most challenging terrain and which traders once trudged with cargoes of tea, Tibetan horses, silver, salt and other commodities.

TELL US ABOUT THE RESORT. Opened last February, the property sits on a seven-hectare meadow with its back to a mountain. It is the brainchild of four childhood friends from Singapore, who discovered the

spot in 2012 while on a stag party. One of the quartet is architect Calvin Sim Chen Min, who worked on W Maldives and Ritz-Carlton Residences Singapore. He took on the design and building of the resort, which was dreamed up as a retirement retreat for the friends' sunset years. Enthusiastic feedback from visitors got them thinking, and the idea of a resort was born.

IT TOOK THEM SIX YEARS TO BUILD THE PLACE? Getting the ground ready alone took a few years. High-tension wires had to be strung and underground plumbing, a waste purification system and Wi-fi cables installed. A 150-year-old house belonging to a Tibetan village chief was dismantled log by log and hauled about 1km to the site by yaks to become a nine-bedroom house. The other accommodation consists of luxury tents (top and above right), with heated king-size beds, Japanese-style toilets and bathtubs, and wood-burning stoves. A lobby building has a communal dining space and a bar with a small but well-curated collection of whiskies and local highland barley wine.

IS THE FOOD WORTH STAYING IN FOR? Although there is only one kitchen, the culinary team doesn't disappoint. The menu is varied, with dishes including coarse-cut noodles drenched in chilli oil, yak pizza smothered with gooey mozzarella, yak meat pot and Korean bibimbap. On our last night, staff prepared a barbecue and built a bonfire, which the Tibetan staff sang and danced around, cajoling guests to join in.



WHAT ELSE IS THERE TO DO? It's recommended that guests stay for at least five nights, as it can take a few days to acclimatise to the altitude. Once you're ready to take on the mountains, go on a guided hike to forage for tender bamboo shoots, in spring, and matsutake mushrooms, in summer. For those who prefer to ride, two Tibetan horses stand ready to bear guests across the verdant landscape. And look out for Simba, a Tibetan mastiff that features in photos taken by visitors tickled by the dog's size.

BUT SURELY WE DIDN'T HOP ON A PLANE JUST TO HANG OUT IN A RESORT? Fear not. The Hidden Valley Resort is in Bisong Village, which is worth a visit in itself. Hotel guests can glimpse local life by visiting the house of the groundsman, Laoye, whose family is one of 40 living in Bisong. His daughter-in-law shows guests how to make

tsampa, a doughy concoction of roasted barley flour and butter tea, and Laoye demonstrates how to eat it. Bisong also has an "old town", the Songzanlin Monastery and a market. Guests can sample beer at the award-winning Shangri-La Highland Craft Brewery, which uses water from a lake 4,000 metres above sea level, German technology and highland barley. Or take an excursion to 600 sq km Napai Hai, which flips between grassland and lake, depending on the season, or the Potatso National Park, home to glassy lakes and lichen forests.

WE CAN'T WAIT TO GO! CAN WE AFFORD TO? Rates of US\$280 to US\$380 per person per night include round-trip transfers to Diqing Shangri-La Airport, full board and all excursions and experiences. The resort reopens on March 8 after a winter break. ■

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