

Yangtze River, China

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Tourist-toting riverboat in one of the Three Gorges Dam’s shiplocks. (Claire Walter photo)

Cruising the “New” Three Gorges

A writer returns to the Yangtze to see what the world’s largest dam has done to the world’s third-longest river and its people.

By Claire Walter

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I went to China in 1999 to take riverboat through the fabled Three Gorges carved by the Yangtze River through the mountains in the heart of China. I had to see these scenic wonders before were “gone” – immersed in a 425-mile-long lake behind a humongous new dam.

The 120-mile Three Gorges – Xiling, Wu, and Qutang – were indeed spectacular. Mountains rose with neck-craning steepness straight from the slender riverbanks. Timeless, terraced farms were etched into hillsides, and misty, wispy clouds hung

romantically onto the peaks. Such scenes inspired centuries of painters and poets centuries and more recent tourist brochures. Gritty river towns and Soviet-era factories remaining from China's first-wave industrialization were less romantic, but they were real. I returned to see what the dam had done.

Implementation of an Old Plan

The Yangtze River flows for 3,900 miles from the Tibetan Plateau through an enormous estuary near Shanghai to the Yellow Sea. Much of the lower river passes lazily through a pancake-flat landscape, and even before steamships, sampans plied these waters with relative ease. The Three Gorges in the river's middle section long presented a formidable, but not impossible, barrier to shipping. Piloting junks safely downstream as the raging river squeezed through these chasms was primarily a matter of steering away from treacherous shoals, but one in 10 boats was damaged and one in 20 was destroyed.

Only the traditional Chinese willingness to supply muscle where there were no machines made upstream shipping possible. Thick ropes harnessed armies of so-called trackers, naked and toiling, to ships. Either trudging through the roiling water, with only rope slippers for traction and a little protection, or walking along paths carved into stone cliffs above the river, the trackers towed ships upstream.

In 1898, a steam-powered English launch struggled more than 400 miles from Yichang east of the easternmost gorge to Chongqing west of the westernmost. The following year, trackers coaxed and dragged a couple of English gunboats with reinforced hulls through the Three Gorges too. The first passage unaided by trackers was in 1900, when an Englishman named Cornell Plant piloted an ironclad paddlewheeler to Chongqing. Plant spent 21 years surveying the river's twists, turns, rapids, shoals, rocks and cliffs for safer travel. The grateful Chinese erected a pink granite obelisk in his honor in a village just below the Xiling Gorge.

In 1919, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen proposed a giant dam to further tame the river, and in 1944, an American engineer named John Lucien Savage began to study the feasibility of such an undertaking, but the Communist Revolution of 1949 halted Sino-American cooperation, and plans for the dam were shelved.

In 1993, after Communism gave way to market socialism, a dam was begun at Sandouping, a wide bend in the Xiling Gorge. Slated for completion in 2009, it has been billed as China's largest construction effort since the Great Wall – in fact, the largest and at \$25 billion or more, the most expensive civil engineering project anywhere, ever. In 2003, ships lined up for the locks, hydroelectric generation began and the Yangtze's waters were brought under control.

Tourist Cruises

Modern tourist-toting passenger boats ply the Yangtze either upstream from Yichang, Wuhan or even Shanghai to Chongqing or downstream in reverse order. If you sail upstream from Wuhan or Shanghai, you will pass through the 230-foot-high, three-lock Gezhouba Dam, 25 miles below Yichang. It is a modest precursor new dam built. Instead of temples, caves and weathered limestone summits poking toward the clouds, the dam itself has become the Xiling Gorge's major attraction. The Wu Gorge boasts a dozen bewitching peaks towering over the river. The Qutang Gorge is the shortest, narrowest, westernmost and most dramatic of the trio.

The treacherous rocks that once claimed so many boats and so many lives were dynamited long ago to make navigation safer, but that did not alter the landscape. In 1999, just over a century after Captain Plant first steamed up the Yangtze, old communities still crowded close to the river, served by local boats that pulled up to slick stone steps to take on and discharge passengers and cargo. Small ferries chugged across, and even smaller rickety sampans traveled on family commerce. Fishermen standing on rocks at river's edge, slowly and patiently swished enormous hand nets. Since the dam was completed and the gorges flooded, such traditional river life has disappeared.

To make way for the dam and for the artificial lake, 1.5 million or more inhabitants were relocated from farms and from some 1,000 riverside settlements. Instead of traditional two-story dwellings, new towns provide six- and eight-story apartment buildings faced in antiseptic white tile perch on hillsides. New roads, bridges and tunnels link them, rapidly replacing small-craft river traffic.

Even the tourist spots have been altered. A motorized sampan trip up a scenic tributary to view the Three Lesser Gorges is a popular excursion to a Yangtze cruise. The original Three Lesser Gorges the Daning River were flooded, so cruise lines have developed a new Three Small Gorges site on Shennong Stream.

The Yangtze runs brown, because it carries so much silt, but the delicate tributaries – whether the Daning of the past or Shennong of the present – thread between narrow, mist-shrouded rock cliffs. Tracker re-enactors are used for local color at the head of the river on this popular side trip.

I wonder what became of the small, shrill-voiced monkeys that used to frolic on the Dicu Gorge's sandbars, more than 12 miles into Daning River excursion. These small simians, once common along much of the Three Gorges, were previously driven into Dicu Gorge. That is now flooded, and perhaps their last natural habitat too is gone. When I asked on my second trip, no one would tell me.

While the dam was being built, Chinese tourism officials promoted the final opportunity to see the Three Gorges, and now, they tell travelers that the Gorges are still there after all. And in some ways, they are.. To be sure, the surface of the river has risen some 450 higher above its natural level, and the spectacular mountains that once rose as much as 3,000 feet above the Yangtze now rise 2,500 feet. Still, that is nearly half the vertical of the Grand Canyon.

Twenty-five designated "scenic spots" have been inundated, but nine new ones have been developed, including Shennong Stream. While some antiquities are gone forever, others have been saved and protected, often in museums. As rising waters obliterated many Middle Yangtze landmarks, the obelisk honoring Plant was relocated but is difficult to see from the river.

The most dramatic difference between my two trips is that the once graceful and dramatic shoreline is now so unnatural. Dead and dying trees line the river's edge. The fishermen are gone. There are no more riverside rocks for them to stand on. In some places, including Yichang, passengers now access the riverboats via funiculars from the new towns in place of slippery old stone steps. On my second trip, I quickly learned to look up at the spectacular peaks rather than down at the brown river trapped between boring banks.

The Dam: Pro and Con

The dam has ardent supporters and equally ardent critics. The government gave three official reasons for building the dam. First was flood control. The lower Yangtze has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives – some 300,000 in the 1930s and 1,500 in 1998 in the last big flood. The flip side is the brown-running Yangtze also carries an enormous amount of silt, critical to downstream farmers. The second reason was hydroelectric generation equal to eight nuclear power plants, reducing air pollution from China's ancient coal-fired powerplants and without the hazards of nuclear generation. The third was to make the Yangtze navigable by oceangoing ships as far up as Chongqing, more than 1,500 miles from the Yellow Sea. Critics acknowledge these goals but feel that the human and environmental cost has been too high.

Whatever one thinks of the colossal dam, it's a done deal – and it the imposing highlight of a Yangtze trip. It is 1½ miles across and 600 feet high, half again as long as and 50 feet higher than the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River. Giant turbines spew torrential cascades of water below the dam, creating a never-ending tidal wave that challenges ships coming upstream toward Yichang and speeds those heading down. Five huge locks raise and lower ocean-going vessels and a unique ship elevator, under construction, will raise and lower smaller ships – in fact, the size of today's passenger ships.

Busloads of Chinese and overseas visitors disembark at a sightseeing center, complete with viewing platform to see the awesome site below. The jury is still out whether the dam is a major wonder of the modern world or mid-river nightmare with future problems. But it is worth seeing, as are the Three Gorges – perhaps stripped of some of their traditional texture but imposing nonetheless when you look up at the mountains that reach for the sky.

IF YOU GO

Spring and fall are the prime seasons for a Yangtze River trip. Rains and mist can come at any time, but summer tends to be hot and wet, and winter is generally cold and wet. A riverboat cruise featuring the Three Gorges takes three or four days (longer from Shanghai) is an included or optional feature on most packages to China. Tour operators use a total of 49 international-standard passenger ships. They feature cabins with private bathrooms, three meals a day (both Chinese and Western) and a multi-lingual crew that includes a river guide who offers narration of sites and attractions as the ship passes.

Information and direct booking of river cruises is available from Orient Royal Cruises (888-543-8088, www.orientcruisetravel.com), and Victoria Cruises (800-348-8084 and 212- 818-1680, www.victoriacruises.com). You can also check the websites for China-based Yangtze River Tour (www.yangtzerivertour.com, no U.S. phone number) or CITS Presidential Cruises (www.cits.net no U.S. phone number).

General information on China is available from China National Tourist Office, 550 N. Brand Blvd., Suite 910, Glendale, CA 91204; 800-670-2228 and 818-545-7507. Also, 350 Fifth Ave., Suite 6413, New York, NY 10118; 888-760-8218. Websites are www.cnto.org and www.discoverchinaforever.com. You can download the mandatory visa application form from these sites.

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