

FASCINATING CHINA

A visit to a snake farm

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■ LEAVING FOR CHINA

Finally it was September 15, 1995. After saving money for a long time, I finally left to visit China on a tour of 30 days. I was somewhat prepared for the Chinese way of life and I knew that certain areas, especially in the south-east, were rich from an herpetological point of view. I am not going to tell you about all my travel experiences, but I will tell about the day I arrived in Yangshuo.

■ SNAKEFARM

At September 18, I stayed in Yangshuo. This town is situated south-west from the town of Guilin which is easily accessible by plane or by train. The town is surrounded by mountains, a lot of green areas, rice-fields and little rivers. The temperature at that time of the year is about 28°C. I had high hopes of observing some snakes in this area and soon I met with mister Su, who spend his free time as a guide to earn some extra money. After explaining my interest in snakes to him, he told that the area in between Dali and Guilin is very rich in different species of snakes. Together with some other travellers we took a local bus for 4.5 Yuan (about

0.3 pound) along a provincial way in the direction of Guilin to visit a snakefarm. This snakefarm was located about 10 kms south of Guilin. From Yongshua it is about an 1.5 hours drive.

The farm existed only since two years. It was in fact, a big fence around a piece of natural land. The snakes, which can be watched here, live within this fence in their natural surroundings. After paying an entry fee of 30 Yuan, we were guided in small groups into the farm by an English speaking lady. She had plenty of time to answer all our questions about the beautiful snakes living in this area. The flora is a bit heathy and here and there creeks for the preys (frogs) for the different species of cobra's and ratsnakes. The only *Elaphe* I saw in this area was *Elaphe carinata*.

■ VENOMOUS SNAKES

Many Monocled Cobras and King Cobras live in the area between Wuzhou and Guilin. The King Cobra is said to reach maximum lengths of 10 meters and is completely black coloured. This snake is feared because after threatening, the snake elevates and tries to bite a human in his neck from which the venom can rapidly spread to the brain. Other venomous snakes occurring are called the five-steps and 48-steps snake, of which I don't know the correct name. These names refer to the impact of the venom. These species occur

predominantly around Guilin. Also different species of Ratsnakes occur, unfortunately I don't have any additional information.

■ UMBRELLA

It struck me that many people carried an umbrella, which was apparently not due to a bad weather forecast. Instead the umbrella is opened when walking beneath trees during the evening or night, because of the snakes living in the trees. The umbrella is also convenient when crossing a bridge. Regularly, snakes cross the way of unsuspecting pedestrians and by using the umbrella the snake can safely be removed from the bridge.

■ EGG-CLUTCHES

In the area of the farm we found numerous eggs of a Python, laying in the open air. The attendants try to intervene as little as possible to let things take their course. The possibility was also offered to have a picture taken together with a female python of about 15 kg. Entertainment all around!

■ MEDICINES

After the tour, of course several souvenirs could be bought. Although initially not very interested after some nosing around we saw some unexpected items. Snake-wine, several medicines and snake-meat, all due to some old Chinese traditions. Though I will never do this with my snakes, I was interested and asked for some more information. Mister Tang Ling Peng explained several customs. Snake-wine is white rice-wine with either a dead python or several other snakes in it and which is brewed for some time. Afterwards the wine is bottled in small amounts. Apparently this medicine raises

the potency and stimulates the bloodcirculation, as other snake-medicines do. In addition, different powders, cremes and pills are prepared from snakes to be used against rheumatism, bad bloodcirculation, stress and bad eyes. Whether it has any affect remains to be seen....

After spending several hours at this farm we returned to Yangshuo. If you ever visit China I like to recommend this visit, as it gives a good impression how snakes live and how they are established in the Chinese culture.

*Many thanks to: Snake King
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