



After the

Far from being spoiled by the construction of one of the world's largest dams, the spectacular Three Gorges on the Yangtze River remain one of China's premium tourist attractions.

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Sunset at
Wuxia Gorge in
central China's
Hubei Province

CHINA **THREE GORGES**

FLOOD

PHOTOGRAPHY: PICTURE MEDIA

MARCH 2012 **QANTAS 93**





The sheer chasm of Shennong Stream; Three Gorges Dam (right)

THE YANGTZE IS one of the most impressive of waterways, up there with the Amazon, Nile and Mekong as one of the great river systems of the world. To the Chinese, it is of immense importance. The area it drains is home to some 500 million people – roughly one in 14 of the Earth's population – and it has, through the centuries, been an essential artery for freight, communication and agriculture. While its devastating floods have drowned millions, the river has also inspired Chinese literature and art for millennia.

At the heart of the Yangtze (now more and more frequently spelled as Yangzi) lie the Three Gorges – Qutang, Wuxia and Xiling – where the river banks soar into the misty sky as the river winds between mountains. It is a sight so central to China that it appears on the 10 yuan banknote and is considered one of China's three great tourist draws alongside the Great Wall and Xi'an's Terracotta Warriors.

But it's not as it was. In 1994 China began building a mighty dam halfway down Xiling Gorge, the furthest downstream (and largest) of the three. Water began rising behind it from 2004. Since construction started, Chinese travel agents have touted the line, "Last chance to see the Three Gorges!" They have argued that once the water reaches full capacity, there will no longer be any gorges left to see. The water hit near capacity in 2008, but the cruises continue, as popular as ever. Rather than being put out of business by the dam, they have simply incorporated it as an attraction on the trip. Now, the line is: the Three Gorges aren't gone, just different.

So, are they still worth visiting? Old hands say the gorges were undeniably more impressive beforehand; by definition, an extra 100m to the water level (as is the case closest to the dam) must mean that there is 100m less of towering gorge above you. "Before the water level rose, we would have to crane our necks to see these peaks," one guide

says. However, the scenery is still impressive and the rising waters have made some tributaries more accessible – and the journey smoother and safer, lacking strong currents and rapids. And for some, the huge and controversial dam is as big an attraction as the scenery.

THE NORM IS to sail downstream from the city of Chongqing, in China's west, passing through the Qutang, Wuxia and Xiling gorges, before disembarking at the town of Yichang after three nights on board. It can also be done in reverse, with an extra night.

The downstream option sets sail from industrial Chongqing at about 9pm or 10pm, when many passengers are asleep. Out on deck, you quickly realise why. First impressions of the Yangtze at Chongqing are

DAM PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; SHENNONG/FENGDU WOMAN: CHRIS WRIGHT

not especially favourable: it smells and is jammed with industrial traffic – freighters and barges loom out of the darkness amid the cruise ships. In fact, being from Liverpool, my first impression of the Yangtze is that it is a lot like that city's River Mersey.

It's not until the second full day on Yangtze trips that you get into the gorges. The first is padded with lectures and demonstrations of local handicrafts. But when you reach the Qutang Gorge, normally before 7am on that second day, it is a sight to behold: usually shrouded in mist and low cloud, with sheer green slopes surging upwards towards rocky peaks. The Wuxia Gorge follows shortly afterwards, and the Xiling Gorge, within which the dam is built, in late afternoon.

The cruises all offer side trips, which vary from one operator to

another, but are central to the experience. Many take their first trip to the Ghost Temple at Fengdu, a town largely inundated by the rising water, whose former residents have been relocated higher up or elsewhere in China.

Yangzi Explorer offers an interesting alternative: it takes you to visit one family in a typical old-town home, and another which has been resettled in new accommodation, to see how their quality of life has been affected. The older houses are simple and unsophisticated, with clay or wooden walls and roof, and no obvious signs of plumbing. The new houses built for repatriated villagers are much bigger brick-and-concrete constructions with air-conditioning, several rooms and modern appliances. The official message is quite clear: by moving, ➤

Dam right

THE THREE GORGES DAM is one of the most controversial infrastructure projects ever attempted. It displaced more than 1.4 million people, who were given (often better) homes elsewhere. But, the end of their communities was not something they had a say in and has particularly disturbed the elderly. Many archaeological and cultural sites were inundated, and more than 1000 towns and villages. There are also grave concerns over the dam's environmental impact. The Chinese government recently admitted that it has had negative, unforeseen impacts such as soil erosion and the pollution of downstream water.

The dam's 26 generators (whose number will rise to 32 this year) together produce 18.2 megawatts annually (ultimately 22.5 MW), some 10 per cent of the country's yearly power output – a big plus for a China under pressure to acknowledge environmental concerns and move away from burning coal as a source of electricity. Flood control rather than hydro-electric power, however, provided the main imperative for building the dam. Over the centuries, millions of people have died from flooding of the Yangtze – 145,000 in 1931 alone, and 4150 as recently as 1998. The dam is intended to help prevent such devastation.



CHINA **THREE GORGES**

THREE GORGES CHINA



GORGEOUS GORGES

There's a wide range of options available for visiting the Three Gorges. Top of them, and targeted at the Western market, is the *Yangzi Explorer*. Here, your money buys three-course meals, Chinese and European cuisine, perfect spoken English, an onboard doctor, personalised service and plenty of entertainment – from lectures on the region and demonstrations of Chinese art to tai chi and cabaret.

Next down the price chain come five-star cruises such as those of the Victoria group,

tailored more towards Chinese tastes. The cheapest and quickest way to see the gorges is by using one of the local public transport options such as a hydrofoil.

While Chongqing – with a population of 32 million within its municipality – is easily accessible from all over China, and has international flights from Singapore and Hong Kong, Yichang has a much smaller airport and presents a few logistical challenges. Most people fly on from there to Shanghai or Beijing in order to get home.



people have improved their standard of living. Of course, the dislocated communities didn't actually have a choice in the matter.

On day two, many cruises also offer a side trip in smaller craft up tributaries to the Little Three Gorges, or to the Shennong Stream. Some find these more impressive than the main attraction, with the chasms noticeably more sheer. It is a chance to meet one of China's minority races, the Tujia, famed for their boatmen who for thousands of years have hauled boats upstream by hand – naked (although not, these days, when the tourists visit). The women have a curious tradition where they are expected to cry for up to a month before their weddings (to show how much they will miss their families).

On the morning of day three, the side trip is the dam itself, which has been built into the fabric of the Three Gorges tourist experience. Heading downstream, it is approached on the second evening, when cruise boats enter a series of five huge locks that take them down to the water level below the dam (doing this upstream is particularly awe-inspiring: like lifting the *Titanic* over the Statue of Liberty, they say.) Some consider these locks the highlight of the trip and compare




Yangzi Explorer;
traditional dance
on board (above)

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS WRIGHT

it to the Panama Canal: each lock can take five or six ships – vessels up to 10,000 tons in weight. It is an imposing feeling to watch the 50m-high gates closing, sealing your ship in the basin.

Downstream, boats moor near the dam, facilitating visits to a park to view it at closer quarters, and to an exhibition centre. It's not an especially gripping sight unless a lot of water is being discharged, as it lacks the Hoover Dam's craggy majesty (although far wider, it's much less tall). Also unlike the Hoover Dam, you can't stand on top of it or see its turbine rooms. But for engineering buffs, it is still a must.

The last hour provides the only chance to see the gorges at pre-dam water levels before disembarking. Three days floating down them may not be as majestically scenic as it once was, but it's still extremely impressive, and provides a chance to understand the shifting patterns of China's journey through millennia of rich history. 

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