Lijiang—A Romantic’s Dream
By K. Sudhir

Tucked away in forested Yunnan
Hugging the panda-land of Sichuan
At the foot of the snow-clad Jade Dragon
It is a majestic vista that beckons

Abundant sunshine
Monsoon like rain
Permafrost and glacier
It is nature’s blend like no other

Jade Dragon—lowest latitude snow-capped mountain
Tiger Leaping Gorge—deep and scenic canyon
Shangri-La—mystical heaven on earth
All so close—nature left no dearth

Goullart’s “Forgotten Kingdom” of the Naxi
Led by wise men—the Mu then, mayors now
The Naxi adapt and evolve, yet preserve and nurture
Their unique language, music, and culture

The old towns of Lijiang and Shuhe
Cobblestone streets, centuries old architecture
A romantic’s gateway to an idyllic past
Living museums to the Naxi way of life

A junction on the “Ancient Tea Horse Road”
AKA the Southern Silk Route
From Sichuan to Yunnan to Tibet and beyond
Linked China and India through culture and trade

As day turns to night; with a magical rub
Old Town turns from museum to nightclub
Xinhua— the aptly named “New China” bar street
Races from quaint past to bawdy modernity

Couples in love
Singles looking for love
Parents with kids
Oh! What a mix!

The alcohol served could flood the nearby canal
Instead, it soothes nerves for all
As Naxi, hip-hop and pop fusion songs blare
Men and women; the young and the old all dance without a care

A picturesque natural landscape
A museum-like living townscape
A revelrous social nightscape
Lijiang—the trifecta for a romantic escape!
Notes:
1. Lijiang is in the province of Yunnan in southwest China—famous for its forests and botanical diversity.
2. Lijiang is in the northeast of Yunnan, bordering Sichuan province—native home for the panda.
3. The Jade Dragon Mountain is the backdrop for most pictures of Lijiang. It is the lowest latitude snow clad mountain with permafrost and glaciers around it.
4. The area around Lijiang that varies from the tropical, temperate to alpine due to the sharp height variations in the area. The winter is dry, and the summer has heavy rains.
5. Tiger Leaping Gorge is a scenic canyon about 2-3 hours drive from Lijiang—it is a deep and scenic canyon on the Jingsha river—a tributary of the Yangtze.
6. Shangri-La is a fictional place in the James Hilton’s “Lost Horizon,” which he describes as an earthly paradise. It is often used in cultural parlance to mean a utopian place. Different places in Pakistan and China have laid claim to being the real-life inspiration behind Shangri-La. Zhongdian in Yunnan, was renamed Shangri-La in 2001 to lay claim to the mythical Shangri-La. Critics call this a crass marketing tactic to capitalize on the growing tourism industry in Lijiang. Shangri-La is a Tibetan-majority county.
7. Lijiang is the cultural and political center of the Naxi (pronounced Nakhi) an ethnic minority in China. Peter Goullart, a Russian writer, immortalized the life of the Naxi, in his famous and well-received book, “The Forgotten Kingdom” after spending several years in the area. The Naxi have been very adaptive in terms of their political relationships with various invading powers—Mongols, Han Chinese etc. to preserve their unique identity and culture. The Mu family ruled the area in the past and managed political intrigue to the benefit of the Naxi. Recent mayors have also been very pragmatic about encouraging tourism to the area, but preserving the unique Naxi language, culture and music.
8. Lijiang and Shuhe are among the most well-preserved ancient towns in China. The beautiful cobblestone streets, businesses and homes in traditional architecture are all well-preserved. It is a living museum in the sense that it gives us a sense of long-ago past, but in an active, real-life setting, where the Naxi live, work and do business. While there have been obvious concessions to modern reality, tourism etc., the place evokes a sense of a simpler time in the past.
9. Lijiang is on what is called the Ancient Tea and Horse Road connecting Sichuan, Yunnan and Tibet, further extending to India. There was an active Tea and Horse trade along this route—and has been nicknamed as the Southern Silk Route, evoking the more famous (northern) Silk route that facilitated trade from China to the Mediterranean through central Asia.
10. The old town of Lijiang transforms magically at night. XinHua street is the most famous “Bar Street.” Xinhua means “New China” and is also the name of China’s official news agency. The street has a canal by its side, which adds to its character. The clubs have lots of live performances featuring Naxi as well as many forms of Western and Chinese pop and hip-hop music, sometimes all mixed in the form of “fusion” music. The range of people in the audience is quite varied: singles, young couples, and families. Lots of alcohol, song and dance, in a very accessible, semi-open and unique setting.