

an earthquake of 7.0 magnitude on the Richter Scale. Yangtze River cruises operate between Chongqing (Chungking) in the west and either Yichang or Wuhan in the east.

During World War II Chongqing served as the capital of China. Then Chongqing also played host to the American volunteer air corps known as the Flying Tigers. Today the port city of Chongqing is China's largest inland metropolis and the most important industrial city in southwestern China. Chongqing is 1,490 miles (2,398 kilometers) upstream from Shanghai and 660 miles (1,062 kilometers) from Beijing.

East of Chongqing near Fengdu is the Snow Jade Cave formed from karst, a limestone which is easily eroded. Created 50,000 years ago but only recently discovered by local farmers, the cave was opened to the public in late 2003. The Snow Jade Cave has a total length of one mile (1.6 kilometers).

Further downstream near Zhongxian is the Shibaozhai ("Precious Stone Fortress") Temple. This 12-story architectural gem dating back to the eighteenth century was originally built atop a 721-foot (220-meter) cliff. A wooden pavilion with stair access was added in 1819 and a further three stories were completed in 1956. When the filling of the reservoir has been completed in 2009 this temple will be preserved on a small island of its own by a coffer dam.

For most travelers the highlights of a Yangtze River cruise are the famed three gorges which are situated in a 118-mile (189-kilometer) stretch between Chongqing and Yichang. The 5-mile-long (8-kilometer-long) Qutang Gorge, the shortest and narrowest of the three, is known for the mists which swirl around its limestone peaks. Prior to the recent rise of the waters, the 25-mile-long (40-kilometer-long) Qutang Gorge, hemmed in by high cliffs, was no more than 500 feet (152 meters) wide. The Wu Gorge, sometimes said to be the most beautiful, also offers scenes of green mist-shrouded mountains. So sheer are the cliffs that legend has it that the sun never penetrates. The 47-mile-long (75-kilometer-long) Xi Ling Gorge, longest and historically the most dangerous of the three, is noted for its caves and rock formations. This latter gorge is bisected by the Three Gorges Dam.

Aside from the three gorges on the Yangtze River itself, there are also three breathtaking lesser gorges on the Daning River, a Yangtze tributary. A day trip up the Daning in a sampan is perhaps the most romantic and beautiful of any of the excursions offered during a Yangtze River cruise. Steep mountains rise on both sides of the clear Daning River, and the gorges are separated by lush terraced fields. Two ancient hanging coffins may also be seen there high up on the cliffs.

Yangtze River cruises must now transit the Three Gorges Dam, which contains the world's largest ship locks. The double five-stage locks are each 256 yards (230 meters) long, 31 yards (34 meters) wide and 4.6 yards (5 meters) deep. Many boats can fit easily into each lock concurrently. After transiting the locks the river boats stop and a very interesting tour is given of the Three Gorges Dam project.

Some Yangtze River cruises end at Yichang. However, mine continued downstream for two additional days along the Yangtze plain. In Jingzhou (Jiangling) a very touching tour was organized to a primary school. Jingzhou was the capital of China some 2,500 years ago, and remains of the old city wall can still be seen today.

My cruise concluded in the metropolis of Wuhan, a major industrial center and transportation hub. Wuhan is roughly midway between Beijing in the north and Guangzhou (Canton)



Passengers disembark from their comfortable Yangtze River cruise boat for an afternoon coach excursion.



Stalactites in the 50,000-year-old Snow Jade karst cave are lit by blue lights. The cave was opened to the public in the autumn of 2003.



A very touching tour to a Chinese primary school featured a welcome from a student brass band!