

# Land of the giants

Endearing pandas and a towering Buddha bewitch Alison Jane Reid on a colourful tour of central China



It's bamboo again for tea...



The Leshan Giant Buddha is carved into a cliff face

China, pandas, exquisite food, a giant Buddha... How could I say no? The offer of a trip to Sichuan Province was irresistible, and two weeks later I arrived in Chengdu in time to see the lights of Tianfu Square twinkling like a restless Manhattan of the Orient.

Chengdu is China's fourth largest city, and the maxim 'Work hard, play hard' could have been invented here. The city is a powerhouse for technology, finance and manufacturing, yet it also has extraordinary natural habitats on its doorstep. Added to the mix is a colourful street culture, where people come together to relax in its famous tea houses, play mah-jong or chat over a bowl of hotpot in the teeming street markets – Chengdu has been proclaimed a city of gastronomy by Unesco.

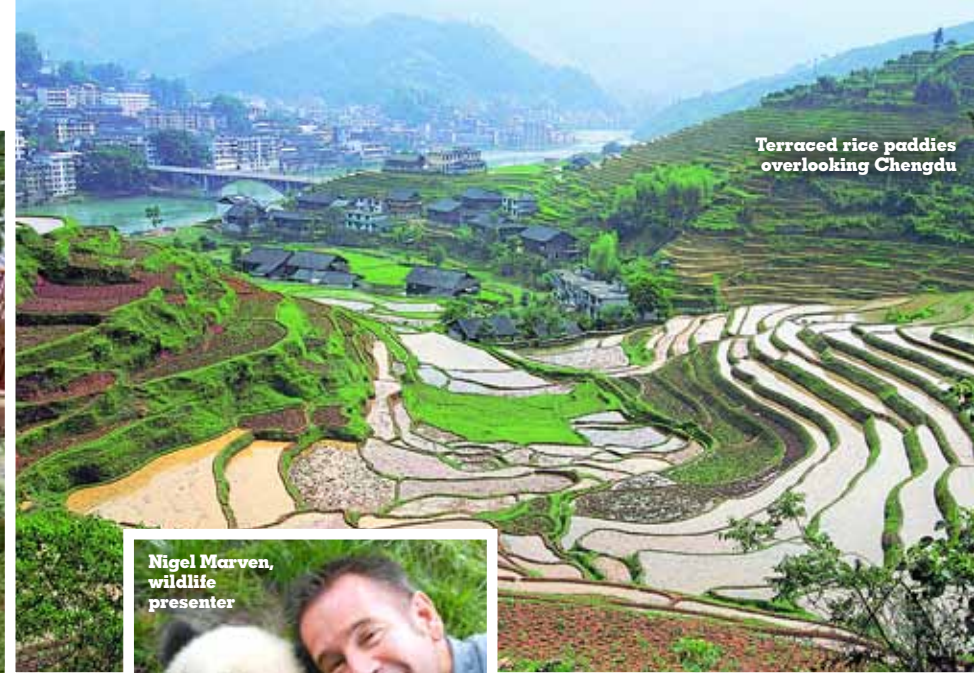
Above all, the people here are proud of their most iconic resident – the elusive giant panda. Today, an exciting conservation programme is helping to stabilise numbers and reverse the threat of extinction facing the world's most famous bear, a familiar emblem of China.

In my lofty, ultra-modern downtown hotel, I find it hard to tear myself away from

the view, as the city looks like a scene from a *Batman* film. The skyscrapers seem vast and superhuman, but every so often, a surprising patch of emerald green punctuates the grey – the Chinese love trees, and Chengdu is full of hanging roof gardens.

The next morning, after a delicious breakfast of dragon fruit, papaya, baby bananas and fruit bread, I'm driven by minibus to the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, the only one of its kind located in a metropolis. Shaded by trees and luxuriant bamboo (the panda's primary food source), the base is acclaimed internationally for its work in reversing the decline of the panda. Probably the world's favourite bear, the species only came to Western attention when it was discovered in Sichuan, central China, by the French missionary and zoologist Armand David in 1869.

By nine o'clock, crowds of curious Chinese and a few Western tourists have begun to gather by the viewing window of the softly lit nursery, waiting for the chance to see a very special young resident. Jiao Qing, which means 'Mother's Celebration', was just a few weeks old on my visit, and he's the only



Terraced rice paddies overlooking Chengdu

Nigel Marven, wildlife presenter



Sichuan is famous for its sizzling food



Feeding time for the panda cubs at the base

surviving panda cub to be born at the base in 2010. Breeding experts weren't even sure the baby's 15-year-old mother, Jiao Zi, was pregnant, because a panda foetus is so tiny and difficult to detect.

Hairless, blind and weighing a minuscule three to six ounces at birth, a panda cub is incredibly vulnerable and faces a battle for life. Happily, Jiao Qing is one of the most cherished infants in the world, and it's hoped one day he may be released into the wild as part of a programme to reintroduce the panda to its natural habitat, the dense bamboo forests of Sichuan.

The following day I'm up early to meet Nigel Marven, a British wildlife producer turned presenter who's invited our party on a trek into Shaanxi. A short plane hop from Chengdu, this part of China is home to a fifth of all remaining pandas in the wild, and we'll be venturing into thick bamboo forest on the Foping Reserve.

Nigel worked on the iconic *Life* series with Sir David Attenborough, and he's a natural, charismatic communicator. A cross between Indiana Jones and Crocodile Dundee, he's a heroic figure in China, admired for his intimate, captivating documentaries on the panda.

The sun breaks through the shimmering white monsoon skies as we arrive at a track surrounded by forested hills. We're met by a crack team of trackers on mobile phones and walkie-talkies who will take us to the bunker-style research base, our home for the night. It takes two or three hours of woodland hiking to reach the base, and not long after our arrival, we're tucking into a delicious meal of chicken, rice and vibrant spring greens from a local smallholding.

My room is just a concrete cell with a bed

and no heating, but I haven't come for the lap of luxury. I'm here for the experience of a lifetime – to see pandas in the wild. The next day we're up at dawn, and after a breakfast of porridge, apples and nuts, the trackers guide us past fast-flowing streams and sunlit clearings into the bamboo thickets that pandas love to feed on. They take us along special bamboo runs to areas where pandas have recently been spotted, and tell us to look out for fresh dung, or trees that have been used as scratching posts for the pandas' backsides.

The forest is a magical place to be, and the startling sight of a flying red and white squirrel propelling itself through the canopy is straight out of *Harry Potter*. There are streaks of intense blue sky set against the green of the bamboo. After two hours following a bamboo run, our trackers plunge deeper into the forest. It's slow, laborious work, but the sight of a fully grown man adeptly climbing the flimsiest of trees to scout for pandas is something I won't forget in a hurry.

Suddenly, the head tracker beckons to Nigel. A female has been spotted lying against a tree only a kilometre away. After a quick discussion, Nigel tells us the tracker will take one person at a time to see her. We'll need to be swift and silent, as the last thing we want to do is alarm the panda or alert her to our presence.

The first thing I see is the bamboo rustling and swaying, and I can hear the panda's nasal breathing. Then I catch a glimpse of the bear, lounging on her back looking contented and relaxed. We can't risk disturbing her, so after a few happy moments, we make a discreet retreat and contemplate our good luck.

Nigel smiles when we tell him of our close encounter. 'The frustrating thing is, you'll frequently hear the sound of a panda munching on bamboo, and it will be so close you can even hear it breathing, but you won't be able to see it through the vegetation.'

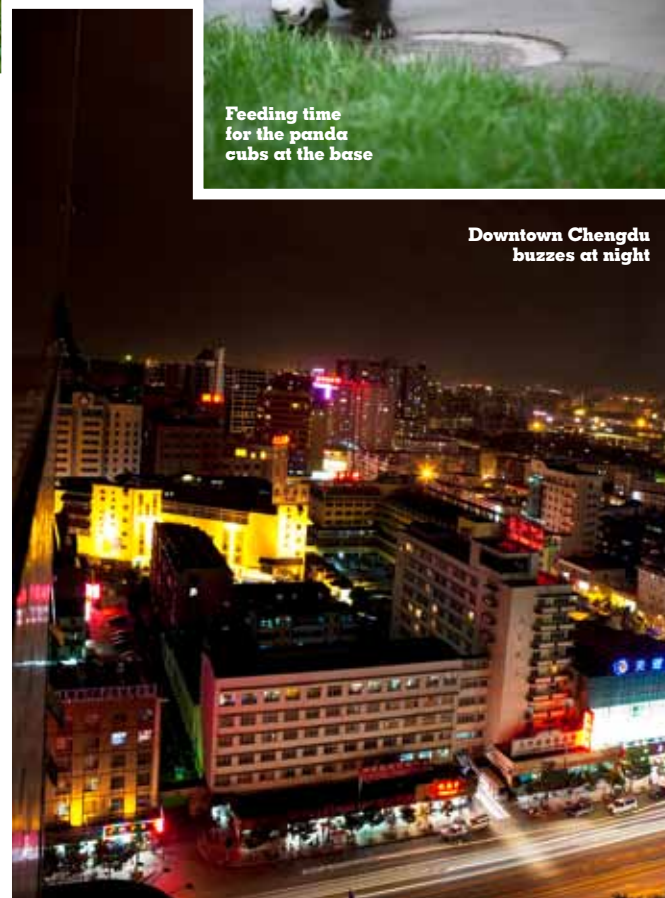
Pandas are famously shy and rarely confront

**'Hairless, blind and weighing a minuscule three to six ounces at birth, a panda cub faces a battle for life'**

their human inquisitors unless a mother is nursing or looking after cubs. 'Pandas move silently, and the moment they hear something rustle in the forest, they're gone,' says Nigel.

The next day I return to Chengdu to visit one of China's most important archaeological museums. The contemporary Jinsha Site Museum is cleverly built to preserve and show off the spectacular excavation of a palace and ceremonial site, which dates back to the Shu Kingdom, more than 3,000 years ago.

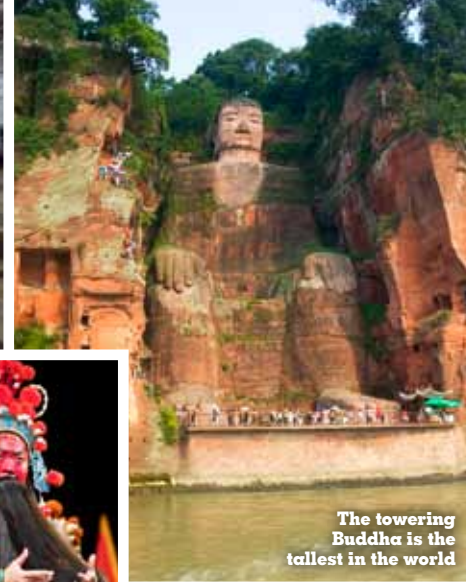
I join a guided tour round the vast ruins, littered with elephant tusks lying just as they would have done when they were used as sacrificial offerings. It's a fascinating window →



Downtown Chengdu buzzes at night



An ancient palace is preserved at the Jinsha Site Museum



The towering Buddha is the tallest in the world



A performer at the Sichuan Opera

on the spiritual lives of the ancient Chinese, and the rare gold artefacts on display are stunningly presented.

In the evening, I go in search of Chengdu's celebrated street culture and find it in noisy, colourful Jinli Street. It's this city's Covent Garden, a place of gilded turrets and crimson magic lanterns, with myriad opportunities to eat, or go shopping for an aromatic cedarwood fan or cheongsam, the iconic silk figure-hugging dress.

The road snakes past stalls selling exotic snacks – anyone for chilli octopus or candyfloss with fried sugar? Or perhaps you'd like to try the famous fiery hotpot dishes in a traditional tea house restaurant? Mostly, though, this is where locals come to meet friends, play cards, or watch the famous Sichuan Opera in the

## 'We're transported back to the intrigue and romance of the Imperial Court – and what a feast awaits us'

open air – by turns funny, cruel and rooted in historical symbolism – and relax into the night.

The next day, despite torrential rain, we set off on a five-hour drive to visit Mount Emei and the amazing Leshan Giant Buddha. The biggest stone carved Buddha in the world, it overlooks the confluence of three rivers and was chiselled out of a cliff face in the eighth century.

A local saying has it that 'no place under heaven is as beautiful as Mount Emei,' and it's hard to disagree. Rolling hills, flowing streams, monkeys, birds and clouds of butterflies flash past our window – it truly is an earthly paradise. No wonder it's worshipped as one of the four Buddhist holy mountains in

and serene in his fertile mountainous home.

In the evening, we dine in Chengdu's Jiu Yi Town restaurant, a painted labyrinth of grand rooms and intimate booths of exceptional detail and artistry. We're transported back to the culinary traditions, intrigue and romance of the Imperial Court – and what a feast awaits us. Sitting around a magnificent table, we graze on all manner of Sichuan delicacies: spider crabs' legs in spiced garlic breadcrumbs; melt-in-the-mouth pine nut and sesame pastries; and succulent roast sugar pork with delicate shiitake mushrooms. Jugs of refreshing kiwi fruit juice and rice wine add to the celebratory atmosphere.

The meal comes to a close with the chance to experience China's famous health-giving teas, full of flavour and delicacy. I cleanse my palate with a pot of perfumed Flying Snow tea from Mengding Mountain, and sit back to see whether it will give me the bloom it's said to bestow upon women.

I don't know if it's the tea or the rice wine, but something brings the colour to my cheeks. I like to think it's the glow of satisfaction that comes from having glimpsed my very first giant panda – the world's most extraordinary bear – thriving in the wild, still free to roam its bamboo kingdom. **SPIRIT&DESTINY**

• *Nigel Marven has been made a Panda Ambassador, a first for a Westerner, and was granted remarkable access by the Chinese authorities to make his Panda Week documentary for Channel Five. Watch it online at [www.five.tv/shows/panda-week](http://www.five.tv/shows/panda-week). For more information about Nigel's work, visit [www.nigelmarven.com](http://www.nigelmarven.com)*

## TRAVELLER'S CHECKS

### FRENCH LEAVE

Thalassotherapy has been making waves along the Brittany coastline for 200 years, and now a new website makes it easier for les rosbifs to get in on this French healing secret. Visit [www.wellness-brittanytourism.com](http://www.wellness-brittanytourism.com) for information on a wide range of wellbeing hotels and thalasso spas, which harness the properties of seawater to promote health. Particularly handy is the search engine that allows you to choose your preferences, whether you're looking for a couple's break, a relaxing getaway or help quitting smoking. What better excuse to run away to sea?

### IN THE PINK



Steep yourself in the colours and traditions of Rajasthan at a new boutique hotel outside Jaipur, India's fabled 'Pink City'. The villas of the Tree of Life Resort and Spa echo the local fairy-tale palaces and forts, with luxurious amenities and vibrant accessories. Spiritual attractions include yoga sessions, a meditation area with 100 statues of the god Ganesh, and twice-daily Hindu ceremonies in the resort's temple. Cookery lessons, organic food and the chance to help out at a local girls' school are also available. A luxury garden and spa villa costs from around £300 a night, B&B. See [www.treeofliferesorts.com](http://www.treeofliferesorts.com)

### HEAVENLY BODY

Want to shape up and love your body again? A Putkisto Method Break in Turkey could be just the ticket. The method was devised by Finnish dance and movement specialist Marja Putkisto, and uses stretching and breathing exercises to improve posture, muscle strength, movement and body awareness, as well as overall wellbeing. You'll also get a 'taster session' of Putkisto's Face Programme, an anti-ageing alternative to surgery. Two courses are planned for 2011, running from 7-14 May and 8-15 October. They take place at the Dionysos Estate on the Lycian Coast, with organic, biodynamic food and a spectacular canyon-top setting. From £1,300, half-board, including flights from London Heathrow, Bristol or Manchester, and all instruction. For details, see [www.exclusiveescapes.co.uk](http://www.exclusiveescapes.co.uk)

## FACT FILE

• On The Go offers an eight-day Sizzling Sichuan itinerary, including trips to the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding and the Leshan Giant Buddha, from £1,449 per person, based on two sharing. Price includes return international flights,

three-star accommodation and most meals. Call 020-7371 1113 or visit [www.onthegotours.com](http://www.onthegotours.com)

• To find out more about the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, visit [www.pandaworld.org.cn](http://www.pandaworld.org.cn)

• Terra Incognita offers 12-day treks in the Foping Reserve to see pandas in the wild from \$5,999 (around £3,779) per

person, full-board, including guides and gratuities. Flights not included. Call 0800-098

8454 or visit [www.ecotours.com](http://www.ecotours.com)

• British Airways, KLM and Air China offer regular flights to Beijing with transfers to Chengdu and Xian (for Foping).

• For more information on visiting Chengdu, go to [www.chengdu.gov.cn/echengdu/](http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/echengdu/)

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