

# A FATA MORGANA ADVENTURE

March 2018



## Amazing Datong!

-how to beat the crowds in China

Photo Brief: High Dynamic Range images for anyone

**W**elcome to ADVENTURE! This is the first issue of the new Fata Morgana Adventure. Adventure is a monthly publication that seeks to evolve the traditional blog. We will feature regular content and articles, but we are not trying to be a print magazine. Designed to be entirely electronic, Adventure seeks to go beyond the limitations of print media by being viewable in a wide variety of formats. You can take this with you on the go and view online via a phone, or you can download the .pdf and bring it up on your laptop while sitting on the couch. Maybe in the end you are old school and want to print it out, well that will work too; but you may not get a lot of the exciting features we will be adding. This first issue is like a “soft opening”, in that we really just need to get the kinks worked out. Over the next several months you will begin to see new sections with video, or animations. It should be fun!

**S**o that is all great, but what about the most important part? The content is the focus here, everything else is just gravy. Each edition will feature a main story that is a combination of exciting travel destinations and tricks you can use to make your experience there unique. This will be accompanied by the Photo Brief section that will teach you how to capture the images used in the feature story in simple and easy ways that you can do on everything from a phone to a high-end camera. The last regular section will be cool things you can do nearby the feature destination, with a focus on how to make it fun for all members of the family. Adventure travel is for the whole family, and we want to show you how to make it possible and fun! Along with these regular sections there will be a variety of other items, everything from cool product reviews to great places to stay.

**W**e're stoked to have you along for the ride and hopefully you will enjoy this electronic rag. Now scroll down, read, enjoy and dream of ways to make your own ADVENTURE!



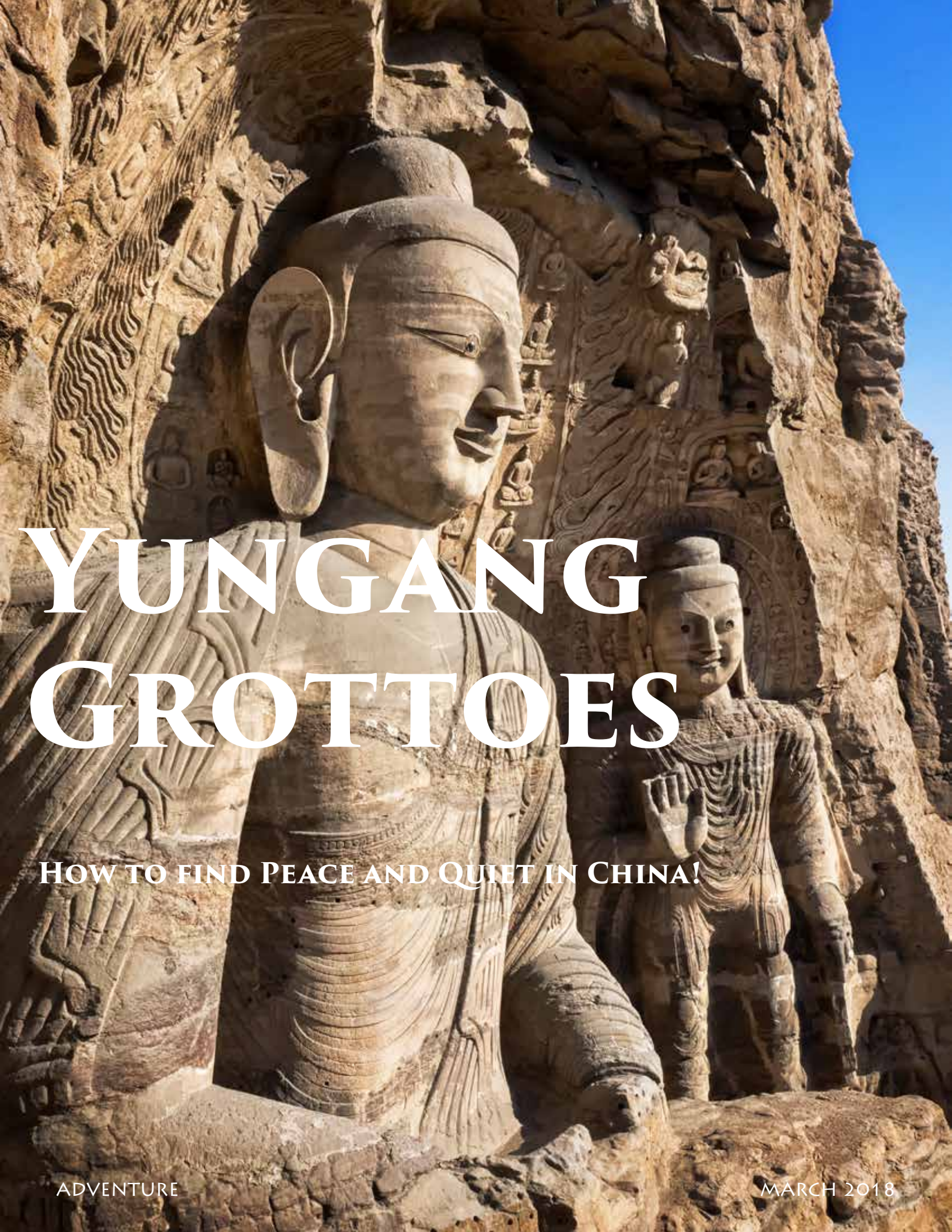
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# YUNGANG GROTTOES

HOW TO FIND PEACE AND QUIET IN CHINA!

China is a country blessed with a long and rich culture and history. Throughout the land are nearly countless amazing sights and world-famous landmarks, including 51 UNESCO World Heritage sites entirely within its borders; which is the most of any country in the world. Aside from these top-tier sites there are literally thousands of other places rated and administered by the China National Tourism Administration. Well this is great! Oh, except that China has 1.4 billion people and they all take holidays at the same time. So let's get this out there right up front: do not even attempt to visit these sites during designated national holidays. On almost any other given day you will share these sites with tens of thousands of your closest friends, Chinese love to travel and domestic tourism is booming. However there are tricks that you can use that can get you what you are looking even on some of the busiest days and on others you can have some of these magical places almost all to yourself!

A very short 40 minute airplane flight from Beijing over the mountains to the west brings you to the edge of the great Gobi Desert. For most of human history this place is where the Mongol horsemen held sway and the Chinese were seen as the outsiders. This is a land where rugged mountains give way to open plains of yellow clay, blowing dust and big open skies. In this meeting place of cultures is the ancient city of Datong. A small city by Chinese standards, Datong has about 3.5 million residents; which would make it about the size of Los Angeles! Like most of China, Datong has very modern infrastructure and has air service to several Chinese cities from a small airport as well as the soon to be completed high speed rail line. Getting there is very easy and it can serve as a two day detour for people visiting Beijing who have a little extra time.



The grottoes are located about a 30 minute drive west of town, next to one of the biggest coal mines in the world. The vast mining complex makes for a very bizarre neighbor for these ancient Buddhist caves but this is the heart of Chinese coal country, much like West Virginia in the US or the Ruhr in Germany. Fortunately you only ever really notice the mine on the drive in, once at the caves you are always facing the opposite direction. As with any major Chinese attraction there is a massive parking area, huge ticket office and a very touristy fake shopping street. The only thing missing here are western fast food and Starbucks! You will pass a Starbucks in the city, but don't get excited it is a fake store front intended to make the shopping center look more upscale.

All this is pretty standard fare in China and once you are through it the actual sites will leave you dumbfounded. In shocking contrast to the entrance area, the grottoes are refreshingly real and the antiquity is readily apparent. Kids will love it too as they can indulge their inner Indiana Jones! As with everything else in China, this is much bigger than you would expect. There are 53 major caves, 1,100 minor caves, 51,000 niches and tens of thousands of Buddha statues and other carvings. It is absolutely overwhelming to see in person, and to top it off there is even a Ming Dynasty fort on top of the cliff still keeping an eye out for approaching Mongols from the west.





COLORS, CARVINGS AND INFLUENCES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

The story of this ½ mile long cliff in barren Shanxi begins in the 5<sup>th</sup> century after the decline of the Jin Dynasty in northern China. In this time this part of China came under the domination of a formerly “barbarian” dynasty known as the Northern Wei. The Wei were astride the northern branch of the famed Silk Road, and this trade route brought Buddhism to the area very early on. Taken as the official religion, Buddhism enjoyed the support of the Wei emperors and it was because of them that work began at Yungang. The site along the cliff was the major trade road into the area and a big part of the northern Silk Road. Visitors

coming into the Northern Wei capital would pass these impressive statues and be impressed by the virtuous nature of the rulers. Or at least that was the idea.

The caves were a hive of activity, both religious and artistic, for the next century; at which time the Northern Wei moved their capital to Luoyang in an effort to become more “Chinese” and expand their power base. This was in 494 AD, but carvings continued using private funds and donations for 30 more years. The statues and carvings you see at Yungang today were mostly carved and painted over 1,500 years ago! There were some other periods of brief work 500 years later and the wooden temples you can see in front of the most impressive caves were built during the Qing Dynasty in 1621.





**D**uring its heyday Datong was a major cultural center, a far cry from the “small”, dusty, industrial city it is today. It was the capital of the Northern Wei and a major crossroads for international trade; which brought some very foreign influences to the grottoes being built. The most obvious influence is from India, as that is where Buddhism was emanating from. You can see a very strong Indian, or Southeast Asian, look in many of the Buddha carvings. They differ notably from the more traditional Chinese versions in both facial detail and clothing. For the casual visitor the feeling is more like temples found in Thailand. Another interesting feature to the caves is the thousands of dancing apsaras, which are female spirits of clouds and waters. Certainly there are not many clouds in desert Datong, nor is there much water! The form of the apsaras is distinct to the grottoes, but the overall impression on well-traveled visitors is a feeling of déjà vu with the temples of the great Khmer civilization in Cambodia.

**B**y far the most startling influence found in the caves comes from the civilizations of Mediterranean Europe! In several of the caves there is the distinct echo the far away world of ancient Greece and Rome. Although there is much discussion today about the new “Silk Roads” that China is building, these carvings prove that this is not a recent phenomenon. Many foreign tourists will be shocked to learn that it was not Marco Polo who first connected Europe and China, opening the Silk Road. If Marco passed through here, which he must have if his story is to be believed, then the carvings he saw were already almost 1,000 years old! Here in these isolated caves in northern China as you gaze upon very Greek carvings you can begin to appreciate just how old globalization truly is.





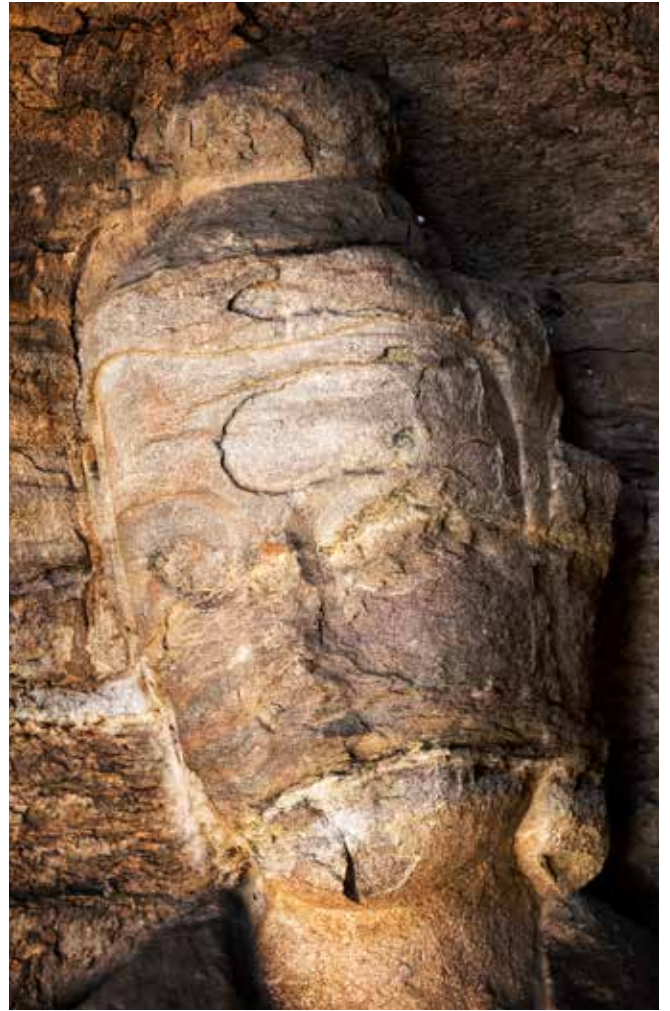
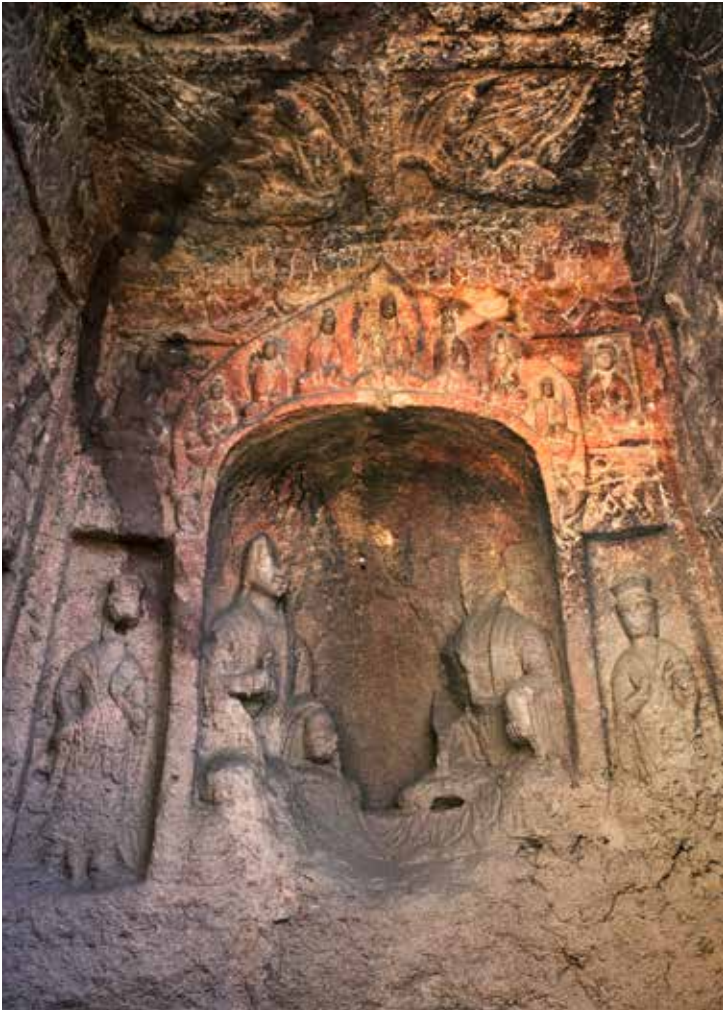
So, obviously, these are incredibly historic works of art that are ranked among the most important in the history of human civilization. Doesn't that also mean that at any given time there will be hordes of domestic Chinese tourists pouring off busses in the vast parking lot? Yes indeed! Yungang gets over 2 million visitors a year, and that number is only growing as more Chinese travel. Now that is small change compared to the Forbidden City in Beijing, which gets almost 15 million, but it is still enough to put off most visitors looking to tap into their inner Indiana Jones. These visitors want to feel a sense of discovery, tranquility and have the time to appreciate what they are seeing without being whacked on the head by countless selfie sticks.

Well there is good news, and this is one of the great tricks to learn while travelling in China. First it bears mentioning again: DO NOT go to tourist sites in China during national holidays. Just don't. Now with that in mind, try and do the following to get yourself the awesome experience you are looking for. In China the vast majority of the population follow the precepts of what is known as traditional Chinese medicine. Many of these practices also have their roots in very deep superstitions that not even the Cultural Revolution could dent. How does TCM help me avoid crowds? Simple, the vast majority of Chinese people who follow TCM will do almost anything to avoid being cold. Cold and wind both have major negative connotations in TCM and Chinese people will bundle up and really crank up the heat in the winter. So if you want to visit Yungang Grottoes, and pretty much have the place to yourself, just go in the cold winter months! This applies to any tourist spot in China, especially in the north.



Unfortunately most travelers aren't looking to visit north China and Mongolia in the depths of winter; so if you are locked into travelling during the warmer months are you just stuck with crowds? No, you can even minimize the crowds during the warmer months. The key to this is to get up early. This applies anywhere in the world, but in China it works especially well. Most Chinese travel in large groups, and these groups will all board their busses at the hotel at between 9-9:30am. Places like Yungang generally open at 8:30, which gives you a window to explore in relative peace. The trick is to wake up, eat, get to the attraction and be there at the ticket office at 8:30. This will give you at least 90 minutes head start before the busses start pouring in. Use this time to work your way through the closest areas to the gate and then head straight for the most famous landmarks. Just when you are finishing up turn around and you will see the hordes of people following the tour guide flags approaching. Score one for getting up early! Of course for the best experience go early in the morning during the winter, which is when these pictures were taken. We had the place to ourselves, literally.





# EMBRACE HIGH DYNAMIC RANGE IMAGES!

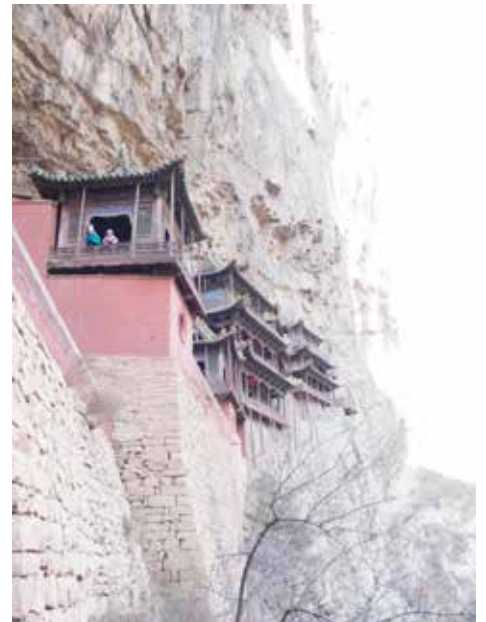


**Y**ou know the problem: there is an amazing shot with the subject in deep shadow with a bright blue sky behind. What do you do? If you shoot it with the sky correctly exposed, then your killer foreground will be too dark to see or just good old black. On the other hand, if you expose your subject correctly you will get a white blown out sky. Don't despair. With a little extra work you can get an image that will totally blow away your viewers! Welcome to the world of high dynamic range (HDR) imaging.

**S**o how does this photographic voodoo work? Simple really. All you are going to do is shoot two or maybe three pictures of the same thing. Huh? Yep, first expose correctly for the darker area to get all the color and detail and take a picture. Don't worry about that blown out sky. Now, instead of walking away in frustration, take a second picture with the sky correctly exposed. Look at all those amazing blues and clouds! That big black area where your subject is can just be ignored, you're doing the right thing. If you are feeling adventurous you can take a third image where the transition area is exposed to your liking. In this case you will end up with a too dark subject and a too bright sky, but overall the image will be viewable. I almost always shoot at least three images and I use this middle one as my "0" exposure. A final pro tip: try and shoot off a tripod or stable platform and don't move the camera between shots. This will ensure that everything lines up nicely.

Ok, now you have two or three pictures and they are all totally hot garbage by themselves. What next? For this you are going to need a photo editing program. If you have Photoshop just make each image a layer and mask out the over/under exposed area of the image on top. Of course most people don't use Photoshop, so what then? In Lightroom you are going to use the HDR Photo Merge feature that is already built in, score! If you don't have PS or Lightroom, then look at picking up a third party standalone program like Aurora HDR. This works incredibly well on both Windows and Mac computers. The best news is for people who don't feel like serious photo editing on a computer. Many new phones and cameras have an HDR feature built in. Just check your phone or camera manual and look for an HDR setting, you'll probably be surprised to find one already in there.

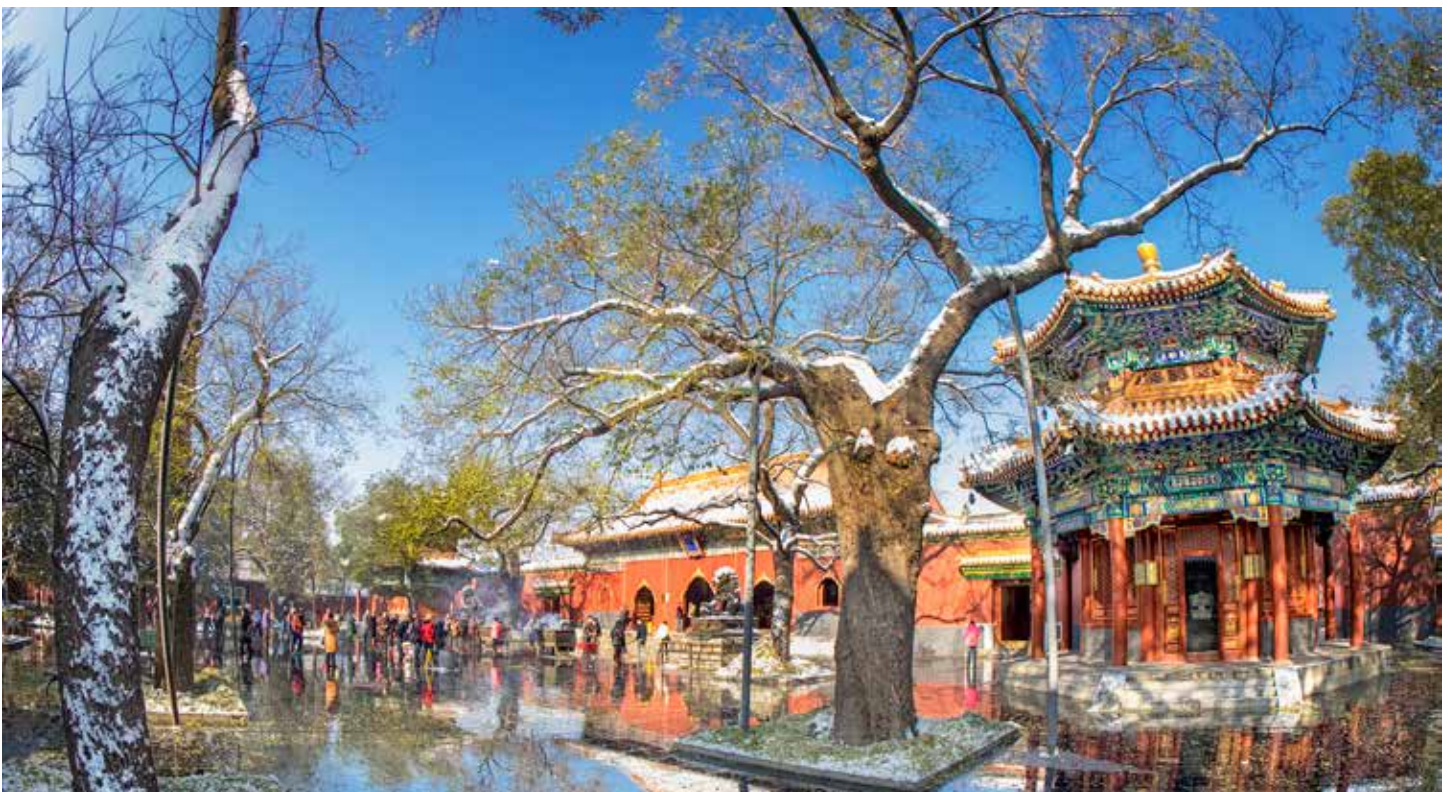




*Here is the bracketing and HDR process at work. The images above are the -1, 0, +1 original RAW photos. When combined they result in the image to the left. What a difference! The sky and bright cliff are from the -1, the lower cliff and above the temple is from the 0 and the temple is from the +1. Easy! This was done using a Photoshop add-in that is very basic and is similar to what phones or cameras can do internally on their own.*

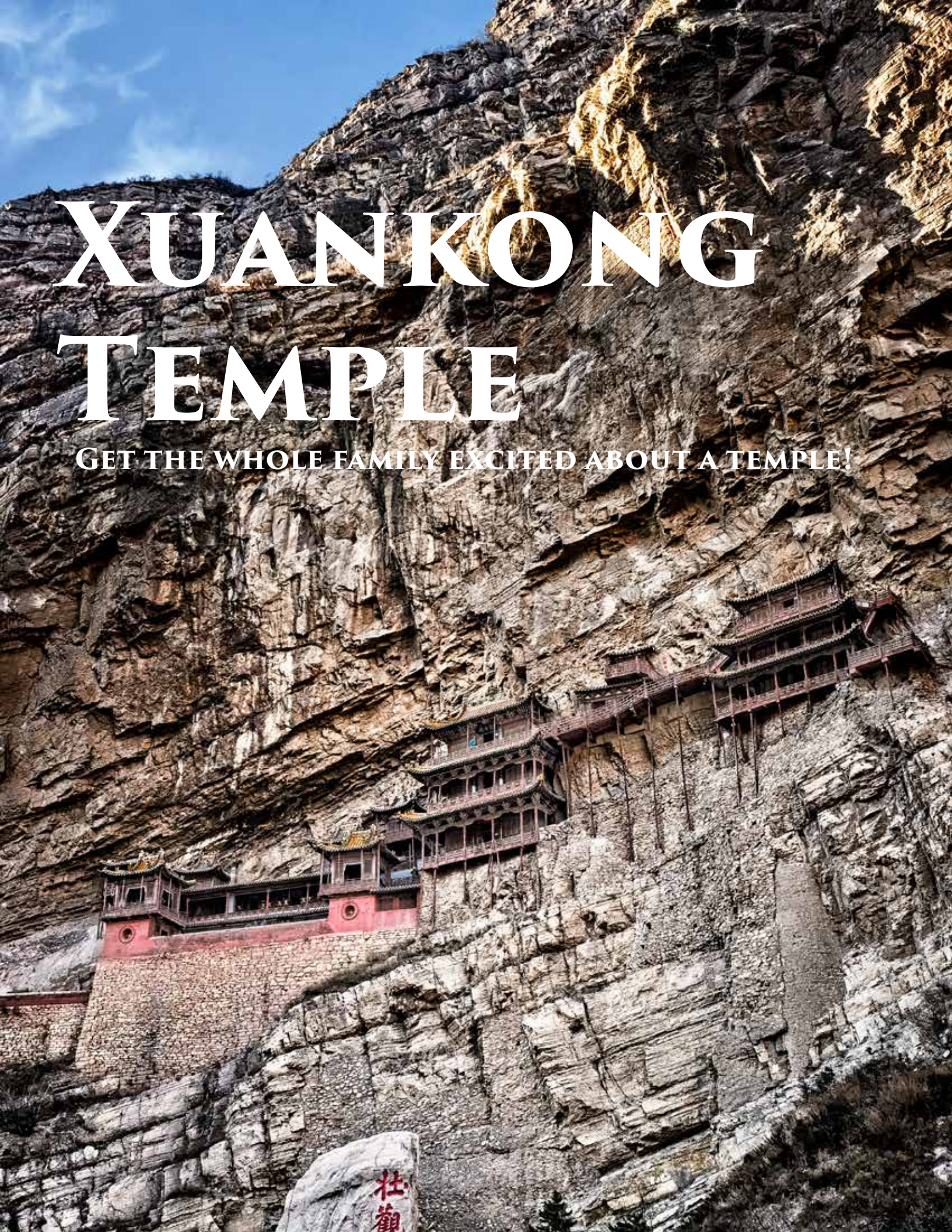


**T**here are too many variables to show you exactly how to do the software part of HDR images, but it can be incredibly easy to shoot. Almost any camera, with the exception of very low cost or older models, will have a bracketing feature. What this does is shoot a set number of photos every time you click the shutter. I often use a five step bracket on almost every shot, with the exception of underwater or action shots. When I click my shutter the camera will take five pictures automatically with the following exposures: -2, -1, 0, 1, 2. This means that my camera will shoot very underexposed, slightly underexposed, correctly exposed, slightly over exposed and very over exposed pictures. If your camera cannot do this automatically just simple do it yourself. It's more time consuming but it is possible. For those blessed with cameras that have a built in HDR function just wait a few seconds and BOOM a stunning composite image will be created for you! People using software will open the program and then select the images they want to use to create their HDR masterpiece and let the computer do the heavy lifting. This is just the tip of the iceberg, but try it and you'll be amazed what you've been missing. So lookup your camera, or phone, manual and find HDR or bracketing and just go from there. Enjoy!



# XUANKONG TEMPLE

GET THE WHOLE FAMILY EXCITED ABOUT A TEMPLE!



One of the big challenges of adventure travel is to get your kids excited about it. It seems crazy, as kids love a good adventure; but you need to sell them on it and educate them. Take them to a world-class museum and all you get is a “meh”; then take them to a simple playground outside it and you suddenly have the highlight of a trip! Kids are bizarre creatures, so let’s figure out a way to get them excited about a trip that doesn’t involve Disney characters.

Since we are focused on the Datong area in China we’ll use a great example of things you can do from that area. Located about an hour east of Datong in a deep canyon along Mount Heng is one of the coolest looking and most photogenic places you will ever find. About 250 feet up a sheer cliff face there is a temple built into the rock, seemingly just barely hanging on. Known as the Hanging Monastery, or Xuankong Temple if you want to be correct, this temple was first built about 1,500 years ago. What makes it even more unique is that this is the only known existing temple that combines all three great Chinese religions traditions: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. So your kids will say, “great another temple” when you tell them where you are going; but when they see it their jaws will drop.



What makes this so cool for kids is that it will require some serious bravery to climb up there, so there is a sense of accomplishment. Plus they will burn up plenty of energy climbing around, it's like a giant 1,500 year old jungle gym suspended precariously on a rock face. Who wouldn't love it? Of course this place has basically zero safety features, and in places like the US you would never be able to climb up there; but that is what makes it so much fun! The railings are only about thigh high on an adult, so they will barely keep kids in. There are tons of rickety stairs to climb and the views are amazing from up high. Of course the fact that Time magazine named this as one of the top-ten most odd and dangerous buildings in the world might give you pause. Great right? The point is that you need to look for places that let your kids physically exert themselves and give them a sense of accomplishment. Even better is if you can add a sense of adventure and the rewards of their efforts can be achieved in a fairly short amount of time. Give yourself an hour or so climb around this temple and everyone will be tired, happy and have some epic stories to tell their friends back at school!

P.S. REMEMBER THE TIPS IN THE FIRST ARTICLE! Don't get stuck here with crowds.



