



The land of Abundance

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China's Sichuan Province: more people than Germany and more superlatives than... almost anywhere. We explored it in the new Volvo XC60 R-DESIGN

Nothing breeds superlatives like China's Sichuan Province. Chongqing, its southwestern dynamo and now an independent prefecture, is the world's largest, fastest-growing city. This metropolis of 34 million people seems to spawn new skyscrapers, freeways, entire districts in an eye-blink. Yet just hours from this frantic city, as big as Belgium and more populous than Canada, winding roads snake alongside snow-fed streams through pristine valleys, then scale hills thick with alpine forests.

And we're in the perfect car for this mission. Our Volvo XC60 is superbly suited to conquering in comfort some of the toughest turf in China, purring up curving roads that climb treacherous switchbacks to the very Rooftop of the World – rugged plateaus bedecked with fluttering Tibetan prayer flags at heights above 4,000 meters. We picked it up outside the Volvo factory in Chongqing,

often called the Chicago of China. Others liken it to Detroit, a mainland Motor City. Perched along the Yangtze River, Chongqing ships goods to Shanghai and around the globe, thanks to the Three Gorges Dam, the world's biggest construction project, completed a few years ago. Chongqing also sits at the confluence of a network of new roads and railways, hub of the Go West scheme, a plan to develop the Chinese interior in an ambitious push that recalls America's New Deal, only vastly more ambitious and expensive.

Superlatives cannot convey the staggering development of this sky's-the-limit city, as I have been reminded over the dozen years I've tracked its transformation. On one visit to the world's largest motorcycle parts factory, I wandered down a ramp into the yard next door and inadvertently discovered the world's largest door maker.

Chinese know Chongqing as one of the furnace cities, as much for the blazing heat of summer as the renowned cuisine. Spicy doesn't really capture the true scope of Sichuan food, savored worldwide in countless Szechuanese restaurants. Laden with chillies, the real kick actually comes from the tiny but potent Sichuan peppercorn. Fuchsia Dunlop, the first westerner to graduate from Chengdu's prestigious Institute of Higher Cuisine, and author of *Land of Plenty: A Treasury of Sichuan Cooking*, explained to me the intricacies of Chinese cooking. Sichuan chefs, considered China's finest, not only style dishes with distinct slicing skill, they catalog food as to texture and even the feeling as it slides down one's throat. Such exactitude extends to a system that classifies dishes according to a handful of tastes, like sourness or bitterness. Sichuan peppers claim one category of their own, a distinct flavor that justifiably translates as "mind-numbing."

That's the feeling we share as we tuck into Chongqing's volcanic hotpot.

Fiery as the name suggests, a vat of chilies simmers with mind-numbing peppers. Brandishing chopsticks, we dip in various meats and vegetables, and are quickly soaked with sweat. It's a Chongqing staple in countless street markets and talk of the town – literally. In local pubs, conversation is heated, but few punters argue the merit of hotpot is hottest. Hence, there is no bigger Chongqing celebrity than He Yongzhe, the Hotpot Queen of China.

She started with a small corner stand. "We only had three tables at first," she says, when we meet at her lakeside

home, in the exclusive Fragrant Garden gated community in the leafy outskirts of Chongqing. Now she has over 300 restaurants, and no city in the world may soon be safe from this one-woman Global Warming; she has opened outlets in North America and Australia, and plans further expansion.

He Yongzhe is now a homegrown sensation. She employs 25,000 people. Several villages do nothing but farm chilli for her operation, which uses 5,000 tons per year. "Hotpot has put Chongqing on the map," she says.

Our bellies are still warm from a gluttonous hotpot feast when we depart

The flavor of Sichuan peppers translates as 'mind-numbing'





Left: Chongqing market. Below: a monk climbs the steps by Leshan's Buddha. Opposite: the grand gateway for those doing it the lazy way

Chongqing early the next morning, bound for the southern reaches of Sichuan Province, China's largest, until Chongqing was given independent status as a municipality a dozen years ago. Combined they have over 115 million people. By itself, Sichuan's population of nearly 85 million is bigger than that of the world's 14th largest country, Germany.

The bustle of hotpot city quickly cools in the big chill of the countryside. Gone is the haze of construction, spaghetti coils of new freeways and sky-rising glass towers. Farms are dotted with cottages, roofs curved and tiled in traditional Chinese manner. The landscape becomes hilly, sometimes carpeted with bushy tea plantations.

Our destination is Leshan, a charming but nondescript Chinese river town – at least until 700 years ago. Then, city fathers began carving a hillside Buddha. Building big must be in the Sichuan blood. Dafo, the world's biggest Buddha stands 71 meters tall.

Legend attributes the original concept to Haitong, a revered monk drawn to the circle of holy sites spiraling

up nearby Mount Emei. Some believe Dafo was designed as a kind of spiritual lighthouse, both to bless and alert passing boats on the Dadu He and Min He rivers, which crash together at the Buddha's enormous feet.

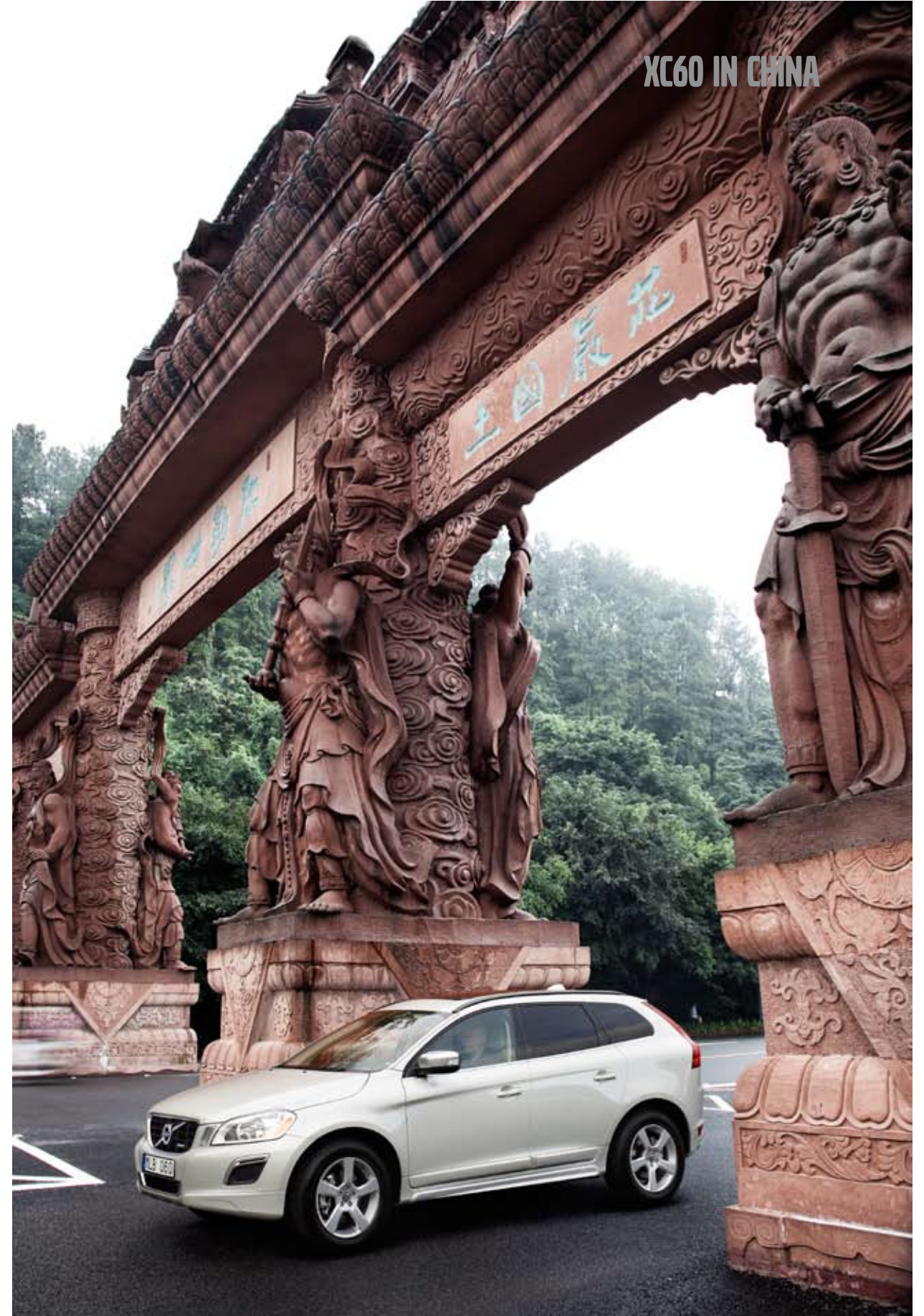
Even the emperor of China was expected to hike up the 3,100m summit to sacred Emei-shan. Pilgrims and backpackers do the circuit over several days, as trails pass scores of temples and shrines, scattered amongst flowers, forests and rather pesky monkeys. Most visitors take advantage of a road that ends near the summit. Even so, after a cable car cuts through the mist that seems to constantly hug the mountain, it's a good hour of huffing and puffing in the noticeably thin air to the peak.

We start early planning to picnic at the top, but are soon sidetracked. He Kaiguan, our guide from Chongqing has never been near Emei. Yet, he's Sichuanese, so intuitively senses that restaurants on the way serve some local specialty. Soon we are devouring dishes like Bamboo Shoots and Fried Meat, and Braised Chicken with River Sponge. All are so fresh we concur that it is the best meal of the trip. At least, until our descent the following day, when we feast on mounds of wild mushrooms.

Stuffed, we stagger up to the



Building big is in the Sichuan blood. Leshan's Buddha is 71m



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summit, where there are stunning views down sheer slopes, a rustic hotel, and little to do except adjust to the crisp air and speculate about tomorrow's sunrise. Emei's mist sometimes produces odd phenomena at sunrise: a colorful halo projected around onlookers.

We are all in a jolly and expectant mood as we tour the temple at the summit of Emei, which shares World Heritage Site status with nearby Leshan. As I practice my basic Chinese, I attract a crowd that includes a television crew from Chengdu, and Kevin, who studied in Calgary, Canada. Yang Xu, the gorgeous TV reporter, is amazed to hear that we are bound for distant Kangding the next day, and the stone towers of Danba, which she has heard about, but never

seen. Yet Kevin prefers to marvel at our Volvo expedition "My father has the same car, and last year, he drove to Emei himself," he notes, saying Volvo in the Chinese pronunciation "Wo-Wo" and with such gusto that it becomes an anthem for the journey.

From Emei, the going gets rough, but rewarding. We descend nearly 3,000m, then climb steadily into the western mountains of Sichuan. This is the home of the Kham, a rugged Tibetan people living at such extreme elevations, the plateaus are said to be perched on the Rooftop of the World. Shaggy yaks give the terrain a fairytale look, as do the distinctive trapezoidal pressed-Earth houses of the villages.

Nothing prepares us, though, for our first glimpse of the Danba towers. Standing 30-60m, they tower over the houses like Redwood trees. Some have four, eight or even 13 corners. With tiny lookout windows at the top of a series of interior stairways, they are thought to

have been built to withstand warring tribes and siege, yet even experts cannot say when or why these evocative watchtowers were built.

Residents offer scant illumination after we hike for hours to tower towns unreachable by road. Mao Dao, 60, who lives in a 200-year-old house beside one of eight towers in Mou Lou Cun village, insists they date back 1,000 years. Yet his son Ze Ren Zha Xi, a part-time guide who leads us to the top, maintains the towers are only half as old. They do seem to be a throwback to the medieval era (and indeed the only similar towers in the world are the medieval towers of San Gimignano in Italy).

From Danba, we want to reach Chengdu, but nobody is sure of the distance. Guessing it is a six, or eight-hour drive, we depart at dawn, but don't

Climbing onto "The Rooftop of the World". The "High Pass" in Sichuan's western mountains between Danba and Chengdu

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A panda at Chengdu's Research Base for Giant Panda Breeding. Some 80 per cent of the world's pandas live in and around Chengdu

reach Chengdu until 4am the next day. Much of the way, we are snarled in unimaginable traffic jams. In May 2008, an eight-magnitude earthquake rocked Sichuan, killing 70,000 people. Entire towns and miles of roads were devastated. Even 16 months later, rebuilding continues on a massive scale. The earthquake also threatened Sichuan's precarious population of panda bears. Some 80 percent of the world's pandas live in these parts. An iconic animal loved across China, the panda has seen its prospects uplifted by successful research in recent years.

"Since the 1980s, panda numbers have been on the rise," says Shen Fujun, who, as head of the Genetics Division at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding deserves a measure of the credit. Declines through the 1970s were due to factors that included loss of terrain and their enormous appetite for food – mainly bamboo, up to 30 pounds a day. Many speculated that extinction of the species was inevitable.

China responded with tough protection measures, setting aside vast tracts of land for preserves, and tackling poaching. Innovative breeding programs reversed the decline. "Early in the project, we had huge problems with mating and with high mortality. About 44 percent of the babies died," he says. "Now, almost all survive." Pandas are treated like the national treasures they have become; babies are removed from parents that sometimes killed offspring, and reared in safe wards. The public has also helped, flocking to view newborns in the nursery, and paying over 100 Euros to pose for pictures with pandas.

Our Sichuan tour ends languidly in Chengdu, capital of the province, and one of the oldest, proudest cities in China. As slow and serene as Chongqing is brash and bustling,

Pandas can each eat up to 30 pounds of bamboo a day



Top: the inscrutable towers of Danba. Above: a Tibetan girl who lives below them. Left, a painting of a Tibetan Buddhist god



Left: performers at Shu Feng Ya Yun opera house, Chengdu.
Opposite: tai chi in Renmin Park, Chengdu

Chengdu abounds with grand old teahouses and spacious parks where one can sit for hours, savoring the slow passage of time. Some parks and most teahouses offer the renowned Sichuan Opera, which is really a variety show with singing, shadow puppets, soap opera and the famous "face changing."

Dating back three centuries, and originating in Chengdu, face changing involves the deft switching of a facial mask on stage, often employing dozens in every show. Invariably the magical performances draw thunderous applause. We watch a flawless show one night at Shu Feng Ya Yun, the oldest opera house in Chengdu. But I'm more mesmerized by the slightly less polished performances that take place the park the next day, where opera novices play to crowds in pajamas, playing cards, gossiping and cheerfully spitting sunflower seeds.

"The people of Chengdu are all about living," confides Kieran Twomey, Irish manager of Chengdu's top hotel, Shangri-la. Named for the fictitious mountain paradise depicted in James Hilton's classic novel, "Lost Horizon," there is much of Shangri-la in Chengdu,



WHAT WE DROVE: XC60 R-DESIGN

Volvo has given the XC60 R-DESIGN some tweaks to improve driving pleasure, stiffening up the chassis and adding more damping to the suspension. They've also tuned the ratios to make the steering feel more sporty and immediate. Looks are improved with a new body-colored lower section and a trendy matt silk metallic finish on the tailpipes and trim. The XC60 also gets a set of 18" Cratus alloys, or you can really bling it up with a 20" option. Inside the cabin, centre stack swirling graphics match the seat trim and there are some discreet "R" logos extra aluminium inserts and sporty aluminium pedals.

China's laziest, most independent big city. Twomey describes how he bikes around the city, soaking it all in, men doing tai chi in the park, women sewing or cooking on the streets. "Chengdu has tremendous soul."

Indeed, Chengdu could be set somewhere in the Mediterranean, like southern Italy, where residents dress casually, argue loudly and eat enthusiastically. As fast as Chongqing is changing, Chengdu is stubbornly holding its charming course – for example, it is one of the few large Chinese cities that still boasts a statue of Mao in its main square.

In one park our last day, as tea is poured, and mahjong tiles are aggressively slammed on tables, I recall a saying in these parts: "The mountains are high, and the emperor is far away." For centuries in Chengdu it has been so, and, serendipitously, there is little sign of change ■

Map to come

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