

Dreams of moccasins and slippers

Gill Regan

My obsession with plants appeared very early in my life. For my twelfth birthday I was given a copy of *The Observer's Book of Wild Flowers* and a year later a copy of Clapham, Tutin and Warburg's *Flora*. Later, after reading the description of moccasin and lady's slipper orchids in an American book¹ I dreamed of seeing such wonderful flowers in the wild. My ambition was put on hold over the years because of work and family commitments but, eventually, when my husband and I had retired and the children were off our hands, we had the time and opportunity: in June 2009 my dream came true when Peter and I saw fantastic slipper orchids in China, a country I had wanted to visit for almost fifty years.

It all started when, out of the blue, we were invited to join a group going to Yunnan. In 1994 an Alpine Garden Society expedition had gone to China (the ACE expedition), and it was planned to retrace ACE's steps as far as possible. We flew to Hong Kong, then on to Kunming, and finally to Lijiang, where we stayed for six nights. We were hoping to search for plants at high altitude so it was vital to acclimatise gradually to avoid altitude sickness. Our first, easy day, started with a western style breakfast then a visit to a



Fig. 1 We soon left the Chinese tourists (in red) behind.



Fig. 2 *Paris polyphylla*

¹ *Michael O'Halloran, Gene Stratton Porter, 1915*

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Fig. 3 The slipper orchid of my dreams, *Cyripedium lichiangense*.

National Park along with many Chinese tourist groups (easily recognised by their long red waterproofs) who, after being photographed with the yaks (fig. 1), returned to their buses and then to the herbal medicine shop. We quickly left them far behind as we explored along the river bank. Very soon there were cries of delight as familiar plants were found – arisaemas, thalictrums, polygonatums, primulas, rhododendrons – and also others that we'd love to grow – *Cyripedium margaritaceum*, *Daphne aurantiaca* and wonderful *Paris polyphylla* (fig. 2). Back at the hotel our first challenge was chopsticks: it was a case of 'learn to eat with them or starve', so by the end of the holiday we were proficient but also several pounds lighter!

Next morning we returned to the Park. 'Wear gaiters and waterproof trousers', we were told, 'there are leeches.' Because of the altitude and the climb our progress was slow, but soon there were cries of horror, not delight. However, once we reached our destination we soon forgot the leeches as we found more orchids: *Cyripedium lichiangense* (fig. 3), *C. flavum* and *Calanthe tricarinata*. After a rather damp lunch (it was the start of the monsoon season) we continued looking for a rare meconopsis, which eventually we found. Later in the week we returned to the same area and climbed much higher, hoping to find *Paraquilegia*. The weather was kinder, and strolling through groves of *Philadelphus*, *Berberis*, roses and many other shrubs, trees, and herbaceous plants was a delight, and a reminder of how many garden plants came originally from Yunnan. The following day we visited the Naxi village where plant collector Joseph Rock spent many years.

On the journey to Zhongdian (known as Shangri La in the tourist industry), we visited Tiger Leaping Gorge, a popular tourist destination, and found *Arisaema candidissimum* growing high above the river. Later, by the roadside, we spotted *Thermopsis barbata* and *Stellera chamaejasme* var. *chrysantha*. As soon as we stopped to take photos, Tibetan people appeared from nowhere and we were quickly surrounded by children begging for sweets or money (fig. 4).

Next day we set out to explore locally. One of the first plants we saw was *Incarvillea zhongdianensis*, first identified as a new species on the ACE expedition. We knew *Nomocharis aperta* had also been found here and, believing it to be rare, I was naturally very keen to see it and absolutely delighted to find

one within minutes. Later we met two young girls who had whole armfuls for medicinal use! (fig. 5)

While at Shangri La we took a cable car to the top of Shika Shan. Here there was much excitement as at last we found *Paraquilegia anemonoides* along with other treasures. Most of the group trekked down to the halfway station but Peter and I decided to explore the mountainside as it was botanically so rich. We had a wonderful afternoon – I listed more than sixty different plants in this one area, among them a trollius (fig. 6) and a lovely pale lavender salvia, plants from two of my favourite families, *Ranunculaceae* and *Lamiaceae*.

As we slowly climbed back up to the cable car a group of Chinese students approached us, curious to discover what we were doing crawling around on the ground. They were very friendly, insisted on sharing their picnic and wanted a photo of us with them. The following day we visited a tourist spot, Bita Lake, very popular with the Chinese, and again people were very friendly and wanted to chat and practise their English. We noticed some of them used the small oxygen cylinders, on sale at all the tourist sites – not surprising as many had come straight from low-lying areas to 10,000 ft and were finding it very difficult to breathe. We felt smug, as after ten days becoming acclimatised to the low oxygen levels we were not finding the altitude a problem.

We had already found two different lilies, *Lilium bakerianum* var. *yunnanense* and *L. lophophorum*, but we were hoping to see a third, *L. souliei*, which grew some distance from Shangri La. After breakfast of rice



Fig. 4 Children soon surrounded us.

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Fig. 5 And I'd thought that *Nomocharis aperta* was rare!

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Fig. 6 *Trollius*

porridge, stir fried noodles, steamed buns and water melon we left to drive to Tianchi Lake. At first the road was surfaced, but then we turned on to a track and bumped along for miles until the bus became stuck; fortunately, after a lot of effort from the men, and one local woman, we were soon on our way again. At the lake we spotted what we thought at first was *L. souliei*, poking up through the rhododendron scrub, but on closer inspection it proved to be a *cremanthodium*, the same colour and height as the lily which we found soon after (fig. 7). Among other memorable highlights of the day were seeing sheets of *Primula sikkimensis* growing with *P. secundiflora*, sitting in the sun among the lilies eating our lunch, walking through *Rhododendron wardii* woodland (fig. 8), and attempting to cross swampy ground as quickly as possible before my boots filled with water – which led to the inevitable, falling flat on my face! It was worth it as a wonderful rhubarb, *Rheum alexandrae* (fig. 9) was growing at the edge of the wood, and further under the trees were more treasures: a *polygonatum*, two species of *Maianthemum*, *Beesia calthifolia* (the plant many of us have bought as *B. calthifolia* is *B. deltophylla*) and a single plant still in flower of *Omphalogramma forrestii*, a relative of the *Streptocarpus* many of us grow as a house plant.

Next day, on a much smaller bus, we had a long drive to Wengshui, a very remote village. Here we stayed in a very simple guest house, essentially the home of an extended family of Tibetans. We were not sure where they slept while we were there. Washing facilities were basic and there was a shortage of towels but at least for us the facilities were inside the building – our driver and guide used the pool in the courtyard. The family was delightful, very friendly and welcoming, and produced an excellent meal every evening. The day we left, our hostess pulled a twin tub washing machine out of a shed, and did her laundry using the same courtyard pool, then climbed a ladder to hang the sheets on the roof to dry!

In fine sunny weather we next headed for Big Snow Mountain to explore the west side of the pass. Climbing up the very narrow track was fine, but when it crossed a very deep valley I got cold feet and came to a halt. This meant that Peter and I took a long downhill diversion to cross the valley and lagged behind

the rest of the group. There were consolations: we saw some lovely plants on the bank; after all the bus rides we enjoyed the exercise; and when it started to pour with rain at lunch time we huddled under our umbrellas watching the others out on the exposed mountain side with no shelter. And on the way back I overcame my fears and crossed the valley with no problem!

After a day of horrid weather spent botanising along the roadsides from our vehicle, the next day, in better conditions though still with poor visibility, we were given a choice of routes to follow. I didn't like the sound of the track climbing up and along the ridge on the east side, but hearing that this was the way to find *Rheum nobile* I

decided to be brave. The path was quite good at first. Then we reached the ridge I had been dreading and the path petered out – I was told later that it was a grade two scramble, whatever that means. Suddenly there was a shout as the mist lifted briefly; someone had spotted the rhubarb. This helped me forget how scary the route was and the thought of the return journey. I was so excited that we'd found the plant that I knew from AGS talks but had never expected to see. Then the clouds lifted further and we could see little white beacons, *Rheum nobile* plants, all over the hills (fig. 10). We spent the afternoon exploring the scree where we found many wonderful alpine plants including several different *Corydalis*, a delightful *Pleurospermum* sp., and one of my favourite plants from the trip, *Saussurea medusa* (fig. 11). Then, best of all, we followed a much easier route down with yet more delights – *Fritillaria delavayi*, *Trollius forrestii*, *Meconopsis lancifolia* and many more rheums along the way.

We explored the village of Wenshui while our luggage was being loaded, and found *Clematis rhederiana* scrambling through the bushes by the road. The drive to our next hotel was long and tedious. We had a half-hour stop for road works and then the surface got worse as we approached Dequen with more, frequent stops. Among the road gangs were attractive young girls helping to rake the surface, wheeling peculiar little barrows of concrete, and generally helping the men. I wondered where they slept as at intervals along the road there were crude huts draped with polythene where the road gangs lived; it must have been very difficult for the girls, who looked very clean and tidy. Dequen itself was not appealing – very dirty, there was a lot of building work, rubbish everywhere, and



Fig. 7 *Lilium souliei*

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Fig. 8 *Rhododendron wardii*

Lamiaceae family wearing ‘woolly coats’, an adaptation to the extreme weather conditions at this altitude. I was delighted to find *Polygonatum hookerii* still with one little pink flower; I had tried to grow it, and after seeing it in the wild I determined to try again. Towards the end of the day we found *Paraquilegia* again – it was starting to seem quite common!

Our second day on Baima Shan was again damp and misty as we set off, hoping to explore the base of a cliff where there was said to be a plant endemic to the mountain, *Baimshanica pulvinata*. We found it there, as well as an interesting yellow-flowered *Aconitum*, another *Codonopsis*, and some *Pedicularis* species (fig. 13), which I believe are nearly impossible to grow, a shame as they are such beautiful plants. As the weather deteriorated, exploring the screes became very difficult, so we left the younger members of the group to climb yet higher and decided to follow a packhorse trail down the valley and back to the bus.

The following day, again very

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Fig. 9 *Rheum alexandrae*

misty, we started out early as we knew we had a very long slow climb up to 4800 metres, the highest point of the trip, where a very choice member of the *Boraginaceae* was said to grow. As we got higher we started to see more and more interesting plants – a group of gentians, several different *Primula* species, a beautiful patch of *Diapensia* and then a most familiar plant, *Bergenia*. After lunch we climbed over a ridge and



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discovered what we had been searching for, wonderful blue cushions of *Chionocharis*. We rushed from one cushion to the next, trying to get the best picture. Later, just before we started the long walk back to the bus, we scrambled up another slope in case there were any more treasures and found *Meconopsis speciosa*, which we had not seen before, and, in a shady crevice, a *Chrysosplenium* sp. and *Saxifraga cavana*. We had spent longer than planned exploring the area so despite hurrying we were still an hour late getting back to the bus; once at the hotel the order of the day was boots off, wash hands and straight down for a meal as the restaurant was about to close. We went back to the mountain next day but many of us were too tired to explore it further and those who did got very wet!

We were nearing the end of our trip and flew to Kunming the following day where we had time to explore the city in the afternoon. I very much enjoyed wandering round

Fig. 10 *Rheum nobile* across the hills.



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Fig. 11 One of my favourite plants from the trip, *Saussurea medusa*.

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Fig. 12 *Meconopsis horridula* Rudis Group

amazement, the background music was provided by a tape of very familiar Christmas carols!

Our last day was a tourist trip to a world heritage site, the Stone Forest, where there are amazing jagged limestone formations. Here many Chinese tourists slowly strolled along the walkways, stopping to take photos of their friends dressed up in the ethnic costumes that are for hire, or to buy food or souvenirs.

Yuantong temple (fig. 14), the largest Buddhist complex in the city. It is a superb example of Tang dynasty design, dating back 1200 years, with a large pool intersected by walkways and bridges in the central courtyard, and it was serene. Green Lake Park, close by, was far from peaceful with groups of musicians, several groups of senior citizens, mainly women, in different parts of the park singing, dancing and exercising to loud music, and also a play area for children with various ride-on toys where, to our

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We quickly left them behind as our tour guide led us off along increasingly narrow paths. Among the rocks we found our last plants of the trip, an *Arisaema* that we had not seen before, a *Corallodiscus* sp. and lots of beautiful butterflies among the trees and shrubs, so it was an excellent end to a truly memorable trip.

When we returned home, some of the group were asked to help with identification of plants seen. Peter and I had chosen *Lamiaceae*

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Fig. 13 *Pedicularis*

as the family we would like to study, not realising the difficulties ahead. We spent many hours struggling with *The Flora of China* on line. In the AGS report of the trip Elizabeth Strangman said that even the botanists complain that the identification key is unworkable. We certainly had problems trying to sort out the salvias. When you only have a photograph it is impossible to know if the plant is very sticky to touch or what the inside of



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Fig. 14 After our arduous adventures, serene Yuantong Temple.

the flower looked like. We visited the Herbarium at Kew and it was very exciting to see a specimen collected and named as *Salvia flava* by George Forrest in the early 1900s looking just like the plants we had seen. Another plant hunter called this same plant *S. bulleyana*, which was very confusing as it looks quite different to a plant we had seen and called by the same name. We now understand why the *Plant Finder* has an entry of '*S. bulleyana* misapplied'!

But we did have some success with other genera. We had seen a delightful plant growing in very wet ground at Tianchi Lake. I guessed *Prunella* as the genus, but working through the key this didn't seem to fit with any of the species described. Another member of the group had suggested *Phlomis tibetica* so, although I didn't believe it could be a phlomis as I thought they all needed a dry situation, I worked through the key and found that *P. atropurpurea* grows in marshy meadows in Yunnan, and apart from the colour, described as dark purple, it sounded like our plant. To my delight Peter found a picture in the Plant Heritage booklet *Phlomis*² which confirmed my identification, and apparently *P. atropurpurea* f. *pallida* is a pale coloured form – a very exciting moment for me. We both very much enjoyed all the detective work but it has made us very much aware of the confusion over names, that names are not set in stone, and more work will result in changes in the future. 🐼

Gill Regan has been gardening in Kent for nearly forty years. Since retirement she has travelled all over the world with her husband to see plants growing in their native habitats.

² *Phlomis*, Jim Mann Taylor NCCPG/Plant Heritage