

Wulingyuan Scenic Reserve

Wǔlíngyuán Fēngjǐng Bǎohùqū 武陵源风景保护区

Known as China's Yellowstone, Wulingyuan Scenic Reserve in Hunan Province is one of the country's most spectacular and popular national parks, featuring limestone gorges, sinkholes, underground streams, and caverns. It was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992.

Wulingyuan Scenic Reserve, known as China's Yellowstone, is a spectacular natural setting near Zhangjiajie City in northwestern Hunan Province in south central China. It also borders Guizhou Province and the province-level municipality of Chongqing. The climate of the region is subtropical, with moderate summers and mild winters with ample rainfall. Wulingyuan Scenic Reserve comprises four sections: Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, Suoxiyu Natural Resource Reserve, Tianzi Mountain Natural Resource Reserve, and the Yangjiajie Scenic Area, added in the 1990s. The reserve covers about 690 square kilometers (266 square miles), roughly the size of Zion National Park in Utah. (By comparison Yellowstone National Park covers some 8,980 square kilometers, or 3,470 square miles.)

The area is known for its *karst* topography, a type of terrain formed by the dissolving and collapse of irregular limestone, which produces gorges, fissures, sinkholes, underground streams, and caverns. The impressive sites of the reserve include more than 3,100 quartzite sandstone pillars that resemble deformed bamboo shoots, many over 200 meters (656 feet) high. There are also many ravines,

streams, pools, and waterfalls; more than forty caves; and two natural bridges. The Zhoutian Dong cavern is thought to be the largest in Asia, and the Tianqia Shengkong natural bridge, the highest in the world.

The Zhangjiajie National Forest Park was established in 1982 as the first authorized forest national park in China. It covers 34 square kilometers (13 square miles). About 97 percent of the park is covered with both dense virgin forest and planted secondary growth. The forest is home to more than 3,000 species of plants, 35 of which are rare protected species. Native plants—such as the dove tree and the lobster flower, a perennial that can change color up to five times in a day—thrive in the park. A number of rare birds and animals also call the park home, including Chinese giant salamanders, Chinese water deer, Asiatic black bears, Asiatic wild dogs, and clouded leopards.

Wulingyuan is also home to a number of China's ethnic minority groups, most prominent being the Tujia, Miao, and Bai peoples. The people in these groups maintain their traditional languages, arts and crafts, costumes, foods, festivals, and music and dance. A museum dedicated to Tujia culture is in Zhangjiajie Village within the reserve. The Yangjiajie Scenic Area is said to have been settled by the famous and venerable Yang family, who moved to the region during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) to escape from continuous warfare. The name of Yang is still important in the area.

Wulingyuan received a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) World Heritage listing in 1992 and is a popular destination for both Chinese and foreign tourists. An admission fee of 158 yuan (about \$23), which includes transportation



The famous quartzite columns of Wulingyuan.

PHOTO BY YIXUAN SHUKE.

within the park, is charged for a two-day visit. Campfires and smoking are prohibited, just one of many restrictions designed to protect the reserve. There are no overnight facilities inside Wulingyuan. The nearest large town is Zhangjiajie City, a city of about 1.5 million people about 33 kilometers (20 miles) from the entrance to Wulingyuan. Ample transportation is available from the city to destinations within the reserve.

Michael PRETES

Further Reading

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