

■ Raining in Guizhou  
Shot with a Canon 5D; EF50mm  
f/2.5 lens; 1/750sec; f/4; ISO 800

SHOOTERS' GUIDE

# Portraits of Guizhou

Hidden in the steep hills of China's Guizhou province are dozens of ethnic minorities and centuries of tradition. Words and pictures by **Ewen Bell**.

**G**uizhou is one of the poorest provinces in China, a land that embraces ethnic people who once fled the change of Dynastic rule.

Over the last few thousand years it has become a sanctuary for people who had nowhere else to go. Guizhou province and neighbouring Yunnan have the highest number of ethnic minorities anywhere in China.

Travelling by road across a 700km stretch of Eastern Guizhou, you can encounter a dozen ethnic groups without leaving the highway. Departing from the capital of Guiyang and the Han villages around it, you head towards the Shui, Dong, Gejia, Miao, Mini-Skirt Miao, Hong Yao and Zhuang.

There's a reason the dispossessed peoples of China fled to Guizhou – because nobody else wanted to live there. Eastern Guizhou is especially difficult terrain, a network of steep mountains and low rain. Mudslides are a seasonal event that washes roads into the rivers and frequently isolates villages.

Rice is the lifeblood for these people, grown on precipitously steep terraces. It's amazing

that they grow rice here at all, but indeed they excel at it. Rice provides more than food as the excess is used to make "Bai Jiu", the local version of rice wine.

Once a year that excess is taken to the extreme during the May Week celebrations. Entire villages drink a month's worth of Bai Jiu in a single day in celebrations that welcome the arrival of summer. The tradition is centred on giving rather than receiving, with generous servings of freshly killed pork served along giant tables in addition to the alcoholic offerings.

Sweet old ladies wander the streets with a kettle in one hand and a bowl in the other. They're not serving tea; the kettle is brimming with Bai Jiu and they pour some into the bowl and tip it down your mouth. When presented with an offering, you have a split second to decide if you will drink it, or wear it. Naturally, I pride myself on being a gracious guest.

I entered one town of Miao people, and at first could not find a soul; the town was empty as I walked the cobbled lanes. As I moved deeper into the town, I could hear a noise in the distance like a rumble of voices. When I reached the town

■ **Rickety bridge**  
Shot with a Canon 1DMkIV; EF50mm  
f/1.2 lens; 1/2000sec; f/2.2; ISO 800



■ **Drink it, or wear it**  
Shot with a Canon 1DMkIV; EF50mm  
f/1.2 lens; 1/1000sec; f/2; ISO 800



■ **Ancient smile**  
Shot with a Canon 5DMkII; EF50mm  
f/1.2 lens; 1/2000sec; f/2; ISO 400



**SHALLOW + WIDE**

Most of my portrait work uses a wide angle lens at the widest possible aperture. This gives me lots of context for my subject but the shallow focus puts emphasis on them instead of their surrounds. A good 16-35mm lens will give you f/2.8, but the 24mm f/1.4 primes from Canon and Nikon have a sweet spot at f/2 with superior optics and dreamy bokeh.

■ **Village elders**  
Shot with a Canon 5DMkII; EF50mm  
f/1.2 lens; 1/2500sec; f/2.2; ISO 400

**“When presented with an offering, you have a split second to decide if you will drink it, or wear it”**

square, it looked as though every resident of the village was in attendance, stumbling in circles or sitting around with red faces and huge smiles.

There was a very old couple sitting on little stools, and I said hello in my broken Mandarin. Like many of the elder generations of ethnic minorities, this couple didn't speak any Chinese, only their native tongue. Their neighbour stepped in and told me that he was 101 years old, that the Bai Jiu made him strong.

The rules of the celebrations are simple: you never pour your own drink. I watched an old woman help her grandchild tip the kettle into a bowl, and then hold his hands to the sides while she necked it. That seemed to be cheating just a little bit.

Weddings and festivals are when you see the finest robes of the ethnic minorities. Young girls spend a decade making their own festival gowns, sewing detail into them by hand and collecting silver to adorn their head-dress. When they come of age, the gowns feature in celebrations – and collectively they are spectacular.

In a little village almost hidden by bamboo, a subset of the Miao people are called the Mini-Skirt Miao, named after their short dress worn during festivals. The town square was barely bigger than a coffee shop, but that was enough room for serious dance moves. Dozens of women rehearsed their choreography while we watched, with a few men banging drums and shouting orders.

The rehearsals were more enjoyable than the show for me, because you see the cheeky smiles of the women and the uncontrolled laughter that erupts when someone slips a step. These are joyous events for each village and are rooted in a tradition that has nothing to do with tourist coaches or camera-happy travellers.

Dancing at the festivals is a massive expression of unity for the villages and a chance to celebrate the beauty of their people. For photographers, it's an intense assault of inspiration in every direction. You fill your memory cards faster than on an African wildlife safari.

I've been lucky enough to visit Guizhou »

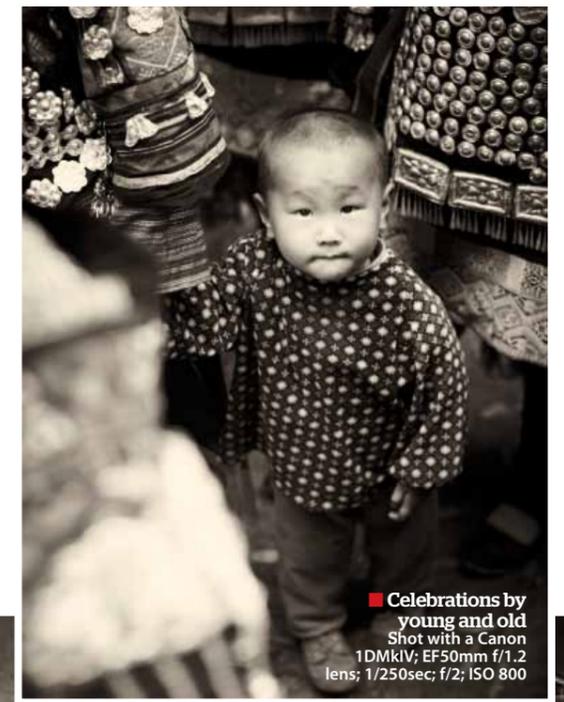


“Once seated, the Bai Jiu began to flow, and we were trapped”

■ **Trapped by hospitality**  
Shot with a Canon 1DMkIV; EF16-35mm f/2.8 lens; 1/80sec; f/4.5; ISO 1600



■ **Generous dining**  
Shot with a Canon 1DMkIV; EF16-35mm f/2.8 lens; 1/160sec; f/5.6; ISO 1000



■ **Celebrations by young and old**  
Shot with a Canon 1DMkIV; EF50mm f/1.2 lens; 1/250sec; f/2; ISO 800



■ **Modern meets traditional cloth-making**  
Shot with a Canon 5DMkII; EF50mm f/1.2 lens; 1/1600sec; f/2; ISO 200

twice on photographic adventures, and on the last visit something truly special happened. In the midst of the May Week celebration, we found ourselves caught up in a wedding. Guests from far away are a special omen for weddings in Guizhou and we were dragged along with the entourage like a bunch of lucky rabbits' feet.

Crammed into a tiny timber house, we sat on the floor with a room filled with family and friends while our host offered pork, fish, rice and chillies. You wouldn't call the scene lavish; more chaotic, and definitely generous. There was enough food for the entire township. Once seated, the Bai Jiu began to flow, and we were trapped.

It took hours to extricate ourselves from the party, and we stumbled back down the laneway towards town and the other festivities. Back on main street, I nearly stumbled over a nice old lady, who it turns out I had met before. Two years earlier I had visited the same town and photographed her smiling face at a morning noodle stall.

In my backpack I had a copy of that photo to give her. She was so happy I thought she'd fall over, and perhaps it was the Bai Jiu but I got a little misty about it myself.

I always print off a set of images when I return to a city so I can share my portraits. I don't like the practice of paying money for a photo, because it devalues the moment and misses the point anyway. Photography is about more than a few pennies, it's about real experiences. If you're photographing a ten-yuan moment, that won't make for such a great portrait. If you're photographing a lovely soul who inspires your spirit, then the magic will come through. Instead of giving money, I like to give photos.



■ **Bustling square**  
Shot with a Canon 1DMkIV; EF50mm f/1.2 lens; 1/100sec; f/13; ISO 800

It's a tall ask sometimes, and once you return home the task of posting off photos is hard to prioritise. When I'm fortunate enough to return to a village, however, I like to come prepared with a stash of 6x4 portraits to give back to the locals. Giving back a photograph means far more to the people in them than any amount of yuan or dollars.

My most treasured portraits from Guizhou are not even the festivals; it's the real moments of life when ethnic people are planting rice, eating a bowl of rice or pounding their purple cloth. The Dong people have retained their traditional clothing in spite of the influx of

cheaper and warmer machine-made textiles. They grow their cotton in terraced fields, drag their threads down the street on narrow looms, dye the cloth purple and pound the finished product to create a semi-metallic sheen.

The ritual of the cloth is fascinating enough to fill a book, and the people of remote Dong villages still wear their fine purple cloth every day. The festivals are lovely, but the daily reality of people in Guizhou can be even more photogenic.

**For more of Ewen's adventures abroad and at home, check out [Photographyfortravellers.com](http://Photographyfortravellers.com)**

**GETTING TO GUIZHOU**

The capital city of Guiyang can be reached by overnight train from Chengdu, allowing you meet the Giant Pandas before heading into remote territory. A private driver is required after Guiyang to wind through the mountains and eventually finish up in Guilin. Allow at least ten days for the drive.