

24 HOURS text and photos by Graham Bond

24 hours in zhaoping

the unspoiled charms of China's most scenic urban center



Star Lake



Stone Cavern Crag

Cradled by the Xijiang River to the south, sheltered by mountains to the north, and boasting a crag-studded lake at its center, Zhaoqing is, perhaps, the most scenic urban environment in all of China. It has a number of rivals, of course, in particular Hangzhou and Guilin, but both these cities traded their tranquility for busloads of tourists. Zhaoqing, on the other hand, is as languid as a tropical summer breeze.

8am: In Guangdong Province, the day begins with dim sum. Dynasty Hotel's mammoth ground-floor dining hall is a great place to enjoy the gastric pleasures of steam-basket cuisine and a remarkably social atmosphere. Be sure to try the local specialty, sticky rice, or *zongzi*.

9:30am: From Duanzhou Lu, take the picturesque pathway that cuts across Star Lake to the gate of the Seven Star Crag Park, named after the seven limestone peaks that rise above the water. With plenty of walking trails, the area is great for solo exploration; indeed, the service of a guide is superfluous. You can climb any of the seven peaks on your own, but the best view can be had from the 113-metre-high Tianzhu Crag.

12pm: Exit the park's western gate and lunch at the nearby Songtao Hotel. Take a table at the base of the verdant Xianzhang Crag to enjoy the city views across the man-made lake, which, by the way, was created some 40 years ago as a flood-prevention measure. While residents of the area's low-lying districts are no doubt

grateful, the lake also serves sports enthusiasts, including China's national rowing team which makes its winter base here. If you visit during the training season you just might catch a glimpse of a future Olympic medalist.

1pm: Take a bus or taxi to Dinghu Mountain, 20 kilometers east of the city, and at the main gate a shuttle bus up to the peak. Then spend a leisurely afternoon walking down the mountain along the nicely-shaded trails, where you'll pass Taoist temples, towering trees, waterfalls and murmuring brooks.

7pm: Acquire an appreciation of Zhaoqing food and beverage prices at the Hujing Wan restaurant/bar, located just behind Paifang Square. With tables set on platforms over the lake – and fabulous views – you might expect to pay a premium. But the bill of fare is surprisingly easy on the wallet, and entertainment is free of charge. At 8pm, the nearby water fountain gushes to the rhythms of marching band music, with a light show courtesy of the huge searchlights scanning the skies. If you're so inclined, stay for the mass dance which starts shortly after the waters recede.

9pm: If tripping the light fantastic is not your thing, walk south up bustling Tianning Lu, take a left at Jianshe Lu and then turn right into one of the alleys that run south towards the river. Here you'll find a crumbling, single-story neighborhood that rivals any Beijing *hutong* for atmosphere, including *zhongshan*-clad cyclists pedaling through the lanes, banging their

drums while dodging farmers sell home-grown produce from wicker baskets.

10pm: Emerging onto Jiangbin Lu, pay a visit to the handsome Yue Jiang Lou Temple where most evenings an amateur Cantonese opera troupe stages free outdoor performances. When the wailing becomes too much, take a stroll along the wide Xijiang River, and stop at one of the relatively quiet waterside restaurants. *Siu ye* – the unofficial 'fourth' meal of the day in Guangdong – gets underway at around 11pm so end your day as you started it – eating. ■

getting there
Regular buses run between Guangzhou (1.5 hours, RMB 40) and Shenzhen (3.5 hours, RMB 100) and a direct train links Zhaoqing with Hong Kong (4 hours, RMB 238)

eat
Dynasty Hotel
9 Duanzhou Lu, Zhaoqing (0758 223 8238)
Songtao Hotel
Seven Star Crag Scenic Area, Zhaoqing (0758 222 4412)

play
The Seven Star Crag and Dinghu Mountain parks both charge RMB 50 entry.
No 21 bus runs between Zhaoqing and Dinghu Mountain's main gate; taxi fare is approximately RMB 50.