

Tibet fears cast shadow over Chinese eco-tour

Last minute security concerns derailed my Sichuan trip to follow in the footsteps of an Edwardian explorer

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It has been a frustrating week as my planned trip through Sichuan was cancelled at the last minute by Chinese authorities who are even more anxious than usual about Tibetan unrest.

The presence of a foreign journalist appears to have been too much of a security risk at a time of heightened tension, which is ironic because I was planning to write a story that was so uncontroversial and off the breaking news track that my main concern was that the Guardian's editors might reject it as insufficiently newsworthy.

A local scientist - Professor Yin Kaipu of the Chengdu Academy of Science - had invited me to join a pioneering eco-tourism trip on the 100-year-old trail of British botanist Ernest H. Wilson, the Edwardian explorer whose collection of clematis, davidia, lilium regal and thousands of other seeds from China have since spread to millions of English gardens.

We planned a five-day tour through forests and mountains in and around Ganzi, a Tibetan autonomous prefecture in southwest Sichuan.

The organiser, Pangolin Tours, hoped this week's trip would launch a new route for foreign visitors who might be interested in a province they style "The Mother of All Gardens". They hoped to showcase eco-tourism and - innovatively for China - promised to offset part of the carbon footprint by donating trees to the Roots and Shoots conservation group set up by Jane Goodall.

I was curious about the eco-tourism (about which I have mixed feelings), but my primary focus was somewhat different. With Yin's expert help, I aimed to compare Wilson's old photographs and diary reflections on Sichuan's forests and mountains with the reality today. It would, I hoped, give an indication of the ecological and climactic changes that have taken place over the past century. It was hardly a provocative subject, but someone in authority became jittery.

I flew down to Chengdu in the morning, joined the launch ceremony in the afternoon, met the rest of the group for dinner and then - just as we were all heading for bed - came the bombshell: "Very sorry, Mr Watts, but you cannot join us. Orders from the government. High up. It's very sensitive. I'm really very sorry."

The next morning I had to wave goodbye to the other journalists in the group - all Chinese - who were allowed to proceed with the tour. Professor Yin and Pangolin were good hosts to the last and seemed embarrassed by the sudden rejection of their visitor, but the incident

does raise broader questions.

Promoting tourism in this part of China is precarious. Tibetan areas are often declared off limits to foreigners. This is particularly true for journalists, as I learned during the violent disturbances in 2008, but business people, tourists and NGO workers can also be affected. On this occasion the reason appears to have been a protest by two monks who immolated themselves, leading to a tighter military crackdown in Aba (known as Ngaba in Tibetan), which neighbours Ganzi.

According to a monk quoted by the International Campaign for Tibet:

"Ngaba is under a kind of invisible martial law. Communication networks are closed down, roads are closed, people are prohibited from gathering, normal religious observances are suspended and so forth. The monasteries and schools have turned into prisons, Ngaba people in Beijing, Lanzhou and Chengdu are being detained or restricted, and a broad crackdown imposed on all monasteries in the region."

Given such restrictions, my personal inconvenience of two wasted days is insignificant. But this case is not isolated. Like many others over the years, it highlights the paranoia of the Chinese authorities and the security obstacles disrupting development of an international tourist industry in this stunningly beautiful, but impoverished region.

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