

History comes alive in picturesque old town



The old town of Fenghuang is known for its natural beauty and cultural charm. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY FENGHUANG COUNTY PUBLICITY DEPARTMENT

By ZHANG ZHAO

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Surrounded by mountains with a river cutting through its center and multiple ethnic cultural backgrounds, the old town of Fenghuang is known as one of the most beautiful in China.

Literally meaning phoenix in Chinese, Fenghuang is a county in Xiangxi Tujia and Miao autonomous prefecture in western Hunan province.

The core area of its old town, covering no more than 1 square kilometer, attracts about 10 million tourists from home and overseas each year.

The many buildings in Fenghuang old town, including residences, temples and shrines, were mostly built during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and have been well preserved. Built mainly of wood and stone, they feature a combined architectural style of the Han and local ethnic groups.

Most of the houses now serve as shops, restaurants, inns and art workshops.

One of the landmark buildings is Hongqiao, or Rainbow Bridge, built about 600 years ago.

Local legends say the bridge was built according to the order of Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

A fortuneteller told Zhu that the landscape of the region was like a dragon, which meant that a new emperor would be born there to replace

him. Believing what he was told, Zhu issued an order to build a bridge over the Tuojiang River to "cut off" the dragon's head.

The iconic red sandstone streets in the old town are said to be the result of the dragon's blood.

The two-story bridge is now a shopping site. The first floor has many booths that sell souvenirs, snacks and handicrafts, and the top floor is a teahouse with views of both banks of the river.

Along the river are many stilt houses. Previously the homes of local poor people, they have mostly been transformed into restaurants, inns and bars that attract tourists because of their wonderful river views.

Visitors can get an even closer view of the water by taking a boat from the North Gate Wharf to Wanshou Palace.

Four bridges were built over the Tuojiang River in 2012, designed and funded by local painter and art designer Huang Yongyu. He integrated traditional architectural styles with his own ideas, and named the bridges for four natural elements — wind, rain, snow and fog.

Fenghuang was a military garrison in the Qing Dynasty to suppress the aboriginal Miao people who would not be governed by the central government. Since 1840, the region has been home to more than 200 high-ranking army officers, according to available statistics.

It is also the hometown of

many celebrities in various fields in China's modern history, including Shen Tsung-wen, one of the greatest modern Chinese writers, and Hsiung Hsi-ling, an educator, philanthropist and premier of the Republic of China.

The former residences of Shen and Hsiung are well preserved in the old town, today serving as commemorative museums. Both are popular tourism sites, despite being tucked away in narrow alleys.

The houses feature traditional Chinese architecture, highlighting wooden mortise and tenon joinery, intricately carved windows and decorated roofs with ridges extending into the walls.

The furniture and daily appliances in the residences are arranged as they would have been 100 years ago to show the local people's lifestyles at the time.

The Shen residence, covering about 600 square meters, was built by the writer's grandfather in 1866. It has two buildings with 10 rooms and a yard. Shen was born in 1902 and spent his childhood there and his cradle is preserved in a bedroom.

Shen's most renowned novel, *The Border Town*, has been adapted to a 75-minute drama that integrates dance, acrobatics and local culture. It is performed every evening at a purpose-built theater.

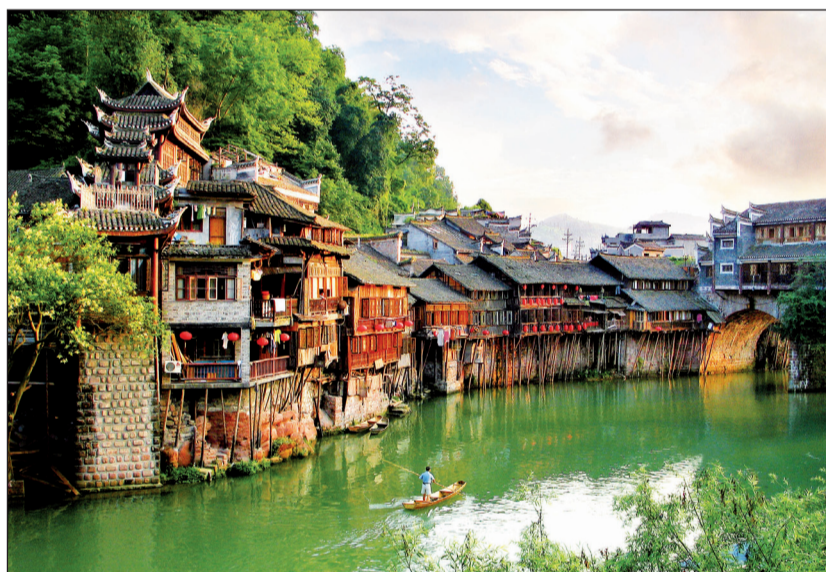
Even at night, the old town bustles with tourists from around the world shopping,



Local Miao people dance at a festival.



The Border Town is adapted from a classic novel. ZHANG ZHAO / CHINA DAILY



Stilt houses line the Tuojiang River, mostly serving as restaurants, inns and bars.



A foreign tourist tastes pickled radish, a popular local snack.

relaxing in bars and taking photographs, and shop owners smilingly welcome new guests.

With colorful lights illuminating both banks of the Tuojiang River, it is another good loca-

tion for photographers.

Visitors can buy through tickets to visit the old town

that cover 10 sites and activities in the area. The tickets are valid for two days.

Fenghuang applies for top tourism ranking

By ZHANG ZHAO

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Already a nationally renowned sightseeing area, Fenghuang county in Hunan province is building a global name as a tourist destination by applying for designation as a national 5A-level tourism zone, the top rank in China's tourism.

The old town of Fenghuang, known for its well-preserved buildings from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), natural environment and ethnic culture, was listed as a 4A-level tourism site in 2009.

Formerly a military garrison in the border area, Fenghuang is applying for UNESCO World Heritage status for its regional military defense system.

The county hosted 9.6 million tourists last year, earning revenue of 8.1 billion yuan (\$1.27 billion).

In the first seven months of this year, it welcomed 6.9 million tourists, an increase of 36.9 percent year-on-year, including more than 210,000 overseas visitors. They stayed for 2.1 days on average, increasing from 1.8 days in the same period a year earlier.

\$1.27
billion

Fenghuang's tourism revenue in 2014

“The tourism market is a platform and promoter for traditional cultures.”

Shi Rongfen, deputy Party chief of Fenghuang

Compared with many other ancient towns across China, Fenghuang stands out because of its combination of many attractive elements — the natural beauty of its river and mountains, centuries-old architecture, cultural heritage and being home to a number of influential people in modern history, said Shi Rongfen, deputy Party chief of the county.

Shi said infrastructure, safety, culture, management and marketing are the key words for the future development of tourism in the county.

She said Fenghuang would put in place more convenient transportation, a new tourist service center, improved toilets and sewage network and a standardized road sign system. A credibility system has been established among the region's shop owners.

High-definition cameras

cover the entire tourism area, so that visitors can be monitored while in the area.

Months ago, a tourist had his belongings stolen and the thief was caught in just 10 minutes thanks to the monitoring system.

As a settlement area for nearly 30 ethnic groups, mainly the Miao, Fenghuang boasts a strong ethnic flavor.

“The tourism market is a platform and promoter for traditional cultures,” said Shi. “We allow the local culture to create blood itself, rather than just transfusing blood to it, by combining it with the business sector.”

The local authorities are promoting local ethnic cultures by organizing festival activities and protecting intangible cultural heritage items.

Shi said the county attracts many tourists every year dur-

ing the Spring Festival, or the Chinese traditional New Year, as many activities are organized, such as art performances including dragon and lion dances and traditional opera, and demonstrations of how to cook the local cuisine and snacks.

Other activities include an ethnic silverware show, a costume exhibition and a biennial photography exhibition.

As Fenghuang becomes increasingly attractive for overseas visitors, the tourism authority has taken measures to improve its internationalized service, including installing road signs in Chinese, English and Korean and encouraging local hotels to learn how to cook foreign cuisine.

In addition to preservation of the old town of Fenghuang, the local government plans to expand sightseeing areas



Fenghuang county welcomed 6.9 million tourists in the first seven months of this year.

along the Tuojiang River, the Nanhua Mountain and nearby villages.

In sharp contrast with the bustling core area of the old town, which the Tuojiang River runs through, the lower reaches of the river are being designed with a theme of peace, where tourists can enjoy walking through nature, contemplating quietly.

The area is scheduled to be completed by 2017.

The Nanhua Mountain area

highlights the culture of the phoenix, which Fenghuang means in Chinese. Buildings including pavilions, bridges and temples are all associated with legends about the phoenix, and there is also a museum showcasing the culture.

In the surrounding villages, three tourism routes are planned, focusing on the natural landscape, local customs and the culture and history of the former military garrison.

Shi said that tourism leads

the way in the county's urbanization and modern agriculture and industry, adding that tourism and related businesses have created more than 100,000 jobs.

One of the county's current challenges is to upgrade industry models, including attracting high-end hotels, she said, as the existing hotels are mostly business-oriented, and Fenghuang wants to introduce more world-class leisure hotel and resort brands.