

Zhangjiajie National Forest Park (张家界国家森林公园)

Zhangjiajie (张家界) is a prefecture-level city in northwestern Hunan Province. Situated in the [Wulingyuan](#) (武陵源) area is a National Forest Park named Zhangjiajie (or Zhang Family territory) after an ancient village located within its bounds. The Zhangjiajie National Forest Park has an area of 72,000 acres, an average rainfall of 1200-1600mm, an average temperature of 16°C and a frost-free period of 240-300 days. Its entire landscape boast some 2,000 pristine limestone rock columns, home to over 500 species of trees including rare varieties like the ginkgo, dove tree and dawn redwood. The fauna ranges from civet cats, monkeys to game, birds, and salamanders. This scenic region was China's first National Park and was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992.

The site has gained international fame after its exotic-looking rock columns inspired the popular 3-D movie *Avatar*, following which one of its 2,000 striking peaks originally named "*South Pillar of Heaven*" was officially changed to "*Hallelujah Mountain*" in a special ceremony with hundreds of ethnic villagers dressed in the region's Tujia costumes.

The Tujia minority (土家族) still treasures its ancient traditions of 'mountain courtship lyrics' (山歌), 'crying marriage' (哭嫁), and 'battle for the wedding bed' (争床). Early in their adolescence, boys and girls are taught skills in courting or thwarting the opposite sex with spontaneous mountain lyrics sung across a distance to their intended individuals. Laggards in these skills would suffer a great disadvantage in competing for a good spouse. When a girl is eventually married off to another village, often hundreds of miles away in these difficult terrains, the whole family, including the bride-to-be, would cry everyday over an extended period as an expression of sorrow for their coming, and possibly perpetual, separation. On the wedding night, the families of the bride and the groom, at an appointed hour after a convivial banquet, would start exchanging genuine blows in a fight to gain possession of the wedding bed. The ancient custom is that between the newly-weds, the winning side would win the right to have the final say in all - their future married life.







Baofeng Lake (宝峰湖) Scenic Area

At the back of Mount Baofeng, which measures 1,212.8 meters high and points straight upwards, is Baofeng Lake, forming part of the larger Wulingyuan Scenic Area. This mountain lake has 274 hectares of fresh water and running waterfalls amidst verdant trees and shrub-clad limestone peaks of various shapes and sizes. Located high up in the mountains, the lake catches some of the first and purest water runoff from the mountain peaks. Its elevation guarantees an air freshness not found around lakes at lower altitudes. Take a trip in a small boat in the tranquility of the lake to enjoy the symmetric reflections of the pristine scenery in a fairy-tale atmosphere.

Not far from the lake itself is a deep, gorge-like valley less than 4 meters wide on average. Viewed from the valley floor, the sky above resembles a long, wavy, silk ribbon. It is one of the most unique sights in China, and, perhaps, anywhere in the world.





Huanglongdong Cave (黄龙洞)

Amongst the top scenic sites in Zhangjiajie is Huanglongdong (*Yellow Dragon Cave*), a gigantic karst cave with a series of very large, tortuous, subterranean chambers featuring numerous stalactites and stalagmites in awe-inspiring formations. Measuring some 100,000 square meters, it has been lauded as the most spectacular karst cave in the world. Included are five of the world's largest stalactites and stalagmites with a 40-person arm-girth, rising several storeys high. At an average growth rate of 0.1 mm per year, some of these giant formations have taken over 350 million years to grow to their present size. At the cave entrance is the so-called '*Gathering Chamber*' (jù huì tīng 聚会厅), the smallest of thirteen such 'chambers', covering an area of about 6000 square meters. '*Tianxian Palace*' (tiān xiān gōng 天仙宫) is the largest chamber, measuring 96 meters by 105 meters. Perhaps the most interesting sight is the '*Monk in Ablution*' (和尚沐浴), which is a huge stalagmite in an unmistakable shape of the back of a sitting monk in Buddhist garb with mineral-laden subterranean water dropping continuously on his head. See the picture below.

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