

An Expedition to China to see: 'The King of Rhododendrons'

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In January, 1991, a party of horticulturalists, our host Ji Xiangsheng (who we called 'Tony' - from the Kunming Institute of Botany, Program Officer for Foreign Affairs, received permission from the Chinese Government for five Australians to travel to see the 'giant Azalea' - *Rhododendron giganteum* var. *protistum*).

Tony spent some time organising the expedition and hired guides, two jeeps and drivers to take us to Jietou village in the Gaoligong Mountains, located in Tengchong County of Yunnan Province of China.

Our botanist, Professor Yang Zenghong, also from the Kunming Institute, was coming with us also; this was his fourth visit to Jietou as he had never seen the 'giant Azalea' in flower. He assured us that it should be flowering at this time of the year (late January).

The official party was Tony, Professor Yang Zenghong, Four Australians namely, Graeme Oke of Bomaderry N.S.W., Peter Teese of Yamina Rare Plant Nursery, Monbulk Victoria, Philip Woodbury of Mt. Kuringai N.S.W. and myself Craig Carroll of Baulkham Hills N.S.W. (One other Australian could not make the trip). We left the city of Tengchong on Monday, 28th January, at 7.30 pm and drove to a small village to spend the night, arriving at 10.30 pm at the hotel. We booked in at the hotel and then went to have dinner - the village restaurant offered us the best bowl of noodles and Chinese food that we had ever tasted. The beer wasn't bad either! After getting to bed at midnight we were up at 5.30 am and back to the restaurant for breakfast and more noodles.

Our groups of eight were into the jeeps and on our way by 6 am. We travelled on an extremely rough road for the next 2¹/₂ hours. Part of the road was washed away so we had to detour in one spot. On the way we picked up a Park Ranger, who was in charge of the Park. The village we arrived at was very remote - this was to be the beginning of our trekking by foot.

We were the first foreigners to visit this village since the early 1930's so we considered ourselves very privileged.

At 9 am we began our 20 kilometre walk with extra party members - two members of the village were to act as additional guides, total party on the walk were ten people (one driver chose not to come).

Graeme, the guides and myself set a fast pace up the valley, crossing the icy streams on slippery, icy logs and arrived at a small campsite at 10 am. Whilst waiting for the rest of the party the man at the campsite offered us a bowl of rice which was most acceptable. We started off again, following a stream, trekking up and down hillsides, through thickly forested areas seeing many plants such as: *Ardisia*, *Acer Davidi*, *Aralia chinensis*, *Green Pilea*, *Violets*,

Schima trees, Oak trees, Clematis (covered with little white bells), Daphnes - sweet scented, *Ficus* trees - large, Orchids - many varieties.

The *Rhododendron delavayi* was just coming into flower - the flowers were bright red. Large trees of *Michelia yunnanensis* were all through the forests. We stopped for lunch near some Hydrangeas and Viburnums and after lunch we headed off through more forested areas, crossing two small landslides above the stream, and then heading down towards the stream, we came across our first *Rhododendron giganteum*. The large leaves were over 30cm X 15cm with 25 veins per leaf. We all thought we must be getting very close to the big trees, the first one we found was about 20 metres in height, close by was a bigger tree, 25-30 metres with two huge trunks and three huge branches off the side of it - this tree certainly lives up to its name of 'King of Rhododendrons'. It was indicated to the group that the tree was over 500 years old. We decided this was a great place to have our lunch! After lunch we photographed the tree from every angle possible, each person having their photograph taken in the tree branches. We were disappointed that the tree was not in flower but we gathered as many seed pods as we could find to take back to Australia.

We then had to walk the 20 kilometres back to the village and did not arrive back until 7.30pm to have dinner and then drove back to Tengchong arriving at 1.30 am very exhausted but extremely satisfied with our achievement.

During dinner we took the opportunity to thank Professor Zenghong, Tony, the guides and drivers, for without their help this trip would not have been possible.



A composite photograph of *R. giganteum* prepared by the Author.

Note:

George Forrest, (Scotland 1873-1932), alone, introduced the incredible total of two hundred and sixty species of Rhododendrons and was probably the most prolific collector of plants the world has known. Because of the enormous amount of seed he collected (45kg at a time) large amounts of plants could be grown for evaluation in the Royal Botanic Garden at Edinburgh.

)expeditions by Forrest in Western China were in 1917-19, 1921-22, 1924-25 and 1930-31. In September 1919 Forrest travelled to the Tengchong area and discovered the 'Giant Rhododendron'. He recorded the finding of three trees; the tallest 24 metres, spread over 12 metres and a girth of 2.3 metres when measured 1.5 metres from the ground. He collected seed from these trees.

In March, 1921, on his way East from Burma, Forrest detoured, seeking specimens of Rhododendrons in full bloom. He was in luck as he found large stems with 15 to 20 large blooms each 6 to 7.5cm in length by 3.5 to 5cm in width. The colours were, quote, "deep crimson or rose crimson shaded to almost white at the base with a deep crimson blotch" unquote. There are two areas where this species has been discovered, Hetou in the South and Jietou in the North. It was first described, in 1926, as *Rhododendron giganteum* and has since been reclassified as *Rhododendron protistum* var. *giganteum*.

It is documented that Forrest, in 1931, was intending to make one final trip before retiring, to Hon-to, at the head of the Shewli valley to photograph *Rhododendron giganteum* and to saw a cross section of the thickest part of the trunk to send home to the Garden Museum. He died of heart failure on 6th January, 1932, a few kilometres from Tengchong and was buried there.

Author