

MARCH-APRIL 2005

# **CNN** Traveller

TRAVEL THE WORLD WITH CNN

## **BY THE BOOK**

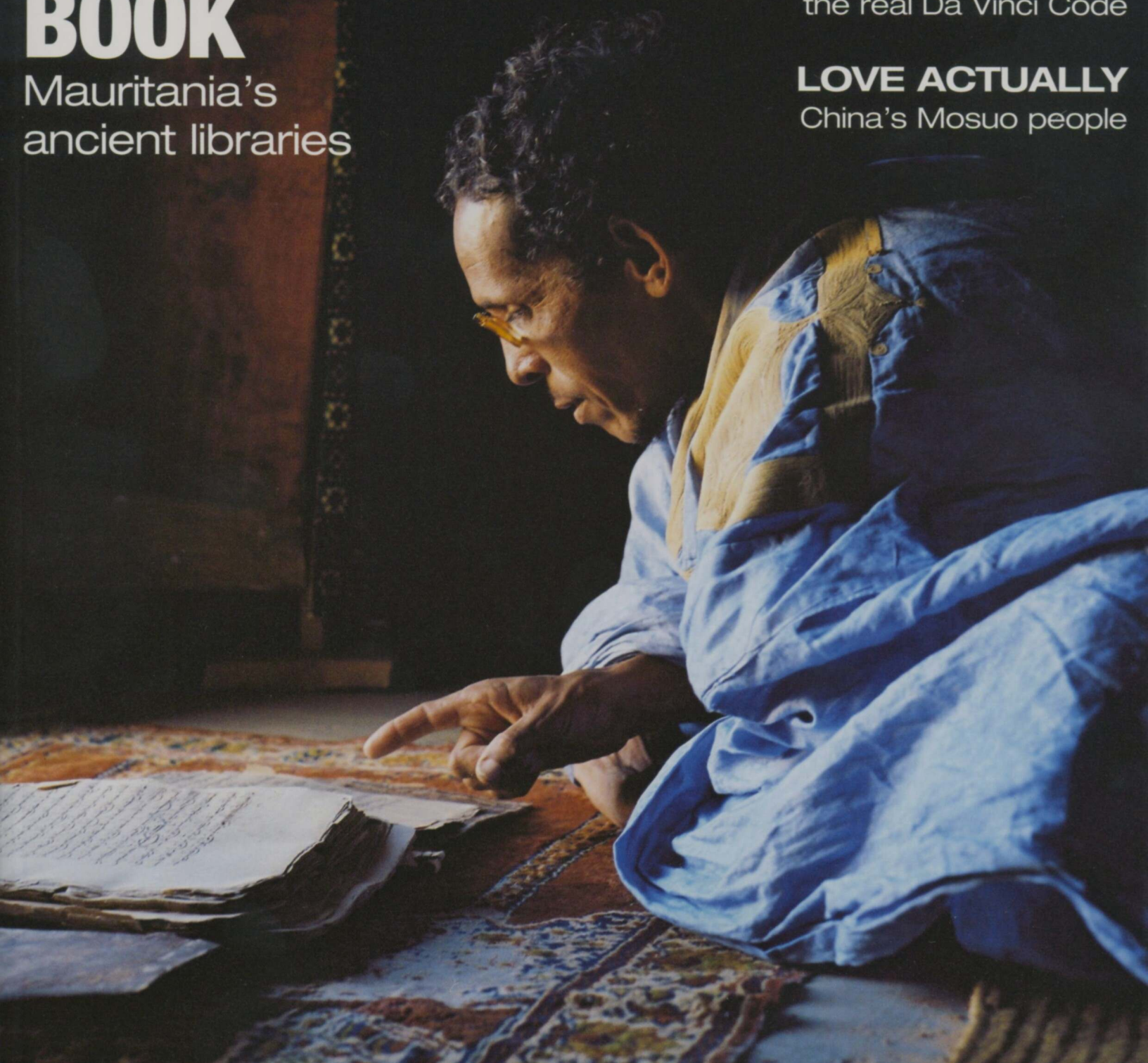
Mauritania's  
ancient libraries

## **TEMPLAR SECRETS**

The Scottish chapel and  
the real Da Vinci Code

## **LOVE ACTUALLY**

China's Mosuo people





## Editor's letter



The Mauritanian town of Chinguetti once lay on the trade route that linked the Arab world and the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. That was many centuries ago, however, and the caravans with their cargoes of salt, gold, dates and ivory have long-since passed into folklore. What remains are ancient libraries of priceless books, jealously guarded for generations by local families. But, as the desert sands encroach on Chinguetti, the race is now on to save these extraordinary literary collections before they crumble into dust. Turn to page 68 for more on this fascinating story.

Dan Hayes, editor. Email: [dan.hayes@hhc.co.uk](mailto:dan.hayes@hhc.co.uk)

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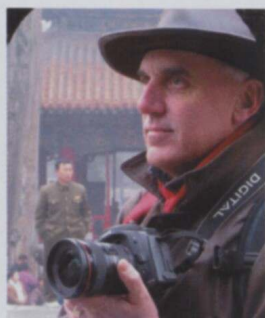
The tsunami that devastated Asia on December 26 was a tragedy with global impact. *Time*'s Andrew Marshall shares his experiences of reporting on its bitter aftermath.

**60. Ladies of the Lake**

On the shores of Lugu Lake in China, the Mosuo people preserve a unique matriarchal society. Peter Ellegard reports.



# Contributors



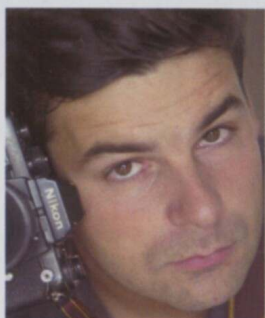
**Peter Ellegard** is a freelance writer and photographer whose travels take him round the world. He has developed a passionate interest in China and its traditions and minority cultures. During one recent journey to the country he visited the matriarchal society of the Mosuo, who live alongside Lugu Lake on the borders of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces.



**John Lee** is a British-born journalist living in Vancouver whose work has appeared in *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Sydney Morning Herald*. A Lonely Planet guidebook author, he travelled to New Zealand to discover how the Maori are gaining ownership of tourism projects.



**Mark Stratton** is a freelance travel writer with a thirst for going off the beaten track. He has visited many unheralded corners of the globe, with Mauritania being the most recent. On the edge of the Sahara he discovered the ancient libraries of Chinguetti, where books that date back to the great caravans provide an exceptional cultural heritage.



**Bela Szandelszky** is a Hungarian-born photo-journalist whose work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *La Libération* and *The Independent*. For this issue of *CNN Traveller* he travelled to Romania to report on how two of the country's historic castles are being adapted to attract visitors from western Europe.



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# Ladies of the lake

**C**ha Cuo and her husband Jun Zhang sit holding hands, their baby daughter on her lap. It is a family scene you would expect to find anywhere in the world, yet it is something almost unheard of in this particular village in rural China.

The couple run a bar in the village of Luoshui, on the shores of Lugu Lake. Their side of the lake is in the province of Yunnan. Across the mirror-like waters lies Sichuan province. Mountains towering to nearly 4,000m cradle the lake, itself at 2,600m altitude; for centuries they kept the outside world at bay. The lake and its environs are home to the Mosuo people – one of the last remaining matriarchal societies in the world. Women head households and marriage does not exist here, at least not in the Western sense.


The Mosuo practise what they call ‘walking marriage’. If a girl likes a boy she will make a sign with her eyes to let him know or by delicately scratching the palm of his hand. A Mosuo boy might leave a stone outside her family’s house. He will then visit the house at night, often on horseback, and spend the night with her.

In the morning, however, he leaves and returns to his mother’s house, where he takes all his meals and where he is expected to help with family chores. Mosuo couples do not live together. Any children born from a union are brought up by the girl, her sisters and brothers. The fathers play no part in raising them. ➤

All clear: a traditionally dressed Mosuo woman rows visitors across the still waters of Lugu Lake





A woman in traditional Miao attire is rowing a wooden boat on Lugu Lake. She wears a red patterned jacket, white gloves, and a headpiece adorned with pink flowers. The background shows a calm lake, distant mountains, and a small boat with other people in the distance.

**On the shores of China's Lugu Lake, paternalistic family values are turned on their heads. Peter Ellegard reports from Luoshui village, where women rule the roost and free love is the norm**



## Minority report

The Mosuo are a sub-group of the Naxi minority group. There are 55 minority nationalities in China, in addition to the majority Han group which comprises more than 1.1 billion people.

### Nomadic descent

The Naxi are thought to be descended from Tibetan nomads. There are about 278,000 of them living in Sichuan and Yunnan provinces. The Mosuo number around 30,000 and live in villages around Lugu lake, in both Sichuan and Yunnan. They maintain the matriarchal family system once commonplace throughout Naxi society.

### West meets east

The Naxi and Mosuo were first brought to the world's attention by Austrian-born American botanist Joseph Rock, who lived in northwest Yunnan from 1922-1949, basing himself on an island in the middle of Lugu Lake for several years. Rock's accounts of this area of China are claimed to have inspired James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*, about the fabled Shangri-La.

### That loving feeling

Mosuo girls with lovers wear pearls on their headdresses differentiating them from those who are single. Matriarchal influences are strong in the Naxi language.

### Gender relations

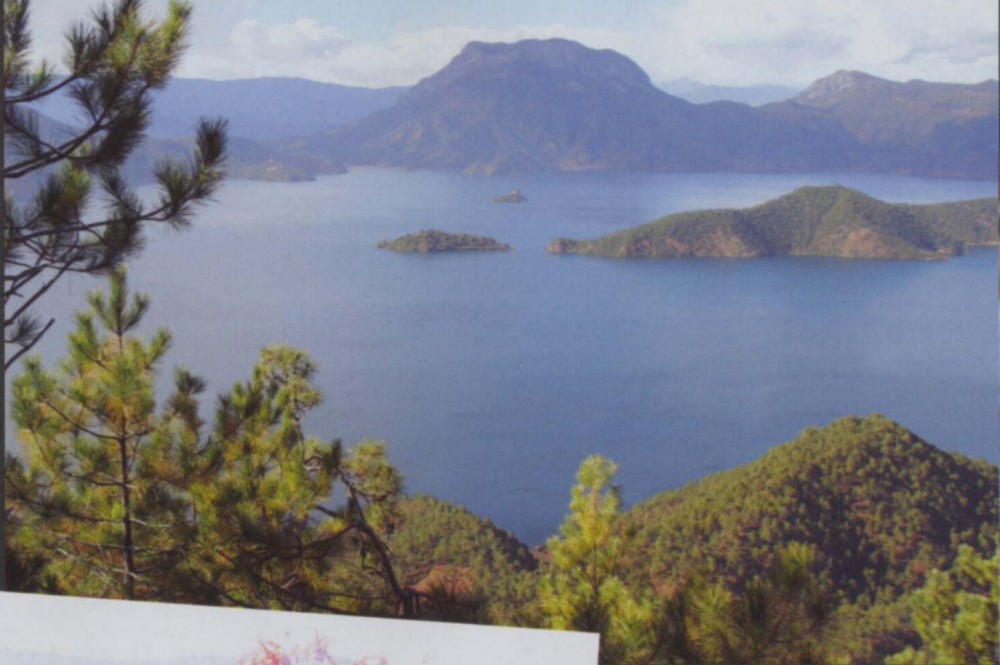
If the word female is added to a noun, it supersedes it, whereas adding the word male diminishes it. So stone and female denote a boulder, while stone and male denote a pebble.

There is no arrangement binding couples together either. Once the love dies the girl may find her nightly visits suddenly stop, or she might choose not to open the door to her lover.


This uncomplicated way of life has endured for generations. Even the lake and surrounding mountains are steeped in legends of love, the waters said to be the tears of a goddess, Gemu, who turned into a mountain overlooking the lake when her lover's horse stumbled and he was killed. But the world is now beating a path to this once-hidden paradise. New roads

lined with guest accommodation blocks. Away from the lake, new buildings are springing up throughout the village. Where 30 families once lived, there are now 100, the newcomers eager to cash in on the burgeoning tourism goldmine. From a trickle of tourists only a few years ago, Luoshui now attracts over 270,000 visitors a year.

Worried about the growing threat of pollution and damage to the lake's fragile ecology as well as the effect on the unique Mosuo culture, local officials are considering ways to curb this growth. One proposal would see a purpose-built tourism village being created away from the village, with the courtyard



Fragile ecology: Lugu in all its glory (above); the pearls in this woman's headdress (left) indicate that she has a lover; a card game on the beach (right)



have made the once-tortuous journey possible in just a few hours from tourist centres such as Lijiang, and visitors arrive every day by the busload. Huge roadside billboards on the approaches to the area proclaim: 'Kingdom of Women, God Living Here'. The Mosuo also appear to be gaining notoriety for their liberal approach to relationships, being portrayed by some as a society of free love. Yet the encroaching influence of modern society is threatening the social fabric of this idyllic culture.

Luoshui looks every bit a frontier town from the US's Old West. Timber framed buildings line the dirt street of its main lakeside thoroughfare. Mosuo walk their horses past ornate gates of traditional homes, many of whose courtyards are now





*'When I went to her home for the first time, her family objected strongly. But they accepted me step-by-step.'*

houses being restored to how they were before the guest blocks were added.

The Mosuo themselves seem determined to hang on to their traditional ways while embracing the influx of visitors. For Cha Cuo, tradition meant having to leave Luoshui when her mother refused to accept her relationship with Jun Zhang, a Han Chinese outsider with whom she fell in love while he was visiting the village. They opened up a bar in the centre of Old Lijiang. It was Cha Cuo's first time outside Lugu Lake, and

they put photographs on a wall as reminders of home. It was only when their daughter was born that her mother began to accept their relationship, and she eventually agreed to let them return to Luoshui and move in as part of the family. The Lijiang bar is now run by a

friend, the pictures of Cha Cuo and the lake still on the wall.

Her husband is sanguine about events. 'When I went to her home the first time, her family objected strongly,' he says. 'Her mother spoke to her in Mosuo language: "There is no white crow in sky, and there are no good Han people on the earth." We tried our best to persuade her family and they accepted me step-by-step. It took over a year to do this, and when we had the baby, our relationship became better.'

Explaining the matriarchy system, Cha Cuo says: 'There is only a mother in the family and the children live together ➤'





Matriarch A Ma (right) spins her prayer wheel as she talks to visitors, these days the tourist trade supplements her income. The brightly coloured clothing of these Mosuo women (above) has something in common with the styles of South America

in this family and obey the mother. Most of the families have no father, we only have our mother and uncles. I got used to this as a child.'

On the Mosuo walking marriage custom, Jun Zhang adds: 'The only reason they get together is love. They separate when the love has gone. There are no problems with property and children. Their relationship is pure; it's the release of humanity. Han or Western people have many problems when they want to separate, but Mosuo people don't.'

Not all Mosuo approve of walking marriages, or even the matriarchal traditions. Yeshe Tsuntim was perhaps the first Mosuo to venture overseas. He walked to Tibet at the age of 17, a journey that took three months. There he joined a lamasery and became a monk, staying for over 10 years until the failed uprising of 1959 which led to China regaining control.

He fled across the Himalayas on foot to India with fellow monks and eventually settled in England in the 1970s, where he began working for an international charity in Cambridge. Tsuntim returned to Luoshui five years ago to spend his final years with his family. He now lives in a room in a hotel block his brother has built in the courtyard of the family home.

He disagrees with the matriarchal system which puts women at the head of households, and also disapproves of the sexual freedom women have – perhaps a reflection of his lamasery teachings. Buddhism is very much in evidence in Luoshui. A temple surmounts a rock outcrop in the lake, while shrines dot the village and include one by the lake edge which Mosuo women clad in their traditional brightly coloured tops and white dresses circle early each morning.

In another courtyard house further along the lake, the venerable matriarch, A Ma, talks about her family as she sits on the veranda outside her wooden home, gently spinning a prayer



'The only reason they get together is love. They separate when the love has gone. There are no problems with children.'

wheel in one hand all the while. There are 17 members of the family spanning four generations. Corn cobs are drying on the roof, the produce of the farmland they till nearby. These days the income is supplemented by visitors staying in two-storey guest blocks. Behind the old lady, red chillies are strung up to dry on an outside wall. Alongside them, incongruously, is a poster of British footballing icon David Beckham. Inside A Ma's single-room home, the heavy-beamed ceiling is stained black from the smoke of the open fire upon ➤





which she cooks, an altar behind it. A fading propaganda poster of Chairman Mao and some family portraits adorn one wall, along with ancient rifles and fly whisks.

Across the room is her bed, built like a cabin with dark green curtains. A blanket on the bed bears the words 'Playa de Sud America'. The reference is strangely fitting. The full, white skirts and bright blue-and-red tops of the Mosuo women are reminiscent of those worn in South American countries, the costume

Prized possessions: a Mosuo man and his horse (above); A Ma's home is a mix of the traditional; such as her curtained bed (left), and the modern; like this poster of the England footballer David Beckham (right)

worn by the men even more so, with their gaucho cowboy-style hats and red blankets tied around the waist. The illusion is made more complete at traditional fire dances, where the Mosuo dance hand-in-hand around a blazing fire to the rhythm of a flute. The dances are performed as much for tourists these days as for the Mosuo themselves, but dancers sometimes use the occasion to let prospective partners know their feelings.

Singing is another traditional method of wooing. Mosuo women and men serenade each other as they row visitors in dugout boats across the lake. The haunting sound of their voices hangs on the still waters, broken only by the splashing of oars. The scene is timeless. Yet for how much longer will these ladies of the lake rule over such a pristine environment? ○

