



**TAKING AIM:** Alice tries her hand at archery, left, and the pool area at the resort in Guilin

# Club Red!

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**M**Y YOUNG son Edward loves funny stories, and as we step into a motorcycle sidecar to explore the stunning countryside around Guilin in southern China, it's clear that he's just remembered one.

'If you lose us, please come back and get us,' he asks the driver, having recalled a tale about his Italian grandmother. When nonna was a young girl, she was a passenger in her father's sidecar. But as they were driving over railway tracks one day, the sidecar became detached from the motorcycle – and by the time her father noticed, a train was heading straight towards her.

Fortunately, disaster was averted. 'Nonna's daddy rescued her,' Edward tells the driver. 'He's like Superman.'

The sidecar was certainly an interesting way to see Guilin, a city in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

Most travellers board a ship to cruise the Li River – famous for its cormorant fishermen – and admire the scenery. Instead, we tackled dusty roads riddled with potholes as the motorcycle's engine roared in our ears.

We trundled past clusters of brick houses, the front doors bearing red paper 'fu' characters, hung upside down for good luck.

Edward pointed out everything: farmers wearing straw hats, water buffalo, mandarin trees, and melons left lying on the ground like discarded footballs. When our tour was over, Edward took off his helmet and commended our driver: 'You didn't lose us. You can have a gold star!'

**G**UILIN has become one of China's most popular holiday spots and it is also home to a French institution – Club Med. Founded in 1950, the company, noted for its luxury holidays, now operates 65 resorts around the world. Before we headed to Club Med, my French friend Celine told me: 'Their Mini Club is super.'

'For Edward?'

'Yes, he'll like it but you'll adore it.'

The Mini Club is aimed at children aged four to ten, and Edward's daily schedule of complimentary activities kicked off with a flying trapeze lesson, followed by tennis, football and swimming. There were breaks for free play, meals and for the raucous evening entertainment.

In the morning, he gobbled up his eggs and sausages so that we could be at the club for a prompt 9am start. Sessions ran until either 5pm or 8pm, depending on whether Edward preferred a sumptuous buffet dinner with

It's an odd mix, but exporting a French holiday institution to southern China has been a huge hit, says **Alice Bianchi**

his new friends or a bowl of noodles with me. Club Med has its very own noodle bar. Here, they are served with roasted peanuts, pickled green beans, cabbage, chilli flakes and beef or pork in a hot broth.

The Mini Club meant I had plenty of time to reconnect with myself and with nature. I suspect this is why Celine suggested I'd love it.

The resort includes a 110-acre sculpture park, and I spent time admiring more than 100 contemporary works by local and international artists. There were plenty of free activities on offer too. My mornings were filled by yoga or salsa lessons. On another occasion, I explored the resort on a bike, and even tried archery.

Later I followed Edward's example and signed up for a trapeze lesson. I managed to banish my fears and found that flying through the air was easier than I'd imagined – and there was a safety net to catch me when I fell. Against my better judgment, I also tried rock climbing. 'I just want a photo to prove I did it,' I told my instructor Charlie. 'A few feet above ground will do.'

He laughed. 'You know when life gets tough, it's easier to make excuses and give up. It's the same with rock climbing. People think it's physical but rock climbing is an exercise in self-belief. You're going to get to the top today and it will change your life.'

So it did – but that's another story.

### GETTING THERE

**Club Med** (clubmed.co.uk, 08453 676767) offers seven nights' full-board in Guilin from £3,327pp, including drinks, sports, activities, kids' club, transfers and return flights.

**WHAT A CATCH:** A cormorant fisherman on the Li River near Guilin



ALAMY