A Visit to the Four Sacred Mountains of Buddhism

By staff reporter XI WEN

Of the various religions in China, Buddhism is the most popular and widespread. It has a history of close to 2,000 years in China. The country’s different geographic areas and languages mean Chinese Buddhism can be roughly divided into Han (Chinese) Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Pali Buddhism. Han Buddhism prevails among the population of the dominant Han ethnic group, and Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Qinghai, Gansu and other Tibetan communities, while Pali Buddhism is prevalent among the Dai minority in Yunnan Province.

In Han (Chinese) Buddhism, Mount Wutai of Shanxi Province, Mount Emei of Sichuan Province, Mount Putuo of Zhejiang Province and Mount Jiuhua of Anhui Province are regarded as the Four Sacred Mountains. According to legends, these four great mountains are the locations of the enlightenment of Bodhisattvas Wenshu, Puxian, Guanyin and Dizang.

The Four Sacred Mountains of Buddhism are famed for their rare Buddhist libraries, cultural antiques, splendid Buddhist architecture and beautiful scenery. They attract Buddhist disciples and tourists from around the world.

Mount Jiuhua after snowfall.
Mount Wutai

Located in Wutai County, Shanxi Province, Mount Wutai is one of the five pilgrimage sites of Buddhism in the world, the other four being Nepal’s Lumbini and India’s Kushinagara, Mrgadava and Buddhagaya. Wutai is especially dedicated to the Bodhisattva of wisdom, or Wenshu in Chinese.

Mount Wutai became the most sacred site of Chinese Buddhism around AD 67. It now holds more than 50 temples; the famous ones are Xiantong, Tayuan, Pusading and Foguang.

Xiantong Temple is one of the oldest in China and the first destination for pilgrims. Most of its buildings date from the Ming and Qing dynasties. Among its valuable cultural artifacts is a copper statue of the Thousand-Alms-Bowl Bodhisattva Wenshu of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and a bronze namesake hall that has thousands of small bronze Buddhist icons lining its four walls. In the Bell Tower in the front part of the temple hangs a 5,000-kilogram bronze bell cast during the Ming Dynasty. When the bell tolls, it echoes all over the mountain.

The Great White Pagoda, or Sarira Stupa, of Tayuan (Pagoda Courtyard) Temple is a landmark of Mount Wutai. According to a legend, after Sakyamuni passed away, his body transformed into 84,000 sariras. King Ashoka, the great Indian emperor of the Maurya Dynasty, built 84,000 stupas all over the world. The Great White Pagoda of Tayuan, one of the 19 Sarira stupas in China, is 56.4 meters high, and enshrines the tablet of a Buddhist footprint, which attracts countless Buddhist followers and non-believers.

Pusading, or Bodhisatva Summit, is the largest and most important temple of Tibetan Buddhism on Mount Wutai. Its name comes from a Manchurian term meaning the living place of Bodhisattva Wenshu. The temple was initiated during the Northern Wei (386-534), and in the Ming Dynasty it became a permanent home for Mongolian and Tibetan lamas of the Gelug Sect. During the Qing Dynasty, it was converted into a royal temple, achieving exalted status. Historical documents show that many Qing emperors worshipped here. The yellow glazed tiles on the roofs of its halls and the archways of four pillars indicate the temple’s royal standing. Two of the nameplates carved on the stone archways were inscribed by Emperor Kangxi (1662-1723).

In Foguang Temple, one can enjoy not only the 1,400-year-old Indian style pagoda with a hexagonal plane and flamboyant lotuses on top, but also a series of carvings created from 386 to 1279, and mural paintings and calligraphy masterpieces of the Tang Dynasty (618-907).
Mount Emei

Mount Emei is located 160 kilometers southwest of Chengdu in Sichuan Province. In 1996, Mount Emei, along with the nearby Leshan Giant Buddha, the largest stone-carved Buddha in the world, was declared a UNESCO World Natural and Cultural Heritage Site.

Construction of Buddhist temples in the area started in the second century and reached its heyday in the 15th century. At present, there are almost 30 temples on Mount Emei, including the famous Baoguo, Qingyinge and Wannian.

Baoguo Temple is the oldest and best-preserved temple in Mount Emei. It houses two renowned treasures: a 2.4-meter-tall porcelain Buddhist statue and a 2.3-meter-tall and 25-ton bronze bell.

Qingyinge is famous for its beautiful gardens, and is regarded as the number one landscape on Mount Emei by tourists, both ancient and modern.

Wannian Temple, one of the main temples in Mount Emei, was built in 420, and is a brick-and-mortar ancient architectural masterpiece. According to historical records, the temple has survived 18 earthquakes over 400 years. Inside the temple is a bronze statue of Samantabhadra riding a white elephant, cast in the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

Besides the sacred temples, the Golden Summit of Emei, 3,079.3 meters above sea level, is also worth a visit. It displays all the glamorous features of the ideal mountain: a sea of clouds, an auspicious halo and sacred lamps.

Mount Putuo

This sacred mountain is actually a small part of the Zhoushan Islands. It lies 100 nautical miles east of Hangzhou Bay, Zhejiang Province.

There are three major temples on Putuo – Puji, Fayu and Huiji. Puji Temple has the island’s oldest structure...
– the Yuan Dynasty Duobao (Abundant Treasures) Pagoda. In Fayu Temple stands a stone stele from Wanli’s Reign (1573-1620) in the Ming Dynasty, carved with an image of Bodhisattva Guanyin holding a willow twig in her hand. The temple also houses the Nine-dragon Hall, a replica of its ruined predecessor in the early Ming Imperial Palace in Nanjing. Its caisson ceiling carved with nine dragons reveals the exquisite workmanship of ancient ornamental architecture.

The new landmark of Mount Putuo is a gold-copper Bodhisattva Guanyin built in 1997. Bodhisattva Guanyin is highly venerated by Chinese people as the embodiment of compassion, mercy and love. Some believe that she can relieve people’s suffering and has the power to grant children.

In addition, Mount Putuo holds many diverse plants and a profusion of forests, and is extolled as an island botanical garden. There are 1,221 trees of 66 species over 100 years old on the island, including 1,000-year-old camphor trees, and an endangered species named *Carpinus putoensis*, which can only be found in the wild here. It is a beautiful and relaxing experience to stroll around the island, frolicking on the sand beach, and enjoying the silvery waves and thick, cool forests.

Mount Jiuhua

Located in Chizhou City on the southern bank of the Yangtze River in Anhui Province, Mount Jiuhua has over 70 noted peaks, about half of them exceeding 1,000 meters in height, with the highest at 1,342 meters. It has beautiful valleys, streams and waterfalls. The mountain is shaped like a lotus flower, and is reputed as the most famous mountain in Southeast China.

After arriving, the first destination for a visitor should be Jiuhua Street, 600 meters above sea level. It is the center of the mountain, and a town complete with schools, shops, hotels, and residential dwellings. Tourists can stay the night before exploring the mountain. Most temples are also located in and around the town.

Huacheng Temple, built in the Jin Dynasty (265-420), is the oldest and most prominent temple on the mountain. Not far east of Jiuhua Street is the Baisui (Hundred-year-old) Palace, a temple built on the steep cliff in the local residence style. Zhiyuan Temple is a labyrinthine complex following the contours of the mountainside. Its tiered palatial roofs create a majestic and spectacular sight. Dongya Temple also clings to a steep cliff. Ganlu is a tranquil temple, and now houses the Anhui Province Buddhism Seminary.