

Myths & Tales:

Shangri-La is a fictional place described in the 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* by British author James Hilton. In the book, "Shangri-La" is a mystical, harmonious valley, gently guided from a lamasery, enclosed in the western end of the Kunlun Mountains. Shangri-La has become synonymous with any earthly paradise but particularly a mythical Himalayan utopia—a permanently happy land, isolated from the outside world. In the novel *Lost Horizon*, the people who live at Shangri-La are almost immortal, living years beyond the normal lifespan and only very slowly aging in appearance. The word also evokes the imagery of exoticism of the Orient.

Several places in the Buddhist Himalaya between northern India and Tibet have claimed to be the location for Hilton's fictional Shangri-La, largely to attract tourism. In China, Tao Qian of the Jin Dynasty described a Shangri-La in his work *Story of the Peach Blossom Valley*. In modern China, the Zhongdian county was renamed to Shangri-La in Chinese) in 2001, to attract tourists. The legendary Kun Lun Mountains in Tibet offer other possible Shangri-La valleys.

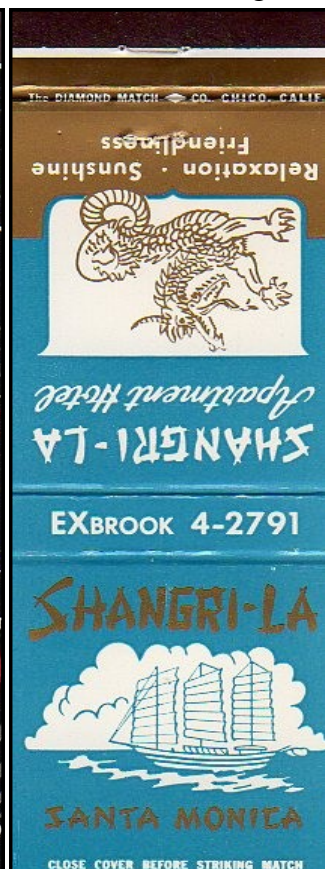
A popularly believed inspiration for Hilton's Shangri-La is the Hunza Valley in northern Pakistan, close to the Tibetan border, which Hilton visited a few years before *Lost Horizon* was published. An isolated green valley surrounded by mountains, enclosed on the western end of the Himalayas, it closely matches the description in the novel. A Shangri-La resort in the nearby Skardu valley is a popular tourist attraction.

In 2001, Zhongdian County in northwestern Yunnan officially renamed itself Shangri-La County. Bhutan, which was until now isolated from outside world and has its unique form of Tibetan Buddhism, has been hailed as the last Shangri-La. Another place that has been thought to have inspired

the concept of Shangri-La is the Yarlung Tsangpo Canyon. TV Presenter and historian Michael Wood, in the "Shangri-La" episode of the PBS documentary series *In Search of Myths and Heroes*, suggests that the legendary Shangri-La is the abandoned city of

Tsaparang, and that its two great temples were once home to the kings of Guge in modern Tibet.

American explorers Ted Vaill and Peter Klika visited the Muli area of southern Sichuan Province in 1999, and revealed that the Muli monastery in this remote region was the model for James Hilton's *Shangri-La*, which



Shangri -La!

Hilton learned about from articles on this area in several *National Geographic Magazine* articles in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Vaill completed a film based on their research, "Finding Shangri-La", which debuted at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007.

There are a number of modern Shangri-La pseudo-legends that have developed since 1933 in the wake of the novel and the film made from it. The Nazis had an enthusiasm for Shangri-La, where they hoped to find an ancient master race, similar to the Nordic race, unspoiled by Buddhism. They sent one expedition to Tibet, led by Ernst Schäfer in 1938.

Another pseudo-legend involves the Ojai Valley as the location for the 1937 Frank Capra film *Lost Horizon*. The outdoor scenes of the villagers of Shangri-La and a cavorting Ronald Colman and Jane Wyatt were in fact filmed in nearby Sherwood Forest (Westlake Village) and Palm Springs. The exterior of the grand lamasery was built and later dismantled on the Columbia Ranch in Burbank, California.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, being considerably fond of Hilton's novel, named the presidential retreat, now known as Camp David, "Shangri-La" in 1942. In that April, United States bombers secretly launched from the aircraft carrier *Hornet* bombed Tokyo in a daring raid led by Colonel Jimmy Doolittle. Since Tokyo was far out of range of any American bomber base at the time, there was intense speculation as to where the bombers had come from. President Roosevelt facetiously told a press conference that the bombers had flown from Shangri-La. In line with this quip, one of the aircraft carriers used in the Pacific Ocean was subsequently named *USS Shangri-La*.

In 1937, Lutch Stark, a prominent Texas philanthropist, started building his own Shangri-La in Orange, Texas. His Shangri-La was a beautiful azalea garden situated along a cypress/tupelo swamp. By 1950, thousands of people were traveling to Orange to visit Shangri La. Every major magazine dealing with gardens published photographs of the beautiful Shangri La in Texas. In 1958, a major snowstorm struck east Texas, destroying thousands of azaleas and closing the garden for forty years. The garden has recently been renovated and is now open to the public once again.

[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shangri-La>]

