



# RED DWARVES

**Stumpy monks! The midget Michael Bolton! Five stubby looking women dressed like the Pussycat Dolls! Welcome to China's 'Dwarf Empire', a Thorpe Park-style attraction where Lilliputians perform for a wage...**

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Through the mist, tiny pumping arms and legs can be seen motoring towards us along the mountain ledge. As our people carrier slows to a standstill, human shapes appear, the bright flames of a campfire lick the air and inexplicably, a shuttlecock is being thwacked backwards and forwards by tiny unseen racquets. The mist clears and dozens of dwarves, variously dressed in business suits, angels' wings and Roman centurions' outfits run out to meet us, joined by tiny yapping chihuahuas. Waving, shouting in Chinese, the dwarves' happy faces are lit up by the arrival of new guests. They drop their games of poker and

**Midget gems:**  
some of the  
Dwarf Empire's  
employees

badminton and gather around the car waving, while a miniature centurion whose head barely comes above the bumper swings open our car door to let us out. We have arrived at the world's first 'Dwarf Empire'. A place exclusively inhabited by people under five feet in height – situated in the mountainous valleys of Kunming, southern China. And we're feeling very, very tall.

Every day for the entertainment of up to 5,000 paying punters, these dwarves perform musicals, drag acts and sing soprano. They gyrate, rap and stage mock martial arts fights. They will pose for photos, challenge you to

a game of badminton, make you coffee and feed you noodles and pizza. All around are dwarf-sized, ramshackle houses which could have been lifted from the props department at CBeebies – slanty roofs, mock turrets and tiny wooden doors. The houses are small, the sinks in the toilets are even smaller and you could whack your shin on the dining tables. I feel like Lemuel Gulliver entering Lilliput, only with the scenery being given a wacky Nickelodeon-style redesign. Here, free from the hassles and restrictions of a normal-sized world, these dwarves – gathered from all over China and the neighbouring >

countries – have an elected king and queen, a political cabinet, a fire service and even a royal guard. To fund their existence, they charge visitors £8 a time to watch their half-pint cabarets and smoke sheesha in their little houses.

To the sounds of what's best described as '90s Nintendo electro, a dwarf announcer with a headset urges us to take a seat in the auditorium.

Two mini presenters – a kind of dwarf Ryan Seacrest/Fearne Cotton double act – pad down a set of stairs on to the stage. In squeaky Mandarin, our hosts announce they are delighted to welcome us to their brand new country – they have their own flag and everything – and that, “with love in their mighty hearts, they will entertain us all day”. I'd say the crowd is well entertained already watching the miniature guards waddle down the stairs with what look like toy shields. They form a guard of honour around the tiny king, who in full regal garb with sceptre and throne looks, from where we're sat, like a crown on legs.

A singer with a mullet, who must be a further eight inches smaller than all the other performers, takes to the stage to sing a Chinese love song. Like some mini Michael Bolton, the elderly tourists are drawn inexorably towards him, leaping from their seats to pelt him with roses – clearly the tinier the heartbreak the greater the sympathy – as smaller belly-dancing lady dwarves shimmy and shake around him. After an effortless falsetto ending, he laps up his applause and exits stage right.

Next up is a pocket-sized breakdancer, dressed in white leather waistcoat and matching MC Hammer parachute pants, who enters to what appears to be the theme tune from *Beverly Hills Cop*. He makes a big show of flexing his chicken leg-sized arms and performing one-handed press-ups on stage. He can't be much bigger than a family Labrador, but he throws himself into a mesmerizing, body-popping 'worm'. More roses land on

## DOWN AND OUT

The Dwarf Empire may embrace the little people, but sometimes life doesn't. Take, for example...



### HERVÉ VILLECHAIZE

This diminutive Frenchman stood at 3ft 11in. Preferring the term 'dwarf' to 'little person', Hervé found fame as Nick Nack in *The Man With The Golden Gun*, but continued health problems left him an alcoholic and depressed. In 1993, it became too much for Hervé, and he blew his little brains out.



### GARY COLEMAN

Not technically a dwarf, the 4ft 8in Coleman suffers a congenital kidney disease that halted his growth. Coleman found his calling as Arnold Jackson in American sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes*. He was massively famous, then he filed for bankruptcy, then he decked a woman after having an argument in a mall. Coleman stated, "I was getting scared, and she was getting ugly."

stage. Our man gives a final flex and rotation of his pudgy guns before bouncing back offstage with a showman-esque toss of his mohawk.

By the end of the performance we've seen a dwarf in drag – looking for all the world like a miniature, muscular Tina Turner – send a silicone boob skywards during an overly excited titty shake; the Dwarf Empire's answer to the Pussycat Dolls pout and simmer for the crowd; and a tiny strongman swallow ball bearings then squeeze them out of his eye sockets. It's part Victorian circus, part human safari. It's *Lord Of The Rings*, *Labyrinth* and *Willow*, all rolled into a musical. But not a musical in the Andrew Lloyd Webber, West End, camp abomination sense of the word – it's a rip-roaring fun fest. We feel at the same time enthralled by the spectacle, yet slightly uncomfortable

## “We're just like big people here – we can do anything. To do things outside was difficult as people would point and laugh at you”

at whether we should be laughing at performances by people who would be registered disabled in this country.

But the dwarves haven't been dragged here against their will. The park is a creation of entrepreneur Chen Mingjing, a normal-sized former teacher who has created the park as both a business venture and hideaway for the dwarves. The 100 undersized men and women are here by choice after answering an internet SOS from Chen, who was seeking to create a park where China's dwarves could live away from bullying and mistreatment. He explains that in wider China they would never have an opportunity to bring in a wage or be able to support themselves.

“Normally, dwarves are not even allowed to do basic manual labour as they have small fingers and feet which

mean they can't hold regular tools or operate machinery,” he says. “And they are never allowed 'front of house' jobs as companies place a lot of importance on appearance and wouldn't want dwarf members of staff.”

At the Dwarf Empire they are positively given centre stage. Whereas many of the dwarves were abandoned in orphanages at an early age or suffered ritualistic abuse in wider society, here under Chen's employment they are given the confidence to perform on stage, life skills training, language classes and even a bespoke suit. In return for two performances a day, they get healthcare, three meals a day, board and lodging, plus weeks of time off. This is added to an annual salary of 24,000RMB (Chinese Yuan, roughly £2,100) which is roughly what a recent graduate would get in

Kunming. If there is anyone being exploited here it isn't the little people. And if they don't enjoy their job, they can leave at any point.

The park, which officially opened in September, cost nearly £5.3 million to build and is expanding – they want to have at least 1,000 dwarves here by 2014. The dwarf emperor, Wu Zimin, whose wife and queen also live with him here, says his people are stronger here together.

“We're just like big people here – we can do anything. To do things outside was very difficult as people would point at you and maybe laugh. Here in my country my people feel protected as they don't stand out.”

With no one to make fun of them the little devils also get plenty of opportunity for romancing. In fact, the Dwarf Empire is like a Love Island.



Seven new couples have formed since the park opened and in November the park celebrated its first marriage. Xiaoxiao, 20, whose name literally means “Little Little” met her boyfriend here and regularly takes him on dates to the local amusement arcade or shopping malls. Others like Chen Zhonghou, 35, the mullet-wearing love singer, has a wife on the outside world who is over five feet tall who comes to visit him at the park. Xiaoxiao takes fierce pride in her performances – she gets upset when I suggest the performances are “unusual” – and all dwarves have to audition before they are allowed onstage.

“They have to surpass a certain standard or else the shows wouldn't be good enough,” she says. “It is a great honour to perform and we have to give value for money. We have thousands of people here sometimes – people even watch from the trees in the forests. I was only allowed to work in a call centre before but now I feel like a pop star.”

Many of the dwarves here already have a background in performance, having worked the bars and clubs of Beijing, Shanghai and further afield for small change and beer money.

Others are employed for their diplomacy skills – there is a fully mobilised parliament here who rule on every issue from sanitation to domestic disputes. Got a problem with your dwarf roommate? See the parliament. Need your shelves lowered? Raise it at the next general meeting. As the show draws to a close the park's exterior minister – the dwarf David Miliband if you will – dances around the camp fire in a massive fur hat and Dolce & Gabbana duffel coat leading his brethren in a routine which involves running as close to the fire as possible without going up in flames. If this is their foreign policy, I'd love to hear what their neighbouring states think.

If they can't perform or are too shy for politics, dwarves are given jobs elsewhere. This can be either making synthetic flowers which are bought by visitors to throw onstage, or cooking



Tall story: FHM pals up with its new Chinese chums



### BUSHWICK BILL

Founding member of The Geto Boys, 3ft 8in Bill was responsible for hits like *Damn It Feels Good To Be A Gangster*. In May 1991, while depressed and suicidal, he went to his girlfriend's house and asked her to shoot him. She refused. During a struggle, the gun went off, shooting out Bill's eye.



### VERNE TROYER

As 2ft 8in Mini-Me in the *Austin Powers* movies, Troyer found fame and Playboy bunnies to sex-pest. But respect dwindled for Troyer when the nation watched him pissing into the corner of a room on *Celebrity Big Brother*. Has pitched a Mini-Me spin-off where “Mini-Me goes to Vegas and shags a bunch of showgirls”. Someone commission this.

