

The time may not be ripe for investors, but for travelers, now is the moment to pack up and head to Asia. After hitting the bustling cities of Hong Kong and Shanghai, you might even have money left over to splurge on the luxurious Amanpuri Resort in Phuket, Thailand. Go east!

Shanghai

THE PARTY'S JUST BEGUN

IN LIGHT NIGHT TRAFFIC, my taxi from the Shanghai Airport rocketed along a freeway walled in translucent panels, then swooped down into a real-world version of the computer game SimCity 2000. Looming everywhere were floodlit, sparkling new high-rises crowned with a dizzying array of futuristic spires, cylinders and domes. Only a few years ago, Shanghai's Pudong New Area was a wasteland of fields and shacks on the bank of the Huangpu River. Now it's a skyscraper farm with a bumper crop that includes the knife-edged Jin Mao Building, the high-tech Shanghai Stock Exchange (its center a square void that serves, locals say, to suck in money) and the Oriental Pearl TV Tower, a glittering spaceship-like Tinkertoy that has become a symbol of the city.

These fleeting glimpses of the largest city (population 14 million) in the world's fastest-growing nation were only the first in a barrage of sights confirming that Shanghai has taken what longtime leader Mao Tse-Tung might have called a "Great Leap Forward." No place for those seeking the fabled languor of the Far East, today's Shanghai suggests *Blade*

Runner more than *Shanghai Express*. The exotic Shanghai of Hollywood lore has gone the way of Marlene Dietrich, unforgettable as sultry Shanghai Lily fending off nefarious men from her smoky train berth.

"Shanghai is the future," declared an American businessman I met, a Shanghai-based exporter of machine tools. "I just returned from Hong Kong, and my friends there don't want to admit it, but it will never be what it was. Hong Kong is the past." Or, as the *New York Times* recently announced of Shanghai, "The 21st Century Starts Here." Undeterred by Asia's economic slump, work continues apace on an expanded subway, new freeways, river tunnels, a giant second airport and what will be the world's tallest skyscraper.

Such change is all the more striking after decades of stagnation, when China's communist leaders kept the lid on what had long been a bastion of capitalism and foreign influence. Its location on the delta of the Yangtze River, which flows into the Yellow Sea, made prerevolution Shanghai a natural target of gunboat diplomacy and those looking to exploit the riches of Asia.

Beginning in 1842, the city was opened to foreign traders, with "concession" areas

A bellhop at Shanghai's Garden Hotel (above left); the hustle and bustle on Nanjing Lu

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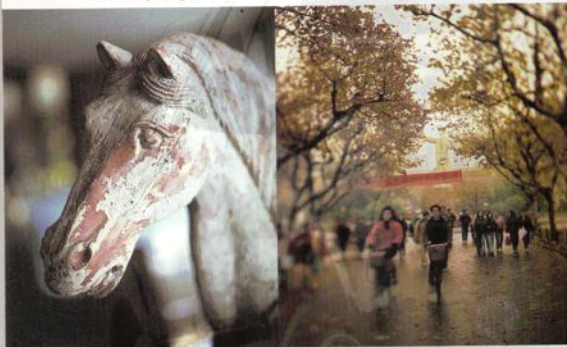
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independently administered by the British, Americans, French and Japanese. Shanghai grew into a thriving center, a mad swirl of opium dens, posh clubs, gangsters, good-time girls and lordly taipans. Known variously as the Pearl of the Orient, the Paris of the East and the Whore of Asia, it was a notorious crossroads of cultures and extremes: wealth and poverty, beauty and blight, big business and high crime. Its existence, said the missionaries, was an affront to Sodom and Gomorrah. But the high times weren't ended by divine intervention: The city was "shanghaied" by the Japanese in 1937, then fell to the communists in 1949.

Forty-three years later, premier Deng Xiaoping proclaimed, in effect, "Let a thousand high-rises bloom in Shanghai!" And so they have. Amid the city's frenetic modernization are remnants and riches of the past. The very new Pudong Shangri-La Hotel offers impeccable service and dazzling views. From this oasis of calm, it's a quick trip by cab across the river to bustling old Shanghai or a pleasant walk to the ferry landing. Taxis and air-conditioned tour buses are easy to find, but the best way to get the flavor of the city is on foot; only by stray-

suited more to tea dances than to speakeasies.

Nanjing Lu, the vibrant boulevard running west from the Peace Hotel, may have been on Coward's mind when he observed that romance is largely a matter of lighting. In the evening, the street's jumble of billboard images and Chinese script explodes into a pageant of impressive neon. But by day, it lives up to its reputation as "the avenue that all of China shops on." One afternoon, I joined the crush and witnessed countless close calls between pedestrians, cars and cyclists convinced that a bicycle bell ensures immortality. (Sample Chinese curse on rude drivers: "May you be pierced by chopsticks!")



SHANGHAI, FROM LEFT: A pottery horse at the Shanghai Hilton's Sichuan Restaurant; college students on University Campus; the futuristic Oriental Pearl TV Tower; a scene from Old City; staff at Sichuan Restaurant

ing onto side streets and back alleys can you witness the vivid texture of everyday life here. One moment, I watched a street vendor weighing freshwater greens and lotus roots on a primitive balance scale; the next, I was practically run over by a woman pedaling past on her bicycle, jabbering into a cell phone and swerving to miss a couple of red-kerchiefed Young Pioneers—communists in training.

Any walking tour of Shanghai should include the Peace Hotel—the once luxurious art deco outpost where Noël Coward penned *Private Lives*. Echoes of imperial gentility still linger in both the lobby and the Dragon-Phoenix restaurant upstairs, famed for its view of the Bund (Old Shanghai's riverfront avenue) and its fried noodles. Downstairs in the bar, the Old Jazz Band, said to include players who practiced in secret during jazz's underground years, cranks out unrepentant tunes

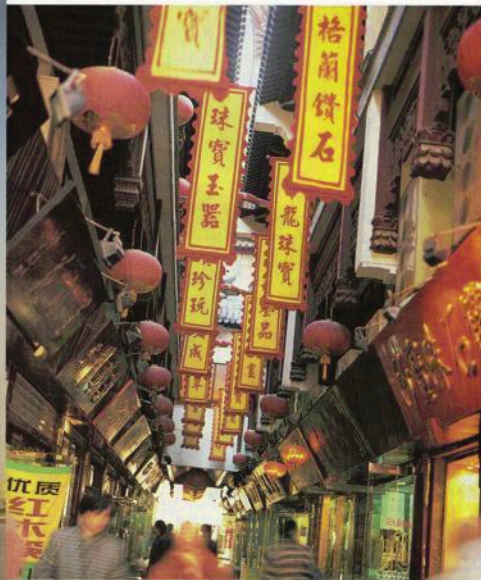


The Shanghaiese have a reputation among their countrymen for arrogance and aggressiveness. But these same characteristics make them natural entrepreneurs, ready and able to gauge the latest winds from the West. (In this emergent consumer electronics market, cell phones are easier to procure than wired ones, and people who've never bought VCRs are leapfrogging into DVDs.) Shopping here can be a challenge—a dance between the merchant's calculator and your bargaining skills. The state-run Friendship Store on Beijing Lu, with

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its cross section of everything from clothing to crafts to calligraphy sets, is worth browsing, as are the chic shops on the up-market Huaihai Lu. *Qi paos*, the famous form-fitting slit-up-the-side dresses nicknamed Suzy Wongs, are not hard to find, nor are Mao jackets. Deals can be had on designer clothing and leather goods, but the most rewarding bargains are in curios and antiques, including easily transported porcelains and boxes. Prices are fixed at the government-run Shanghai Antique & Curio Store at 218-266 Guangdong Lu, while haggling is essential among the stalls of the Dongtai Antique Market and the flea markets of Zhonghua Xin Lu.

Taking a break from the hubbub, I strolled through Renmin Park, pausing to watch people practicing tai chi. South of this pleasant park is Renmin Square, Shanghai's cultural centerpiece. On one side sits the striking Shanghai Grand Theater, which opened last September with a concert by José Carreras. On another rises the Shanghai Museum, where important



bronzes, ceramics, paintings, jades, furniture and other collections are arranged around an atrium and easily navigable with an English "acoustiguide." Because it holds China's finest display of art, the museum is reason enough to visit Shanghai. Other stops on the limited tourist circuit, however historically significant, recall the by-the-numbers feel of the old state-chaperoned tours—like the birthplace of the Chinese communist party, a bourgeois townhouse where Mao and 11 other delegates met in 1921, and the villa inhabited by Soong Ching Ling, activist widow of republican hero Sun Yat-Sen.

One tourist mecca worth a visit is the Chinese Old City, with its cobblestone streets and quaint neighborhoods where old Shanghai ways endure. Wandering among gossiping neighbors and curbside vendors, I occasionally spotted passersby wearing cotton pajamas. "Pajamas are cool in hot weather,"

someone explained to me. "You Americans wear them inside; we also wear them outside."

The most atmospheric part of Old City is the Yu Garden, a walled refuge dating from 1577. A classical Chinese garden with reflecting pools, airy pavilions and arched bridges, it has fanciful flourishes—eroded rockeries, a guardian dragon—that suggest mythical landscapes. In front, rising from a fountain-sprayed pond, is the pagoda-style Huxinting Teahouse, where I relaxed and watched the endless parade.

While the tea here was tasty, most of my meals lacked the range of flavors I'd hoped to find; it was as if the lazy Susan found on every table was spinning the dishes into a culinary blur. Shanghai cuisine emphasizes fish and is rather oily, but the problem at these multicourse banquets is not so much the food as the absence of variety from one to the next. I wasn't tempted by local branches of the Hard Rock Cafe and Tony Roma's and realized too late I should have been sampling the cooking of Szechwan and Hunan. One good place to graze, I learned, is Yunnan Lu, a street south of Nanjing Lu and a block east of Renmin Park that is lined with restaurants and stalls. Also just off Nanjing Lu is longtime favorite Meilongzhen Jiujia, famed for old-school dishes like Imperial Concu-



bine's Chicken. For the less adventuresome, the Hilton Hotel's Sichuan Restaurant is considered among the best in town.

With so much money being bet on Shanghai becoming Asia's next boomtown, it's no surprise that some of that energy is seeping into the city's nightlife. The club scene may not be as decadent as it once was, but there's no lack of watering holes where one can rub shoulders with the city's decked-out singles, prowling yuppies and expat businessmen. The most stylish nightclub is Park 97. Housed in a renovated French Concession mansion, it's a lush space where you can drink Veuve Clicquot while listening to French rap music and watching Shanghai's *jeunesse dorée*. It also attracts locals looking for more than just a good time. "Hundreds of couples will get married in this garden in 1999," one habitué informed me. "It's a propitious year because nine symbolizes longevity."

Both the music and the Day-Glo murals throb at Casa-blanca, 30 floors up atop the modern Rainbow Hotel. There I discovered the latest version of the singsong girls (the geishas of old Shanghai)—freelance hostesses bent on luring men into Karaoke TV, or KTV, rooms for overpriced drinks, laser-disc

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karaoke and perhaps something more before the night is over. As bass riffs vibrated the yuan in my pocket, one of these young lovelies rubbed her throat and cooed, "Buy me a Coca-Cola, together, happy happy no problem. You see, darling."

But I didn't see because I was off again to another succession of nightspots. At the eardrum-splitting Judy's Too (popular with the dance crowd), a trombone and an interstate-highway sign hang above the bar. At the MGM Club, trendy young Shanghainese orbit the circular bar (major sexual feng shui). The next night, I sampled a drink in the retro cool of Cafe 1931, checked out the casino and tuxedo action of James Bond Night at Zoo Bar and listened to a Filipino band play American and Cantonese pop at Paulaner, a German brewpub. But the most raucous is the after-hours DD's, a velvet booth-antique lamp kind of place where I met a consultant for GM's new Shanghai plant. "We used to get hardship pay to work in Shanghai," he complained. "Then the bosses cut back because it seems like nothing but a good time here."

Well, the bosses don't have to fight the traffic and bureaucracy of a city where opportunity and upheaval go hand in



hand. There are good times to be had, yes, but Shanghai is clearly overbuilt ("the clothes are too big for the baby," as locals say) and beset by falling rents and jumpy investors. When the dust from this frenzy of development clears, the natives may wish they had saved more relics of their seedy and glamorous past. Still, Shanghai remains one of the most intriguing cities on earth: As New China's global gamble, it is poised to welcome the adventurers of the next century. —JEFF BOOK

Hong Kong

THE CITY HONG KONG is a small, densely packed island in the South China Sea, a territory of 700 square miles. It is a place of great contrast, a place where the old and the new coexist. The city is a mix of traditional Chinese architecture and modern skyscrapers. It is a place of great diversity, a place where people from all over the world live together. The city is a place of great opportunity, a place where people can make their fortune. The city is a place of great danger, a place where people can lose their lives. The city is a place of great beauty, a place where people can enjoy the view. The city is a place of great mystery, a place where people can discover the unknown. The city is a place of great excitement, a place where people can live their lives to the fullest. The city is a place of great hope, a place where people can build a better future. The city is a place of great love, a place where people can find their soulmates. The city is a place of great life, a place where people can thrive. The city is a place of great death, a place where people can die. The city is a place of great everything, a place where people can experience it all.