



# The Perfect Match

This bustling metropolis will win you over with all its colour, clamour and contradictions. East truly meets West here, in a way you've likely never experienced.

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Photography Luca Isola*



**Clockwise from top left:**  
The financial district Lujiazui  
in Pudong, as seen from the  
nearby ring overpass; shop  
window at Xikang Road;  
East meets West: visitors  
anxiously waiting to be  
admitted to the Christian Dior  
exhibition at the Museum of  
Contemporary Art (MOCA)



**G**azing across the expanse of the mighty Huangpu River, the Pudong skyline, with its globes of steel and glass, looks more 2050 than 2015. But if you turn your eyes to the other side of the river, the Puxi skyline, dominated by Gothic, Beaux Arts and Art Deco structures built in the early 20th century, transports you back in time to the 1930s. Strolling down the promenade along The Bund, Shanghai's historic riverside, can feel like walking along a wrinkle in time.

This strange feeling of straddling things – centuries, cultures, nations – hits you often when moving about Shanghai. The bustling port city has drawn many influences over the centuries, and each has left an indelible mark on it, resulting in a delightful blend of everything: East and West, old and new, backwards and forwards. Even in China's most reclusive years, Shanghai has always been its most international city. For a century after the Opium Wars, certain areas of the city were given to the Americans, British and French to govern. After the end of those foreign concessions, foreigners grew more scarce, but they began trickling back with the loosening of China's economic policy in the 1990s. That trickle has since become a flood, as people from all over seek out the excitement of living in one of the fastest-growing, quickest-changing cities in the world.

## Walk on

With wide sidewalks and the longest metro system in the world, getting around Shanghai as a pedestrian is easy. Chinese life takes place on the streets and rich experiences are gained by pounding the pavement as visual treats or cultural gems are waiting to be found around every street corner.

Meander through People's Square – a former horse-racing course turned into a public park with several museums that lies at the heart of Shanghai – and you're bound to encounter a group of dancing ladies whirling the afternoon away, filling the air with strains of pop music from their radio. Stroll east towards the Old City and a shop-lined street turns into one of Shanghai's disappearing *lilongs*, traditional

neighbourhoods featuring stone *shikumen* lane-houses built from 1842 to 1949, where you can weave through lines of laundry, on-going *mahjong* games or residents preparing their next meal. Dive headlong into the crowds outside of Yuyuan Garden to browse kitschy tchotchkes in the open-air bazaar and participate in high-volume bargaining to get a taste of the Chinese concept of *renao* – loosely translated as 'hot and lively', the idea is something closer to an atmosphere rich with 'human flavour'. It's a quality the Chinese consider essential to social gatherings. Follow the throng into the complex to take in Yuyuan's rebuilt Ming Dynasty-era pavilions and gardens. The sight of these ancient structures framed by the skyscrapers of Pudong looming over them is an iconic Shanghai vista.

For a taste of history that's less *renao*, the former French Concession southwest of People's Square makes for pleasant strolling with its tree-lined avenues. This area retains much of its pre-war, Western-influenced character, and historic buildings and small museums turn up in surprising places, nestled among the many independent boutiques and cafés. The Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Centre is one such private museum, hidden in the basement of an apartment tower, which showcases the colourful propaganda art once used to bolster the Communist Party's rise.

## Constant feast

One observation made while walking is that Chinese people are constantly munching on something. Food is such a part of life here that great eats must be accessible at all times, and they are at the many tiny stalls and street food markets that dot the city. Humble, regional bites like *xiaolongbao* – soup dumplings that celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain has described as "ballistically designed delivery vehicles for pure pleasure" – can bring you the greatest of gustatory delights.

A fuller perspective of Shanghai cuisine can be formed off the streets at unassuming restaurants like Jian'guo 328 Xiaoguan. The foreigner-friendly spot bans smoking (a rare treat) and can assist English speakers while still serving up authentic *hongshaorou* >

### **Previous left page:**

Street food vendors, like this one near the Cheng Huang Miao (city temple), are very common in Shanghai



**Clockwise from top right:**  
Shanghai's downtown flyover highway, which runs across the whole city like a fluorescent coloured snake; The Bund promenade overlooking the Huangpu River, with Shanghai's iconic Oriental Pearl tower in the background; old calligraphy brushes shot at Dong Tai Road antiques market



(soy-braised pork belly) and *cong you ban mian* (scallion oil noodles). Traditional dishes from China's many distinct cuisines can be had at restaurants all over Shanghai, but what truly sets the city apart from the rest of the mainland is the abundance of world-class dining.

Jean-Georges Vongerichten was one of the earliest chefs with major international clout to blaze a trail with his namesake restaurant Jean-Georges. He has since opened two more venues and others, like global brand Hakkasan, have moved to conquer this new frontier. And Paul Pairet put Shanghai on the foodie map in 2013 when his French venue Mr & Mrs Bund was given a spot on San Pellegrino's World's 50 Best Restaurants list. According to Jenny Gao, Jing Theory food blogger and co-owner of a new casual Chinese dining concept called Baoism, "With more and more international superstars flocking here to open outposts – Joël Robuchon may open two spots in 2015 – I think this will serve to encourage more risk-taking in the restaurant scene, and more young Chinese entrepreneurs to enter the industry." The local palate is evolving ever so gradually and beginning to demand more.

## Old is new again

As the expanding economy brings more tourism, foreign investment and new appetites, businesses open and close in the blink of an eye to chase the influx of money. It's difficult to grasp just how much Shanghai has grown in the last few decades, but a trip to the Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition Center close to People's Square can put it all in perspective. On the third floor is a gigantic scale model of the city, with every building represented in miniature, and depictions of Shanghai's past can be found throughout the exhibits.

Preservationists tend to lament the disappearance of the old to make way for the new. However, "the anomaly was the period between 1949 to 1992 when the city wasn't changing," explains Tina Kanagaratnam, co-founder of Historic Shanghai, a group dedicated to raising awareness of Shanghai's unique built heritage and cultural history. "Change and progress is this city's DNA. Shanghai always wanted, and still wants, the latest, the newest, the tallest." In spite of this, the past and future manage to coexist to some extent. The city that will be home to the second tallest building in the world – the Shanghai Tower opens to the public later this year – >

## Places to eat

### **Fu 1088**

This is Shanghainese dining at its finest. Partake in traditional dishes fused with light Western touches while enjoying the atmosphere of a private room in a 1930s villa.  
375 Zhenning Lu

### **Pirata**

Helmed by Ling Huang, this new tapas concept offers Spanish food with global influences from behind a sushi bar-like counter.  
136 Xinle Lu

### **Bistro 321 Le Bec**

French cuisine has a long history in Shanghai, and this villa concept by celebrity chef Nicolas Le Bec elevates the city's pedigree. Le Bec himself whips up hearty bistro fare with Asian elements.  
321 Xinhua Lu

## Places to drink

### **Constellation**

Once upon a time, this was the only place in town where you could count on getting a proper cocktail, and it is still a paragon of Japanese mixology precision.  
99 Taixing Lu

### **Union Trading Company**

This collaboration between chef Austin Hu and mixologist Yao Lu serves inventive bar food to go with the playful 100-cocktail list.  
64 Fengyang Lu

## Places to stay

### **URBN Hotel**

This boutique hotel is proud of its green pedigree as China's first carbon-neutral hotel. Located on a quiet street in Jing'an District, it's just a walk away from the former French Concession and Nanjing Xi Lu.  
[urbnhotels.com](http://urbnhotels.com)  
183 Jiaozhou Lu

### **CHAI Living Residences**

These luxury-serviced apartments, located in the historic Embankment Building and among long-term Chinese residents, immerse you in local life and beautiful Art Deco.  
[chailiving.com](http://chailiving.com)  
370 Bei Suzhou Lu

### **Waldorf Astoria Shanghai on The Bund**

Housed on the site of the historic Shanghai Club, this Hilton outpost marries heritage architecture with modern luxury. Take in gorgeous views of the river from the waterfront rooms.  
[waldorfastoriashanghai.com](http://waldorfastoriashanghai.com)  
2 Zhongshan Dong Yi Lu





**Clockwise from top left:**  
Umbrellas are frequently used as a protective sunshade in China since Asian women value their fair skin highly; the variety of design, shape and material used for bowls and cups is huge, and in more elegant establishments, it is common that each guest's eating 'tools' have a different design and colour; the magnificent view from the 100F Sky Walk observatory deck of the Shanghai World Financial Centre

## Walking tours

### Culinary Tours

Untour Shanghai helps navigate the edible chaos of Shanghai's food markets and eases any concerns that come with ordering unpronounceable (to non-Mandarin speakers) delicacies. [untourshanghai.com](http://untourshanghai.com)

### Art Tours

Independent art critic and contemporary art specialist Xhingyu Chen leads custom tours through Shanghai's burgeoning art scene. See the M50 art district, museums and galleries through the eyes of an art insider. [xhingyuchen.com](http://xhingyuchen.com)

### Jazz Walk

Take an evening stroll with author and jazz enthusiast Andrew Field to relive Shanghai's jazz history from its heyday in the 1930s up to its present revival. [shanghai-flaneur.com](http://shanghai-flaneur.com)

## Places to shop

### Spin Ceramics

The beautiful ceramics here are made in China's ancient porcelain capital, Jingdezhen, and fuse traditional techniques with modern designs. [spinceramics.com](http://spinceramics.com)  
360 Kangding Lu

### West Nanjing Road

While East Nanjing Road has a famous pedestrian street, the section of West Nanjing Road – stretching from west of People's Square to Jing'an Temple – has countless malls as well as flagship stores for luxury brands.  
Nanjing Xi Lu

### Shi Liu Pu Cloth Market

Visitors with some time in the city come here to get custom tailored clothing. While the South Bund Fabric Market is more famous, this market further north affords better quality and more breathing room.  
168 Dongmen Lu



Jasmin Evans

- 1 The Bund
- 2 Mr & Mrs Bund restaurant
- 3 Jean-Georges restaurant
- 4 West Nanjing Road shopping district
- 5 People's Square
- 6 Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition Center
- 7 Waldorf Astoria Shanghai on The Bund
- 8 Yuyuan Garden
- 9 Fu 1088 restaurant
- 10 Diva nightclub
- 11 Danshui Lu street
- 12 Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Centre
- 13 Jian'guo 328 Xiaoguan restaurant
- 14 Former French Concession

also boasts the largest collection of 1930s Art Deco buildings in Asia, and will play host to the World Congress on Art Deco in August. While *lilongs* are demolished yearly to make way for new developments, entertainment enclaves in Xintiandi and Tianzifang have repurposed old *shikumen* to give them new life as restaurants, shops and galleries.

Sitting at an Italian wine bar on Danshui Lu, sipping a moderately priced Primitivo, one can ponder on how the city has transformed since almost a decade ago. There was a time when wine was excitingly new and considered a rare treasure by the Chinese consumer. Now, China is the world's largest market for red wine and the drink has been democratized to a point where young professionals can sip the ruby nectar from sidewalk seats as they observe locals and *laowai* (foreigners) mix on this slowly gentrifying bar street.

It is mostly locals that own Danshui Lu's tiny watering holes, and the street is full of the energy of the new breed of Chinese entrepreneur. The innovation of youth contrasts with the ancient community spirit that pervades Shanghai's residential streets and is still very palpable here. In Shanghai, the cycle of old to new to old again is endless, and we wonder what the cycle will bring in the future. ■

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