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Travel

SHANGHAI

Shanghai is too big to fail to be enjoyed

By Niecee Regis | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 04, 2012



NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

On pedestrian Nanjing Road East, 21st-century and 1930s Art Deco buildings cohabit.



SHANGHAI - A rainy night in Shanghai. Neon lights reflect violet-pink-yellow-red in puddles along Nanjing Road East, a pedestrian-only

commercial district where 21st-century high-tech buildings bump against 1930s Art Deco wonders. Umbrellas snap open as shoppers scurry past Westernized clothing boutiques, electronic stores, high-end jewelry shops, and brightly-lighted fast food emporiums with familiar names: KFC, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Wendy's.

I am dodging raindrops with Jenny O'Connor, my niece, who traveled to meet me from her home in Guangzhou. (She moved there two years ago with her husband and their four children for his job at the State Department.) We are hungry, but I have not endured 14 1/2 hours on a plane from Chicago to eat a fast food burger with fries, so we turn down a side street and wander till we find an appropriate place to dine.

The menu, with glossy photos and English subtitles, offers all manner of duck - spicy fragrant neck, delicious duck feet, glutinous duck tongue, spicy hot duck's head - as well as stir-fried ox tongue, snake head hot pot, natural bean dregs soup, hot and spicy cooked gizzard's blood, brine pig's tail, sauteed old frog, and palatable black fungus.

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Two and a half days isn't nearly enough for two first-time visitors to fully explore China's largest city, but we do our best.

We begin on the Bund, a 1.6-mile raised promenade along the shore of the Huangpu River, a perfect introduction to Shanghai's East-meets-West sensibilities. Nearby, sturdy early 20th-century banks and trading houses - many now posh hotels - were built in neoclassical, French Renaissance, Art Deco, and modernist styles. Across the river, in the financial

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district of Pudong, fanciful 21st-century skyscrapers dominate the horizon. It's the yin-yang of glamour - colonial next door to contemporary - and both vistas offer photo ops for throngs who stroll, cameras in hand.

Encouraged by his mother, a small child pees on the sidewalk. My niece looks down at my flip-flops and frowns. "You want to keep as much distance as possible between you and China," Jenny advises.

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We are staying at the Fairmont Peace Hotel, an impeccably restored Art Deco structure built in 1929 (originally the Cathay Hotel), and the only accommodation I know with its own on-site historian. We sign up for a 90-minute tour, which non-hotel guests can take as well.

"The history of the hotel coincides with the history of Shanghai," says Jenny Laing-Peach. "It's hard to pull them apart. You can, but you're telling the same story."

The tale spans centuries. We learn about Shanghai's growth as a port in the mid-19th century, the commerce of tea, porcelain, silk, silver, and opium, the development of the Bund - a Hindi word, brought by the British from India, meaning "a muddy river bank" - the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, and Shanghai's recent rejuvenation as a world-class destination.

The hotel exudes an opulent nostalgia, especially in the Dragon Phoenix restaurant, restored to its original glory with pale blue walls, lacquered red and gold square columns, and a view of the river. The menu's traditional Chinese offerings include local specialties, like the avocado, crab, and mushroom salad, and delicate Shanghai dumplings.

Later, we linger over high tea for two in the hotel's Jasmine Lounge, where a woman in traditional garb plays the guqin, a seven-stringed zither. Though we are tempted to remain in this retro-glam cocoon (where Noel Coward, Charlie Chaplin, and other celebs have stayed), we get going.

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Taxis are cheap, so getting around is less daunting than I had imagined. Hotels with a decent concierge desk will print the name and address of places you hope to visit on small cards, in Chinese and English, to give the driver. We carry cards for multiple destinations, hoping to be flexible according to the weather and our appetites.

En route to the Shanghai Museum the view from the cab reflects the energy of this city of close to 20 million people, where skyscrapers along Huaihai Road house shops to rival those on Fifth Avenue in New York. We pass Max Mara, Zara, Dolce and Gabbana, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Ermenegildo Zegna, Swarovski, Coach, Tiffany, and Cartier. Three blocks later, we pass the same stores again. Then again. We're not driving in circles; the Chinese, it seems, cannot get enough of a good thing. Inches from our taxi, men on bicycles piled high with cardboard recycling or vegetable deliveries weave in and out of traffic.

I spend our entire two-hour museum visit in the stunning ceramics collection. Jenny spies a Tang Dynasty polychrome glazed "Heavenly Warrior," a deranged looking figure standing atop a squirming child, and snaps a picture to show her kids.

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Off Taikang Road we discover an artsy tangle of lanes and old brick buildings. Galleries abound as well as crafts and clothing boutiques. It is where the young come to shop, eat, see, and be seen. It is big enough to feel as if we are getting lost but not so big that we worry we are. We find a book on Art Deco Shanghai in The Old China Hand Reading Room, a bookstore, art gallery, and tearoom run by photographer Deke Ehr. In Woo, we are tempted to buy luscious pashminas, woven capes, and scarves. I almost spring for an industrial-inspired bag but decide to save my money for lunch.

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We snag a cab and hand the driver a card for the spicy Hunan restaurant Guyi.

We have heard it is a local favorite, always busy, no reservations, expect a line. We arrive at 3 p.m. and find it empty. No one sits beneath the crystal chandeliers at tables set with crisp white cloths, except the staff dining in the far corner. It is open? Yes. We are handed a voluminous menu with snappy color photos and order by pointing. Jenny knows the word for beer: “pi jiu.”

Chicken with fresh bamboo shoots, chilies, and cilantro arrives in a cast iron wok. Purple baby eggplant and green beans with red pepper are eye-popping bright and sufficiently spicy. The only thing missing? Napkins.

“I rarely find napkins in restaurants in China,” says Jenny, confessing she often slides the tablecloth across her lap.

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We are trying to find the undulating dragon wall of Yuyuan Garden, a Ming Dynasty-era enclave of rock gardens, pavilions, and ponds located in an area called Old Town. The cab deposits us at a crowded intersection rimmed by six-story pagoda-like structures that seem like a Disneyland version of China. Is this the garden?

Hooray for signs that point where to go, though first we must traverse a commercial bazaar, running a gauntlet between gawkers and shoppers, beneath gates and across plazas, past a four-story tea house on a lake with a zigzagging bridge. It’s the Quincy Market of Shanghai. Pushcarts decorated to look like mini-pagodas sell hats, key chains, paper lanterns, umbrellas, decorative fans, jewelry, embroidered shirts, candles, crafts, and toys. Food choices: McDonald’s, Dairy Queen, KFC, spring rolls, dumplings large and small, skinny birds on a stick. Hawkers are everywhere.

“Rolex. Cheap! Cheap! Special price for you!”

“Millions of gourmet food!”

We find the ticket booth, pay the fee, step inside the Yuyuan Garden and . . . silence. Or what seems like it, as the decibel level has dropped so significantly we

can't hear the throngs and commerce just outside the wall. A breeze rustles the trees and a waterfall soothes the senses as goldfish dart beneath a series of graceful arched bridges. People step through circular gates, circumambulating the maze of this five-acre oasis.

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The French Concession sounds like a tent for crepes and café au lait at the World Expo. But, no, it's the area leased to the French by the British in 1846, a district where houses with shutters and mansard roofs populate shady, tree-lined streets, with boutiques and restaurants, where the pace is slower than the bustling downtown. We saunter past a woman sweeping leaves with a tree-branch broom and pass shops selling jewelry, retro-hip clothing and accessories, leather belts, shoes, beauty and skin products, and pianos. Art Deco apartments, frayed but standing, bear historical markers, "Heritage Architecture," crediting the architect and date of completion. If not for street vendors selling grilled meat on a stick, or pots of bubbling stews, we would have had no idea we were in China.

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We are way too full to eat lunch. Still, Lost Heaven is in the French Concession, and it is highly recommended.

Everything about the place is seductive: the room with dark wood and red walls that soar two stories, the Buddha with multiple arms and hat sprouting tiny heads, the spicy, aromatic Yunnan food from an area bordering Tibet. And so the eat-a-thon continues. We order spring rolls in tofu skin with a tangy tamarind-cilantro dip, stir-fried broccoli with ginger and red chilies, Miao Tribe hot and sour prawns, and pumpkin cake, light puffs of panko-crusting sweetness. We waddle out. Happy.

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It is a drizzly afternoon. Vendors are almost ready to call it a day at Dongtai Lu, an outdoor flea and antique market crammed with stalls selling Maoist-era

memorabilia, old posters, paintings, vintage typewriters, lamps, jewelry, trinkets, musical instruments, T-shirts, chopsticks, clocks, and crafts. (Mao statues, anyone?) Bargaining is expected. “Best price!” means they won’t bargain anymore; unless you walk away. Then they might.

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We can squeeze in one more activity before our late-night flight. Back to the river we go, down to the Bund Tourist Tunnel, a five-minute psychedelic tram ride to Pudong beneath the Huangpu River. Kitschy? You bet. But for two unsuspecting tourists, who mistakenly thought we would be walking through the tunnel, the experience - colorful flashing strobes, goofy props, humorous sound effects, and spoken words (“Fossil memories!” “Paradise and Hell!”) - is the perfect ending to a jam-packed visit.

If you go...

Where to stay

Fairmont Peace Hotel

20 Nanjing Road East

866-940-4914

www.fairmont.com/peacehotel

Restored Art Deco hotel along the Bund with 270 rooms and suites. Doubles from \$348. Fine dining, Willow Stream Spa, high tea, and jazz bar.

Where to eat

Lost Heaven

38 Gaoyou Road

011-86-21-643-35126

www.lostheaven.com.cn/home.aspx

Yunnan food from southern China in stylish setting in French Concession.
Entrees \$12-\$20.

Dragon Phoenix

Fairmont Peace Hotel, 8th floor

Quintessential Shanghainese and Cantonese cuisine in classic Chinese setting overlooking the Bund. Entrees \$18-\$33.

Guyi

87 Fumin Road

011-86-21-624-95628

Very spicy Hunan food in a contemporary space. Entrees \$10-\$16.

What to do

Walk the Bund

Renovated pedestrian promenade along the Huangpu River offers stunning views of colonial-era and contemporary architecture.

Shanghai Museum

210 Renmin Ave. (Entrance on E Yan'an Road)

011-86-21-637-23500

www.shanghaimuseum.net/en/index.jsp

Some 120,000 works of art including ancient Chinese ceramics, bronze painting, jade, and calligraphy. Free; small fee for special exhibits.

Yuyuan Garden

132 Anren St.

011-86-21-635-55032

Ming Dynasty-era, 5-acre garden in the heart of Old Town. Admission \$6.30.

Historic Tour and High Tea

Fairmont Peace Hotel

Reservation: 011-86-21-613-86886

Tour only: \$15.80 With high tea: \$51.50 Only high tea: \$31.50.

Bund Tourist Tunnel

Entrance on the Bund at Nanjing Dong

011-86-21-588-86000

\$6.35 one-way, \$8 round trip.

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