

DESTINATION CHINA:

HOW TO HIT THE HOTSPOTS

From the Wall to the Warriors, China has something to offer every visitor. Here's our guide to making the most of your time in the Middle Kingdom.

*By Katie Roberts and
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The Forbidden City

SEE

China's capital is a sprawling mega-city of 21 million people and five-and-a-half million cars (not all on the road at the same time, thanks to the “odds and evens” number-plate system). But it's a city of contrasts: away from the wide boulevards lined with grand, statement buildings, which feel more akin to a European capital, are the narrow, grey **hutongs**, or traditional neighbourhoods.

Many of these historic warrens are within walking distance of two of Beijing's best-known sights: the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square. The central area that includes these landmarks is one of just a handful that tourists should concentrate on. Others, a taxi ride away, include the shopping and night-life enclave of **Sanlitun**, the art galleries of quirky **798** district, and the renowned **Summer Palace**.

Though many hutongs were demolished a decade ago in the rush to modernisation, the 25 that remain standing are protected. One of these is **Wudaoying**, close to the Forbidden City and home to the **Drum Tower**, once the city's time-keeper. While many residents have sold and moved out to high-rise developments, there's a certain feel to the hutongs that no apartment complex can replicate.

The narrow lanes, high walls and large, forbidding wooden doors conceal quaint courtyards shared by residents, often extended family. Also shared, by tourists and residents alike, are the public toilets. (Warning: the low

partitions do not allow much privacy.)

An intriguing custom to follow when passing through the doorway of a home or temple is to avoid standing or stepping on the wooden threshold, known as “the edge of difficulty”. It's meant to keep out the evil spirits, who have no knees and cannot jump.

Kids will be fascinated to meet some of the personalities who call the hutongs home, but a guide is essential for translation. Retired cricket-trainer (the insect, not the bat-and-ball sport), 64-year-old Mr Liu, welcomes people into his home for insights into the thousand-year-old tradition of cricket-fighting. He proudly shows off the champion status of his crickets, and the accoutrements required for breeding them. There's even a tiny wedding chamber and, of course, coffins. Hugely popular, the fights are legal, though gambling on them is illegal.

Eating dumplings for lunch and riding a rickshaw through the narrow alleys is a fun way to take in the pace of hutong daily life. Stunning **Lama Temple**, **Houhai Lake** and **Beihai Park** are all easily accessible from Wudaoying, and a boat ride across the lakes of Houhai or Beihai at sunset is highly recommended.

In a half day it's possible to take in **Tiananmen Square** after a self-guided visit to the enormous 73-hectare **Forbidden City** (40 RMB, S\$8). Get kitted out with an audio guide (an additional 40 RMB), which kids above

TIP: Seeing any city with a local resident as guide can make for a more meaningful – and less stressful! – experience. The ultra-professional team at Bespoke Beijing offers set and customised itineraries around Beijing with knowledgeable and caring guides who speak excellent English. (Frank and Michael are highly recommended.) While the tours are not cheap they do maximise the Beijing experience. bespoke-beijing.com

eight years will enjoy, and be prepared for walking, walking and more walking. The “city” itself is 750 meters from east to west, and 960 meters from north to south. There are reportedly 9,999 rooms, the moat is 52 metres wide and there are 308 copper pots that were used to hold water for fire-fighting.

Once you've finished in the Forbidden City, if it's a clear day and you've still got some stamina, walk directly across the road from the northern exit to the lookout in **Jingshan Park**. The view over this part of Beijing is stunning and you will understand, seeing the size of the Forbidden City, why your feet are throbbing.

It's probably sensible to visit Tiananmen Square before all of this (it's directly across from the southern entry point), but if you're happy to retrace your steps, or hail a taxi, it's interesting to see the square at sunset, when the Chinese flag is lowered by soldiers in a patriotic ceremony.

Hotel Highlight: Kerry Hotel Beijing

KID-FRIENDLY

CALLING ALL KIDS Located in the ultra-modern CBD district, littered with corporate offices and the eccentrically designed CCTV Tower (nicknamed “underpants” by locals for obvious reasons), the Kerry Hotel is geared up for families and energetic kids. Unpretentious and ultra-comfortable, this five-star Shangri-La offshoot has a new adventure and sports centre.

ROOM Contemporary comfort is probably the best description for the 486 rooms decorated in soothing silver and grey tones with sumptuous furnishings and soft carpet underfoot. Nothing has been forgotten: complimentary mini-bar, BOSE sound dock, Nespresso coffee machine, rain



shower, bathroom mirror with built-in television, and a toilet that eerily seems to second guess every (ahem) movement. Guests on Club Floors are entitled to 24-hour access to the 18th-floor Club Lounge with complimentary cocktails and canapés every evening. Breakfast is served there daily, too.

RESTAURANTS: As the first Beijing restaurant with an open kitchen, Kerry's Kitchen is renowned for its huge buffet breakfasts, easy lunches and a dinner selection of international favourites. To satisfy a craving for the legendary Beijing dish, Peking duck, visit The Horizon where Chef Yuan Chao Ying grills the finest farmed ducks over jujube wood for a crispy, melt-in-the-mouth experience. For night owls, Centro is a popular bar with live music.

RECREATION Within the hotel, Kerry Sports is a state-of-the-art gym with fitness classes and a 35-metre swimming pool. The best bit, as far as kids are concerned, is the Adventure Zone. Children from six months to 12 years will burn off energy on the challenging slides, soft play equipment and high-quality toys.

RATING This is a brilliant hotel with something for every member of the family, and unbeatable value for a five-star property. Within easy reach of the hotel are the Silk and Sanlitun markets and the embassy district. The Forbidden City is about a 15-minute taxi ride. From S\$300 per night.

thekerryhotels.com





Hotel Highlight: **LUXURY** Aman Summer palace

Aman Summer Palace is a tranquil shelter from the bustle of Beijing, though just one wall away from one of the city's biggest attractions.

LOCATION: It is located in northeast Beijing – about 40 minutes by car from the city centre – in a walled compound to the east of the famous Summer Palace. A wall separates the hotel from the former imperial living quarters inside the palace.

LOOK: Think weeping willows, bamboo-lined stone paths, painted corridors and Chinese courtyards. The hotel blends seamlessly with the imperial architecture of the Summer Palace – as it should: many of the buildings are over 100 years old. There are no lifts, no signs of any kind, no grand ballrooms and no tour groups. It's a quiet, regal place – a place to reflect after days spent battling legions of tourists at the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, a place where you can expect to dine, swim and stroll in peace.

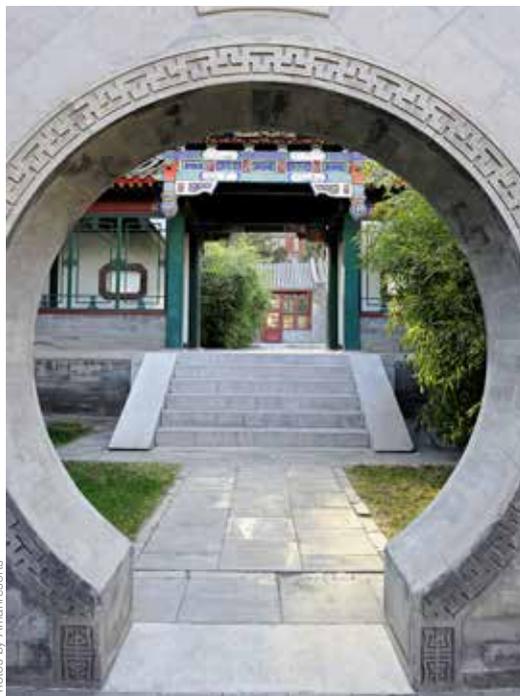
LUXURY: Rooms boast carved Chinese walls, gabled ceilings, fine Chinese porcelain and Bose speakers from which emanate the soft sounds of mandolin strings. Chinese tea, baked goods and complimentary mini-bar drinks are replenished daily. There are only 50 rooms and suites, though guests can still enjoy private Pilates



TIP:
Hotel guests get private access to the Summer Palace through a secret door that links the two properties. Not only do you avoid entrance fees and queues, but you can go before or after official opening times to escape the crowds.

classes (with or without Reformer machines), a grand spa experience, a luxury gym workout and a nightly film in the hotel cinema. Three on-site restaurants offer traditional Chinese (including an absolutely exquisite platter of Peking duck), French and *kaiseki*-style Japanese fare. Breakfasts are, of course, made to order.

LASTING IMPRESSIONS: A few things not to miss at Aman Summer Palace: afternoon tea on the terrace of the lotus pond, learning Chinese calligraphy in the Cultural Pavilion, participating in the daily tea ceremony, and enjoying a morning picnic of *viennoiseries* and smoked salmon on the palace grounds before the gates open to the general public.
amanresorts.com



WHAT IS THE SUMMER PALACE?

Building of the former summer home of the Chinese imperial family was started in 1153 and not completed until the mid-1700s. It was abandoned in the 1920s and 30s after the fall of the last emperor, and renovated from head to toe before the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. The site – which is dominated by the man-made Kunming Lake – features gardens, former imperial living quarters and a temple, and is now one of Beijing's main tourist draws.

Summer Palace

Photos by Amanresorts

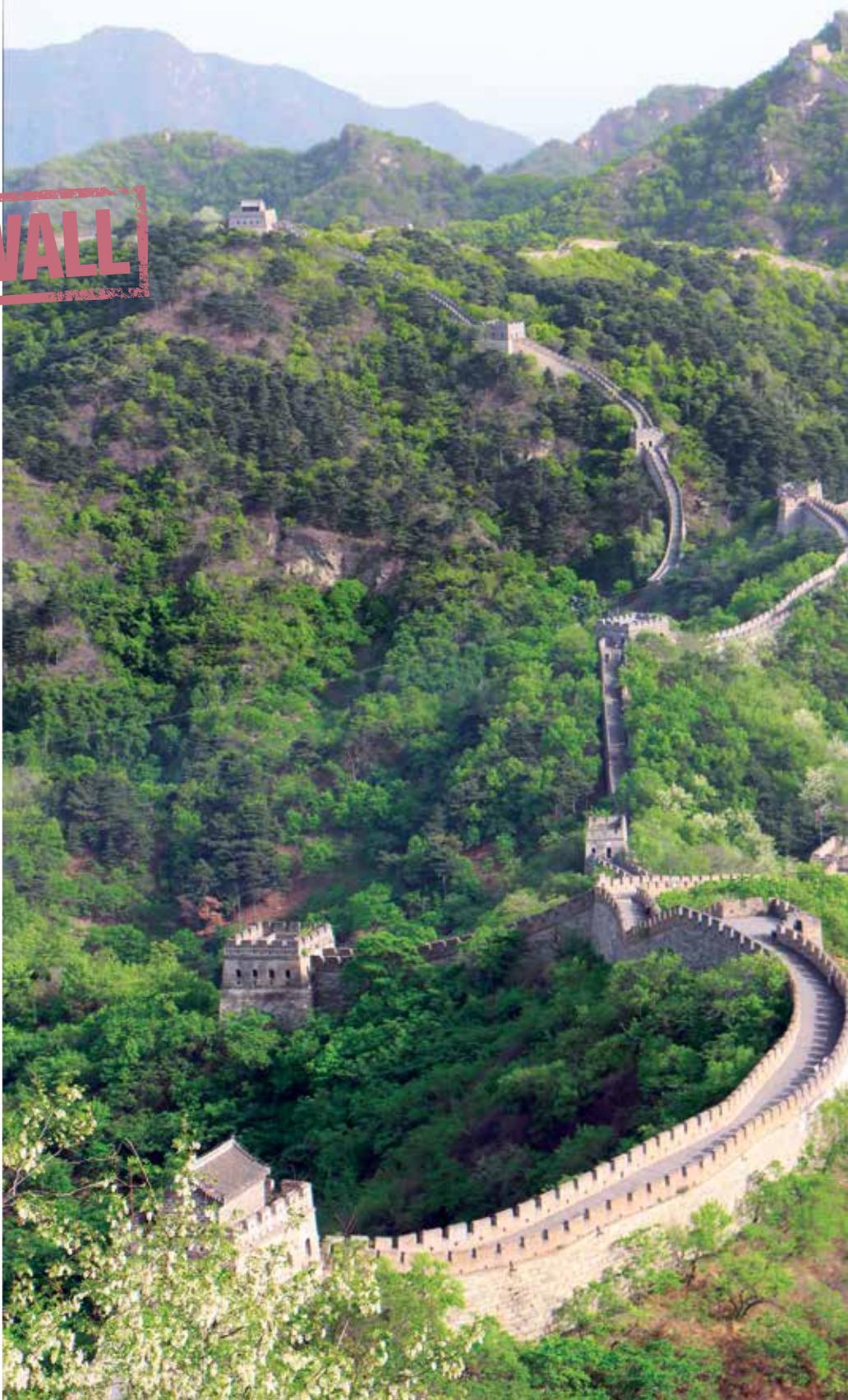
THE GREAT WALL

It's a wall steeped in legend, myths and, well... shockingly steep inclines. It's also one of the biggest tourist attractions in the world.

SEE

Popular sections of the Great Wall include:

- *Badaling* – the most visited section of the Wall. Just 80 kilometres away, it's the closest to Beijing, completely renovated (for better or worse) and outfitted with wide, well-paved granite paths and handrails, making it easier to climb than most sections. It's also the spot of choice for big tour operators (which are known to make frequent pit-stops at souvenir factories along the way).
- *Mutianyu* – Less crowded than Badaling, though still popular with independent travellers and smaller tour companies. Cable cars shuttle tourists from the base to the top of the mountain for spectacular views. To get down, you can hike, jump back on the cable cars or opt for a wind-in-your-hair toboggan ride, which will ruin forever the thrill of the luge on Sentosa. mutianyugreatwall.net
- *Simatai* – The two-hour-plus drive from Beijing deters most tourists, as do the plunging cliffs, jagged ridges and super-steep watch towers. The charm of this section of the wall is that it's largely un-renovated, though major parts of this section are now closed exactly for this reason.
- *Jinshanling* – Starting point for a steep 7km hike to Simatai that takes from three to four hours for the reasonably fit.
- *Huanghuacheng* and *Jiankou* – These sections are strictly for those with hiking boots and a healthy relationship with heights; stretches are steeper and bricks are looser along these unrestored parts of the wall.
- *Other parts* – a group called Beijing Hikers (beijingshikers.com) organises tours to more remote parts of the wall. This is a decent option for strong-backed tourists who loathe weak-backed ones.



STAY

HOW LONG? If you have limited time, then a day trip is your only option. However, while you'll check the box and get plenty of photos to splash across social media on a one-day visit, we recommend

staying overnight at the Wall, if possible. This allows you to go to different parts of the structure at different times of the day to fully experience this great historic landmark.

WHERE?

House: Opened in 2006, The School House is a sustainable tourism enterprise that provides employment for village residents, enabling them to stay put, rather than head to Beijing to find work. Long-term American expat Jim Spears and his enthusiastic business partners have transformed a former school (it closed when the local population shrank) into a glass-blowing enterprise and a restaurant that champions locally produced food. In March this year, Michelle Obama and her daughter lunched here and visited the Wall, amidst tight security.

They've also restored eight disused village houses into comfortable visitor accommodation that retains traditional features. Best explored on foot, the area offers numerous walks around Mutianyu, taking in the orchards and a new visitor centre. It also produces artisanal, natural and sustainable products.

There's a steep track to a wild section of the Wall, which abuts the more touristy part. Here, a solitary experience on a crumbling, unrestored wall awaits. Depending on the time of year, you'll experience spring blossoms, blazing autumn leaves or winter snow. Stay for the quiet that descends when the tour groups leave in the afternoon; by 8pm there's not a sound to be heard nor a person to be seen on the streets of the village, in stunning contrast to Beijing.

Grandma's House is a two-bedroom house with kitchen, laundry, two bathrooms and large enclosed garden, perfect for a family. Other houses are larger, and feature gorgeous interiors and views of the Great Wall. Houses start from 2,800 RMB per night. theschoolhouseatmutianyu.com

Hotel: The Brickyard is a 25-room lodge and spa close to Mutianyu. Rooms have a modern rustic feel and feature a glass wall and outdoor terrace with spectacular views of the Great Wall. There is an onsite restaurant that offers free breakfast and coffee, tea and homemade cookies throughout the day. Transportation is available (though not at all times of the day) to and from Mutianyu, which is about ten minutes away. brickyardatmutianyu.com

Farmhouse: William Lindesay is a British Great Wall researcher who has been walking and writing about the Wall for decades. His company, Wild Wall, organises excursions to unofficial and remote sections of the wall through weekend trips (including guided hikes with two nights' accommodation in a farmhouse and meals) to longer camping-style, point-to-point "extreme" hiking adventures. wildwall.com

GETTING THERE: Popular options include taking a public bus, booking a tour, dishing out a few more dollars for a private guide or seeking something offbeat, like travelling via chauffeured sidecar. We've heard rave reviews about Beijing Sideways; you'll just want to make sure the air quality is good enough for your nasal passages to travel comfortably without a windshield. beijingsideways.com

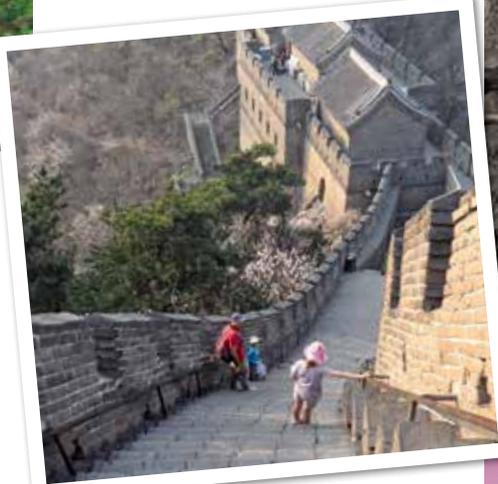
TIP: Violet and Kong also provide day tours (including the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, Jingshan Park, the Summer Palace and other famous sites), offer transportation to and from airports and train stations, and can book train tickets to Xi'an and other cities before you arrive in Beijing. Full-day tour rates start at 1,100 RMB. To read customer reviews, see "Beijing Private One-day Tour Guide Violet" on TripAdvisor. boutiquetour.com

If you decide to stay at the Wall for a few nights, round-trip transportation can be booked through companies like **Violet and Kong**, a husband-and-wife team of licensed tour guides with great English skills and a knack for promptly replying to emails. Round-trip transport from Beijing to Mutianyu starts at 800 RMB.

THE MYTH THAT WON'T QUIT

The Great Wall is the only man-made structure that can be seen from space. FALSE!

Debunked time and time again, this myth is so ingrained in popular culture that astronauts, including Neil Armstrong, have reported being asked this question *ad nauseum*. Recently, high-tech equipment has been able to detect the wall – and other objects – from low orbit, but the fact remains that the human eye cannot detect the Great Wall from space.



Grandma's House

XI'AN

GETTING THERE: Xi'an is over 1,000 kilometres from Beijing; a high-speed train service that opened in December 2012 can get you there in 5.5 hours. High-speed trains depart from both cities ten times a day; those who prefer to take their time can choose an overnight sleeper trains. Direct flights are around two hours.

STAY: We recommend a two-night stay (which allows for visiting the Terracotta Warriors and a full day

in Xi'an) at the **Crown Plaza Xi'an**, an upscale, relatively new hotel with reasonable rates, good service and very comfortable rooms. It's located in Xi'an's tallest building, the Shaanxi Xinxin Tower, not far from the CBD and city walls, making it a popular choice with business and leisure travellers alike.

SEE: The Terracotta Warriors are, of course, the main draw to this city of eight million people. The excavation sites are located east of Xi'an and can be viewed in a few hours, leaving time to tour the Tomb of Emperor Jingdi, snake through the narrow alleys and food stalls of the

TIPS: When touring the terracotta soldiers, skip the ticketed tram service to the excavation site; the walk is short. Bypass the audio tour and opt for a private guide instead. At the site, tour the pits in reverse - 3, then 2, then 1 - to save the best pit for last. Don't miss the small on-site museum, which tells tales of the atrocities that occurred when the tomb was being built - namely, the thousands of artisans that were killed to preserve the secrecy of the tomb's location.

Muslim Quarter, walk or cycle atop the old Ming city walls (now fully restored) and stop for a drum show at the Bell Tower.



BOOKING A GUIDE: **Tailor-made Xi'an Tours** is a small group of professional guides offering city tours of Xi'an, along with hiking, biking, hot springs, countryside and three-day Taoist pilgrimage experiences, too. Get an overview of the city in the Xi'an "Essence" tour, the company's popular one-day tour to see the Terracotta Warriors, the city wall and the Muslim Quarter. Transportation to and from the train station can be arranged (even on days you are not touring with them), and the guides, in our experience, have above-average English skills. xianprivatetours.com

DID YOU KNOW?

The terracotta soldiers protect the tomb of Qin Shi Huang, which is said to be a palatial underground cavern filled with jewels, rivers of mercury (ground tests in the area show mercury levels 100 times higher than normal) and Indiana Jones-style booby traps. For a number of reasons, the tomb has yet to be excavated. For now, you'll have to settle for a photo of the grassy mound that covers it, located 2km from the terracotta soldiers' excavation site.





View of the Bund from the Pudong Shangri-La

SHANGHAI

SEE

Many families travelling with children bypass Shanghai in favour of Beijing, because it has fewer landmark tourist sights. But this cosmopolitan city of 23 million has much to entertain young minds. Given that Singapore already offers children great waterparks and zoos, there's not much point spending time at similar attractions when there are some of the world's tallest buildings and unique neighbourhoods to explore.

Though the landmark 468-metre **Oriental Pearl Tower** in Pudong is no longer the city's tallest building (it was overtaken by the Shanghai World Financial Centre in 2008), it does house the impressive **Shanghai History Museum**. Through models, dioramas and special effects, it lays out the story of the city from its beginnings as a village 1,000 years ago to global prominence in the 1930s, along with its present-day obsession with skyscrapers.

Also in Pudong is the semi-completed **Shanghai Tower**; at 632 metres, or 121 storeys, it will become the world's second-tallest building when it is completed next year. Across the **Huangpu River** (which is crisscrossed by 10 tunnels

and 10 bridges) is the 1.5km riverfront promenade known as the **Bund**. Whether you walk, drive or take a boat cruise to see its 25 century-old buildings, it's handy to have a guide or a brochure with information about each building.

The labyrinthine **Yu Garden** is one of the city's biggest attractions. Separated into small courtyards by dragon-shaped walls, the gardens were built in 1559 in traditional style and overflow with wooden pavilions, koi ponds, pagodas, stunning trees and a 12-metre-high rockery.

In complete contrast are the European **concessions**, designated areas of the city that were granted to foreign countries in the 1800s. Shanghai operated as a treaty port, which meant that foreign countries had their own jurisdictions; the respective neighbourhoods subsequently developed strong cultural identities. Taking a self-guided walking tour around the tree-lined back streets feels, at times, like strolling through a European city.

Many people head for **Xintiandi**, where upmarket boutiques and restaurants have gentrified the traditional 19th-century *shikumen* houses. (*Shikumen* is a traditional Shanghainese architectural

style marked by grey- and red-brick walls and arches.) Ironically, this lavish commercial area was also the location of the First Congress of the Chinese Communist Party.

In Shanghai's rush to modernity, traditional handicrafts have thankfully not been forsaken. At the **Museum of Arts and Crafts**, visitors can watch dozens of artisans at work, including jade- and wood-carvers, paper-cutters, embroiderers, jewellers and painters. Housed in a stately 100-year-old French mansion with sweeping staircases, it's a place to find authentic souvenirs; the artisans will intrigue curious children, too.

Amongst the myriad shopping and tailoring options, it's hard to beat the **AP Markets** in the basement of the **Shanghai Science and Technology Museum**.

Directly accessible by the Metro station named after the museum, the markets are the place to bargain hard for knock-off goods.

TIP: Visit the warren of laneways known as Tian Xi Fang, a bohemian mix of studios, cafes and quirky shops all hemmed inside narrow alleys teeming with atmosphere. Whether you're shopping or not, it's a unique neighbourhood to get lost in.



PRICELESS BUND VIEWS

Hotel Highlight: Pudong Shangri-La

Some would argue it's better to look at the Bund, rather than the opposite outlook of Pudong's futuristic buildings. The 950-room Shangri-La was Pudong's first luxury hotel and sits comfortably in Shanghai's top 10 hotels according to TripAdvisor.

ROOM Request a river-view room for a priceless outlook of The Bund; it's stunning enough by day, but really comes into its own when lit up at night. The rooms are elegant with subtle Oriental touches in the wallpaper and art, complemented by crystal chandeliers and marble bathrooms. Horizon Club guests enjoy L'Occitane toiletries in their rooms, plus 24-hour access and complimentary services at the Horizon Club Lounge on the 32nd floor.

RESTAURANTS There are 11 restaurants and bars in the Pudong Shangri-La, including Japanese and Chinese eateries, a wine bistro and Jade on 36, the signature restaurant and bar. Yi Café features 10 lively show kitchens and a cosmopolitan food selection for the huge buffet breakfast (there's even a map, it's so big) – don't miss it.

RECREATION Alongside the award-winning spa, CHI, there are two swimming pools, two health clubs and an outdoor floodlit tennis court.

RATING The promise of high tea in the Lobby Lounge, an elegant Michelin-star dining experience, or a long hot bath, makes the Shangri-La a welcome respite from the frenetic pace of a city that doesn't sleep.



shangri-la.com



Zhujiajiao village

Day Trips from Shanghai

HANGZHOU

It's the home of China's famed West Lake, a domestic tourist magnet and an area of natural beauty (when the smog cooperates, of course). Of China's 72 lakes, this is the most popular. Catch misty scenes of *tai chi* being performed on the water's edge at sunrise, drink a cup of *longjing* tea made with leaves plucked in nearby plantations, tour the many temples and monasteries that dot the area, and book a seat at *Impression West Lake*, a spectacular outdoor performance directed by Zhang Yimou, the mastermind behind the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics opening and closing ceremonies. Stay in the remains of a 300-year-old tea village next to one of area's most sacred temples, Longyin Si, by booking a stay at Amanfayun. amanresorts.com

WATER VILLAGES OF THE YANGTZE RIVER DELTA

On the edge of Shanghai's urban sprawl, a dozen or so ancient villages line the small lakes and waterways of the Yangtze River delta. **Zhujiajiao** is pleasant enough to warrant a half-day trip, though be aware that anything authentic has long disappeared, and most of the quaint town shops now sell food and souvenirs. Still, the old Ming- and Qing-dynasty architecture, including that of bridges across the narrow canals, is atmospheric, and many visitors take a leisurely boat ride. This is a domestic tourism magnet, so it's best to visit late in the afternoon on a weekday. Take the hour-long bus ride from People's Square in central Shanghai, or arrange a car and driver.

SUZHOU

Trace the steps of artists, scholars and Chinese high society through gardens, canals and arched bridges in this picturesque town. Express trains can get you from Shanghai to Suzhou in less than 30 minutes. Highlights include the West Garden Temple, the Taoist Temple of Mystery, and an hour-long boat ride around the outer canal every evening starting from the Renmin Bridge.

NEED TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

1. VISA

Citizens of Singapore, Brunei and Japan don't need a visa for a stay of less than 15 days. All others require a visa. The simplest way is to book an appointment time online (visaforchina.org), print off the application form and present it with all supporting documents at the China Visa Application Service Centre located at 80 Robinson Road, #16-01/02/02A. Call 6226 2358. Fees vary according to nationality, visa type and processing times.

2. AIR QUALITY

There are several smartphone apps that give real-time PSI readings of air quality in major Chinese cities. High levels of air pollution can aggravate bronchial, sinus or asthma conditions. A pollution reading of 300 and above is considered extreme; several cities including Beijing regularly exceed this number. For more information, visit www.aqicn.info.

3. WATER

Buy bottled water; don't drink from the tap.

4. INTERNAL TRAVEL

Even the Chinese recommend avoiding internal flights in favour of comfortable and safe train travel. For tourists, the fastest options are the bullet trains which crisscross the country at speeds of up to 300kph. Beijing has four enormous train stations; make sure you know which one your train departs from, and allow plenty of time for the airport-style security checks. The high-speed train from Beijing to Shanghai arrives promptly (to the minute, in fact) in five hours. An adult ticket in economy class is about S\$150. Kids under 150cm are half-price. Foreigners need to buy tickets through a train-ticketing agency, or in person at a station. Check this website for tips: www.seat61.com.

5. TRANSFERS

To avoid hassle when arriving at or leaving a city, whether at an airport or a train station, book as many transfers ahead of time as you can.

6. TRAFFIC

Congestion in major (and many minor) Chinese cities can be a bit of a mind-boggle, especially in Beijing (the worst traffic jam *in world history* is said to have occurred here in August 2010, when a 62-mile-long jam took a full 12 days to clear). Plan plenty of travel time, especially to airports and train stations.

7. INTERNET CENSORSHIP

Can't live without Facebook? You'll learn to here, as this site and many others, such as Google (including Docs, Maps and +, though email works sporadically), YouTube, Yahoo, Twitter, *The New York Times* and many others, are completely blocked on the mainland. Censorship like this is why the 1989 Tiananmen Square "Tank Man" photo – one of the most iconic images of all time – remains largely unknown in China.

8. CROWDS

Get to tourists spots early. China's population is 1.2 billion, so don't expect too many moments of quiet contemplation. Try to avoid the annual "Golden Weeks" (national holiday periods) of Chinese New Year, and the first weeks of May and October, when most Chinese are travelling, either to home to be with their families, or to visit famous sites. [a](#)