

Shanghai MAGIC

Whether it's a stopover or the beginning of a wider China holiday, one of Asia's most thrilling cities has never been easier to visit

Nicknamed 'the Paris of the East' during its 20s and 30s heyday, Shanghai has always been a city that rewards travellers with a mash-up of art deco glamour, sci-fi supertall structures and rich local culture. Following the recent introduction of visa-free travel for UK passport holders (for up to 30 days), barriers to entry have dropped, making now the perfect time to visit.

Blast the past

To see the city's historic highlights, a private Tripadvisor tour with car, driver and guide is an excellent and surprisingly affordable option (£85 for four hours, tripadvisor.co.uk). Shanghai is a big place, so travelling by car makes it easy to cover must-sees like the serene, incense-scented Jade Buddha Temple – home to two white jade Buddhas – and the restored Yu Garden, an example of classic Ming-dynasty landscaping complete with curved bridges, white-crested ducks and sashaying koi.

Exploring the French Concession reveals a quieter side of the city, with tree-lined streets, art deco villas and indie boutiques, while a stop at the Propaganda Poster Art Centre – a museum displaying bold graphic posters from the Mao era – offers insight into the city's political past as the birthplace of the Chinese Communist Party.

East feast

Shanghai's food scene is famously vast, and navigating it alone can be daunting (especially as English menus are hard to find). Lost Plate's Shanghai Evening Food Tour (£50, lostplate.com) offers a brilliant introduction, leading foodies through the city's characterful French Concession to blink-and-you-miss-it, family-run eateries that have stood the test of time.

'We only go to small, no-chain places,' says tour leader Angela, as she introduces Shanghai signatures like xiao long bao (soup dumplings) and hong shao rou (mahogany-hued chunks of braised pork belly).

For a sense of old Shanghai pizzazz, book a table at Dragon Phoenix, the celebrated Chinese restaurant inside the Fairmont Peace Hotel (fairmont.com), known for banquet dining.

Dazzling in gold and red, the buzzing dining room is great fun, while the menu showcases refined regional dishes such as the silky and fragrant cong you ban mian (scallion oil noodles) – the best in town.

For drinks, The Peninsula's Sir Elly's (peninsula.com/shanghai) on the Bund is widely considered to have the best vantage point in the city. If you're jet-lagged, go for a Wake Up, made with gin, Cointreau and green tea syrup. In the French Concession, don't miss RX (206, 2nd Floor, Xiangyang Fang, No. 100 Xiangyang North Road), a discreet, apothecary-style cocktail spot inspired by traditional Chinese medicine, where each drink comes with a 'prescription' to cure ailments.



Find refuge at the serene Jade Buddha Temple



Visit the tree-lined streets of the French Concession district



The Yu Garden dates back to the Ming Dynasty

Enjoy Shanghai's vast food scene with a tour



Serious shopping

Shanghai is China's fashion capital. Nanjing Road is the biggest, oldest and most prominent shopping street, while Xintiandi is a hotspot for chic brands housed in restored shikumen (stone-gate) buildings, as is the pedestrianised, cobblestone Yuanmingyuan Road.

Fragrance fans should drop into To Summer on Yuanmingyuan Road, a Chinese perfume brand celebrated for its minimalist aesthetic and contemplative scents. The tea-inspired fragrances, in particular, capture something uniquely Chinese and make thoughtful gifts. You also can't go wrong bringing back White Rabbit candies, a nostalgic Shanghai sweet that tastes like milk and comes wrapped in edible rice-paper packaging.

A base in the Bund

Few hotels capture the spirit of the city quite like The Peninsula Shanghai (peninsula.com/shanghai), which sits proudly on the iconic waterfront promenade called the Bund. A modern build echoing the grandeur of 1930s Shanghai,

the hotel's real showstopper is the view of the boat-filled Huangpu River and the cloud-skimming skyline of Pudong beyond. From river-facing rooms, the city unfurls in cinematic fashion, especially at night, when the skyscrapers dazzle in a nightly light show.

The hotel has a private boat for cruises along the river, and while it's not cheap, it's remarkably good value for five-star luxury: rooms start around £300 per night, which is a bargain compared with London's Peninsula at £1,200 per night. Even if you don't spend the night, visit the lobby and top-notch rooftop bar.

BOOK IT

✦ China Southern (csair.com) flies direct from London to Shanghai. For package tour options, try Wendy Wu Tours (wendywutours.co.uk)

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For shopping, try the city's Nanjing Road