

At the Crossroads

Huangpu River splits the city of Shanghai in two — one's old and the other spanking new. Here's how you can discover both sides of the story.

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A morning tai chi session along the Bund in Shanghai.

While I have only been in Shanghai for an hour, I've already seen two very contradictory sides to the city. Slouching off the effects of jet lag on a bench along the river, I am watching a group of elderly women, draped in flowing, pristine-white gowns, performing a languid dance with crimson fans held aloft. It is a colourful, captivating tradition that harks back centuries. Yet across the river, providing an incongruous backdrop for the dance, is a wall of skyscrapers.

Shanghai is at the crossroads of China's developing narrative. The country has a history that stretches back several millennia, but the city is tenaciously forging its way towards a dominant future. Longshaped by ancient Chinese dynasties and varied foreign oppressors, it is now prevailing as the world's most populated city, a cosmopolitan hub with its own destiny firmly in hand.

I have come to Shanghai to try and understand this blend of the old and new.

Divided both literally and metaphorically by the Huangpu River, Shanghai's Puxi (as the west bank is known) is the keeper of the city's remarkable past, while Pudong, on the east bank, promises a remarkable future. I want both sides of the story. From traditional Chinese temples to towering office blocks, rickety bicycle carts to gleaming Ferraris, this is a tale of two cities.

REDISCOVERING THE PAST IN PUXI

Arriving in Shanghai earlier this morning, I hurtled in from the airport by the high-speed Maglev train, then checked into China's oldest Western hotel, Pujiang (15 Huangpu Rd; www.pujianghotel.com), also known as the Astor House Hotel. I am beginning my tour of Shanghai with a stroll along the Bund, a historic region that runs along the west bank of the river ('bund' means embankment). This is considered the beating heart of Puxi.

Drifting along Zhongshan Road, I'm surprised to notice the huge variety of

architectural styles, from neoclassical and Gothic revival to Art Deco. The dominating Custom House looms high over the boulevard, with its lofty bell tower an homage to London's Big Ben, while the neighbouring HSBC Building, which now houses the Pudong Development Bank, stands as another 20th-century monument to British influence. However, it's the less imposing buildings that give the street its charm, from the bleach-white Russell & Co building at number six, to the boxy-but-grandiose House of Roosevelt at 27.

My first meal in Shanghai is a succulent *hong shao rou* (braised pork in red sauce) in LanXin restaurant (130 Jinxian Rd; +86 21 6253 3554), a recommendation of city blogger Jenny Zhu (www.jennyzhu.com), who calls it "a quintessentially local dish representing the Shanghai style of cooking". Walking off the sticky delight in a nondescript backstreet, the bustling Nanjing Road emerges and suddenly I find myself standing along one of the longest shopping strips on Earth. ►



(clockwise from top left) The bustling Nanjing Road; lunch hour in Shanghai's French Concession; Fuxing Road offers sights such as pop-up flower stalls; a local enjoys a game of mahjong.

A half-pedestrianised street once renowned for its cheap market but now for its designer brands, it's the place to go for the latest Prada handbag or Armani jacket. It's the shop window for a city with a burgeoning reputation for mode (Shanghai Fashion Week is closing the gap on the big four of New York, London, Paris and Milan). Homegrown designer boutiques can be found along Jinxian and Changle roads, while there's also a traditional fabric market nearby.

With the sun slumbering over the city, the Fairmont Peace Hotel (20 Nanjing Rd East; www.fairmont.com) is the perfect spot for an evening of fine food and lively jazz. To quote Zhu: "Shanghai is a jazz city; it's an experience that evokes the old Shanghai." Sipping on an oak-matured whisky at the hotel's 1920s-era Jazz Bar while watching veteran musicians take to the stage, it's easy to see what she means.

A 15-minute drive away, the city's traditional narrative continues at the

French Concession, but with a twist. Ruled by the French for almost a century, this part of Shanghai has a uniquely fascinating heritage. However, there is more to the area than just history. "Here, you'll see the past, the present, the foreign and local," says Zhu.

Ambling along Fuxing Road, you can catch a glimpse of pretty side lanes and their leafy residential streets, grand pink-brick mansions and striking Gothic churches. It's a microcosm of modern Shanghai life, where natives and newcomers, businesspeople and bohemians sip cappuccinos at pavement cafes and talk of world events.

Venturing to Lost Heaven (38 Gaoyou Rd; +86 21 6433 5126; www.lostheaven.com.cn) for lunch, is another revelation of modernity melding with tradition. Eating among a cosmopolitan crowd, the Yunnan speciality of Da Li-style chicken is one of the "dishes that combines contemporary and traditional ways", according to Lost Heaven's owner Robin Yin. The French

Concession doesn't feel like a slice of history, but rather an illustration of the new Shanghai: a 21st-century city where all and sundry live side by side.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE IN PUDONG

Crossing the Huangpu River by the subterranean Bund Sightseeing Tunnel — a pod on a long cable, complete with a peculiar light-show and a pseudo-philosophical voice-over — is a brave new world of shining steel and glistening glass.

"Pudong is the landmark for Shanghai's luxury scene," says Ulf Bremer, general manager of the Pudong Shangri-La (33 Fu Cheng Rd; www.shangri-la.com). "When we opened in 1998, there were only three buildings in Pudong. Today, Lujiazui [the financial district] is more than 10 times the size of City of London [known as the Square Mile]." Looking back to 1993, when Pudong was declared a Special Economic Zone, reveals an even greater transformation; from farmland to global ►



(clockwise from above)
The Shanghai World Expo Cultural Center in Pudong; the see-through floor of the observation deck of the Oriental Pearl Radio & TV Tower; rich tiramisu at Danieli's Italian restaurant at The Hongta Hotel Shanghai.



hub in 20 years. "And it isn't just the availability of international cuisines," says Bremer. "[Citizens] have also embraced and adapted to a cosmopolitan lifestyle."

My first impressions of Lujiazui, one of four economic districts of Pudong (the others are Waigaoqiao Free Trade, the Jinqiao Export Processing Zone and Zhangjiang Hi-Tech Park) are of life at a rather hectic pace, where hundreds of businesspeople race to Friday-morning meetings. Also noticeable here is how everyone is conversing in either English or Mandarin. The Shanghainese dialect is being superseded; a consequence of millions of foreign visitors arriving in this city every year.

There are many attractions in this part of the city, from walking along the transparent-floored viewing platform of the Oriental Pearl Radio & TV Tower (1 Century Avenue; www.orientalpearl.com/en) to rediscovering the city's colonial past in the Shanghai History Museum, housed in the TV tower's lower levels. The area, however, also feels a little deserted during the day. That all changes

at 6pm, when a tide of smart-suited businessmen pours from the skyscrapers — the week's end in the upper echelons of finance, trade and media — and makes haste for the nearest drinking hole.

Determined to get a glimpse of the city's future on my last day in Shanghai, I head to the eastern district of Zhangjiang Hi-Tech Park (www.zjpark.com). Known as Shanghai's Silicon Valley, it was founded in 1992 and is now home to a wealth of technology firms including Sony, Intel, Lenovo and IBM. At its borders, there is also the Shanghai New International Expo Centre (en.sniec.net). This glass colossus regularly plays host to everything from motor shows to tennis tournaments but its crowning glory was being one of the principal venues of the Expo 2010 Shanghai, the largest world fair in history.

A delicious Italian lunch at Danieli's Italian Restaurant in The Hongta Hotel Shanghai (889 Dong Fang Rd, Pudong; +86 21 5050 4567; www.starwoodhotels.com) is the perfect prelude to an afternoon tour of the futuristic exhibits in the

Shanghai Science & Technology Museum (2000 Century Avenue; +86 21 6862 2000; www.sstm.org.cn). Top this off with a night to remember at Cloud 9, a bar with a sophisticated vibe on the 87th floor of the Grand Hyatt Shanghai (88 Century Avenue; +86 21 5047 1234; www.shanghai.grand.hyatt.com).

With a perfectly chilled martini in hand, I settle down into a comfy club chair and stare out over the city below. And the historic buildings on the Bund stare back. From happening high-rises to history and heritage, from Pudong to Puxi, the city has truly transformed over such a short space of time; a city with a remarkable past giving way to a remarkable future.

From the corner of my eye, I see a quick flash of crimson emanating from across the water. I squint to try and spot a group of fan dancers, but it's no use. That city is simply too far away. ☹

GETTING THERE To book your Virgin Australia flight to Shanghai, visit www.virginaustralia.com or simply call 13 67 89 (in Australia).