

SHANGHAI EXPO AND BEYOND

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

SHANGHAI—Upwards of 70-million tourists will be attending Expo 2010 between May 1 and Oct 31 in Shanghai, a city so electrically charged under normal circumstances that it is a virtual world's fair in itself.



Colorful Xidi river scene

Some even predict the visitors may number more than 100-million. Add that to the 20-something million residents already here and

you have the greatest assemblage of human flesh anywhere on the planet.

Many Expo attendees will literally

«fly» from Pudong International Airport to downtown Shanghai on the magnetic levitation train known as Maglev which floats above the tracks at speeds that can reach 500 kilometers an hour.

Instead of the usual hour by limousine or bus to cover the 30 kilometers, Maglev will get you there in 7 minutes flat.

So, after a week of visiting the 200 pavilions at Expo, and keeping up with the dizzying pace of the city itself, you're now in desperate

need of a little relief. China can do that, too. «Laid Back» in China is also Made in China.

Here are a few welcome getaways within easy reach of Shanghai:

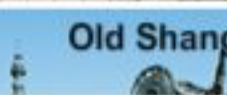
ZHUJIAJIAO and ZHOZZHUANG

These two towns with the jawbreaker names are charming waterside communities. Zhujiajiao, the closest to Shanghai, has nine old streets forming the shape of a large open fan over the Caogang



**Morning
waltzing on the
Bund**

Old Shanghai scene



Hongcun river bridge



River. About 2500 residents are here, using small boats that travel under picturesque arch bridges to get to shops, temples, rice paddies and the like. Chinese often refer to Zhujiajiao as «Little Venice.» Zhouzhuang, with a history of over 900 years, is skirted by water on all four sides, so the only means of transportation for the 5,000-plus residents is by boat. While tourists have begun to swarm here in recent years, Zhouzhuang is still a treat, for your eyes and your appetite—stay for lunch or dinner at one of the waterside cafes.

WUZHEN

Known as the best preserved ancient town of China, Wuzhen has never changed its name, water system or lifestyle since its establishment in 872 A.D. Less than 10,000 people live within Wuzhen's 40 hectares, so it is more like a natural museum of ancient architecture than a town. There are more than 100 stone bridges of various shapes crossing the canal that snakes through the community. About a two-hour drive from Shanghai, Wuzhen is a pleasant place to spend a day

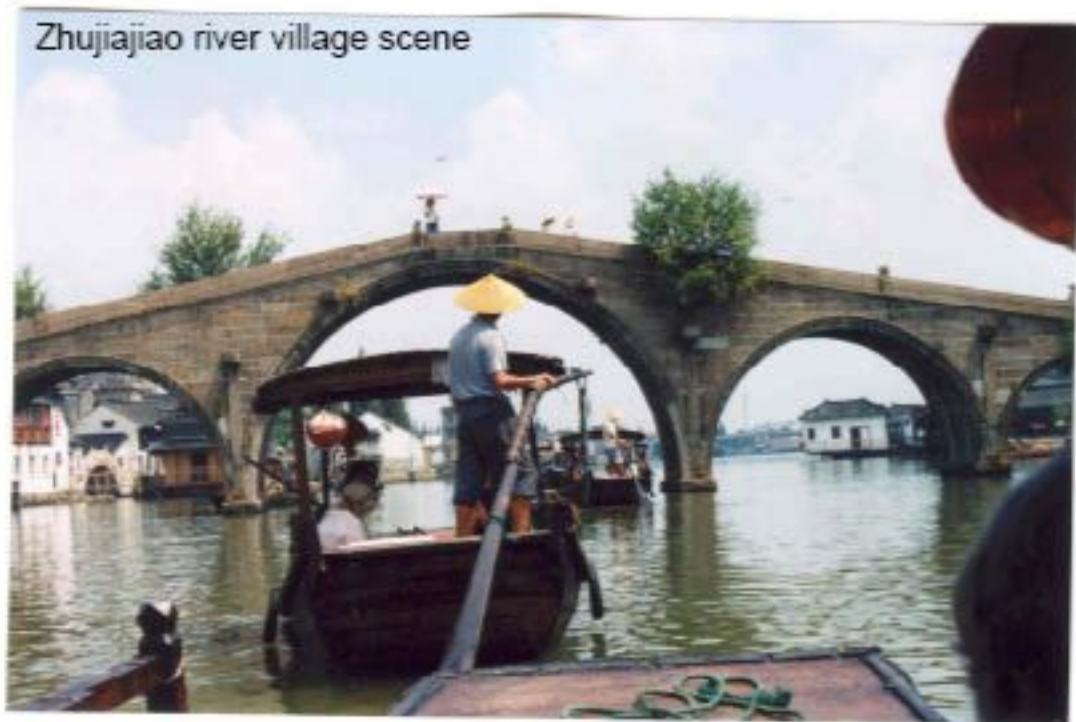
walking its ancient streets, taking a boat ride, and capping the day with some braised mutton and chrysanthemum tea, a favorite combination for the locals.

HANGZHOU

Who would think of going to a city of 5-million people for some peace and quiet? But compared to Shanghai, Hangzhou is tranquil if not a tranquilizer, and is just up the road from Wuzhen. Hangzhou is a tidy, uncluttered and slow-paced city that is world famous for

its silk. It is also the birthplace of Longjing Tea, the most distinguished tea in China. It has also led the list of China's «Happy Cities» for the past 6 years. One of the 7 ancient capitals in China, its history goes back to the New Stone Age almost 5,000 years ago. The main tourist attraction is the West Lake scenic area in the center of the city. Within this area is a Buddhist monastery that contains a statue covered with gold foil that stands 25 meters high, the tallest wooden Buddhist

Zhujiajiao river village scene



Monks at Shanghai temple



statue in China. But the big pleasure and surprise in Hangzhou is that it is a big modern city with the feel and charm of an ancient village. There are all kinds of temples and pagodas here, but put aside the guidebooks and maps and explore the city with no set agenda.

YELLOW MOUNTAIN

About a five-hour drive from Shanghai, and well worth the trip, is Yellow Mountain, a magnificent range of peculiar and beautiful shaped granite peaks and pine

trees. The mountains are listed as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site and is one of China's major tourist attractions, surpassed only by the Great Wall, Forbidden City and the underground army at Xian. But in terms of sheer natural beauty, it is unsurpassed in the great treasure chest of China. Two weeks before visiting here I had spent some time in the Grand Canyon, and the Yellow Mountain held its own in that company. In fact, it is often referred to as the Grand Canyon of the west. Yellow Mountain covers 1,200 square

kilometers and has many beautiful peaks, 77 of which are over 1,000 meters above sea level. The peaks change color and appearances with the season. Plan to spend the better part of the day here, walking the trails, resting on one of the ample benches along the trails, having a leisurely lunch. If it is a clear day, the memory will last a lifetime.

XIDI and HONGCUN

Our final getaways are the neighboring ancient villages of Xidi and Hongcun, both listed as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. Built in the shape of a boat, Xidi village was founded in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127-) and covers an area of over 160,000 square meters. It contains 124 preserved wooden residences



River village boat



from the Ming and Qing dynasties. All the streets and lanes are paved with colorful bluestones. Wood, stone and brick carvings are everywhere. About 1,300 people live in Xidi, and there are a few restaurants and lodgings, including a boutique hotel that began life centuries ago as a pig sty. Just down the road is Hongcun with a history of over 800 years. Built in the shape of an ox, it also contains over 100 residences from the Ming

and Qing eras, along with beautiful arched bridges. This is where the hit movie «Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon» was filmed, and tourism has been increasing ever since. You can enjoy both of these charming villages in a day.

These are but a few of the rest and recreation spots in the area. Once you've had your fill of the peace and tranquility, there's always Shanghai.

(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Food & Travel Writers Assn. and is based in Montreal.)

IF YOU GO:

We flew Air Canada nonstop from Toronto to Shanghai.

Visas are required. Check online, through your travel agent or nearest Chinese embassy.

Drink only bottled water.

Don't bring old or crumpled bills. Most Chinese will only change for clean, crisp currency.

