

Shanghai

A city looking for the future

> By Dominick Merle

SHANGHAI - While the world spotlight is focused on Beijing and the 2008 Olympics, Shanghai continues its economic explosion into the 21st Century at a dizzying pace. If there's any city in the world that can take the "bite" out of the Big Apple, this is it. And that's coming from a native New Yorker.

There are about 17 million people here, along with 8 million bicycles, 6 or 7 million vehicles, and at last count almost 5,000 high-rise buildings of 20 floors or more. But forget the numbers. Don't do the maths. They change all the time. Besides, the Chinese are starting to round off some things to the nearest millionth.

One of the cardinal rules in travel writing is that readers should be able to find what you describe if they visit the destination. That goes out the window, too, because destruction and construction move too fast for the naked eye to follow in Shanghai. Guidebooks become obsolete almost as fast as the ink dries.

"We have a saying that to see 5,000-year-old culture, visit Xian and its terracotta warriors," said our tour guide Ping, "For 2,000-year-old culture, visit Beijing's Forbidden City and Great Wall. But if you want to see tomorrow, come to Shanghai."

Our tour group checked into the Portman Ritz Carlton on bustling Nanjing Road, the most famous shopping street in all of China. I stayed at this property 8 years ago when the bountiful breakfast buffet contained about 80 percent Chinese food and 20 percent Western. Today, those numbers are reversed.

I walked from the hotel down Nanjing Road to the Huangpu River and for all practical purposes could have been in Manhattan walking towards the Hudson River.. Wall-to-wall skyscrapers lined the street. The only time I got a glimpse of times past was when I peered down one of the small alleys.

However, there are a couple of places left



Historic site

مكان تاريخي



Old Shanghai

شونغهاي القديمة

where you can revisit that once mysterious city of the Orient. One is a small section appropriately known as "Old Shanghai" where a number of buildings and temples have been preserved. No one actually lives there; it is simply a cluster of shops and restaurants, but the sight of a Starbucks coffee shop somehow breaks the spell.

The other area is, in fact, a permanent movie set in the Songjiang District, where old Shanghai street scenes have been meticulously duplicated. Obviously, no one lives there, either.



Traditional Shanghai

شونغهاي التقليدية

Otherwise, you'd have to take a short drive from the city and visit one of the historical river towns that still clings tenaciously to its roots rather than joining Shanghai's fast track to the future. We visited one the next morning, Zhujiujiao, a village founded 1,700 years ago during the Ming Dynasty. And people do actually live there, about 4,000 of them.

We spent a pleasant afternoon walking the cluster of about 10 streets and aboard one of the small boats on the narrow rivers running through the town, passing under beautiful arched stone bridges. Many of the shops had

signs only in Chinese, attesting to the fact that this was more than merely a tourist stop.

But that was then, this is now and so we returned to today's Shanghai, the one that seems to keep changing before your very eyes. We headed for the Bund, perhaps the symbol of Shanghai and often referred to by the Chinese as the "best street in the east." Actually, the Bund is not a street at all, but an area, and its main attraction is an elevated concrete boardwalk that curves along the western bank of the Huangpu River until it meets the mighty Yangtze River. Like Venice, Shanghai is slowly sinking, and so the level of the promenade has been raised to prevent flooding.

Everything seems to happen on the Bund. In early morning you will likely find groups of young people exercising and senior citizens waltzing to western music—yes, waltzing, it's a favorite wake-up activity for many seniors throughout China. In the evenings, strolling couples of all ages take over.

The main road running along the Bund is a vital link in the city's new highway network and it is framed on the other side by an imposing line of buildings in the grand European style. This slice of Shanghai, although it looks more Old World Europe than Orient, has remained relatively unchanged during the current boom. It was often said while we were there that 20 percent of all the construction cranes in the world were being used in Shanghai.

Pudong, the so-called "city of the future" although it lies within Shanghai, is on the other side of the Huangpu River. A decade or so ago, this was vacant land; today it contains a dazzling display of futuristic buildings, some shaped like needles and others like spheres, giving it a world's fair appearance. That's appropriate, since Shanghai will be the site of Expo 2010.

The next morning I walked towards the Bund

area again, turned down a sidestreet and into a tiny neighborhood barbershop where hardly any English was spoken. I used sign language for a haircut, and ended up getting a massage from the waist up and a mini-acupuncture treatment - including having needles stuck in my ears-- for an hour and a half before one hair on my head was touched.

Almost three hours later I emerged from the shop, trimmed and relaxed. Total cost: roughly \$5.

On my final day I struck out in a different direction from my hotel. Shanghai is not an easy city to negotiate by vehicle or on foot. Sometimes you can walk faster than the traffic flows, but walking also takes you up winding pedestrian overpasses that resemble mazes. If you're not careful, you can easily come back down on the same side.

Shopping centers are plentiful and everywhere, there are said to be more than 500 of them. Already Shanghai has surpassed Hong Kong in its heyday. And bargaining continues to take place in even the most upscale boutiques. One member of our group, of Chinese ancestry but now living in Chicago, managed to buy two sports coats for the price of one without much haggling at a major department store.

Food is another wonderful experience, especially street snacks like pigeon eggs glutinous rice balls and rib rice cakes. Both were inexpensive, delicious and mysterious.

Restaurant fare is generally a mixture of Hangzhou, Ningpo and Yangzhou cuisine. Shanghainese like both sweet and mild tastes, not the spicy Sichuan style, and often dine out several times a week. Consequently some restaurants can be the size of hotels, and some hotels look like small fortresses. We had our final dinner in a six-floor restaurant that served only one dish-- duck.

So does Shanghai have it all these days? Not quite. There was one thing conspicuously

missing during our experience, something that many Chinese do not know even exists, and yet we often take for granted in this part of the world. Fortune cookies.

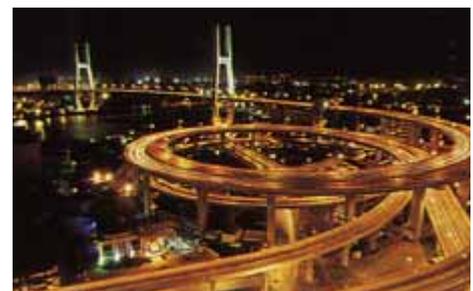
(Dominick Merle is Canadian Director of the International Travel Writers Assn.)

TRAVEL TIPS

Visas are required for North Americans. They can be obtained at your nearest Chinese Embassy or Consulate or through your travel agent or tour operator.

We flew Air China nonstop from New York to Beijing over the North Pole, roughly a 13-hour flight, transferring to another Air China flight for the short hop to Shanghai. A new German-built magnetic levitation train known as Maglev can, in effect, float you at speeds of up to 430 kilometers an hour from Shanghai's international airport to the city center - roughly 30 kilometers-in 8 minutes. It is the world's first commercial application of this technology. The fare is about \$8 each way and the trains run every 20 minutes.

For further information on China, try the website www.cnto.org or e-mail the China National Tourist Office in New York ny@cnto.org or Toronto cnto@tourismchina-ca.com



Busy Shanghai

شونغهاي المزدهمة



Giant checkers on a Shanghai side street
لعبة شعبية في شارع جانبي في شونغهاي



Shanghai the futuristic city
شونغهاي مدينة المستقبل



View of Pudong area from across the Huangpu River
منظر بودونغ عبر نهر هوانغ بو