

Q: 'What's the most thrilling city in the far east?'

With modern hedonism and enchanting throwback moments, step forward Shanghai, says **Alicia Miller**

It's all bright at night: the Pudong skyline and Huangpu River as seen from the Bund waterfront



All around the austere table, where 10 of us are sitting, a forest grows: a foggy woodland, projected onto the walls, joined by music flooding from speakers. Waiters enter, clutching plates of truffle-doused toast, one of 20-odd immersive, choreographed courses at the three-Michelin-starred restaurant Ultraviolet by Paul Pairet (uvbypp.cc). Here, dinner, which can cost almost £1,000 a head, is theatre as much as sustenance. Because, well, this is Shanghai.

Glitz, tech, outrageous excess: Shanghai does them better than any other Asian city. Its history may be long and rich, but the one-born-every-minute skyscrapers and high-end shopping complexes show it holds few binds to the past. Every year the cityscape is recast, sentimentality is flung aside, with eyes fixed firmly on the future.

In many ways here the future is now. The bullet-quick maglev train whisks you from the airport. The Oriental Pearl tower, once the dominating pin-up of the Pudong district, is engulfed by cloud-tickling glass builds. (The current world-beater: Shanghai Tower, at 632m, dwarfed only by Dubai's Burj Khalifa.) If you last saw this city two years ago, you'd hardly recognise it now.

With all this big-money-fuelled modernity comes the high life, and Dubai-levels of indulgence. There's a galaxy of Michelin stars dishing up caviar-soaked evenings. A trendier scene has emerged too: head to the glam Xintiandi district to dine on pretty rainbow dumplings at Sober Company (99 Yandang Rd), or to Pudong's 58th-floor Flair Bar (ritzcarlton.com) to sip Champagne, the city winking below.

The hotels are just as swish. There's the roll call of luxury stalwarts you'll find in

Hong Kong or Tokyo, but home-grown players are showing them up: the PuLi (thepuli.com; doubles from £190, room only), with its serene pool and cool slate detailing overlooking Jing'an Park, recalls traditional *shikumen* houses. At the Middle House (themiddlehousehotel.com; doubles from £256, B&B), suites are lined with floor-to-ceiling windows, and there's a subterranean spa and chic bar leading into a luxury shopping centre on Nanjing Road West. Oh yes, shopping: Shanghai's main sporting event. Whether you're after designer labels in Jing'an or trendy sneakers from the refurbished alleys of Tianzifang, you'll find it.

But let's wind back to that long and rich history: because here is where Shanghai really gets interesting. Among all that consumerist joy of super-sized Starbucks and designer handbags is entangled

the core of an 800-year-old city. There are serene temples and crisscrossing backstreets, colonial ghosts and smoky tea houses. Start in the old French Concession, just south of Jing'an. Here, crumbling buildings have been reclaimed by boutiques and brunch spots, giving way to quiet, leafy streets of European-style mansions. Off South Shaanxi Road, a lawned art deco mansion holds Daketang, a retro tea house pouring rare *pu'er* teas; nibble sesame biscuits and watch ageing businessmen strike deals in its intimate rooms. Then rattle through the neighbourhood's dumpling restaurants – street stalls serve crisp *jiaozi* dumplings, and rustic family eateries dish up soup-filled *xiaolongbao* buns (tours with untourfoodtours.com; £66). This is living, breathing Shanghai.

Go deeper still. Taxi north of Jing'an to the Jade Buddha Temple and wander its

serene grounds, incense wafting the air, red lanterns swinging above, people bowing at golden sculptures. In People's Park, to the east, pensioners practise *t'ai chi* by a smile of a lake and birdsong rings from soaring treetops. People's Square, nearby, is a vast, austere plain, its brutality tempered by the oddly grand-scale topiary. At the fringes, the mannered, columned Shanghai Museum (shanghaimuseum.net; free) is cluttered with priceless calligraphy, robes and jade sculpture (and excited school children).

Worlds merge at the Bund, the historic, chiselled waterfront once home to colonial-era banks and trading houses. The dazzling vintage Peninsula (peninsula.com; doubles from £269, room only) has afternoon teas and grand bedrooms, while down the road bow-tied octogenarians play 1920s jazz in the ornate Fairmont Peace Hotel (fairmont.com).

But beyond these cream-stone hideaways the waterfront strip is very now: electric-light shows, an emerging modern art quarter, and brides in designer gowns posing against Pudong's skyline.

They say nothing lasts for ever. And even in the oldest corners of the Bund, there's a sense the past is fleeting. But, for now, at least, you know those yesterday places are there, in between the gloss, the noise and the neon lights. And when you know that, you know the real thrill of Shanghai.

Get me there: BA flies from £367 return. Bamboo Travel (bambootravel.co.uk) has a 12-day Highlights of China tour with two nights in Shanghai from £2,795pp, B&B, including some meals and guiding. You can stay visa-free up to 144 hours if you are flying onwards to another destination; see www.chinese-embassy.org.uk. ■

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