

You've been

SHANGHAIED

 By Sharon Stephenson **“Welcome to the Future” says the sign at Shanghai’s Pudong Airport. It isn’t lying. Or even slightly exaggerating.**

China’s largest city is a vortex of neon and glass, more cranes than I’ve ever seen, and 23 million people, all of whom seem to be engaged in a brash and relentless race to make Shanghai the most fast-forward city on the planet.

The journey to the future starts the moment we step into the Jetson-esque magnetic levitation train, which is powered by giant electromagnets. With a top speed of 431 kilometres per hour, the MagLev, as it’s affectionately known, is the world’s fastest operating train, whisking us from the airport to the city in about seven

minutes. It’s over far too soon, but it must be one of the world’s most fun commutes – even the staid businessmen in our carriage whipped out their iPhones to photograph the speedometer at the front of the train when we hit top speed.

Once in the city centre, it appears as though our visit has coincided with the Construction Olympics: apparently there are more cranes in Shanghai than in the whole of the United States, and we’re told that roughly every month, a high-rise of more than 30 storeys is completed.

What makes it so astonishing is that 15 years ago most of this didn't exist. The Pudong area, which sits on the east bank of the murky Huangpu River, used to be paddy fields and wasteland. Today it boasts not only the World Financial Centre, a vertiginous black high-rise nicknamed the 'bottle opener', but also the famous Oriental Pearl Tower, the bulbous coloured TV centre that's supposed to represent twin dragons playing with pearls. It isn't what you'd call 'a looker', but the views from the 350-metre-high viewing platform are well worth the overdose of kitsch.

When you're trafficking in this very fast-paced development, you need the transport network to keep pace and, accordingly, Shanghai's metro system is fast, clean, efficient and cheap. Astonishingly, it didn't even exist 15 years ago. But two years ago it surpassed London's Underground as the world's longest (by track length), and that's not even taking into account future extension plans.

However, our guide suggests that we forgo the metro for the Bund Tourist Tunnel, which couldn't be more different from the MagLev train if it tried. Featuring hologram displays and 1970s' sci-fi music it is, to be honest, a pretty bonkers experience.

Today there's little of the 'old' Shanghai left, but what there is can be found on the Bund side of the Huangpu River. Rhyming with 'fund', this Euro-styled boulevard, which recently underwent a large-scale facelift, is one of the prettiest places in the city. Back in the 1920s, Shanghai was known as the Whore of the East, thanks to the opium, prostitution and bad behaviour that ran through its veins. The Bund was where foreign banks and trading houses set up camp to cater for the trade in legal and not-so-legal substances. The grand old colonnaded buildings still stand, but these days they're home to posh restaurants and high-end shops that disregard a sensible budget, such as Gucci, Armani and Hermes. Interestingly for a nation where, only a few decades ago, everyone dressed in identical Chairman Mao uniforms, China is now the second largest spender on luxury goods, including fashion items, in the world.

But unless your surname is Hilton, shopping on the Bund is kind of silly. Shanghai is a bargain-hunter's paradise and with 90% of the world's fake goods originating in China, this is a great place to haggle for clothes, bags and shoes. A good place to start is Fengshine Plaza, a credit card's throw from People's Square, which contains three storeys of tiny

shops. If you're not opposed to goods of 'unknown origin' – or if you just love haggling and can't resist a bargain – drop by here to exceed your luggage allowance.

I snag a North Face jacket for \$40, some black leather gloves for \$10 and a pair of Converse sneakers for \$18. A day later, at the Yatai Xinyang Fashion Market, which squats at the entrance to the Science and Technology subway station, I add a sleek black Louis Vuitton wallet for \$20 and some Chanel earrings for \$8. I'm told designer Giorgio Armani visited this market and was so impressed with the quality he bought two of his own 'designs'. I'm not sure how true that is, but if it is, then I can understand Mr Armani's admiration.

It's important to note that not everything for sale is fake: many items are a result of China's famous 'grey' market where factories make in excess of their orders then sell the extra stock. These excess items, together with samples and factory seconds, find their way to markets and outlet stores all over the city.

If, by now, you haven't fully scratched the Shanghai shopping itch, then Dongtai Lu Antiques Market is a good place to visit. Three blocks of small stores where the word 'antique' is very loosely applied to anything from dusty old books, vinyl and furniture to watches, posters and statues (a good portion of them featuring the severe expression of Chairman Mao), it's lots of fun, and we find some cheap and quirky souvenirs to take home.

By now we're in need of some time out, so we head to the gracious, tree-lined streets of the Former French Concession. Popular with expats, the low-rise neighbourhood is lined with

Photos courtesy of Martin Haughey.



elegant villas, boutiques and cafes. Planned and built by French colonists in the early 20th century, this neighbourhood has a distinctly Parisian feel (but without the dog poop).

It is also a good place to explore Shanghai's cuisine. One of the great joys of this increasingly cosmopolitan city is its food, and the headline act is undoubtedly Xiaolongbao dumplings (pronounced *shaow-long-bow*), steamed parcels of pork or prawn that come encased in hand-rolled pastry. Be warned though, these dumplings are not as innocent as they appear, and conceal a scalding soup between the layers of pastry. Many an unsuspecting diner has risked third-degree burns by biting into one, only to have the gelatinous liquid squirt all over their face and clothes. Our guide tells us that the trick is to pick up the dumpling at the neck with chopsticks without piercing the skin, then poke a little hole in the top to suck out the soup. Using a spoon for extra manoeuvrability is advisable.

Although you do have to exercise some caution when eating at street stalls, it would be a shame not to experience authentic Shanghai cuisine. We tuck into jian bing, crispy flat pancakes that come slathered with egg, soy paste and a slab of crispy wonton, before being rolled up. They don't sound like much, and look even less impressive, but they are so delicious that we gobble them as though a famine were nipping at our heels.

Our guide tells us that food in Shanghai is usually oilier and sweeter than elsewhere in China and, as if to illustrate his point, he steers us towards another street stall where we try steamed bread coated in a red bean paste and

fried blocks of rice which, again, wouldn't win any beauty contests but are strangely addictive.

As you'd expect, eating the way the locals do is cheap. At Henana Lamain, a tiny hole-in-the-wall cafe with rickety steps that would cause occupational health and safety inspectors to have heart palpitations, we watch the chef 'pull' fresh noodles before dunking them in hot oil and adding chunks of dried tofu and vinegar. It's simple, tasty and at \$5 for three bowls, is kind on our wallets and waists.

Being an animal-loving semi-vegetarian, and with horror stories of chicken beheadings ringing in my ears, I'm not too keen to visit a traditional wet market. Fortunately we stumble upon Donghu Lu, a wet market that contains row upon row of pretty standard fruit and veg, and some more unusual items such as tea eggs, small turtles and duck feet – thankfully the process of separating the birds from their feet has already occurred somewhere else. We try a range of pickled vegetables and scoff fat, juicy cherries that taste the way they used to when we were kids.



If simple but tasty food is Shanghai's punch, then tea is its jab. At Tianshan Tea City, all the tea in China is packed into 23,000 square metres, ranged across five floors. We wander mesmerised as more than 150 stalls grade, sell and brew tea from all over China. Although we're the only foreigners around, and many of the stallholders don't speak English, we manage to sample tiny cups of black, green and delicate white teas; for a green tea obsessive like me, it is heaven. We also buy sealed packets that cost less than half what I pay at my local supermarket for the weak teabag version, and make room in our overstuffed suitcases for an authentic clay teapot, which has become my new best friend.

Shanghai isn't restful or sentimental or always an easy place to visit. But if you like your holidays served with a side order of excitement, fun and wackiness, this is the place to come... 🍵

Sharon Stephenson travelled to Shanghai as a guest of Air New Zealand. For more information visit www.airnewzealand.co.nz.

