

THE BEST OF CHINA

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China is a continent-size colossus that swats away those who try to pin it down with platitudes. It's the font of an ancient, unyielding culture, sure, but it's also as modern and fearless as a joyriding teen. It's deeply traditional, no doubt, but remains oddly calm in the face of relentless change. It's a communist country, in name at least, but run by technocrats whose financial scheming would put even Wall Street to shame. If there's one thing that can be said with reasonable confidence, it's that China rarely stays still for long. The three cities at the heart of this book are rightly renowned, not only for being jam-packed with world-beating tourist sights but also for capturing the different sides of these beguiling contradictions.

Beijing is fast becoming a full-on megacity, dynamic and diverse with pockets of imperial grandeur and low-rise charm. Xi'an is the original melting pot—the New York City of the first millennium—and reels off its ancient hotspots like tomorrow never actually came. Shanghai's swagger is of the modern, moneyed variety, but the city tells a seductive tale of former colonial glory and soaring modern ambition. Amid this abundant tourist treasure, hidden dangers lurk: Pollution has become a serious problem for both residents and visitors, navigating what are increasingly large and crowded cities isn't always easy, and the startling rise of domestic tourism has transformed some of the best-known sights into overpriced circuses. Fortunately for every problem in the People's Republic, there is generally a clever solution. You just have to know the secret. That's what this book is all about. As an entrée to the very best that China has to offer, follow the lists overleaf.

CHINA'S best AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES

- o **Walking on the Great Wall** (Beijing) Seeing the Great Wall for the first time is sure to get the spine tingling but for the full blood-pumping experience, you need to clamber up and walk. The section near Jinshanling is still in a pleasingly varied state of repair, some areas freshly restored, others thoroughly crumbling. It runs over steep peaks, through patches of astonishing wilderness, and is a worthy introduction to this magnificent monument. See p. ###.
- o **Exploring Shanghai's French Concession** This is the most well preserved of Shanghai's former colonial enclaves, with roads lined with plane trees imported from Paris and gorgeous villas from the 1920s and 1930s, the heyday of swinging Shanghai. Art Deco gems abound, hidden behind years of grime and beneath webs of laundry poles—so keep your head up as you wander. See p. ###.
- o **Cycling the City Wall in Xi'an** The largest city walls in China have been much pierced for modern needs but can at least be tackled by modern means with a breezy, traffic-free ride above the rooftops on rented bicycles and tandems. Behold views of the vernacular architecture and busy avenues on the inside of the wall, and an ever-thickening forest of skyscrapers on the outside. See p. ###.
- o **Dining like a local** “A revolution is not a dinner party,” said modern China's founding father Mao Zedong. However, a Chinese dinner party can sometimes feel a little like a revolution. Gathering over a meal is China's most popular and occasionally raucous leisure activity. Forget about chicken, beef, or pig's trotters. The essential ingredients are steaming plates, sweaty brows, loud conversation, and frenzied waiting staff. It won't be making the Michelin guide anytime soon, but for old-time dining fun, try Shanghai's **Bao Luo**. See p. ###.

THE most OVERRATED EXPERIENCES

- o **Terracotta Warriors** (Xi'an) Qin Shihuang's funerary army remains wondrous on several levels, but it's worth moderating expectations. Problems include the remote location, the bloated commercial circus leading up to the entrance, the crowds, and the fact that years of exposure to beautiful “National Geographic” photography and clever camerawork may leave you underwhelmed. Don't even think about *not* going, but be prepared to dream a little to make the magic work. See p. ###.
- o **Tian'anmen Square** (Beijing) To this day, the name conjures memories of the drama and tragedy of 1989. But the words James Fenton wrote then are as true today as ever: “Tian'anmen is broad and clean, and you can't tell



where the dead have been.” It’s worth remembering, especially for travelers of a more morbid or earnest persuasion. The world’s largest patio is designed to a big, bombastic, but basically boring Stalinist spec. Wander around to say you’ve been but don’t expect the memories to linger. See p. ###.

- **Oriental Pearl TV Tower** (Shanghai) There perhaps aren’t that many who would “rate” this architectural abomination, but in case you are drawn toward the pink baubles of Shanghai’s most iconic building, be warned: It’s nearly as silly on the inside as it is on the outside (with the caveat that the separately run basement museum is pretty great). Get your cloud-level kicks instead at one of the three nearby skyscrapers. See p. ###.

THE best RESTAURANTS

- **Temple Restaurant Beijing (TRB)** Tucked away within a central Beijing *hutong* alley, TRB offers sumptuous fine dining within a charming backstreet location that five-star hotel rivals can only dream of. It really doesn’t matter that there’s little authentically “Beijing” about the starchy tablecloths, debonair waiting staff, and snappy suits. It’s a world-class restaurant, plain and simple. See p. ###.
- **Di Shui Dong** (Shanghai) This Hunanese restaurant has cornered the market in Shanghai for home-style chili-powered dishes. It’s seriously unflashy, with the ruddy-cheeked waitresses observing few airs and graces. But for its mouthwatering—and occasionally face-numbing—peasant dishes and enduring ability to pull in a mixed foreign–Chinese crowd, it deserves its many plaudits. See p. ###.
- **Mr & Mrs Bund** (Shanghai) For a local take on the foamy food alchemy beloved in posh Western restaurants, this chic Bund restaurant is *the* destination. Head chef Paul Pairet has been tickling the taste buds of Shanghai high society for more than a decade, and on the menu are dishes that have attained semi-legendary status, such as the steamed lobster in a citrus jar and the reconstituted lemon tart. A true culinary romp. See p. ###.
- **Lost Heaven** (Beijing and Shanghai) Authentic ethnic cuisine without the fuss and mess of the street stalls in which it’s usually served. From its perch just off Tian’anmen Square, Lost Heaven transports its customers to China’s tropical Southeast Asian fringe with dreamy decor, sensuous lighting, and dishes of vivid color. For those who miss their moment of culinary romance in Beijing, check out the original Shanghai outpost. See p. ###.

THE best HOTELS

- **Park Hyatt Shanghai** Located in the upper reaches of the Shanghai World Financial Center, the Park Hyatt exists, literally, on a plane of its own. With its minimalist Zen-like interiors and lofty views, this is a hotel that seems to float above the fray and is complemented by some stunning facilities, like the 85th-floor infinity pool and tai chi courtyard. Having your



head in the clouds is apparently no bad thing. Exclusive, and expensive, but worth every penny. See p. ###.

- o **The Puli** (Shanghai) Styled as an urban resort, the Puli is the hipster's choice and a perfect tonic for China's relentless intensity. Rooms are spa sanctums in miniature and afford twinkling city views from the window-side bathtubs. The real spa downstairs is like a gleaming space pod, complete with sliding doors. And with its extraordinary long bar and cobbled floor, the lobby is perhaps Shanghai's finest. See p. ###.
- o **The Peninsula Shanghai** Housed in a Bund new-build—the first major building to go up on Shanghai's famed riverside strip since the 1940s—the Peninsula does old colonial charm better than the *real* heritage hotels that surround it. Art Deco flourishes abound and, as with its world-famous sister hotel in Hong Kong, afternoon tea in the lobby comes with a string quartet. The spa, service, restaurants, and location all contribute to a hotel of near perfection. See p. ###.

THE best UNDISCOVERED EXPERIENCES

- o **Beijing's Waterways** Beijing's clamorous streets have become increasingly hazardous for those seeking to explore the capital on foot. The solution is a wander around the metropolis just below pavement level—on its manmade waterways. The network is a combination of ancient canals, historic moats, and modern water diversions. The mostly excellent pedestrian access guides hikers past gleaming skyscrapers and ramshackle hovels and beneath giant intersections. See p. ###.
- o **Jing'an's Shikumen** (Shanghai) Most visitors' experience of Shanghai's wonderful East-meets-West *shikumen* architecture begins and ends with the boutiques of Xintiandi. There's a better way. The wonderful stone gates and lintels on show in the Jing'an District may be slightly grimmer but are all the more authentic for it. You'll also witness Shanghai's vibrant neighborhood street life, a far cry from the sometimes sterile main thoroughfares. See p. ###.
- o **Xi'an's Central Mosques** Xi'an's famous Great Mosque is pretty great until you factor in the entrance ticket and tour-group hordes. A few hundred yards away are two other mosques, slightly smaller but nearly identical in their exquisite courtyard design and with a far greater sense of spiritual repose. They're also free. See p. ###.
- o **Workers' Cultural Palace** (Beijing) This is a beautiful slice of imperial architecture that's rarely busy, despite being located right next to the Forbidden City—probably the country's busiest tourist attraction. It enjoys much of the same architecture, grandeur, and historic gravitas of its famous neighbor, yet hardly anybody bothers to stop by on the dash for the big ticket. Don't be put off by the rather dour name. Rather, thank the Maoist moniker for putting off the masses. See p. ###.

THE best FOR FAMILIES

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The Best Free Things To Do

- **Shichahai Skating** (Beijing) The collective name for the network of three lakes that run north of the Forbidden City, Shichahai is pleasant year-round but essential if you visit Beijing from December to February, when Houhai—the southernmost lake—turns into a fabulous natural skate rink. Kids need no skating skills to enjoy the funky chair sleds for hire. See p. ###.
- **The Maglev** (Shanghai) It was built to be a dazzlingly modern piece of Shanghai's transport network, but it takes almost no parental effort to repackage this for the kids as a chance to go faster than a racecar. Even those who hate rollercoasters will be able to enjoy the 431kmph (268 mph) top speeds from the security of the bullet carriages. See p. ###.
- **Shanghai Ocean Aquarium** China's waters may be shockingly murky, but the curators of this excellent aquarium have expanded their horizons, from the Amazon to the Antarctic. The spectacular underwater tunnel that twists and turns over 155m (509 ft.) is the highlight, though the twice-daily shark, penguin, and seal feedings will also intrigue, or appall, younger members of the clan. See p. ###.
- **Biking in Hangzhou** Flanked by misty mountains and studded with pagodas, Hangzhou's West Lake is China's most serene body of water. The oldest metropolitan bike-sharing network in China also happens to be the largest in the world and has made it a cinch to explore the watery jewel in Hangzhou's crown. The way is flat, so older kids can pedal themselves, but some of the 66,000 bikes also have child seats. See p. ###.
- **ERA: Intersection of Time** China is full of acrobatic shows, most of which are impressive in artistry but lacking in presentation. Not so at ERA, Shanghai's long-running spectacular. The creators were all schooled in Cirque du Soleil wizardry, and the result is a beautifully presented show of near unbelievable bravado. Assuming they can bear to look, the kids will love it. See p. ###.

THE best FREE THINGS TO DO

- **Chairman Mao's Mausoleum** (Beijing) After Mao Zedong died in 1976, the Communist Party, which he had molded in his image, ignored his wish to be cremated and instead embalmed his body for permanent display. Mao's crystal coffin is raised from its underground refrigeration unit each morning and there is a guaranteed line of devotees outside ready to pay their respects. Whatever your feelings about the Great Helmsman, it's a worthy cultural experience. See p. ###.
- **The Museums** China's major museums always charged their guests, up until the time of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, when "soft power" became the big new thing. Promoting the nation's cultural treasures is now part of a coordinated global strategy, generating pride at home and awe abroad. The net result is that overseas visitors need only their passports to enjoy the very

best of the cultural bounty on display at the **National Museum of China** (see p. ###), the **Shaanxi History Museum** (see p. ###), and the **Shanghai Museum** (see p. ###), among others.

- **The Wild Wall** (Beijing) Slithering over the undulating landscapes of northern China like some kind of mythical dragon, the Great Wall is unquestionably one of the wonders of the world. It's not always possible to appreciate the magic amid the hawkers, cable cars, and tourist mobs at the easily accessible sections north of the city. Those who relish an adventure and a chance to get away from the crowd should consider a trip to the undeveloped areas where entrance gates have not yet gone up. See p. ###.

THE best MUSEUMS

- **The National Museum of China** (Beijing) After a mammoth restoration effort that cost nearly \$400 million, the National Museum—three times the size of the Louvre in Paris—impresses with its trove of more than one million cultural relics from China's lengthy history. Don't miss the exhibit on Ancient China, which covers in exhaustive detail the prehistoric era through China's final dynasty, the Qing. See p. ###.
- **Shaanxi History Museum** (Xi'an) Shaanxi may only be a humble province, but it's a province with serious historical pedigree. This compelling museum is compact and concise enough to get around in a couple of hours, and has an unrivaled collection of Silk Road relics. Oh, and then there's the small matter of the Terracotta Warriors, a handful of which are on display and can be seen from a closer vantage point here than at Qin Shihuang's fabled tomb itself. See p. ###.
- **Shanghai Municipal History Museum** (Shanghai) It's not free, but this superb museum paints a vivid picture of Shanghai's short-but-swashbuckling history. Where most Chinese museums major on statues and bronze work—exhibits that require a little background knowledge to appreciate—this place tells its tale using dioramas, sound effects, and colorful waxworks. It's a museum that even a history newbie can appreciate. See p. ###.

BEIJING

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If China's vast landmass looks a little like a giant rooster, it's perfectly appropriate that Beijing sits right at the jugular. The roll-call of invaders and usurpers over the past seven centuries have looked to make their mark here, from Mongol marauder Kublai Khan all the way to guerrilla upstart Mao Zedong, with the Ming, the Manchurians, and the ransacking British crashing the party in between. This is the nerve center of Chinese civilization, anchored by foreboding temples and palaces, strafed by huge boulevards, and ordered by the concentric circles of its ring roads. But between these mighty surges of people and traffic, Beijing retains pockets of pedestrian charm. Get caught in the fast lane, and there's nowhere more intense. Hang out in the gaps, where kites fly, tai chi flows, and old-timers chat, and Beijing can feel almost provincial.

From an emperor's-eye view, Beijing is a strange vantage point from which to lord it over the nation. It lies on a sandblasted plain, more than 4,500km (2,796 miles) from the nation's farthest borders, and has neither major river nor coastline. This is a clue to the fact that the city developed from the drawing board rather than by an organic progress. The planned grid pattern was first laid down in the 13th century and labeled Khanbalik ("Dadu" in Mandarin), new capital of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). It was razed, rebuilt, and renamed Beijing—"northern capital"—by the Han Chinese rulers of the subsequent Ming dynasty (1368–1644). They added most of the city's most impressive surviving structures, the Forbidden City among them. The Manchurian Qing (1636–1912) chose to repurpose the city, rather than start afresh, and layered on new landmarks like the Summer Palace.

Some of the greatest damage to Beijing has occurred in the last 170 years. Invasion, rebellion, and civil war all altered the face of the city. Revolution too. In the first decade of the People's Republic, a distinctly Soviet-style grandeur was imposed. The ancient city walls and old Imperial Way were both leveled and paved over in a gesture of socialist modernity.

Present-day Beijing is vast. Unconstrained by natural obstructions, the city has grown into a seemingly endless sprawl, and it can take hours to get from one side to the other. It has also become a



magnet for migrants from around the country, and the population is now more than 22 million. Roads that once swarmed with bicycles are now choked with traffic.

The 2008 Olympics may feel distant, but their legacy in changing the face of Beijing cannot be underestimated. The development-scramble added tidiness, even a little glamour in parts, but took its toll on Beijing's most charming aspect, the *hutong*. The city was once a giant warren of these narrow residential lanes, which twisted and turned for miles on end. Many survive, but they have been sliced and diced by development.

Beijing has a dry, still climate, searing in summer and bitter in winter. When the northern breeze blows from the Mongolian steppe, the skies are a rich, cerulean blue. But without the movement of wind or rain, the pollution can build to apocalyptic proportions. When it's nice, it's *really* nice. When it's bad, it's horrid.

It all adds up to a city that requires both time and patience, but offers rich rewards. And for those seeking China's essence, it's unbeatable. Whether you're after the upturned eaves and imperial palaces of "ancient" China, the pomp and power of "communist" China, or the malls, jackhammers, and gridlock of "rising" China, Beijing serves all needs.

ESSENTIALS

Arriving

By Plane **Beijing Capital International Airport** (Beijing Shoudu Guoji Jichang) (☎ **010/96158** for information and ticket inquiries) is 25km (16 miles) northeast of the city center. The wonderfully modern Terminal 3 (T3) is Air China's home base but also serves the majority of international passengers, while Terminal 1 (T1) and Terminal 2 (T2) largely cater to domestic flights. Free 24-hour shuttle buses connect all three terminals.

Taxis line up outside the international arrivals gate at T2 and T3 and take 30 minutes to an hour to reach the city center, depending on Beijing's (often horrendous) traffic. The fare should be around RMB80 to RMB100 (20% higher after 11pm), not counting the RMB15 toll. Bypass any drivers who approach you inside the airport, and head for the taxi stand instead. Insist on using the meter.

The cheapest way to get into the city is on the air-conditioned **airport shuttle buses**. Of the 16 lines, the busiest depart between approximately 7am and midnight. They run approximately every 30 minutes, and tickets cost between RMB15 and RMB30, depending on the route. Of the three most useful routes, Line 1 connects with Guomao in the Central Business District, Line 2 skirts just north of the city center on its way to Xidan, while Line 3 goes via Chaoyangmen on its way to Beijing Railway Station.

The **Airport Express** line connects T2 and T3 with Sanyuanqiao (Line 10) and Dongzhimen (Lines 2 and 13) on the Beijing subway. Trains run from T3



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XI'AN

Spread across a basin between the rugged Wei and Yellow river valleys, Xi'an lies near modern China's geographic center. With miles of loam hills to the north and lush terraces of rice and tea to the south, this has long been a fertile land, and rulers from 11 dynasties established their court here, leaving behind archaeological treasures that only Ancient Egypt can rival. At its 8th-century peak, Xi'an was the largest and grandest city in the world, the terminus for the "Silk Road" traders who wended along the dusty corridor between the Gobi Desert and the Tibetan Plateau. The modern city may only be a humble provincial capital by comparison, but there's a palpable sense of history and plentiful reminders of the city's rich, cosmopolitan past.

Xi'an was first made capital of China under the Zhou dynasty in the 11th century B.C. The city rose and fell again and again until the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907), when Xi'an—known then as Chang'an—enjoyed almost three uninterrupted centuries as China's political and cultural center. Scholars and merchants flocked from all corners of the known world, and the city became a huge, cosmopolitan melting pot. From the north came Mongolian foods and weapons; along the network of canals to the east flowed silk; and, from the distant west, the spices, fashions, and metals of Central Asia were carted in by horse and camel. There was also a great flowering of the arts, sciences, and religion. Manicheans, Nestorian Christians, and Buddhists mingled freely in what was the first millennium's most tolerant and globalized capital. Buddhism in particular enjoyed imperial patronage and inspired painting, sculpture, and poetry, which survive to this day.

The scale of the metropolis is readily imagined. What are now referred to as the "city walls" were rebuilt during the Ming dynasty (1644–1911) on merely the inner sanctum of the Tang city. The real city walls created an enormous rectangle and stretched for 36km (22 miles), with the south gate opening onto a tree-lined avenue that was 150m (500 ft.) wide.

With the passing of the Tang, Xi'an lost its lead role to the cities of the east, though its slow fadeaway perhaps proved its modern saving-grace. While European colonial powers ransacked many of China's coastal cities during conflict and colonization, Xi'an was a distant backwater. It remained so when **Red Guards** marched through during the Cultural Revolution, vandalizing what symbols



of the feudal past they could find. In 1974, just as things were settling down, an impoverished farmer accidentally bored a well into the awe-inspiring tomb of 3rd century B.C. emperor Qin Shihuang. The Terracotta Warriors found inside became the poster boys China needed, just as international tourism boomed—and Xi'an hasn't looked back since. The find prompted other digs that have turned up more archaeological treasure and cemented Xi'an's reputation as the cradle of Chinese civilization.

Locals beam with pride at belonging to such a grand historic narrative, but there's a sadness that their city ever fell so far behind. But herein lies Xi'an's more unexpected appeal: Where Beijing and Shanghai are highly internationalized, showcase cities, Xi'an is earthier, rawer, and more representative of the Chinese heartland. Yes, it's crowded, cluttered, and horribly polluted at times. But it's also genuine (Tang dinner shows aside, see p.###), and all the more charming for it.

The local government has sought to broaden the city's attractiveness to tourists in recent years. Xi'an's Tang heritage is at the heart of huge new developments such as the **Daming Palace**, **Tang Paradise**, and the **Tang Western Market**, all constructed on or around historic sights. There's the distinct feeling of history being forcibly foisted on Xi'an as opposed to bubbling up by itself, but there's a certain epic quality to these developments, and anything that can draw the masses away from the Terracotta Warriors is probably to be welcomed.

Xi'an is more compact than Beijing, with a grid layout that's easy to navigate. The main city-center sights can be seen in a day or two, though the famous tombs, the **Terracotta Warriors** foremost among them, are actually a long way outside the modern city, and you may need to arrange independent transportation. A new subway network is gradually making getting around easier and will one day stretch all the way to Qin's famous mausoleum, though not in time for readers of this book.

ESSENTIALS

Arriving

By plane Daily flights connect **Xi'an Xianyang International Airport** with all major cities in China, including multiple daily flights to and from Beijing and Shanghai, as well as select international destinations within Asia. It's not currently possible to fly directly to Xi'an from North America, Australia, or Europe. The airport is 37km (23 miles) from the center of Xi'an. **Airport shuttle buses** run along eight different routes, though none travel to points within the city walls, meaning an additional taxi ride will be required. The fee is RMB26 regardless of destination. All buses depart from both Terminal 2 and Terminal 3. Buy tickets from the desks just after baggage claim in either terminal. The most useful routes are **Route 1**, which runs to the Aviation Hotel on Laodong Nan Lu, west of the city walls; **Route 2**, which goes to the old Railway Station, right on the north city wall (and from which certain

SHANGHAI

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It's been 175 short years since Shanghai started her journey from the boonies to the big time. Hers is a Hollywood tale of soaring highs and crashing lows, shot through with glamour and greed. Bankers and gangsters, socialites and shy-sters, colonials and "coolies," aristocrats and revolutionaries, all have been lured into Shanghai's seductive embrace and shaped the city's sometimes sordid history. Today Shanghai is China's economic engine-room, and it's the huddled masses who march toward the bright lights at the mouth of the Yangtze, seeking a slice of the pie amid China's relentless boom.

It was undoubtedly colonialism that gave Shanghai her first, bittersweet break. Before the Opium War (1839–1842), Shanghai was a semi-prosperous market town that few people outside the Yangtze Delta would have heard of. The Treaty of Nanjing, which ended hostilities, carved open the area for colonial occupation. The enclaves that were established—first by Britain, then the United States and France—became a magnet to both foreign adventurers and domestic migrants. Shanghai was seen as a safe haven during the bloody Taiping Rebellion, and later, during the chaotic Warlord Era, when the Communist Party secretly set up shop under unsuspecting French noses. By the early 1900s, Shanghai was entering its "golden age," fattened on overseas investment, cheap labor, opium, and extortion. If you were on the right side of the racket, life couldn't be sweeter. Away from the champagne parties and dance halls, the bodies of half-starved unskilled local laborers (known as "coolies"), prostitutes, and criminals were regularly fished from the portside.

The population of Shanghai's well-defended foreign concessions swelled again when Japan overran China in 1937 but then suffered as the Japanese took complete charge 4 years later, making servants of those who had once been masters. Most of the population assumed it would be business-as-usual after 1945, and some even carried on dreaming after the Communists' civil war victory in 1949, but they were spectacularly mistaken. Mao didn't care for Shanghai's infamous "anything goes" culture, and his ascent to power led to the private clubs, swanky hotels, and gambling dens shutting their doors for good.

The Mao era was unkind to Shanghai. The Cultural Revolution, which ravaged China during the Great Helmsman's last years,



began in Shanghai and was directed from the city by the so-called “Gang of Four.” Thousands were sent from their urban homes to the countryside for reeducation. Four decades of radicalism and repression ended in 1991 when Shanghai’s mayor, Zhu Rongji, got a promotion to the head table in Beijing. The city was opened to the world once more, but rather than merely “reform,” as instructed, Shanghai flung herself into the largest urban transformation in human history. There’s hardly been any let-up since. If the American Dream was distilled from the dusty plains of the West, China’s current dash for wealth and power has risen from the boggy flats east of the Huangpu.

The city’s new architecture symbolizes this spirit, with glass and chrome totems being summoned from the swamps like something out of an alien invasion. The mightiest of them, the 128-story Shanghai Tower, now looms over the 101-story World Financial Trade Center, and its paltry 88-floor neighbor, the Jinmao Tower. They haughtily look down at the colonial buildings of the Bund just opposite—past and present, divided by a muddy river.

The faint echoes of “swinging” Shanghai’s decadent heyday have lately become unmistakable boom-box thuds. The nightclubs are as exclusive as they ever were back in the 1920s, with added diamonds and designer suits. The gap between rich and poor has again become a chasm, with hapless Dickensian slop boys coexisting with dot.com.cn billionaires. And the new wealth has produced hedonism. Prostitution and drugs have both returned, though neither is legal, as they once were. History doesn’t repeat, but it does rhyme.

Like many of those who live in life’s fast lane, Shanghai gets depressed; she is sinking by roughly a centimeter each year. Indeed, if that master of kill-joys—global warming—has his way, she will be one of the first to find herself underwater. However, there’s little sense of impending doom. This is a city that revels in danger.

The Shanghainese are famed for their frankness, efficiency, business acumen, and general contempt for anyone unfortunate enough not to have been born in this blessed city. There’s no doubt they have created China’s most outward-looking, modern, and brash metropolis. In a city once dubbed the “Whore of the Orient,” you may not always find yourself in “good” company. But there’s no denying the folks ’round here are a lot of fun.

ESSENTIALS

Arriving

BY PLANE Shanghai has an older airport to the west, **Hongqiao International Airport**, and a newer airport to the east, **Pudong International Airport**, which began operations late in 1999. Virtually all of the international carriers use Pudong, which serves all major international destinations from Amsterdam to Vancouver. Every major city in China is also served with multiple daily flights. Most use Hongqiao, but flights to and from Beijing and Xi’an also use Pudong.

The **Pudong International Airport** (www.shairport.com; ☎ **021/96990**), your likely point of arrival, is located about 45km (28 miles) east of

