



My old China

Between Shanghai's skyscrapers lurk the very last vestiges of a vanishing city. Amanda Hyde goes hunting for treasure

Amanda Hyde Published: 8 December 2010



Every morning, some of Shanghai's more mature residents play cards in Fuxing Park (Tom Parker)

tragedy thanks to light filtering through a beautiful stained-glass window – watching the caretaker's key click shut in a padlock attached to the only exit.

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It had been an up-and-down sort of afternoon: my guide, Peter, and I had already shared a teary moment, gatecrashed a wake and exchanged pleasantries with the local gangster, but neither of us could have predicted this latest development. Panic rising in my throat, my five-day break flashed past me: I'd come to chase the shadows of old Shanghai, but China's new dawn was on full beam in the city, and finding much semblance of

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I didn't expect to go like this, locked in a condemned building in Shanghai and flattened by the inevitable steamrollers. Nobody had warned me, or asked me to sign a disclaimer before I took my tour of the city. Yet here I was, halfway up a stairwell – a chiaroscuro

the past was proving difficult. Now, it seemed, even we were consigned to the scrapheap: two history-obsessed Brits, far too old and dusty for this 21st-century giant.

Shanghai is a city that revels in renewal. It was a former metamorphosis that had sparked my interest in visiting. In the early 20th century, the 'Whore of Asia' grew into a tantalisingly decadent metropolis, carved up into areas presided over by the Brits, the French and the Chinese, home to brothels and opium dens, casinos and grand ballrooms. It was full of speculators and secrets: Iraqi Jews built up great empires, and thousands of Russian ex-soldiers flocked here to work as bodyguards in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Meanwhile, the skyline zigzagged with skyscrapers before other cities even thought of building them.

The Bund – Shanghai's grandest thoroughfare, which runs along one bank of the Huangpu river – was packed with banks and hotels. And each was more fanciful than the last, with gilded lions guarding their gates and pastoral scenes of faraway Europe painted within.

These days, finding the Bund is easy (with its elaborate buildings, it's Shanghai's biggest tourist attraction), but uncovering other old treasures among the skyscrapers and multistorey apartment blocks requires a trained eye. Peter, surname Hibbard, picked up an MBE in this year's honours list for his services to conservation here, but he's not above pacing the streets with a tour group and his folder of laminated study aids – one man fighting a battle against an invading army of steel and glass. He's a conservation superhero (more Peter Parker than Spiderman) given to saving the occasional building – and this afternoon, I'm desperately hoping he can save me.

Although more than slightly ruffled, he manages to free us from our condemned prison in a few minutes, shouting repeatedly in Shanghaiese to the angry caretaker (in a tone I recognise from disaster movies). Eventually, with a lot of cursing and finger-wagging, we are shooed back into the din of rush hour. 'There'll be nothing left soon,' says Peter, shaking his head as he walks up the street to complete his regular assessment of the remaining relics.

It's dusk by the time I get back to the Bund, and my home for the weekend at The Peninsula Hotel. The street is midway through a makeover, scaffolding turning the view into a crossword sketched across a toffee-coloured dusk. Suited couples, fresh from work, hold hands as they stare across the Huangpu river to the glittering towers of Pudong, China's new and shiny finance district; a hunched old man weaves between commuters as he practises t'ai chi; constant traffic prowls along the road, its noise dulled by the rush of the grey river. Change is in the air, just as it must have been a century ago – so much so that Pudong's Barbie-pink and grey Oriental Pearl TV Tower, finished in 1994, looks incongruously old-fashioned next to its neighbours, though the Bund's grand facades more than hold their own against the giants facing off with them across the water.

The skyscrapers seem to be closing in on me (a feeling exaggerated by biting jet lag that's clouding my sense of perspective), so I retreat to the hotel lobby for something reassuringly familiar: afternoon tea. My state of mind lends the place a dream-like air – peals of laughter rise above a tuneful string quartet, and light sparkles off dozens of tiered cake stands. The hotel is purpose-built, but – unusually for Shanghai – its aim is to emulate the past. In my fuzzy state, it's easy enough to imagine all those long-gone hopeful immigrants here, dressed in their finery and sipping champagne as they caught up on the latest scandalous gossip and devised get-rich-quick schemes.

'We did try and build The Peninsula in an old building and capture that old decadence,' says the manager, when I corner him over a cucumber sandwich. 'It's just that there weren't any left.'

But the next day, on the hunt for history, I breakfast in a hotel that has scarcely changed since it was erected in 1846. Right where the Bund meets the Huangpu river, Astor House was once billed as the 'Waldorf Astoria of the Orient' and welcomed Einstein, Charlie Chaplin and Bertrand Russell – but now you're more likely to find backpackers scoffing breakfasts in what used to be the ballroom. Gigantic chandeliers drip from the ceilings, setting the wood-panelling off perfectly, but jarring rather with the rucksack-sporting guests.

Upstairs, bedrooms run off a bizarre, half-timbered, Henry VIII-style gallery. It's like wandering through a museum, and I'm glad the big chains haven't managed to conquer it yet (giant Canadian chain Fairmont has just taken over the historic Peace Hotel down the road).

Behind the Bund, I uncover more ancient(-ish) treasure – a little labyrinth of lilongs, the streets full of terraced houses that were built to house immigrant families in the early 20th century. Now, several Chinese families live in each one, clinging on until they're sent off to the high-rise suburbs. Men sit at alleyway kitchens, eating



Scenes of Dong Tai Road Antiques Market, where nostalgia comes in many guises (Tom Parker)

dumplings ladled from steaming pots, and contemplating the billowing clouds of washing that punctuate the view skywards. Occasionally, a scooter whizzes past down narrow lanes, shattering the calm as it splatters mud up red-brick walls.

It was in a similar cluster of alleys that Peter and I had gatecrashed a wake the day before, unintentionally walking into a

courtyard full of solemnly weeping women, not knowing until it was too late what we'd come across – or whether to allow ourselves a quick gaze upwards to take in the little wrought-iron balconies, packed with plants and drying clothes, before we beat a retreat. In the end, we'd quickly withdrawn to Peter's own apartment block, a hefty old red-brick behemoth on the edge of the French Concession that once housed an eight-year-old Margot Fonteyn (her dad was one of those hopeful émigrés, accepting a job in a tobacco company in 1927). It was a happier place than the lilongs, with a couple of hole-in-the-wall bars marking its beginning and end, a makeshift furniture shop wedged between the apartments, and neat rows of plants around its perimeter.

'You're not meant to grow flowers, but these belong to the local gangster, and he can do whatever he wants really,' says Peter. And, right on cue, a burly man in a tight T-shirt whizzes past on a scooter, high-fiving us as he goes.

This place is enthralling: a celeb past, passionate Peter and a gangster with scant regard for the law have conspired to keep the neighbourhood as it was back in the '20s – complete with a similarly multinational population of grafters and lost souls. Fast food and coffee chains may have it surrounded on all sides, but something tells me it won't fall anytime soon. The next morning, inspired by the Art Deco treasures in Peter's local bric-a-brac store and keen to get some suitably historic souvenirs, I embark on a shopping trip.

Avoiding the Bund's credit card-busting designer names, I head off by subway in search of goodies less shiny and new. I am greeted at the South Huangpi Road station by a black, angry sky, pouring its scorn on the pavement in heavy drops of rain. An ocean of umbrellas swirl on the streets, creating multicoloured pointers to the malls and office blocks. This is one of Shanghai's glitziest shopping areas, but I'm not here for Dior and Cartier – 10 minutes' walk away, a market is still defiantly up and running, selling Chairman Mao watches and lifesize terracotta warriors to less-solvent visitors, from stalls in front of the tumbledown terraces of Dong Tai Road. This antiques market (although 'antiques-style' might be more accurate) is in business from dawn until dusk, one of the few places where you can buy mementos of the city's yesteryears.

In the misty drizzle, it's bewitching – as though a film director has CGI-ed a mini city of run-down terraces between the skyscrapers, casting a grizzled army of stallholders to hide in grimy shadows and pop out whenever they see a sales opportunity.

'You want?' shouts an old man sheltering under a porch, as he points at a giant wooden horse. 'Need this, miss,' says a woman authoritatively, pushing a rusty gun in my direction. But I require both hands to hold my makeshift newspaper umbrella, so I shake my head politely and wander off in search of shelter.

Around Dong Tai, the skeletons of tens of similar streets remain, ghostly and grey. Without a busy market or Hibbard-style saviour, they couldn't beat the bulldozers. Facades have fallen, leaving innards exposed –



Surveying the city's skyscrapers from the iconic Oriental Pearl TV Tower (Tom Parker)

shops and restaurants. Lord knows what the Communist Party (who held their first congress in one of the district's shophouses) must make of the newly posh lanes, packed with bars and design stores, but I like this tiny slice of reinvigorated old Shanghai. I commit a Communist cardinal sin by consuming a latte in the local Starbucks, watching tourists practise their Mandarin on the multilingual staff.

All very enjoyable, but I'd become haunted by the niggling feeling that there was more of old Shanghai out there – things that hadn't been glitzed up or half-bulldozed. Peter's apartment block had shown me that, in some places at least, life went on pretty much as it had done a century ago. Elsewhere, I'd seen some strange places – one street where the shops only sold pants; another called 'Love Lane' where half-demolished restaurants revealed ovens peeping out from collapsed walls (and where Peter welled up on the site of his favourite cafe, now razed to the ground) – but most of the people I'd encountered were commuters and tourists. Even a bar crawl through the Bund's poshest pitstops had revealed only pricey cocktails and empty tables.

With one day left in the city, I take drastic action and log on to the Chinese version of Gumtree, the classifieds website. Through it, I find Sophia, who offers to show me other old bits of the city for £40 – if she doesn't kill me. Meeting strangers on the internet isn't an idea I'd normally entertain, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

At 11am the next morning, I loiter nervously in the lobby of the Pudong Shangri-La Hotel – while Sophia loiters nervously about 10m away. A quick phone call and we are united, dressed in identical Converse trainers and parka jackets, and chatting about the degree she's just finished. It turns out she's lived in Shanghai all her life, and is working as a guide until she finds 'a proper job'.

We join the teenagers strolling the Pudong Riverside Promenade, and ignoring the magnificent view to the Bund, she asks me what I'd like to see. 'Anything but skyscrapers,' I reply, and we're soon wandering the shops of Nanjing Road, the Shanghai equivalent of London's Oxford Street.

There's even a dodgy Tottenham Court Road-style end, complete with bad jewellers and fake-handbag touts. But it's at the Shanghai First Foodstore (relatively ancient, at 60 years old) that I see my first crowd. A battalion of elderly women armed with shopping bags marches between the stalls, picking out dried fish and pigs' ears from the 10,000 products on offer.

'This is the city's biggest foodstore, with specialities from all over China,' Sophia tells me. 'We eat a lot you see, but we're not fat. British people are fat, though, so why aren't you?' Her frank, stream-of-consciousness dialogue continues throughout the day, as we wander around the market and temple-strewn alleys centred on Zhonghua Road ('Look at her skirt!' she yells loudly, pointing at an overweight teen crammed into a ra-ra and

washing drying on rafters, tables set for dinner. Occasionally, a complete house remains between the ruins, its elderly residents perched on chairs outside to survey the scene. Even they look like museum pieces.

In the half-light of the downpour, it's all rather spooky, so I retreat to Xin Tian Di, a neat grid of old stone houses on the way back to the subway, converted into



Cultural revolutions: cycling through Dong Tai Road Antiques Market (Tom Parker)

lacy tights) and sneak into hotel loos ('I must wee,' she says. 'Hide').

I am having so much fun that my lack of breakfast goes unnoticed, until 3pm when my stomach starts to rumble.

'Are you hungry?' Sophia asks as we turn down a sidestreet. Suddenly, we are among crowds of people – gossiping students and wrinkled old-timers and office girls with spot-

the-difference fake handbags, all queuing for restaurants that reach as far as the eye can see.

East Wujiang Road is buzzy and alive – it might not look like '20s Shanghai, but the exotic spirit of the street matches the black-and-white photos I've pored over much better than the sanitised Bund.

Red lanterns swing high above the doorframes, and painted signs announce mouthwatering specialities from the rooftops, while hawkers hand out menus to passers-by.

'This road is famous for its snacks,' said Sophia, eyeing the queues at two restaurants opposite each other. 'Do you want dumplings or broth?'

We opt for dumplings, and join a line of people snaking towards a minute doorway full of steam. Every now and again it clears to reveal a huddle of women making little parcels of pork at breakneck speed. The tables are crammed, and it takes around 20 minutes to get a seat, but eventually we settle in and order a giant platter of the speciality – just 70p a head. It is the best version of the dish I've ever tasted – every mouthful is a subtle mixture of pork and pastry, followed by a surprising burst of broth (apparently, they inject it into the middle of each one).

'I think I could get fat living here,' I tell Sophia approvingly.

Back in London, four months pass. Daydreaming about my trip on the tube to work, it's the sights and smells of exotic, old-fashioned Wujiang Road that I remember. But when I look it up on the internet later that day, I get a shock – the thoroughfare's been demolished to make way for a 'Fashion Street' of boutiques, apartments and hotels. I think of Peter Hibbard, doing his daily rounds of historic buildings, and hope he's got his superhero costume at the ready.

NEED TO KNOW

www.kuoni.co.uk) has four nights in Shanghai, from £920pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow. Upgrade to the charming Shangri-La Pudong, which has a fantastic view of the Bund, from £1,192pp. Or try Regent Holidays (0845 277 3317, www.regent-holidays.co.uk).

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Virgin Atlantic (0844 209 7777, www.virgin-atlantic.com), BA (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) and Air China (00800 8610 0999, www.airchina.co.uk) fly to Shanghai Pudong International from Heathrow, from £550 return.

Where to stay

The Peninsula Hotel (00 86 21 2327 2888, www.peninsula.com), at the end of the Bund, has doubles from £328, B&B. It arranges tours with Peter Hibbard. For affordable character, and rooms almost unchanged since the '30s, try Astor House (00 86 21 6324 6388, www.astorhousehotel.com; doubles from £110, room only).

Further information

You need a visa to enter China – apply at least one month before your trip and expect to pay from £65 (see www.visaforchina.org.uk). Read more about old Shanghai in The Bund Shanghai: China Faces West by Peter Hibbard (Odyssey, £15). You can arrange a tour with him by calling 00 86 21 6271 5551 (from £40 per half-day). The metro system is easy to use, with signs in English. If you plan to take a taxi, ask someone at your hotel to write your destination in Chinese.