

SLOW BOAT TO XITANG

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COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

In the water-town of Xitang, a few hours outside of Shanghai, a gentle mist of rain dampens the timber decking of the row boats and the first colours of autumn have begun to appear on the trees. This is one of those places where a little rain somehow adds to the charm. Xitang is an historic town that became prosperous during the hey-days of China's Grand Canal but in recent years has been rediscovered by Chinese tourists.

This town is a treasured jewel where a traditional way of life has been preserved, and travellers who venture out of Shanghai for a day-trip are greeted warmly and with the most sincere of smiles.

Xitang sits elegantly on top of nine rivers, and the water-ways dominate every aspect of life. Over one-hundred bridges have been built, each offering a vital connection between laneways and corridors and each enhancing the beauty of the town. Bridges are given lyrical names such as "Rainbow across the river" and "Lying dragon over ripples".

The oldest bridge was built in the 17th century Qing Dynasty and the great joy of Xitang is that so much architecture from this period has been preserved. Temples, gardens and halls of residence are tucked away behind modest facades, many now serving as cultural centres for displays of artistic crafts like bamboo carvings, stone inscriptions and tile collections.

The laneways in Xitang are a world removed from modern cities. The stone paved paths were a feature of the original residences and there is always a sense of mystery as to what lies at the other end. Some lanes connect to another river, or a hidden temple or a snack shop selling tea and ice-cream. One particular lane is popular with local tourists for its "skin of stone" – the flags of granite have been chiselled very thin and are often described as walking on a beam of light.

But it's the water that defines the character of Xitang, and those points where the village meets the river. Covered corridors feature above many paths that follow the canal, the longest being made from dark-red timber and stretches over a kilometre. Red lanterns drop down from the beams and vendors politely conduct their business as I pass by. If it rained all day I would still be dry and happy.

While rice-wine is a local custom in Xitang, as in any town in China, Tea is the drink of choice for socialising. All manner of tea-houses line the water-ways to offer a steaming-hot cup of cha and a few delicacies to snack on. The five-spice-beans are a local offering of green soy beans smoked through with Chinese five-spices and whole chillies, so I take a little extra care when grabbing a handful.

Fragrant tea and Pu'er are the most common varieties for sipping, and the latter is discernable from its intense red colour and slightly burned flavour.

If a more substantial dining experience is required then head for the town centre and chose from the many restaurants built high above the water view.

Most menus adhere to the more traditional cooking style, and are far less ornate than you find in Shanghai. Dishes are simple but elegant and always very fresh. Ordering is a little tricky because English is rather a new phenomenon in these parts. The simple phrase "sui bian" instructs the owner to decide on my behalf – ensuring a good mix of vegetables and seafood and, invariably, way too much of everything.

As a plate of steamed shrimps with ginger hit the table I watch a boat punt up the river, possibly carrying a catch of freshwater fish, eels, or crabs.

The larger boats offer protection from sun and rain for sight-seers, and for a few dollars you can enjoy the town of Xitang from the river. Your driver will stand at the rear of the boat and rocks the single steering oar from side to side to gently propel the craft forward.

Traffic on the water largely consists of scenic tours, rubbish collectors and the occasional cormorant fisherman. I ask to take a photo and am greeted with a friendly acceptance, and no money required – such is the nature of this charming little town.

Taking a stroll back from the water and I notice the stonework is embellished with timber tones and window shutters, and the occasional tune of a song bird calling from its cage. The older generations who live here spend a lot of time watching people go by, and perhaps very little else.

My pale and round face is as interesting to them as the narrow and winding lanes are to me. Now I just need to find the right laneway out so I can get home again.

