

SHANGHAI'S SURPRISE

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COVER STORY, SUNDAY TELEGRAPH TRAVEL SECTION

If you want a vision of the future in China, and a glimpse of the past, you need go no further than Shanghai. The red-tiled roofs of historic old buildings are giving way to a modern skyline of glass and steel. Shanghai is a sassy youngster, full of bravado and confidence with a truly modern face.

The people of Shanghai don't just wear iPods, they make them.

Sitting quietly in the shadows, just a few hours drive away, are her elder sisters; the modest and charming water towns fed by the gently flowing waters of the Grand Canal. Graceful villages such as Wuzhen, Nanxun and Xitang give us a glimpse of old China, frozen in a pre-revolution bubble and bricked in from all sides by Qing Dynasty architecture.

These small villages have changed little since the time of emperors and dynasties. Narrow stone-paved streets are flanked by timber facades, doors and shutters. Few are painted, the natural colour of the wood still evident after decades of weathering.

Trees and pot-plants offer the only competing colour along the waterways, with every inch of brick rendered with white-wash. Even the roofs are a dark-grey hue, tainted by the silty-clay of the canals. Occasional punts travel up and down the water, adding a little more timber to the view.

The laneways of Wuzhen are connected by dozens of carved-stone bridges that span the canals, some dating back as far as the 7th century and each with their own history and character.

Typical of the Chinese flare for style, the bridges are granted poetic names such as "First Time Reunited", in reference to a period after the Tang Dynasty when two halves of the town belonged to different kingdoms.

The preservation of the historic centre of Wuzhen has allowed the locals to retain a relaxed way of life. Shop-keepers and residents take short walks to visit friends in the street and share a pot of green tea.

For over a century the locals have enjoyed "jing-chi", the gentle energy that comes from time spent in good company with an endless cup of green-tea. The same few tea leaves are repeatedly used to infuse hot water, and many hours can be spent watching river punts pass by or being challenged to another game of Mah-jong.

As a traveller to Wuzhen it is useful to learn the Chinese symbol for tea, as many of the tea houses are so ornate that you can easily mistake them for an imperial courtyard or temple.

Westerners are a rare sight wandering through the streets and canals. Wuzhen has only recently opened its doors to the travelling public, and the few buses making their way daily from Shanghai and Hangzhou carry mostly Chinese tourists.

Town officials must have been expecting more English speaking visitors, because many signs for temples and lanes are marked in English.

The lone restaurant along the main canal is clearly marked with an official sign that reads "Chinese Restaurant", just in case you were expecting something else.

Don't let the signs fool you however; no one here speaks a word of English and attempts to order food are an adventure into the unknown.

Cuisine in the canal-towns lacks the modern-fusion of Shanghai, the locals preferring to enjoy traditional delights such as steamed river

shrimp and baby-greens with mushrooms. The best advice is to look up the phrase "You decide" in your guide book and sit-back for some culinary surprises.

As dusk colours the sky above Wuzhen the shops start closing up, their wooden shutters placed one-by-one into hand-carved frames. A few tea houses that line the canal stay open, and their red lanterns reflect off the water.

Fishermen tie their punts to bridges and walk down the lanes with their catch, another reminder that these are living villages.

No motorbikes or cars are permitted in the historical centre, so footsteps are often the only sound you will hear at this time of night unless musicians are performing in the square.

Once night has truly fallen the colour of lanterns is joined by candles floating down the river in paper-boats. For less than a dollar you can add to the scene and send your own prayers and wishes to be gently carried away by the current.

If you still have a few coins left in your purse then it's worth heading for the souvenir stalls that flank the entrance to the historical town. Prices here are more modest than in Shanghai and yet equally impressive for stylish trinkets, bronze replicas, and an extensive range of Mao-morabilia.

It is difficult to imagine what the autocratic architect of "The Great Leap Forward" would say about his cheerful image frozen in porcelain alongside laughing Buddhas and fake jade charms, but it's a reminder that the gaze of Mao Zedong remains ever-present over China, like a stern grandparent who dispenses un-approving glances at short skirts and fast cars.

A truly original keep-sake is the locally produced rice-wine. Elegantly presented bottles of distilled alcohol are infused with plums and sold cheaper than wine. The old lady who sold me a bottle assures me that I won't wake up with a headache even if I drank it all in one night.

I chose to keep that souvenir for a special occasion and headed back to the river to enjoy a last cup of tea before heading back to the City and her modern ways.

