

From the moment I stepped on the high-speed Maglev Train at Pudong International Airport, Shanghai captivated me. I'd done my research and knew it was a superlative city—China's biggest, one of its richest and the largest shipping port in the world. One-quarter of the world's construction cranes perch on the skyline, which is dominated by some of Earth's tallest buildings.

I'd read about this megalopolis' provocative history, its foreign occupations and despotic influences. But as I watched the Maglev's digital speedometer whir, it was obvious that, although impacted by its past, Shanghai is hurtling toward a freer future.

An Emphasis on Modernity

My captivation was purely voluntary. However, the city's name is most often associated with the 19th-century practice of involuntarily conscripting men as sailors on clipper ships headed to the Orient. "Shanghai" actually means "on the sea," which is fitting as the city sits on the eastern shore of the South China Sea. The Huangpu River divides the city into two sectors, Puxi and Pudong, and has always been Shanghai's economic artery. It was also the byway to occupation for the British Royal and Imperial Japanese navies.

A small fishing village until the mid-1800s, Shanghai has been divided by civil war, ensnared by the opium trade and bullied by gangsters. In 1949, Mao Zedong ushered in its darkest days. Mao supporters launched a deadly campaign to eliminate any opposition. All private enterprises were nationalized, and profits from industry were sent elsewhere.

After Mao's death in 1976, progressive Deng Xiaoping rose to power, abandoned his predecessor's failed economic policies and embraced privately owned enterprise. In the 1990s, Shanghai became a new commercial hub, and millions of dollars were dedicated toward establishing Pudong as the city's equivalent to Manhattan.

■ *Shelly Steig is a freelance writer based in Parker, Colo.*

A Pearl Emerges

Today, Shanghai is fondly called the Pearl of the Orient. It boasts nearly 20 million residents and is considered exotic even by the Chinese. With a booming economy, Shanghai is bustling, exhilarating and infused with a youthful vibe thanks to its recent capitalistic rebirth.

Shanghai is also a city of constant contrasts. Pudong has a futuristic feel with the Maglev, the world's first commercial high-speed magnetically levitated train, and towering and unique skyscrapers such as the iconic Oriental Pearl TV Tower. Puxi features classical Chinese gardens, ancient temples and street markets nudged by modern office and residential buildings. Colonial-style architecture dominates the Bund (the former Shanghai International Settlement), while in Nanshi (Old Town), my husband and I stumbled upon steeply pitched roofs with upturned and pointed flying eaves—architecture from the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Seeking an authentic experience, we wandered Shanghai's



streets our first morning, despite the haze of August heat and humidity. We stepped out of the conveniently located Sofitel Shanghai Hyland hotel directly onto Nanjing Road, the city's busy pedestrian thoroughfare. Crowds of Shanghainese darted in and out of stores, hands filled with shopping bags. My husband's 6-foot-8-inch stature made him a curiosity, and friendly residents repeatedly tapped him on the shoulder, then framed a wide grin with a double thumbs-up.

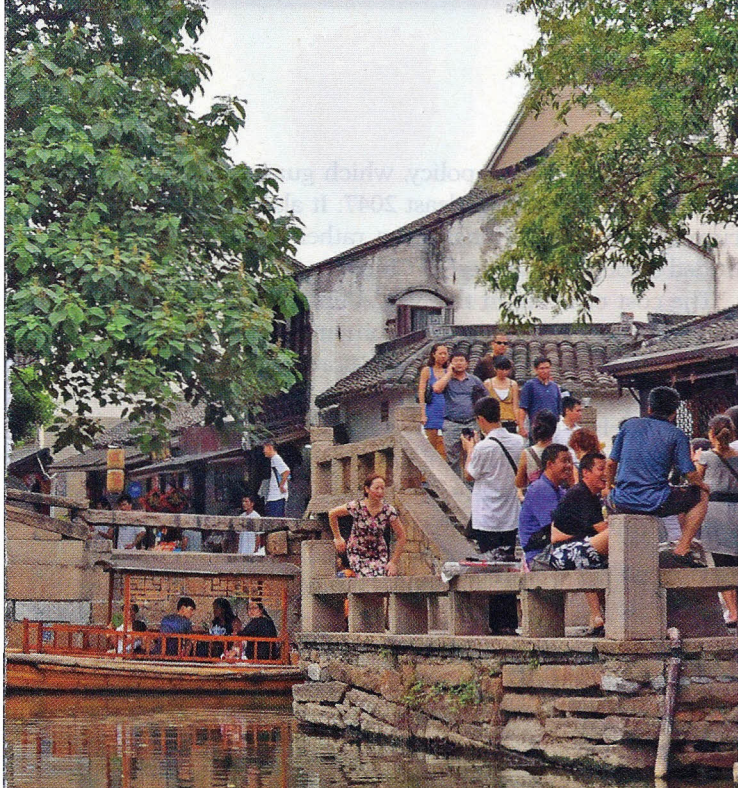
Our destination was one of Shanghai's more curious street bazaars—the Wanshang Bird & Flower Market. As I entered an enclosure, I could hear a constant buzzing, like that of a high-voltage electrical unit, coming from piles of tiny bamboo cages filled with chirping crickets. Believed to ensure luck and prosperity, the Singing Brother has been a favored pet for 2,000 years. Whistling birds and yapping puppies added to the din.

The city hosts many outdoor and indoor markets, including those that sell antiques, eyeglasses, knockoffs and silk. Tailors at the South Bund Fabric Market will even sew a custom-fit suit in short order.

The Pulse of Shanghai

After that first day, we bounced from place to place in taxis. It cost about \$4 to journey crosstown, and it was the wildest ride since my last roller coaster. Traffic lights were mere suggestions, and throngs of motorcycles, bicycles and walkers darted between autos that honked loudly and veered within a hair's breadth of other vehicles.

After moving to the über-hip JIA Shanghai boutique hotel, we discovered our concierge was a wonderful resource. Not only did he write our destinations in Mandarin for the taxi drivers, he also suggested other ways to experience the city's unique culture—such as seeing Chinese gymnasts at the



JEFF STEIG

Zhouzhuang (above) is an ancient water village outside Shanghai, where canals and branching streams flow under stone bridges and past black-tiled residences. Markets in Shanghai proper (top right) showcase knick-knacks, lanterns, clothing and jewelry, among other things. Classic Chinese architecture dominates the Jade Buddha Temple (right), home to two jade Buddha statues.

Shanghai Acrobatic Theatre and partaking in a traditional tea ceremony at the Huxinting Teahouse.

We felt the pulse of Shanghai as we ambled through the Jade Buddha Temple, where the devout bowed and waved sticks of incense, filling the air with musky-smelling smoke. We strolled Yuyuan Garden, an oasis for centuries, and visited nearby Zhouzhuang, a water village where narrow canals have supplied residents' way of life for hundreds of years. I bartered for keepsakes at the Yu Yuan Bazaar and fumbled with chopsticks while sampling dim sum (Cantonese for "touch the heart"), which consisted mostly of dumplings filled with meats or vegetables, then heated in bamboo steamers.

I also experienced Asian hospitality at the luxurious Pudong Shangri-La hotel. The cordiality was purposeful at the hotel, but it was a common element that ran throughout our visit. With their delicate manners and determined resiliency, the people ultimately captivated us the most.

Planning Your Trip

For more information about Shanghai, visit www.meet-in-shanghai.net. For trip-planning assistance, contact a local AAA Travel agent or visit AAA.com/travel.

H&A



SHELLY STEIG



JEFF STEIG

The Most Attended World's Fair in History

There's only a few months left to visit the Shanghai World Expo 2010, which ends **Oct. 31**. The fair hadn't opened when we were visiting, but in preparation, the city was in the midst of a spruce-up and building

frenzy rumored to cost \$42 million.

The fairgrounds span the Huangpu River on both the city's Puxi and Pudong sides near Nanpu Bridge. Covering approximately 3.28 square miles, the site includes permanent structures as well as international and corporate pavilions.

With the theme Better

City, Better Life, this year's expo showcases modern urban living. Seventy million visitors are anticipated.

