

# The San Diego Union-Tribune

## River delta city Suzhou is slice of Venice in China



Considered the "Venice of China," Suzhou sits in the center of the Yangtze River Delta, where gondolas push through narrow waterways, lit by paper lanterns and shadowed by stone bridges. (Marlise Kast-Myers)

By **Marlise Kast-Myers**

JANUARY 5, 2017, 5:50 PM

**T**he 2016 presidential election was approaching, and the climate of our country had gone from bitter to acidic. Having long abandoned social media, I periodically peered over my husband's shoulder to see "friends" battling their political views on Facebook, hidden behind the safety of a screen where filter-less opinions have no boundaries. The controversy surrounding our presidential candidates rattled the very people they fought to represent, and divided a nation once united in freedom.



How ironic, then, that I found peace and wholeness in the communist city of Suzhou. Located in the Jiangsu Province of Eastern China, Suzhou has a population of 13 million, of whom 416 traveled with me on the packed flight to Shanghai.

Stacked on top of a delayed flight out of San Diego, and a four-hour layover in San Francisco, was the final 13-hour journey to Shanghai. Once on the ground, I was faced with another two-hour drive to reach Suzhou. Without those setbacks, travel to Suzhou would have been surprisingly easily, with nonstop flights from 16 North American cities to five international airports, the most common being Shanghai Hongqiao International Airport.

It was my first trip to Mainland China, and although I've traveled to some 80 countries, I felt I had landed on the moon. The driving — even at 10 p.m. — was a pandemonium of cars straddling lanes, honking for no apparent reason, whipping U-turns in front of oncoming traffic, and mopeds (with helmet-less drivers, four passengers deep, all on cellphones) zipping through chaos without a care in the world.

Flashing billboards and illuminated skyscrapers reminded me I was far from San Diego's North County, not to mention my driver didn't speak a word of English. Trust me, I tried to converse. In hindsight, the high-speed train from Shanghai — taking just 35 minutes — might have been easier. But then again, I would have missed all the action.

Somehow, in the midst of it all, I fell asleep, curled up in a tight little ball, using my backpack as a pillow. I awoke to a uniformed doorman welcoming me to the Shangri-La Hotel, the first international luxury hotel in the New District.

Centering the lobby was a floral arrangement the size of my garden, boasting orchids so perfect I touched them to verify their authenticity. Overhead were massive chandeliers resembling upside-down wedding cakes, reflecting prisms of light on polished marble floors. I was so excited, I bowed at check-in.

After showing my passport, I was handed a keycard to my suite. It had two bathrooms (because one just isn't enough), a walk-in closet, a lounge area, floor-to-ceiling windows, and three TVs — allowing me to cartwheel between rooms without missing a second of Chinese MTV.

First things first. I had to send an email to my husband notifying him of my safe arrival. Easier said than done. I couldn't log in to Gmail, and ignorantly Googled "Is Gmail blocked in China?" The 404 response led me to

Yahoo, which confirmed my suspicions.

In an effort to stretch my swollen legs, I went to YouTube in search of a yoga video. Again, blocked. Needless to say, I was frustrated, cut off from my downward dog, and emails, and campaign updates, and, well, all those “important” things I must do while traveling.

In typical San Diegan fashion, I headed to the gym for a midnight workout. The health club boasted panoramic city views, tennis courts, an indoor lap pool, and the whole shebang. To wash away the flight, I headed to the pool but was stopped by a lifeguard.

Since he didn't speak English, and I don't speak Mandarin, we found ourselves doing a sort of bow-nod dance with one another. Apparently, he wanted me to wear the mandatory “bathing cap,” which he kindly loaned compliments of the hotel. There was a kindness about him that was difficult to define. It was the same gentle disposition I had noticed in everyone thus far.

There were no walls of pretention, or strings attached to acts of service, or impatient stares waiting for a tip. People were genuinely hospitable. They wanted to practice their English, and lock eyes with my culture. They wanted to take my picture and post it on RenRen, China's version of Facebook. They wanted to make me happy and see me smile.

And smile I did. The hotel had butler service, complimentary cocktails, late checkout, and other perks (including the colossal suite) all for under \$200 per night. During those three brief days in the city, I was entirely disconnected from technology and increasingly connected to Suzhou.

The first morning, I headed to Old Town District, with a layout that has remained unchanged for more than 2,500 years. Considered the “Venice of China,” Suzhou sits in the center of the Yangtze River Delta, where gondolas push through narrow waterways, lit by paper lanterns and shadowed by stone bridges.

Framed by 85 historical sites, Suzhou's Grand Canal is 1,200 miles long and rivals the Great Wall as one the most magnificent man-made wonders in China. The labyrinth of waterways gives way to the Hanshan Temple, the city's most important landmark.

On foot, you can stroll — and shop — for hours along the cobblestone streets of Pingjiang and Shantang. These pedestrian zones are lined with merchants selling everything from silk fans and Biluochun tea, to animal-shaped dumplings and Chinese propaganda posters.

Reserve your appetite for Old Town and you won't be disappointed. TongDe Xing Noodle Shop won me over with its broth. Reportedly the best place in Suzhou to get noodles (say locals), TongDe Xing serves a tightly woven mound of noodles dropped into a steamy dark broth. You can order it with deep-fried fish or simmering pork and then pull apart the thick noodles with your chopsticks. Closed by 1 p.m., this place is about as authentic as you can get. You won't find English, wine or toilet seats here. But that's OK, because you're in Suzhou.

Besides noodles, traditional Suzhou dishes tend to be on the sweet-and-sour side, like the fried squirrel Mandarin fish named for its unusual shape (does not contain squirrel!). Expect plenty of vegetable and fish dishes, impressive on presentation and hit-or-miss on taste. Menus highlight eel, carp, moon cakes, spring rolls, youtunjinjiao (fried steamed bun), sugar porridge, jiuniang cake, and braised bean curd with crab. Any and all of the above pair well with Tsingtao beer or green tea, but again, don't ask for wine.

In between Pingjiang and Shantang streets, you'll find the Suzhou Museum, showcasing a collection of ceramics, relics, carvings and designs by award-winning Chinese-American architect, *I.M. Pei*.

Neighboring the museum is the Humble Administrator's Garden, one of nine in Suzhou designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. As Suzhou's largest garden, it also happens to be the city's most famous and crowded. Expect to be whacked by a few selfie sticks and backpacks somewhere between lotus ponds and bonsai trees.

Even if you're not into mixing history and nature, it's worth visiting the Humble Administrator's Garden and the Lingering Garden, both built during the Ming Dynasty and considered the archetype of classical garden design.

Nearby, you'll find Tiger Hill, home to several historical sites, including the Tomb of King He Lu, the Yunyan Temple Pagoda (Huqiu Tower), and the Verdant Mountain Villa once belonging to Emperor Guangxu of the Qing Dynasty. According to ancient poet Su Dongpo (aka Su Shi), "To visit Suzhou and not see Tiger Hill would lead to a lifetime of regret."

Well, I certainly didn't want that. As the cultural symbol of Suzhou, the leaning Huqiu Tower is a must-see, with its 154-foot, seven-story pagoda tilting at a 4 percent grade in all its glory. From serene robed monks to bonsai masters shaping 400-year-old trees, you're liable to find healing here, without even trying.

Between shopping, teahouses and cruising canals, you might find it challenging to explore beyond the cultural center of Old Town. But do.

As the hub of silk production, Suzhou introduced to me a material I had seldom worn, and knew very little about. From raising silk worms to wadding silk pillows, I was walked through the whole process at Suzhou's Silk Factory and Embroidery Institute. The mulberry-leaf eating invertebrates produce cocoons with single silk strands 1 mile long. The tour ended at a silk shopping mall, with anything and everything that could be made of silk.

By this point, I had been in Suzhou for 48 hours yet had absorbed a week's worth of culture. My final day was spent visiting the water town of Tongli, one of eight outside of Suzhou. On the banks of Taihu Lake, the town is divided into seven islets, with 15 canals and 47 bridges linking them together.

With its gardens, temples and mansions, Tongli has served as a sanctuary for poets, painters and Confucian scholars for more than 1,000 years. Today, its spellbinding waterways are best explored by gondola, or by strolling its willow-shaded alleys where locals transport heavy loads with bamboo carrying poles.

Beyond the whitewashed homes and tranquil teahouses is the Moxibustion Institute of Qing Shan Tang. From tai chi to acupuncture, I was familiar with some Chinese healing practices, but Moxibustion was a first. The smell of incense wafted from the courtyard, where masters of the art explained the medicinal therapy of burning dried mugwort (moxa) near particular points on the body.

My treatment began with a shoulder massage, followed by a smoking cylinder of moxa pulp placed at the base of my neck. Dating back 1,000 years, the therapy promotes well-being and relieves everything from inflammation and fevers to headaches and constipation. For years, I've had chronic pain in my neck and shoulders, and within minutes, I felt the pain pour down my back and "drain" out the spine. The one-hour treatment cost just under \$30.

Back at the Shangri-La Hotel, I didn't check emails, watch TV or search Yahoo. In fact, during my three days in Suzhou, I was disconnected from technology (other than Skype calls) and used my room for nothing but sleep.

Suzhou may not have been a beach destination, or even particularly relaxing, for that matter. But for just a brief moment in time, it rescued me. It pulled me away from politics and news and deadlines and even myself. If it took 15 hours and 6,622 miles to get there, so be it.

*Kast-Myers is travel writer based in Vista. Her website is [www.marlisekast.com](http://www.marlisekast.com).*

## If you go

**About Suzhou:** [www.traveltosuzhou.com](http://www.traveltosuzhou.com)

### WHERE TO STAY

**Shangri-La:** 168 Tayuan Road, ShiShan, Huqiu Qu, Suzhou Shi, Jiangsu Sheng; [www.shangri-la.com](http://www.shangri-la.com)

**Marriott Suzhou:** 1296 Ganjiang Road West, Jinchang District; [www.suzhoumarriott.com](http://www.suzhoumarriott.com)

### WHERE TO EAT

**TongDe Xing:** No. 624 Shiquan Street, Suzhou, China; [www.tongdexing.com/en](http://www.tongdexing.com/en)

**Xi Shan Tang:** Tongli Town

### WHAT TO SEE

**Suzhou Museum:** No. 204, Dongbei Street, Suzhou

**Humble Administrator's Garden:** No. 178, Northeast Street; [en.szzzy.cn](http://en.szzzy.cn)

**Tiger Hill:** No.8, Huqiu Hill; [www.tigerhill.com/EN](http://www.tigerhill.com/EN)

**Tongli Water Town:** No. 1 South Zhongshan Road, Tongli Town

**Hanshan Temple:** No. 24, Hanshan Temple Alley, Fengqiao Town

**No 1 Silk Factory:** 94 Nanmen Road, Cang Lang Qu, Suzhou Shi, Jiangsu Sheng; [www.1st-silk.com/main.html?lan=EN](http://www.1st-silk.com/main.html?lan=EN)

**Qing Shan Tang (Moxibustion Institute):** No. 116 Dong Xi Jie, Tongli Old Town

Copyright © 2017, The San Diego Union-Tribune

**This article is related to:** Asia, Shanghai, China, Elections, I.M. Pei