

# VENICE OF THE EAST

Explore the canals and gardens of **Suzhou**, a second-tier Chinese city that's first-rate

By DAN ALLEN

It could be the biggest city you've never heard of. Greater Suzhou in China is home to 13.7 million people — making it one of the largest metropolises in the world.

But the green, canal-laced city (pronounced *soo-joe*), about 65 miles west of Shanghai, is just one of many giants in its own country, behind the financial and political blockbusters of

Beijing and Shanghai, as well as southern industrial hubs Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

Like all urban Chinese powerhouses, Suzhou's city center teems with dazzling new skyscrapers. But even as it charges headlong into the future, Suzhou continues to honor its ancient heritage and natural beauty — making it a fantastic destination for second-time visitors to China, or even those looking for a respite during a longer visit. Visitors here get to dive

into the country's splendor and culture without having to deal with the mindblowing enormity and chaos of an ultra-huge metropolis.

Founded some 2,500 years ago, Suzhou's fortunes took off with the building of China's Grand Canal in the early 7th century, linking Beijing in the north to Hangzhou in the south — still the world's longest manmade canal. For Suzhou, the Grand Canal meant near-instant prosperity as one of the area's most important trading centers, and helped its nascent silk industry become one of the country's most important for centuries to come.

Today you can learn the fascinating history of Suzhou's silk production — and witness it still happening firsthand, from silkworm larvae to harvesting to thread-spinning — at the **Suzhou Silk Museum**. Naturally there's a massive shop, too, where you can pick up silk souvenirs galore, such as purses, pillows and pajamas.

Silk is also the root of an-

other one of Suzhou's claims to fame: its unique style of double-sided Chinese embroidery. At the **Suzhou Embroidery Research Institute**, you can watch these pieces (often months in the making) be painstakingly crafted. Its shop, too, features some breathtaking creations, from affordable small unframed works to astronomically priced masterpieces.

(A telling sign of Suzhou's off-the-radar status is how few of its major attractions have English websites. The tourism board's website — [TravelToSuzhou.com](http://TravelToSuzhou.com) — describes the highlights.)

Suzhou's growing wealth over the centuries translated into its rise as a hub of high culture — for where rich people go, leisure pursuits will follow — and led to the cultivation of one of its best known attractions: its many classical gardens. Using gorgeous greenery, water features, rock formations, pavilions and bridges, these spaces were meticulously designed to show a series of



Delectable Chinese street eats are a highlight.

Suzhou Tourism (3)

striking vistas along their pathways. About 60 gardens remain, the nine most stunning are collectively designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The largest

and most famous (go early to beat the crowds) is the **Humble Administrator's Garden**, nearly 13 acres of graceful Ming Dynasty-style scene-scenery.

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## CHECKING IN

## AMANGIRI Canyon Point, Utah

**A**MONG the cult-like devotees of Aman Resorts — the ultra-luxury, ultra-minimalist hotel group — Amangiri is one of the most sought-after properties. Both hard to get to and easy to lose yourself in, the 34-suite property is a study in understated elegance. It lets guests explore the great Southwest in the most sophisticated way.

**WHY** The stunning hotel, opened in 2009, is made of

concrete slabs nestled into the valley of a field of mesas — dusty red mountains with flat tops. Each suite has its own outdoor lounge and fire pit, perfect for stargazing or s'more-eating. A 4½-hour drive from the Las Vegas airport, Amangiri is all about seclusion and immersion.

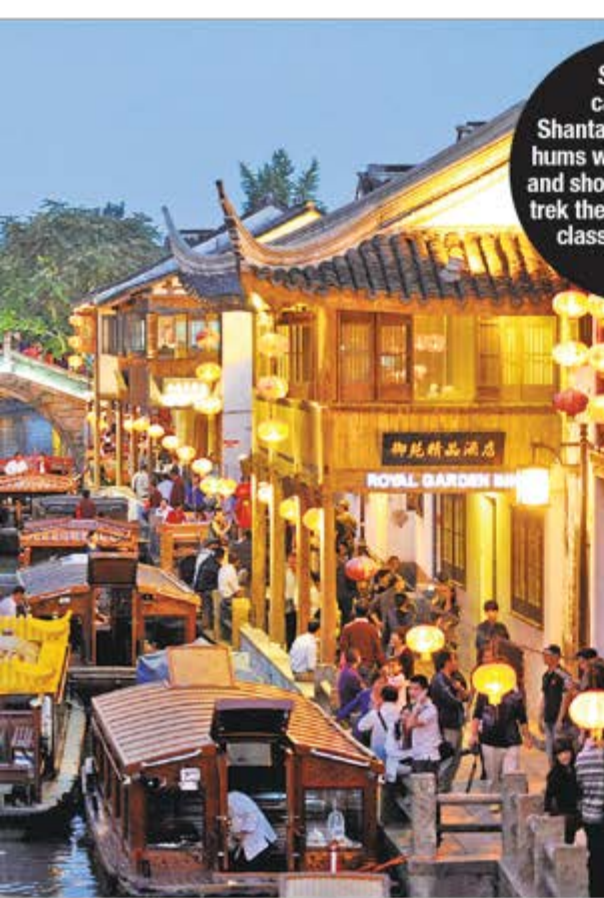
**WORKING WELL** The hotel offers complimentary hikes on 8 miles of on-property trails. Food is also included. A revamped menu includes

hits like hearty chicken porridge for breakfast and rib eye for dinner. (The "regional" style is dressed in Utah salt, chile rub, pumpkin seeds and ancho chile steak sauce.)

Like its sister properties, the spa is a haven for relaxation. Sneak away to its hidden hot tub. **NEEDS WORK** Amangiri offers a wide array of adventurous activities at an



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Suzhou's canal-side Shantang Street (left) hums with restaurants and shops; visitors also trek there for gorgeous classical gardens (right).



Villa, a park showcasing gorgeous bonsai, with scenes crafted to look like Suzhou gardens in miniature.

**Shantang Street**, one of Suzhou's most famous arteries, was originally a 9th-century Grand Canal extension linking Tiger Hill to the city center. It was part of the elaborate canal system that earned Suzhou a nickname that stuck: The Venice of China. Today, the picturesque street is lined with colorful canal-side shops and restaurants, and is popular with visitors. Somewhat less kitschy and touristy is **Pingjiang Road**, another pedestrian-only street that's now filled with a delightfully quirky array of cafés, teahouses, food vendors and shops. For those in need of a Western-style shopping fix, the far more modernized **Guanqian Street** will suffice.

As for food, try two local favorites: the fabulous noodles at **Tongdexing**, and the superb soup dumplings at **Xishengyuan**. Check out a performance of *pingtan*, Suzhou's captivating brand of traditional story-singing, at **Pin Von Teahouse**.

Adding to its charms, the city is easy to get to. High-speed trains connect to central Shanghai and Shanghai's Hongqiao Airport in less than 30 minutes, with fares as low as around \$6. For that speed and price, Suzhou can even serve as a day trip from Shanghai.

Hotels like the sumptuous **Shangri-La** (from \$120; [Shangri-La.com/Suzhou](http://Shangri-La.com/Suzhou)) and the resort-like **Pan Pacific** (from \$85; [PanPacific.com](http://PanPacific.com)) are affordable by Western standards.

Two anticipated newcomers are **Le Méridien at Suzhou Bay** in July, and the **W Suzhou** in August.

So go ahead, find some fresh air in China.



Next door is the **Suzhou Museum**, with its vast collection of ancient art, ceramics and crafts — but equally visit-worthy for its beautiful design by famed Chinese-American architect I. M. Pei, whose family's ancestral roots were in Suzhou. Said to be Pei's last design before he retired, the stylish white structure incorporates inner pools and reflective spaces.

One of Suzhou's most iconic landmarks is the striking seven-story **Tiger Hill Pagoda** (also called Huqiu Tower), known as the "Leaning Tower of China" due to its gradual tilt over the centuries.

The surrounding lush hillside is covered with several great attractions, including **Wanjing**

Tiger Hill Pagoda is one of the city's most iconic landmarks.



After a delicious meal (left), relax on your private patio with built-in fire pit.

extra cost, including a \$700 package for a Navajo-guided tour of three Instagrammable canyons. But those on a relative budget can go rogue. We borrowed one of Amangiri's BMWs and hired the Navajo guide ourselves on-site for \$45 per person. We couldn't have had a better time.

**MUST TRY** Splurge on a Via Ferrata rock climbing excursion (\$600 for two people). Metal cables and ladder rungs are fixed into the rock face and guests — geared up in helmets and harnesses — clip in and out as they ascend

the steep slope along six different routes.

**BOTTOM LINE** Beloved by everyone from Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt (in their halcyon days) to Cate Blanchett, Amangiri lets you experience some of America's finest topographies like an A-lister. Whether you want to lounge all day (ask for a Thai massage with Rikki) or hop aboard a hot-air balloon straight from the grounds (\$1,210 for two people), Amangiri has you covered.

**DETAILS** From \$1,400; [Aman.com](http://Aman.com). — Dana Schuster

**SECOND IS THE BEST**

Next trip, try another enchanting second-tier Chinese city.

**GUILIN** Its dramatic landscape of limestone hills surrounded by snaking rivers is captured in many iconic artworks.

**CHENGDU** The capital of Sichuan, Chengdu is beloved for its giant pandas and deliciously spicy food.

**HANGZHOU** Hangzhou's famous West Lake has inspired poets and artists. Also here: China's best tea.

# Royal treatment

All aboard Queen Mary 2, the iconic ship that sails from Brooklyn to England



Immaculate staffers treat guests like kings and queens.

**D**AUNTED, I walked up the gangway of the Queen Mary 2 last fall. Its hulking figure floated alongside Brooklyn's coastline. Cunard's ocean liner was about to embark on a transatlantic journey from Red Hook to Southampton, England — my first ever, and its 15th since a \$132 million redo last year.

The massive ship, 14 decks high and 151,800 tons, with a capacity of 2,961 passengers, was an intimidating sight. The journey ahead also loomed. Would the weeklong traverse, mostly crossing the North Atlantic, prove too long to endure?

In addition to new furniture and art, the 2016 makeover added 50 staterooms to the 1,355-room liner. My home for eight nights was cozy, with a dreamy bed, desk, loveseat and table (\$829 per person for double occupancy; [Cunard.com](http://Cunard.com)). I enjoyed my balcony, checking on the state of the sea and sky first thing so I knew whether to expect a fair or foul day.

The atmosphere on the ship is mellow by day, as passengers sun themselves on royal blue deck chairs or walk laps to keep those capillaries a-flowing. Among other amenities, there are two pools, a shuffleboard court, a Champagne lounge, a casino and an art gallery. The QM2 also carries the world's only kennels at sea. There's also the beautiful library, where bookcases have glass doors to protect the volumes.

Each morning, I perused the delightfully named Daily Programme, a printout delivered to the rooms that lists the day's lectures, concerts and entertainment. (Burt Bacharach singalong, anyone?) Passengers have free rein to explore the upper decks, including the control room where the captain actually steers the ship. Every day at noon, without fail, bells blare as the midshipman announces QM2's approximate location; it's also a reminder to set your watch ahead an hour as you cruise through time zones.

Although time seems suspended over the Atlantic, meal times are set in stone and a strict dress code — jackets for men! — is mandatory after 5 p.m. Cunard regulars go all out in silk evening gowns and glittering jewelry, as if off to an awards show instead of the ship's tiered restaurant, Britannia. Pricier staterooms afford access to other eateries, where solicitous waiters bow and scrape before the various Mr. and Mrs. Mountjoys, placing silverware with an exaggerated solemnity that would make "Downton Abbey's" starchy butler Carson mutter, "Really now!"

As the ship approached the English coast, a trio of dolphins dove in formation in front of the ship; seagulls hovered above the mast. I reluctantly disembarked. Buses took passengers into London, or to the airport. It was time to go home — the fast way.

New York-Southampton sailings depart on May 15, May 31 and June 15. — Robert Rorke



The majestic ocean liner keeps passengers entertained for a week.