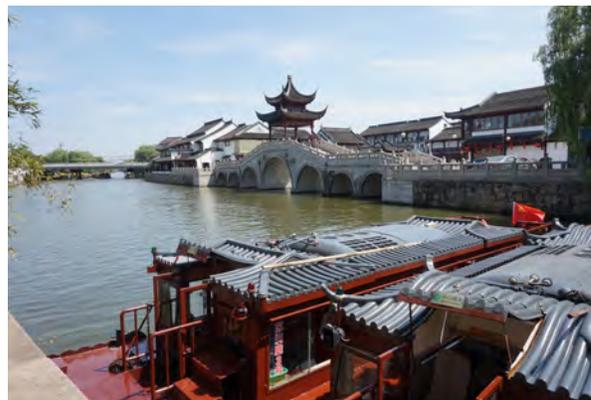




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Michele Herrmann
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Taking a canal boat ride to Tiger Hill in Suzhou, China.

Surrounded by canals and bridges, and graced with public gardens and pagodas, Suzhou feels unchanged by time. While also embracing modern developments like its Industrial Park, this southeastern city—located in China’s Yangtze River Delta—preserves a history dating back more than 2,500 years. To start, Suzhou’s Grand Canal is still quite an architectural marvel. Constructed in ancient China, it spans approximately 1,200 miles in length, making it the country’s longest manmade waterway. Meanwhile, Suzhou’s seasoned neighborhoods are alive with marketplaces and eateries, where it’s easy to see, and taste, Suzhou’s cuisine. Teahouses offer performance art known as Kungu opera and Pingtan (a mix of song and acting). As for shopping, you’re covered. For centuries, Suzhou has been the source for handcrafts such as silk production, sandalwood fans, and embroidery – so get your Yen ready.

Referred to as “The Venice of the East,” here is why Suzhou is so captivating.

The Humble Administrator’s Garden



Once privately-owned properties by Chinese officials or prosperous families, these gardens now serve as public parks where visitors can walk along pathways and inside various buildings. Nine of them have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage sites. One of them—the Humble Administrator's Garden—is also the largest classical garden in Suzhou.



Built during the Ming Dynasty, the Humble Administrator's Garden once belonged to a Chinese government worker who imagined it as his retirement home. As you walk along its three different parts, notice that one third of its area is covered in water. Along with its central portion, there are pavilions, bridges, connecting pools, and halls like its Distant Fragrance Hall, which was named after an aromatic lotus pond nearby.

The Lingering Garden



Another noteworthy UNESCO site is The Lingering Garden, whose different owners added their individual touches to this green space, developed during the Ming Dynasty.



The garden has four varying parts connected by a long corridor, featuring exquisite halls, houses, an ancestral temple, a bonsai garden, a pond and grotto, and a central courtyard.

Tiger Hill



A Song Dynasty poet named Su Shi once said, “It’s a lifelong pity if having visited Suzhou you did not visit Tiger Hill. A popular Suzhou attraction, Tiger Hill is a natural scenic wonder featuring manmade marvels such as its signature feature, Yunyan Pagoda. Having the nickname, the “Leaning Tower of China,” this seven-story structure has developed a slight slant over time due to being affected by the natural elements.

Tiger Hill is also the burial site of warrior King He Lu and also includes a section of tea plants; a lush garden of bonsai trees—some dating as far back as 400 years; and a sword testing stone and sword pool, where it’s believed that the king’s sword collection may be buried underneath. According to local legend, Tiger Hill gets its name from physically looking like a crouching tiger. Another tale says that after the king’s funeral, a white tiger appeared on the hill to guard his tomb.



One way to get to Tiger Hill is to take a canal cruise along the Shantang River, which is aligned with private homes and bridges.



Culinary Finds

Suzhou is known for unique epicurean dishes, with main ingredients such as vegetables, freshwater fish, and noodles offering delicious options. For a heaping bowl of noodles, visit Tongdexing Noodle Shop. Their dishes come with the right amount of broth and can include a choice of add-on toppings ranging from pork and duck to shrimp and vegetables.



For other traditional meals, head to Song He Lou, one of Suzhou's oldest restaurants and where Qing dynasty emperor QianLong dined a few times. Order the Squirrel-shaped Mandarin Fish, a surprisingly shaped, reddish-orange-hued creature that's actually a fish cut up into sections and coated in a sweet and sour flavored sauce. Don't worry; it won't bite.



Another treat to try in Suzhou is loquat, a Chinese fruit that is very popular among locals. They have a tart flavor.



Historic streets

There are pedestrian roads in Suzhou that have existed for centuries, and today still see a lot of foot traffic.



Shantang Street is graced with red-colored lanterns, restaurants and eateries such as Song He Lou, and various shops for getting local candies and snacks and a variety of souvenirs such as paper-cutting art and embroideries.



In the Pingjiang Historic District, find eateries and stores on its main road suite to every budget and taste. Pick up Chinese tea, embroidered dresses and housewares. For a more cultural experience, visit a teahouse where you can catch a Kun Opera performance.

Suzhou Museum



To learn more about Suzhou's cultural wonders, visit the Suzhou Museum. Designed by Chinese-American architectural guru I.M. Pei, this museum showcases ancient Chinese art and crafts, including an extensive collection of relics dating from the prehistoric era, to the Ming and Qing dynasties, to recent years.



The museum's galleries have displays featuring porcelain and bronze sculptures, paintings, calligraphy and unearthed finds. Even the museum building is a work of art, with an exterior layout that resembles a Suzhou garden.



Silk production

Among its handicrafts, Suzhou is best known for producing silk goods. To learn how this type of fabric is made, go on a tour at the No. 1 Silk Factory. There, witness examples involving the step-by-step process of manufacturing silk—which originates from a cocoon spun by a silkworm—by watching workers overseeing different tasks such as operating machines that stretch out the cocoon's threads. The factory also includes a museum devoted to the history of Suzhou's silk production and various shops for purchasing just about any silk-related item. Get a scarf, bedding, fan, wallet, tie, throw pillow and other keepsakes.



Tongli

Take a short trip from Suzhou to the water town of Tongli about 18 kilometers (or around 11 miles) away. Tongli is based on the bank of Taihu Lake, and is east of Suzhou's Grand Canal. It is surrounded by five lakes and is divided into seven parts by 15 brooks and 47 bridges. Three of these bridges—Taiping (peace), Jili (luck), and Changing (celebration)—are all regarded locally as significant pieces of architecture.



Explore Tongli on a canal boat ride or on foot. This town also contains a plethora of gardens, temples, shops, restaurants, and former residences built during the Ming and Qing dynasties. There's also an institute called Qing Shan Tang, which trains students in a traditional Chinese medicinal practice known as moxibustion. This practice involves heat therapy, with the burning of a dried herb called mugwort to promote healing.