

Insider Places: Exploring Suzhou, China's "Venice of the East"



By  [Greg Shillinglaw](#), Jun 13, 2018

Suzhou may be called the "Venice of the East," but that nickname only tells part of this ancient Chinese city's story. Yes, there are plenty of similarities between Suzhou and its Italian counterpart, with gondola-like boats, picturesque stone bridges and fresh seafood on tap.

But there's another side to Suzhou that's often overlooked amid the Venetian comparisons. For visitors trying to experience all that China has to offer, both old and new, this city a short bullet train ride from Shanghai could be exactly what they're looking for.

While Suzhou's charm is certainly rooted in its old water towns, there's a modern metropolis thriving just a short drive away. Here the city's epicenter – Suzhou Industrial Park – is brimming with 21st century

skyscrapers, five-star hotels and a massive Ferris wheel sitting atop a cavernous lake. With that in mind, here's a closer look at some of the top things to do and see in Suzhou:

Sightsee at Humble Administrator's Garden: A trip to Suzhou wouldn't be complete without a stop here. This garden is Suzhou's largest and dates back over 500 years to when a government official retired and decided to devote his life to gardening. Even if you're not the biggest fan of flora, it's worth checking out this UNESCO World Heritage Site in the summer and fall months as lotus flowers and lilies come into bloom. Altogether there are nearly 50 different buildings, dozens of monuments and winding streams dotting the property. Be sure to enjoy a cup of tea while you're there, and arrive in the early morning or late afternoon to beat the crowds and experience the garden at its most peaceful state. Location: Gusu District at 178 Dongbei Street, Suzhou; Hours: 7:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. (March 1–Nov. 15), 7:30 a.m.-5 p.m. (Nov. 16–Feb. 29); Admission: \$11 (January–March, June, November–December), \$14 (April–May, July–October).

Instagram China's Leaning Tower of Pisa: It's hard to miss this cultural symbol of Suzhou. From a distance, it looks like just another one of the city's massive pagodas. But look closely at the Yunyan Pagoda (also called Huqiu Tower) and its famous lean comes into focus. This thousand-year-old, eight-sided stone temple is perched on Tiger Hill, which has a story of its own. According to legend, the King of Wu buried his father atop the hill and a white tiger appeared several days later to guard the tomb. Visitors are encouraged to make the trek to the top and then look down toward to the Sword Pool, believed to be the king's final resting place for his weaponry. Thanks to this history and folklore, it's easy to see why one ancient Chinese poet once said visiting Suzhou and not seeing Tiger Hill would lead to a lifetime of regret. Location: Gusu District at 585 Huqiu Hill, Suzhou; Hours: 7:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.; Admission: \$9.50 (January-March, June, November-December), \$12.50 (April, May, July-October).

Chow Down on Chinese Food Suzhou-Style: Those looking for an authentic dining experience should head to Songhelou Restaurant, one of the city's oldest and best-known eateries. The restaurant has been around for over 250 years and specializes in the regional Jiangsu cuisine, which can be just a little on the sweet side. Be sure to try the city's traditional dish, squirrel-shaped Mandarin fish, a fried, orange-colored fish with a sweet-and-sour sauce. Diners can also find other seafood dishes and local staples on the menu, including tiny fresh water shrimp, tofu with crabmeat, Chinese-style pickles, and green rice cakes filled with red bean paste for dessert. After dinner, visit Shantang Street for an evening stroll. This block in the old city dates back to 825 A.D. and was once among the most developed commercial and cultural districts in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties. This is also a great place to shop for silk scarves and other souvenirs. There are two restaurant locations: 141 Guanqian St. and 198 Shantang Street in Suzhou, Phone: 011-86-512-677-00688

Take a Gondola Ride in "Venice of the East": Those looking to experience what earned this region its nickname should head to the ancient water towns. One of these communities, Zhouzhuang, is known for its impeccably preserved residential architecture, stone bridges and winding canals. Another top draw is Tongli. Located in the Wujiang District along Taihu Lake, this 1,000-year-old town features bridges that locals consider sacred. There are also hundreds of gardens, temples and mansions. Whether you're visiting Zhouzhuang or Tongli (or both), the best way to experience Suzhou's water towns is by boat.

Visitors can take a daytrip on a bus to town, and then walk around the neighborhood, where shops sell souvenirs along lantern-lined streets. Location: Kunshan City, Suzhou; Hours: 8 a.m.-9 p.m; Admission: \$16 (8 a.m.-4 p.m.), \$12.50 (4-9 p.m.). Location: Wujiang District at No. 1 South Zhongshan Road, Suzhou; Hours: 7 a.m.-9 p.m. Admission: \$16 in the day or \$8 in the evening.

Explore Both China's Old and New Sides: In Suzhou, you can immerse yourself in ancient history and then marvel at modern architecture by walking just a couple of blocks. The layout of the old town district has remained largely untouched for over 2,500 years, with pagodas, temples, waterways and teahouses filling the streets. Those looking to experience a more modern China can head over to the Suzhou Industrial Park. There hundreds of contemporary hotels, shops and restaurants surround Jinji Lake, the largest inland city lake in China. You'll also find a Ferris wheel and a musical fountain and water curtain that doubles as a movie screen. If you happen to be in town on a Saturday, don't miss the 30-minute show that begins at 8 p.m. It combines lasers, movies, music, and other elements to transform the surrounding landscape. As for accommodations, Suzhou has a number of international hotel brands, including the Crown Plaza, Hyatt, Marriott, Shangri-La and InterContinental. There's also the newly opened W Suzhou, which has a rooftop bar perfect for a nightcap and epic views of the water fountain show.

For more information on Suzhou, call 646-465-9770, email Suzhou@PHGConsulting.com or click on [Travel to Suzhou](#).