Suzhou’s 2,500-year history embraces legacies and legends within a dynamic environment that provides Western comfort for its visitors and 10 million residents. One of its most famous guests was 13th-century Venetian explorer Marco Polo. It is reported that Polo was so enthralled with the beauty and efficiency of Suzhou’s canals, he called the area the “Venice of the East.”

“The best way to know the city is to get close to the local people,” said Amy Ji, general manager of Suzhou Pinglong International Travel Service and MoreFunAsia.

Ji encourages groups to step into Chinese history and culture by visiting Suzhou’s famous gardens and then experience Suzhou’s lifestyle with interactive stops. Suzhou is a 30-minute bullet train ride from Shanghai.

Suzhou Tourism
traveltosuzhou.com
Tour ãuxìng

Suzhou is known worldwide for its luxurious silk. Suzhou Silk Museum houses a number of fascinating exhibits that detail the history of the area’s 4,000-year-old silk industry. A narrated tour includes weaving demonstrations, viewing silkworm caterpillars nibbling on mulberry leaves, cocoons and the spinning of silk. It takes eight cocoons to make one strand of silk.

Suzhou Silk Museum
traveltosuzhou.com

Cruise zuò yóuchuánt

One of six water towns in the Suzhou area, Tongli Water Town boasts 15 brooks and a staggering number of bridges — 47 in all. The most celebrated bridges being Taiping (peace), Jìlì (luck), and Changìng (celebration). Gondola tours are one-way with groups disembarking for a waterfront meal or a scene from a Chinese opera performed in the square.

Tongli Water Town
cnto.org / traveltosuzhou.com

Enjoy xìxiângshòu

Set along a canal lined by whitewashed homes, tea houses, cafes and shops, charming Pingjiang Road offers groups a glimpse into Suzhou’s past with an eye on the future. Did Marco Polo travel along this canal? Many think so. Watch for photos ops of wedding parties in traditional costume, families out for an evening meal and colorful stops for selfies.

Pingjiang Road
traveltosuzhou.com

Explore tànxiǎn

Often called the “window to Wu culture” and designed by Suzhou-born architectural powerhouse I.M. Pei, the Suzhou Museum has more than 15,000 pieces in its collections. These include ancient paintings and calligraphy, ceramics, and crafts, as well as historic books and documents. Pei gave a nod to Suzhou tradition by including water, rock and bridges in his design.

Suzhou Museum
szmuseum.com
Welcome to The Humble Administrator’s Garden

By Mary Lu Laffey
In 1504, Michelangelo unveiled his masterpiece, the 17-foot sculpture of David. It still stands in Florence, Italy.

That same year, Leonardo da Vinci worked on a commission that forever changed the face of portraiture. He called his work, La Gioconda or the Mona Lisa, which is displayed in the Louvre Museum in Paris.

Around that same time on the other side of the planet in Suzhou, China, a government administrator named Wang Xianchen started to build a garden that would grow over the centuries into 14 acres. Wang may never be a household name outside of his homeland, but his idea that the life of a humble man could embrace nature continues to capture the imagination of millions of visitors.

Located in the Yangtze Province, about 70 miles from Shanghai, The Humble Administrator’s Garden is one of the four most famous public gardens in China. In 1997, it was named part of a collective UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site.

My group stepped off the coach on Dongbei Street within sight of the entrance to The Humble Administrator’s Garden. On the short drive from the hotel, our MoreFunAsia tour guide, Cathy, had briefed us about the history of the garden that began five centuries ago. Armed with a bilingual map and her words that Chinese gardens are built, not planted, we thought we were prepared for what lay beyond the garden’s gate. Like many instances during our tour of Suzhou, we were delighted to be so wrong.

The map shows a bird’s-eye view of the garden anchored by a lake and carved into three sections — eastern, middle and western. Each area boasts its own poetic landscape, changing waterscape and romantic structures for the owner to sit and be one with his surroundings. The exquisite buildings include pavilions, towers and shelters; many are named to honor the view — perhaps of lotus, water lilies, azaleas or the variety of birds that make the garden their home.

There’s the Orange Pavilion, where citrus trees flourish; the All Blue Pavilion is built on a large pond that reflects the color of the sky and the Hall of 18 Camellias captures the scent of the blooms on a summer night. There are more than 20 such structures. Some names reflect the purpose of the shelter, like the “Keep and Listen” Pavilion or the “With Whom Should I Sit?” Pavilion.

Stepping through another moon gate (circular doorway), my group was greeted by a great swath of lotus stretching above a large pond divided by a serpentine bridge. We could see masses of water lilies on the other side. In China, walks and footbridges often zig and zag; the design is thought to confuse evil spirits that are believed to slither along the ground. Keeping evil spirits at bay is another reason that gardens often require guests to step over a door’s threshold to enter. In Feng Shui, such a threshold protects and controls the movement of good Chi; in the case of a garden, the threshold keeps it inside the grounds.

A Chinese garden is often compared to a scroll painting. The scroll unrolls to present a series of scenes of a carefully composed story. On a simple stroll in The Humble Administrator’s Garden, visitors are greeted by real-life scenes that were carefully composed to provide a story of harmony that began more than 500 years ago.

For first-time visitors to Suzhou, I strongly recommend Americans and Canadians to visit two or three of Suzhou’s classical gardens. Different gardens have different stories, feelings and features, even though they have the basic common construction of water, stone, trees and buildings. The Humble Administrator’s Garden is recommended in spring and summer because of its festivals. Every year it holds the azalea festival in spring and lotus flower festival in summer.

— Lincoln Wang, director of international marketing, Visit Suzhou

4 elements of a Chinese garden

- Water represents the ever-changing environment.
- Rocks, especially limestone formations, symbolize eternity.
- Plant life and trees show the shift of the seasons.
- Architecture both composes views and offers itself as part of a view.