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SUZHOU, CHINA: A GARDEN STORY 2,500 YEARS IN THE MAKING



Chinese gardens are often compared to traditional scroll paintings. In viewing a scroll, a sense of discovery unfolds as the scenes slowly reveal the vision of the artist. By following a path in a classic Chinese garden, the centuries-old vision of the owner unfolds as well.

It rained every day during our visit to **Suzhou**, 70 miles from Shanghai. The city of 10 million people is built on and around fresh water. Nearly half of the area is covered by lakes, streams and ponds.

Water is one of four symbolic elements in a Chinese garden; it represents the ever-changing environment. Other elements include rocks symbolizing eternity; plant life to show the shift of the seasons and structures built to compose a view or present itself as part of a view.



Lesson with a bonsai master at Tiger Hill in Suzhou, China / Mary Lu Laffey

"Suzhou classical gardens were built by talented scholars hundreds of years ago," said Lincoln Wang, director at Suzhou Tourism Bureau. "I strongly recommend international tourists experience a special activity when visiting a garden." While tea is offered at all of the gardens, some have classes and demonstrations. A flower arrangement class is available at the Lingering Garden and a lesson from a bonsai master can be arranged at Tiger Hill. "Visitors can imagine how elegant these authentic experiences were in old times," he said.

In ancient China (c. 6th century B.C.), gardens were the province of the wealthy. In 1509, when a retired government worker named Wang Xianchen began to build his own garden, he also changed history. Wang may never be a household name outside of China, but his idea that a humble man could embrace nature continues to capture the imagination of millions of visitors.



Zig Zag footbridge at the Humble Administrator's Garden / Suzhou Tourism

At 14 acres, the Humble Administrator's Garden is the largest in Suzhou. It is considered the quintessential Chinese landscape garden and is one of nine of Suzhou's 50 public gardens that have been designated as a collective UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site.

Our guide, Cathy, gingerly led us along stone paths and zig-zag walkways. She took us atop interlacing bridges and paused by romantic water features as she pointed out historic and preserved pavilions. Each area boasts its own landscape and structures for the owner to sit and be one with his surroundings.

Structures are named to reflect their purpose, like the Mountain-in-View Tower, the Hall of Distant Fragrance and the "Keep and Listen" Pavilion. There's the Orange Pavilion where citrus trees flourish. The All Blue Pavilion is built on a pond that reflects 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 in Wang's garden.



Moon gate view of lotus pond, the Humble Administrator's Garden / Mary Lu Laffey

As we were leaving, Cathy stopped by one last pond. On the near side of a bridge, brilliant white lotus blooms reached high above the water. On the other side, lily pads floated in the shade of the canopy. Standing at the water's edge, she summarized our visit by calling our attention to a limestone feature that lay ahead, the native trees and the overarching bridge. "This is a wonderful view in the garden," she said ever so softly. "It has everything."

WHEN YOU GO:

Warm welcome

The **Intercontinental Hotel Suzhou** works with tour operators to provide door-to-door service from airport to hotel and throughout a stay. Breakfast is served buffet style in Jing and on the 27th floor. Look for the “doughnut tree,” a favorite for Western visitors.

Dining

During a traditional Chinese meal, restaurants first serve cold dishes, so guests can have refreshment while selections that require cooking are prepared. Courses are presented family style on a revolving tray in the table’s center.

Surprise!

One of the restaurants at **The W Hotel** has an authentic Spanish kitchen. Called Toro Loco, it offers a choice of flatware or chopsticks; salad chopsticks have prongs on the tips.

More to-do

Suzhou’s canals were made famous by Venetian explorer, Marco Polo, who visited the area and called it the “Venice of the East.”

Suzhou Tourism provides insight into the goings-on of the area and helps to plan visits.

Featured image – Humble Administrator’s Garden by Suzhou Tourism.

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Mary Lu Laffey is a travel writer based in Holland, Michigan. When she is traveling, she seeks out public gardens for the experience and for the camaraderie of staff gardeners. In addition to sharing gardening tips, they often offer where to go for a great cup of coffee.

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