

Family Travel Guide: Hangzhou and Suzhou, China

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West Lake Cultural Landscape of Hangzhou is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
Credit: 2019 Getty Images

China has gained popularity as a playground for traveling families. Safe cities, straightforward transportation and highly satisfying cultural experiences have reduced the stress of exploring the country, as well as increased the enjoyment of towing children around this massive locale. And yet, China's size and far-flung attractions can still present a challenge.

For a powerful introduction to kid-friendly China without lengthy transfers, my family focused on one cluster of world-class cities in the central coastal region: Shanghai and easy-to-reach Hangzhou and Suzhou.

The fact that Hangzhou and Suzhou are overshadowed by Shanghai is alone an excellent reason to visit them. But they certainly attract plenty of travelers with their museums, lakes, shrine-filled parks, peaceful gardens and shopping streets — all of which are full of the sights, sounds, tastes and smells that make China great for families.

Hangzhou, Home of West Lake

The capital of Zhejiang Province, Hangzhou sprawls along the eastern shore of West Lake, a large body of blue offset by a natural backdrop of green. Together, they comprise the West Lake Cultural Landscape of Hangzhou, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that's about an hour by bullet train from Shanghai.

The lake is Hangzhou's grandest enticement. My family spent a leisurely day on foot and on bikes, taking in the surrounding gardens, willow-lined walkways and pagoda-topped hills. We photographed tourist boats adrift between park islets and half-moon bridges on the miles-long, pedestrian-only Su and Bai causeways.

Equally well-suited to adventuresome children is the natural setting for the historical Chinese parks and monuments west of the lake. Take a gentle forest hike to temples and Hupao Spring (Dreaming of the Tiger Spring), a notable water source marked by dramatic statues. North of Hupao, the Dragon Well village and plantations are fabulous for observing straw-hatted workers picking and processing tea leaves. The China National Tea Museum teaches more about tea.

Farther north, Lingyin Scenic Area and Feilai Peak (Peak Flown from Afar) are famous for Lingyin Temple, a lively Buddhist temple complex; a brookside trail that passes hundreds of centuries-old riverside carvings, among them a large laughing Buddha; and a nature path ascending through multiple temple platforms. There's also a cable car to Bei Gao Feng (Northern Peak) and its panoramic views. Slightly farther afield, Xixi National Wetland Park is a serene nature reserve of waterways, ponds, fields and an old fishing village.

Back in town, our busiest outing was to Qinghefang Ancient Street, a historical stretch of traditional shops. Our kids were fascinated every step of the way, ogling artisans, mochi, candy, food and more.

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Suzhou, the Venice of Asia

Suzhou, located in Jiangsu Province about 30 minutes from Shanghai via high-speed train, deserves its reputation as one of China's loveliest cities.

Suzhou's gardens are the city's top draw. Meticulously landscaped, the 69 preserved gardens — nine of which are UNESCO World Heritage sites — capture the balance between natural beauty and man-made architecture. The largest and most celebrated of these is Humble Administrator's Garden, a maze of pools, pagodas and pavilions. It's a young photographer's dream, but kids should be prepared to pose frequently with locals, too.

Other family-friendly World Heritage-listed gardens include Lion Grove Garden and its rocky maze, and the small Master of Nets Garden. However, the crowds and entrance fees may rankle families; we enjoyed ducking into less acclaimed, back-street gardens and lapping up the tranquility.

Our children also adored Suzhou's renowned canals. Within the city, Pingjiang Lu and Shantang Jie are pedestrianized shopping and dining streets that parallel waterways spanned by lantern-adorned bridges. Lively and alluring day and night, they were sensory feasts for my sons. Far more authentic are the suburban "water towns" of Zhouzhuang, Tongli and Luzhi — rustic communities of brookside cottages and little bridges.

Of note along one canal in the southwest corner of the old city is the vast Panmen Scenic Area, a showcase of historical gardens, temples, gates and the remains of a 14th-century wall. It brought to life my sons' imaginings of ancient times.

Finally, Suzhou is remarkable for its folk arts and crafts. Of distinction are Kun Opera, China's oldest operatic form, and the city's 4,000-year-old silk trade. The free Suzhou Silk Museum is a fantastic place for kids, complete with large functioning looms and live silkworms munching on mulberry leaves.

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