

48 HOURS IN

Shanghai

—Traditional charms and modern flavour unite in this eclectic Chinese city. Janet Gyenes ticks off all the essentials, then hits pause to drink in a more personal experience—



SHOPPING IN TIANZIFANG



EDITION HOTEL



JING'AN TEMPLE



FUCHUN XIAOLONG



M50 CREATIVE DISTRICT



LOCALLY MADE FEIYUE SNEAKERS

THE ULTIMATE HIT LIST...

Go high

Give in to temptation and cross the Huangpu River to Pudong and ride an elevator up one of the district's high-altitude skyscrapers. You can (and should) survey Shanghai from the spaceship-like Oriental Pearl Radio and TV Tower, the 128-storey Shanghai Tower (the world's second-tallest building) or the monster-sized "bottle opener" that is the Shanghai World Financial Center. But that's just half the picture. Gaze at both the city's ultra-modern future and colonial past from the 29th-floor rooftop bar in the new Shanghai Edition hotel (editionhotels.com/shanghai). Sip an Old Fashioned while overlooking the Art Deco Fairmont Peace Hotel with a forest of steel buildings beyond.

Slurp on dumplings

Looking for a ticket to pork paradise? You'll find it at Fuchun Xiaolong on Yuyuan Road, sitting elbow-to-elbow with locals slurping on Shanghai's xiao long bao (traditional soup dumplings). Newbies, take note: these pleated packages don't swim in soup – the soup's hidden inside each delectable dumpling – and there's a method to ordering and eating. Look for a paper menu (it has English), order and pay at the counter. Stake out a table and flag down a waitress by waving your receipt. Eat like a local, too – place one of your dumplings onto a spoon, nibble it open and suck out the soup. Then, dip it in vinegar and enjoy.

Shop and pop

Hipster shopping becomes a history lesson in Taikang Road's Tianzifang, where a warren of boutiques have taken up residence inside traditional shikumen (stone-gate) houses. Your goal? Get lost strolling the alleyways. You'll find treasures such as singing bowls at Joma's Collection and Feiyue sneakers (a cult favourite here – the local brand harks back to the 1920s) at Culture Matters. If you need to fuel up, snack on skewered cuttlefish and hawthorns or duck into Kommune café's courtyard for a Tsingtao beer.

Interact with art

Contemporary art and industry collide at the M50 creative district on Shanghai's Moganshan Road. Wander among the remnants of the Chunming Slub Mill, where rusty metal staircases and graffitied walls are the backdrop for the galleries and artists' studios that inhabit the old warehouses. Must-see spots? Island6 (island6.org), a collective of self-described "tech geeks" who create LED art, ShangArt Gallery (shangartgallery.com), one of the country's first contemporary art galleries, and Chronus Art Center (chronusartcenter.org), a non-profit dedicated to media art.

Tour a temple

Jing'an Temple on West Nanjing Road has a bizarre backstory – it's the city's newest Buddhist temple and one of the oldest. Built on the banks of Suzhou Creek some time in the Three Empires Period (220AD-280AD), it was moved to its current site in 1216. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1950s, the temple was converted to a plastics factory before it burned down. In 1983, it was reconstructed as a temple, where today you can listen to monks chant and watch Buddhists light incense sticks and pray. Check out the main hall to see a 15,000-kilogram sterling silver Buddha, then visit the Jade Buddha Hall, where it's namesake – China's largest sitting jade Buddha – holds court at 3.65-metres tall.

And now for something different...



THE DEEP DIVE...

Baijiu tasting

I'm sitting on a plastic stool shivering inside a tent after a day of horseriding in Inner Mongolia. Baijiu, China's most consumed spirit, seems to be what's keeping everyone else from quaking in the cold. So I accept a glass (or two) and join in the shouts of *ganbei!* Bottoms up.

The clear liquor, reminiscent of tequila, goes down like a river of fire and leaves a pool of warmth in my belly. But when I walk outside to stare at the billion stars blinking above, dizziness and disorientation hit me like twin hammers. That was some rough stuff.

A few weeks later, I'm back in Shanghai with six tiny cups of baijiu arranged before me. I'm at Healer, an elegant cocktail bar in the leafy former French Concession – an area popular with expats and tourists, where the streets hum with scooters and selfie-takers posing in front of Art Deco buildings and a tunnel of London plane trees. Tonight, Healer's owner, Phoebe Han, is hosting a masterclass on baijiu.

The spirit often gets a bad rap thanks to its high alcohol content, typically ranging from 40 to 60 per cent. But it's also a misunderstood spirit, one that's complex and intricately woven into centuries of Chinese culture. Phoebe is on a mission to bring baijiu's true story to the city's sophisticated cocktail scene. "I want to change peoples' ideas of baijiu," she says. "And I'm glad I can share some Chinese culture here."

When Phoebe opened Healer two years ago, she put a few Chinese-style cocktails on the menu. "People loved them," she says, so she expanded her offerings using Chinese osmanthus wine, baijiu sourced from around the country, plus varieties infused in-house. Gleaming glass bottles of baijiu lining the back bar are filled with red dates, bamboo leaves, green plums and even sea stars "for virility", she says. It's a modern apothecary meets drinking den.

Phoebe has travelled extensively in China to learn about baijiu, which makes up 99 per cent of China's spirits market. The liquor varies wildly from region to region, both in ingredients and the methods in which it is made.



HEALER



LIQUOR BOTTLES BEHIND THE BAR



HEALER'S BAIJIU MASTERCLASS

“IT’S A REFRESHING MIX OF OLD AND NEW THAT EMBODIES THE BEST OF THE COUNTRY’S MOST POPULAR DRINK.”

The first type we taste, called kumiss, comes from Inner Mongolia, Genghis Khan’s stomping ground. According to folklore, it was the Mongol leader’s drink of choice. Traditionally, baijiu is distilled from wheat but there aren’t any hard and fast rules for making it, unlike spirits such as bourbon or gin. This one is fermented from horse’s milk. The clear liquid smells faintly like blue cheese and tastes a little like it, too. At only six per cent alcohol, it goes down smoothly.

Another one we try is chocolate-brown and smells like dates. It’s crafted from purple rice, which is made into wine, then fermented in clay with baijiu added, boosting the alcohol level to 17 per cent. It’s sweeter and ideal for sipping.

We sample a couple of others, including Chu Yeh Ching Chiew, a golden-green baijiu from Shanxi province. At 45 per cent alcohol, it’s almost a Chinese-style gin (minus the juniper) made with a dozen herbs and spices, leaving a lingering hint of cloves in my mouth.

To me, the most compelling of all the baijiu we try is the one “farmed” in Fujian province. The baijiu is injected into a living bamboo plant, where it ages for 18 months. As the bamboo grows, it infuses the spirit with water and flavour. This modern take on tradition is the star ingredient in Healer’s Bamboo Forest cocktail, along with maraschino, Cocchi Americano, cucumber and mint. It’s a refreshing mix of old and new that embodies the best of the country’s most popular drink. Six tiny cups of baijiu have let me travel around China in an evening. It’s certainly a different – and fascinating – way to see a country.



THE FIERY CHINESE SPIRIT

WHAT MASTERCLASS AT HEALER

WHERE 30 TIANPING ROAD
(A FIVE-MINUTE WALK FROM
THE JIAOTONG UNIVERSITY
METRO STATION)

HIGHLIGHTS THE MANDARIN
COCKTAIL. PHOEBE WON THE
CAMPARI RED HAND COMPETITION
IN CHINA FOR HER TAKE ON
CAMPARI MIXED WITH BAIJIU