# 12 Best Free Things to Do in Shanghai

Just as you would expect in a megacity of more than 24 million people, there are more choices for [sights and activities in Shanghai](https://www.tripsavvy.com/best-things-to-do-in-shanghai-1495585) than time to enjoy them. Many of the free things to do in Shanghai involve [appreciating the port's rich history](https://www.tripsavvy.com/best-things-to-do-in-shanghai-1495585). From foreign powers occupying or carving out concessions to the city's hay day in the 1920s, the story of Shanghai's growth into a financial superpower is both tumultuous and fascinating.

Yes, [Shanghai](https://www.tripsavvy.com/shanghai-guide-planning-your-trip-4796877) is becoming an increasingly expensive city, but you'll still find plenty of free (or nearly free) activities to enjoy.

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## [Tour the Shanghai Museum](http://www.shanghaimuseum.net/museum/frontend/en/)

The Shanghai Museum (上海博物馆 pronounced "shang hai boh oo gwan") is one of mainland China's best collections of treasures, and admission is free! With four floors to explore, you can easily spend half a day or more learning about Chinese culture as you browse through bronzes, jades, calligraphy, and porcelain, to name a few. An inexpensive audio tour is available.

The official address for the Shanghai Museum is 201 Renmin Avenue, but you'll find it at the southern end of People's Square. The museum is open every day but Monday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (last entry at 4 p.m.).

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## [Get Lost on a Walking Tour](https://www.tripsavvy.com/walking-tours-of-shanghai-1495167)

Walking along the usual part of the Bund definitely isn't the only option for exploring Shanghai on foot. There are plenty of opportunities for observing daily life and impressive architecture.

Optionally armed only with a map or guidebook, you can [enjoy a free stroll through Shanghai's historic neighborhoods](https://www.tripsavvy.com/walking-tours-of-shanghai-1495167) and soak up some street culture along the way. Stop for tea or dumplings when you need a break then head out for more.

The Honkou neighborhood (the [former Jewish quarter](https://www.tripsavvy.com/tour-hongkou-shanghai-former-jewish-quarter-1495577)), the West Bund, [Puxi/Pudong](https://www.tripsavvy.com/two-sides-of-shanghai-pudong-puxi-1495288), Shaoshing Road, Fuxing Road, and Taikang Road are just a few popular choices among a long list of places to enjoy getting lost.

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## See Art at the M50 Moganshan Road Contemporary Art Galleries

M50 is the name of the complex that evolved into the Moganshan Road Art District in Shanghai. The row of dilapidated warehouses just south of Suzhou Creek was converted into the epicenter of [Shanghai's modern art movement](https://www.tripsavvy.com/shanghais-best-contemporary-art-galleries-1495581). Enjoy the industrial vibe of the area and some of the city's trendiest [art and cafes](https://www.tripsavvy.com/best-shanghai-cafes-and-coffee-houses-1495627).

The best way to get there (go before 6 p.m.) is by taxi. You can request "moh gahn shan loo, woo shih how" or show the driver this text: (莫干山路50号) (近苏州河).

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## [Meet People in Some of Shanghai's Parks](https://www.tripsavvy.com/china-things-to-do-4138873)

Most of Shanghai's parks don't charge an entry fee (a few do, but it's usually less than $2). Parks are a wonderful way to observe Chinese culture, [interact with locals](https://www.tripsavvy.com/romantic-getaways-in-southeast-asia-1629759), and maybe even participate in free activities.

Locals head to parks early in the morning to exercise and walk. Sometimes you'll see groups of all skill levels practicing tai chi, qi gong, and other martial arts. People play tabletop games such as mahjong and chess—you may even be asked to join for a friendly match. You'll usually encounter a group of seniors singing or dancing. Playing badminton is another popular activity to enjoy in parks; a group may invite you to join, but watch out: they're often good!

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## Admire an Affluent Neighborhood in China

Xintiandi (新天地 pronounced "shin tian dee") is a lifestyle/entertainment area known as the "New World" and often touted to be the most expensive place to live in China. Pedestrianized squares and streets are lined with classical architecture, cafes with patios, art galleries, and high-end boutiques. The Xintiandi neighborhood isn't sprawling (you can cover it in an hour or two), but it is beautiful.

Some mid-range shops and eateries have popped up to satisfy the influx of tourists coming to eat, shop, and gawk. Exploring is free, but you'll have to resist plenty of temptations to dig out some [*renminbi*](https://www.tripsavvy.com/a-complete-guide-to-using-money-exchange-and-atms-in-china-1495194)!

Xintiandi is on the eastern edge of the former French Concession. Start your exploration at Huangpi Nan Road and Taicang Road, near Taipingqiao Park.

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## [Enjoy the Old French Concession](https://www.tripsavvy.com/visitors-guide-former-french-concession-shanghai-1495574)

[When the weather’s nice](https://www.tripsavvy.com/weather-and-climate-in-shanghai-4774550), head over to the area of the former French Concession in Luwan and Xuhui on the west side of the Huang Pu River. The atmosphere is pleasantly calm in this neighborhood of cafes, old mansions, and streets lined with imported trees—especially if you wander some of the quieter lanes.

Shopping opportunities are abundant; although, simply strolling is enjoyable enough. Don’t leave before exploring the [interesting lanes in Shaoxing Park](https://www.tripsavvy.com/visitors-guide-former-french-concession-shanghai-1495574) or relaxing with a tea in the nearby Old China Hand Reading Room.

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## Appreciate the Blooms at the Shanghai Botanical Garden

If [visiting Shanghai in April](https://www.tripsavvy.com/weather-packing-event-guide-april-china-1495458), heading out to the Shanghai Botanical Gardens in the southwestern part of the city will become a trip highlight. Although technically not free, you’ll quickly forget about the $2 entrance fee when standing beneath the brilliantly [blooming cherry and plum trees](https://www.tripsavvy.com/japan-cherry-blossom-festivals-1550069). China’s largest city botanical garden is pretty spectacular outside of *sakura* season, too. This is the place to go when you need some personal space away from Shanghai’s 24.2 million residents.

Get to the botanical garden by taking line 3 on the metro south to Shilong Road Station. The garden is a short walk to the south.

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## [Marvel at Pearls in the Markets](https://www.tripsavvy.com/top-shanghai-markets-1495370)

Whether or not you’re looking to buy something, wandering Shanghai’s massive markets is a memorable experience. Several of the markets specialize in local pearls and precious stones for all budgets; the First Asia Jewelry Plaza and the [Hongqiao New World Pearl Market](https://www.tripsavvy.com/shanghai-hong-qiao-new-world-pearl-market-1495355) are two popular choices. You can design and customize jewelry to be made on the spot for a fraction of what it would cost elsewhere.

Yes, there are fake pearls out there in [markets meant to target naive tourists](https://www.tripsavvy.com/shanghai-4138869), but telling the difference between real or plastic [isn’t as difficult as you think](https://www.tripsavvy.com/buying-pearl-jewelry-in-china-1495333). Don't be afraid to bring back some pearls as a local souvenir for someone special.

If you wear eyeglasses, take a copy of your prescription with you! [Shanghai’s Optical Glasses Market](https://www.tripsavvy.com/shanghai-4138869) has more frame designs for rock-bottom prices than you’ve ever seen in one place.

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## Stroll Along the Bund

Could walking Shanghai’s scenic Bund ever get old? The architecture, history, and people watching can keep you entertained for hours. Visitors get treated to a glimpse of the Bund’s grandeur from the 1920s alongside impressive, modern development. You can get a feeling for just how important Shanghai was as a trading port in the early 20th century and as a financial center today.

Begin your walk north of the Waibaidu Bridge. Cross the bridge and continue south along Zongshan East 1st Road to the Fairmont Peace Hotel. Loop around Yuanmingyuan Road to take in some of the smaller lanes.

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## [See the Ancient Water Towns](https://www.tripsavvy.com/china-4138875)

A number of ancient villages and towns set in [the Yangtze River Delta](https://www.tripsavvy.com/china-4138875) have become tourist draws as a sort of “Venice of the East.” Most of these historic towns of crisscrossing canals and photogenic stone bridges are located 1 – 2 hours outside of Shanghai, but seeing at least one is worth getting out of the city.

Entering the water towns is usually free; however, you’ll have to pay if you want to take a boat cruise or visit famous attractions. There are quite a number of villages from which to choose; some are more crowded with tourists than others. Zhujiajiao is perhaps the most accessible from Shanghai. Nanxun is among the most picturesque of the choices.

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## [Visit Unique Temples](https://www.tripsavvy.com/best-temples-in-shanghai-to-visit-1495583)

Shanghai is blessed with [a number of interesting temples](https://www.tripsavvy.com/best-temples-in-shanghai-to-visit-1495583) ideal for sprinkling some calm and culture into a day of shopping and sightseeing. Many of the temples have a long history. For instance, the monastery at the Longhua Temple dates back to the third century!

[The Jade Temple](http://www.yufotemple.com/en/) (*Yufo Si*) is possibly the most famous temple in Shanghai. You’ll frequently see it advertised. The meager $3 entrance fee is more than fair for a chance to wander the beautiful halls, but the temple can get busy sometimes. You can try your hand at Chinese calligraphy inside (free).

If the notoriety of the Jade Temple puts you off, you could visit the Confucius Temple (*Wen Miao*) instead. You won’t bump into nearly as many tourists in the landscaped gardens there. A secondhand book swap is held every Sunday morning outside the main gate.

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## [See New Exhibits at the Museum of Contemporary Art](http://www.mocashanghai.org/about/?lang=en)

Located in the People’s Park north of the Shanghai Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) was China’s first private contemporary art museum. The sunny building was once a greenhouse but is now loaded with impressive work from contemporary artists. Entrance is free. There’s also a chance to catch some of the artists alongside their exhibitions!

Find the Museum of Contemporary Art at Gate 7 of the People’s Park on West Nanjing Road.