Your Trip to Shanghai: The Complete Guide

Shanghai is both historic and futuristic, fashion- and food-forward, and full of cultural sights to explore. The food scene (of local, regional, and international variety) is strong, and some of Asia’s (and the world’s) top ranked bars and restaurants can be found here. The city’s wealth of museums and exhibition halls chronicle the country’s history and house its art. The skyscrapers of Pudong district vie for world records of height and luxury, and the Shanghai Fashion Weeks are two of the most important events of the year for the fashion industry. Plan some of your days here, but allow yourself time to wander and discover its diverse neighborhoods. You might find yourself at a jazz show, discover an amazing *xiaolongbao* (soup dumpling) restaurant, or even stumble into a 400-year-old garden. Make a few plans, but also keep your schedule somewhat open to let Shanghai surprise and delight you.

## Planning Your Trip

* [Best Time to Visit:](https://www.tripsavvy.com/best-time-to-visit-shanghai-4780510) Fall is the best time to visit Shanghai. The plum rains (heavy showers) are over, and the weather is temperate with a mix of warm and cool days. Visitors can take advantage of the clear skies to sightsee outdoors, as well as enjoy the views from Shanghai’s famous rooftops.
* Language: Mandarin and Shanghainese (Shanghai dialect)1﻿
* Currency: Yuan. The currency is also called renminbi (RMB).
* Getting Around: The [Shanghai Metro](https://www.tripsavvy.com/shanghai-guide-public-transportation-4782430) is cheap, fast, reliable, and easy to navigate. All signs are in Chinese and English.
* Travel Tips: Always carry a tissue pack and hand sanitizer; restrooms at more local places might not have toilet paper or soap in the bathrooms. And download [WeChat,](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.tencent.mm&hl=en) called "Weixin" in Chinese. You can pay for pretty much everything in China using the wallet feature, and it also has a great written translation function.

## Things to Do

Ascend some of the world’s tallest buildings. Shop for the latest pieces from local designers or some of the best knock-offs on the market. Wander active religious sites. Stroll through historic neighborhoods that show off European grandeur, art deco design, and Shikumen houses (a style of Shanghainese architecture). See live jazz, independent, or orchestral music in different venues throughout the city. Attend a tea ceremony, and buy your favorite brews. Go clubbing with live sharks—Shanghai has a vast and evolving list of activities, but here are a few of our favorites to get you started.

* Head to the Bund to see the sunrise (known locally as “Bundrise”). Here you can observe or join in local tai chi classes, run along the river, and see the city slowly wake up.
* Go shopping on Nanjing Road, one of the world’s most famous shopping streets. This three-mile (five kilometer) strip has high fashion malls, specialty stores, street vendors, and historic jewelers. If you get tired, swing into the Shanghai Museum or Jing’an Temple, also both found along the road.
* See Shanghai from the top of the Shanghai Tower, the world’s second tallest building. Take some of the fastest elevators in the world (at a speed of 46 mph) to its observation deck on the 118th floor, the highest observation deck in the world.

Explore more attractions with our full-length articles [the 20 best things to do in Shanghai](https://www.tripsavvy.com/best-things-to-do-in-shanghai-1495585) and [the top activities for kids](https://www.tripsavvy.com/top-activities-kids-shanghai-1495582).

## Getting There

Shanghai has two international airports: [Shanghai Pudong International Airport (PVG)](https://www.tripsavvy.com/shanghai-pudong-international-airport-guide-4783946) and Hongqiao International Airport (SHA). Most international flights from outside of Asia will fly into Pudong. Most domestic flights will fly into Hongqiao. High-speed trains are another popular and quick form of long-distance travel, connecting Shanghai to Beijing, Chengdu, Shenzhen, and other cities in China.

## What to Eat and Drink

Shanghai is famous for its regional cuisine, which capitalizes on its proximity to the coast. Dishes are known to be sweeter and oilier than other regions in China. Their most famous culinary claims to fame are xiaolongbao (soup dumplings), which were invented in a village just north of the city. Other Shanghai specialties include *si da jin gang* (the four warriors of breakfast), yellow croaker noodles, and hairy crab. A large number of highly skilled chefs and restaurateurs have also shaped the culinary scene and made the Bund area the epicenter of creative and fine dining in Shanghai. However, for street food, head to Fangbang Xi Lu by Yuyuan Garden.

Microbreweries, wine bars, speakeasies, and rooftop bars can all be found in Shanghai. For a drink with a view, head to the Bund. For hip haunts, head to the Former French Concession. Baijiu is the national cheap spirit, but in recent years, it has received a makeover by being used as a base in cocktail bars, featuring higher-end varieties from different regions. [Healer](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Healer-Bar/640979849419434) in the FFC is particularly known for their baijiu creations.

Tea culture is pervasive throughout China, and Shanghai is no exception. Go to a teahouse to experience a traditional Chinese tea ceremony in which you can see the tea prepared in front of you by a tea master. A tea ceremony will have several varieties of tea for you to taste and the tea master will explain not only about the properties and qualities of tea you are sampling but also how they are important to Chinese culture as well.

According to the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism, the tap water is not safe to drink.2﻿ Instead opt for bottled water which is readily available at most hotels.

Explore our articles on [the 10 best dishes to try in Shanghai](https://www.tripsavvy.com/best-food-to-try-in-shanghai-4772378), [family-friendly restaurants](https://www.tripsavvy.com/shanghai-4138869), and the [best cocktail bars](https://www.tripsavvy.com/best-cocktail-bars-in-shanghai-4772678).

## Where to Stay

Unless you have business in Pudong, stay on the Puxi side of the river. Neighborhoods here include the Bund, People’s Square, the Former French Concession, Jing’an, and Xujiahui. For central, more affordable areas well-connected to the rest of the city by the metro, stay in Jing’an and Xujiahui. Jing’an in particular is known for its historic sites, and both Xujiahui and Jing’an are known for their extensive shopping options. The Bund and People’s Square have luxury hotels, superb restaurants, high-end nightlife options, and are easily accessed by public transport. The Former French Concession offers pleasant avenues good for walks, lots of greenery, French colonial and old Shanghainese architecture, and excellent bars and restaurants.

Explore [the different neighborhoods](https://www.tripsavvy.com/top-neighborhoods-in-shanghai-4796329) you can stay in, and our recommendations for the best hotels.

## Culture and Customs

Tipping is not a typical practice in Shanghai. In the fancier hotels and high-end restaurants, a tip might be included (10 to 15 percent), but most restaurants, taxis, and other services will not include or expect a tip. If you try to tip people at a local restaurant, they might actually be offended, as it could be seen as a loss of face (embarrassment, but the concept of “face” goes deeper than that).

It might be hard to flag down a waiter in more local Chinese restaurants. Should you need to get their attention, it’s perfectly acceptable to belt out “*Fuwuyuan!*” (meaning “waiter” in Mandarin) to get their attention while raising your hand. Keep in mind that whoever is paying for the meal is the person that orders the dishes.3﻿

If someone hands you something like cash or a business card with two hands, you should receive it with two hands as a sign of respect. Also, if you receive a business card you should take a minute to carefully look over the front and back, before putting it in your wallet. Again, this is a sign of respect.

There are some [scams in Shanghai](https://www.china-mike.com/china-travel-tips/avoiding-scams/) targeting tourists, but they can be easily avoided. Should anyone approach you and ask for you to buy art, go to a tea ceremony, or get a drink, it’s best to decline. If you think their offer is genuinely made though, you can test it by suggesting to go to another bar or teahouse. If they insist on going to one of their choosing, just walk away. Also, always use official taxis and insist on the meter being used. If a driver is unwilling to comply, hop out and get another one.

Read more about [why not to tip in China](https://www.tripsavvy.com/tipping-in-china-1458670) and [how to save face](https://www.tripsavvy.com/saving-face-and-losing-face-1458303).

## Money Saving Tips

* Take a metro over the taxi. Shanghai has the most expensive taxi fares in all of China.
* Visit in the low season (November to March) for cheaper accommodations, flights, and entrance fees to some attractions.
* Instead of taking the Maglev train to or from the airport, take metro line 2 the whole way.
* Shop at markets and not malls.
* Most of the museums and parks in Shanghai are free or have a low entrance fee.
* Many of the main attractions in Shanghai are free to visit: the Bund, Nanjing Road, the Former French Concession, and more.
* Buy a one-day or three-day pass for the metro, or one- or two-day hop-on-hop-off pass for a bus, if you know you will be taking several rides a day.
* Shanghai is famous for its delicious and varied street food that doubles as a super cheap breakfast, lunch, or dinner option.
* Pulling money out of an ATM will give you a better exchange rate than exchanging cash in person.
* Get on a promoter's list to get into clubs for free. (Usually just as simple as asking for their WeChat).

Learn more about the cheapest ways to have fun by exploring [free things to do in Shanghai](https://www.tripsavvy.com/free-things-to-do-in-shanghai-1495584).