

Sojourn to Suzhou



Text and photos by Dr Jimmy Teo, Editorial Board Member

Following a visit to Nanjing (<https://bit.ly/5205-Indulge>), I took a high-speed rail trip to Suzhou. Being a foreigner, it was difficult to book tickets online as a passport is required for purchase and most websites are in Chinese. I thus took the easy way out by going to the train station about one hour before my desired departure time to book my trip at the ticket office. Often, there are counters that cater to foreigners, but once the window for online booking has closed, the lines may be long due to locals booking in person. Security is tight at the train stations and taking trains is akin to taking a flight. You need to give yourself additional time to put your baggage through security checks and pass

through the manual checkpoints, as self-scanning turnstiles are only for travellers with Chinese identity cards. Do note that many cities have several train stations and you should select your destination station based on your schedule and where you intend to stay.

Sights and sounds of Suzhou

The old city centre of Suzhou is close to the Suzhou train station (the other being Suzhou North station). Through Booking.com, I made my booking with the Hotel Soul Suzhou, which is located close to the area framed by the north-south roads of Lindun Road and Pingjiang Road. Many shops and restaurants are located in this area.

Suzhou used to house many wealthy salt and silk merchants, and the billionaires of those days built magnificent gardens and residences. Of the many Classical Gardens of Suzhou, nine of them are designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The Humble Administrator's Garden (拙政园, Zhuo Zheng Yuan) is one of these nine gardens, and also the largest. Built by Wang Xianchen, a Ming dynasty official in the sixteenth century, it is located north of Lindun Road. The tour guide helped us appreciate the

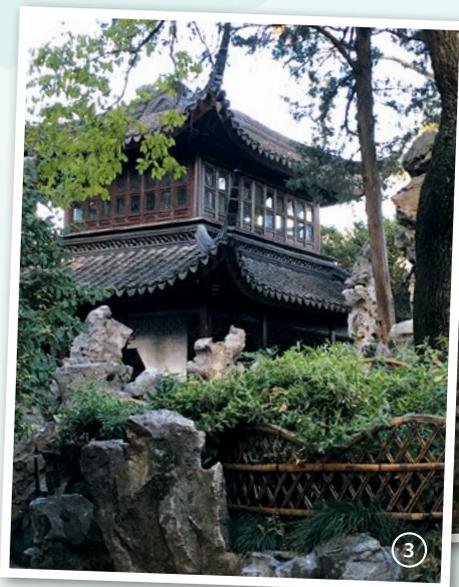


many ideas and imageries used in the construction of these gardens. A part of the garden (Central Garden) even used the Beisi Pagoda located many miles away to complete the view, and the city authorities have restricted the heights of the buildings around the area to preserve the framed view. Next to the garden is one of the most visited museums in the world, the Suzhou Museum, which houses ancient Chinese paintings, calligraphy and handmade crafts.

Close by is another garden known as the Lion Grove Garden (狮子林, Shi Zi Lin), also one of the nine UNESCO World Heritage Sites. This garden features many multi-storey rock mazes. It is said that Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty visited it six times, and was so enamoured with the garden that he spent hours in it and even reproduced one in the imperial palace in Beijing.

A vibrant culture

Suzhou is also known as the Venice of the East with its many canals. Many of them are well preserved and the neighbourhoods are being revitalised with new investments and tourist attractions. You can enjoy boat rides in the waterways, or take a stroll down the quaint alleyways and walk over the many bridges. If you're looking to sample some snacks, you can savour local sweets and confectioneries, and shop for silk clothes as well along the canals.



In many parts of China, the wearing of Han-style clothing (Hanfu) has come into vogue, especially in the older city areas. Locals and tourists add much colour and excitement to the city when they don traditional Chinese clothes. The cuisine of Suzhou is similar to other styles in the Jiangsu province, though every place would have their own unique take and dishes. Here, I tried the squirrel fish – a deep-fried fish cut such that the meat stands up like the bushy tail of a squirrel, and drenched with sweet and sour sauce.

Besides seeing the older city centre and gardens, other places worth visiting include the new Suzhou city areas built outside the old city walls and the Suzhou Silk Museum – China's first museum specialising in silk. A day trip to nearby water towns like Tongli

is also easy and convenient. Suzhou is connected to Nanjing, Hangzhou and Shanghai by high-speed rail trains, and soon I was away on my next adventure in another part of China. ♦

Disclaimer: The author took this trip in end-2019, shortly before the COVID-19 travel restrictions were in place.

Legend

1. Canal
2. Humble Administrator's Garden
3. Pavilion in Lion Grove Garden
4. Lion Grove Garden
5. Lindun Road shops
6. Squirrel fish

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