

SHANGHAI – TEN NIGHTS – MARCH 2007

For several years I wanted to go to Shanghai because I had heard that it is one of the most exciting cities to visit, full of energy, a fine museum, great food and shopping and much more. It is all of that in a state of frenetic activity with an almost surreal juxtaposition of historic old, 50's Communist drab and trendy ultra modern. I knew that by going in mid-March it would be rather chilly and wet and it was. But that did not interfere with our enjoyment of this fascinating place.

LE ROYAL MEREDIEN HOTEL:

The first decision was where to stay. The one thing I did know was that we did not want to stay in the new Pudong area across the river. Almost all of the attractions and the historic district are in the Puxi area. If you were to stay in Pudong you will spend a great deal of time foing back and forth across the river. So the next question was where to stay in Puxi. Friends and various publications recommended the Portman Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons, JW Marriott, etc. and they all seemed fine, but they were all quite expensive. Nobody recommended the “Le Royal Meredien” at 789 Nanjing Road except for the website TripAdvisor. There were only 8 reviews, but they all gave the place five out of five stars. The price was close to \$100 less than the aforementioned hotels. So we decided to take a chance and booked it for our entire ten day stay with the thought that we would move if it was not as terrific as represented. It turned out that the reason that it was not publicized is because it had only been open for three months at the point that we checked in. We had a room on a high floor and it was very quiet with nice views. The hotel has a nice contemporary mood and our room was large and done in excellent taste. Service from the people at the concierge desk was exceptional. We really liked the location which was on Nanjing Road, the large pedestrian street, and within walking distance of the Shanghai Museum. We loved the place and stayed the entire ten days. Cost ranged from \$220 to \$300 to \$345 plus tax depending on whether it was a weekend and when we booked it.

THE SHANGHAI MUSEUM:

Shanghai has many attractions, but this is the main one and a reason in itself to go to Shanghai. It is an extremely well organized museum, captions are in English, you can take pictures, the audio guide is excellent, and the collection is the best we have seen except for the National Museum in Taipei. The sections are Sculpture, Bronze, Ceramics, Calligraphy, Seals, Painting, Coins, Minorities Dress, Furniture, and Jade. We came with the idea that we probably would have limited interest in Seals, Calligraphy, and Painting, but we thoroughly enjoyed all sections of the museum with the possible exception of Coins. We spent the better part of the first three afternoons at the Museum and over nine hours to see everything. It was one of the best museum experiences we have had.

THE SHANGHAI ACROBATIC TROUPE:

This is another “do not miss” attraction. They perform with hula hoops, umbrella handles, glasses, bowls and many other items doing what seems to be the impossible. The precision with which they perform is absolutely amazing and unique. Most performances are in the evening, but we saw them in the afternoon. Your hotel can get the tickets for you and let you know what performance times are available.

XINTIANDI:

This is a very new upscale development in the former French Concession area. It does a fine job of incorporating the old into the new. The complex itself has some outstanding restaurants, and countless shops of high quality. Near the complex is a new hotel, the 88 Xintiandi. It is a small hotel and quite beautiful. We looked at a room and it was very impressive. However, to avoid street noise you would have to get a Deluxe room with a lake view and then you would be well over \$400 a night. And we preferred the more vibrant area around Nanjing Road so we would probably stay in that area again. From here you can explore the French Concession area with its old homes. The French Concession is not a clearly defined area so it is best to ask at the hotel where the best walking streets are. For us it was pretty much hit or miss, but we hit enough to make the exploration worthwhile. Our best experience in the French concession was to take a taxi to Sinan Road and then walk to Fuxing Park; on the way we saw the former house of Sun Yat Sen. Another nice experience was when we took a taxi to the Jinjiang Hotel and walked that area. In the process of this we ran into a very interesting looking building. We didn't know what it was or whether it was open to the public. It turned out to be an immensely popular and attractive bar called "Face Bar". The place was overflowing with people, but we managed to get a table and have some tea. Attached to this fabulous place are a Thai and an Indian restaurant.

SHOPPING:

Shanghai is a shopper's paradise that far eclipses Hong Kong. We found some of the best on lanes off Taikang Road. At a place on lane 200 called Coat and Jacket factory outlet I was able to purchase two waxed cotton jackets for \$75 each. I have seen similar items in Europe for \$500. Close by Arlene purchased a beautiful suit made to order in a day for \$125. Another store of note is Shanghai Tang which has some very upscale and expensive clothing items. There are three in Shanghai, but the one that we went to was in the Xintiandi area. Then there are the "knock off" places. We went to a lot of them, but by far the best was the New Xiang Yang Market. The easiest way to get there is to take the number 2 Metro line and get off at the Shanghai Science and Technology Museum Station; the market is underground in the station. Walking the pedestrian street, Nanjing Road is an enjoyable shopping experience and it is where many of the local residents do their shopping. Also worthwhile is a walk through the gigantic eight story "Raffles City" shopping complex. The irony was not lost on us that the foreign tourists are all roaming the "knock-off" markets and being drawn into back alleyways off Nanjing road for their Prada, Dolce & Gabbana, and Giorgio Armani fakes, whereas the the giant shopping centers like Raffles City are packed with young Shanghainese paying very high prices for Levi's jeans, Timberland boots, and other designer items.

Yu Gardens and Bazaar is another place worth visiting. The gardens, despite the very urban setting, are very nice and the shopping bazaar is very bustling and seems to go on forever.

TRANSPORTATION:

From the airport we got a taxi for 175 RMB (the local currency) which at the 7.5 exchange rate was about \$23. There are ATM machines everywhere including the airport. The best way to get around is by taxi. They are very inexpensive. However, you must have the concierge write down your destination in Mandarin as none of the drivers speak or understand English. If you are going to several destinations have the concierge write out all of them before you leave, even ones that

you may not get to because of lack of time. And be sure to have with you the card that the hotel provides so you can get back to the hotel from anywhere when you decide to return. For longer distances you can use the Metro. It is surprisingly easy to use, and although it won't set any speed records it will get you to a more distant location much faster and less expensive than a taxi.

A ONE DAY EXCURSION TO SUZHOU AND LUZHI:

We had great plans for several excursions from Shanghai, but the city proved to be so interesting that we could only manage one. We hired a car and driver for the day for less than half of what the hotel quoted us. We found the driver, Ivan, through the lady sommelier at "Jean-Georges" restaurant. And we had an English speaking guide who managed the house of a Chinese American friend. His name is Liu Qin (pronounced chin) of the San Francisco Cultural Delegation Tours. He was terrific and I would highly recommend him. His cell phone is +86-13806208422 and his telephone/fax is +86-512-65012168. E-mail is gzmzr@hotmail.com or cymz@aol.com. I do not have the phone number of the driver, Ivan, but Qin probably does and it would be best to contact him through Qin since the driver's English is very limited. Since the driver did not speak English we got Qin in touch with him so they could decide where we would meet. Suzhou is famous for its gardens but we only had time to see three. The first that Qin took us to was the "Master of Nets Garden" which was really wonderful. Despite Qin's warning we went to the most popular which is The Humble Administrator's Garden. It was very large, but polluted with people sitting on every rock; Chinese gardens are primarily rock gardens. It had a lot of beauty, but it was difficult to take it in because of the crowds. However, the Bonsai Garden was fabulous and here there were not so many people (no rocks to sit on and be photographed!). Many of the bonsai dated from the Ming Dynasty and were over 500 years old. We happen to love bonsai so we were literally in "bonsai garden heaven". Then Qin took us to the Silk Embroidery Institute. It happened to have a very beautiful small garden and we had it all to ourselves. It was a great experience that we never would have had if it were not for Qin. Then we went to Luzhi which is a "water town" on a canal lined with houses and shops. It is a very popular tourist destination and Qin took us there late so that most of the tourists would be gone. They were and we had a great time walking along the canal and through Qin talking to some of the artisans and shopkeepers. It was a long ten hour day, but a great one.

EATING:

The restaurants we explored fell into two categories: moderate to expensive fusion type places and strictly Chinese. Generally we chose to have dinner in the fusion places and lunch in the Chinese restaurants.

DINNERS:

Jean-Georges:

Just before he died Johnny Apple (R.W. Apple, Jr.) wrote an article in the New York Times featuring ten restaurants that he thought would be worth boarding an airplane to visit. One of those happened to be in Shanghai. It is "Jean-Georges" at Three on the Bund. So, naturally, we made it our first stop for dinner. First of all this is an exceptionally beautiful restaurant with an Art Deco theme. Tables were generously spaced, and if you have a window table the views are stunning. There were two tasting menus so we ordered one of each and were able to make a couple of substitutions. I won't attempt to describe or list all that we had, but I counted 14 different items. Everything got at least a star and some got two or more. There was not a single

miss during the entire dinner. The preparations were a wonderful blend of French with some Asian influences and they all worked extremely well. To accompany the meal we had, a glass of Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand and a bottle of Pinot Noir from Tasmania. Without any doubt we felt that this was the best restaurant in Shanghai and one of the better dinners ever. Cost was \$300 for the two of us plus tip. A meal of this quality would be twice as much in Europe. After trying quite a few other places we decided that “Jean-Georges” was so good that we went back for dinner on our last night. We had plenty of other good dining experiences but there was nothing in the same league. This time we ordered a la carte. We had seven different things and again they all got at least a star or two and the tasting of chocolate deserved three. I had the same glass of New Zealand Te Mata 2006 Sauvignon Blanc and then we had a bottle of Australian Shiraz. The dinner was just as great as the first one which left no doubt that this is not only the best restaurant in Shanghai, but one of the best anywhere. Johnny Apple was absolutely right on. This dinner was considerably less than the tasting menu night at \$255 with tip. For the unusually high quality it was actually very reasonably priced. Service at both dinners was superb.

Laris:

This gorgeous modern restaurant designed by Michael Graves is also at Three on the Bund. After a wonderful canapé we had crab with avocado salsa and lemon grass gazpacho, carpaccio of beef, wild duck prepared two ways, veal with Parmesan crust, and panna cotta and a chocolate fondant cake with ice cream, and finally some exceptional chocolates. I gave everything at least a star, and the chocolate items two stars. Service was very prompt. While the food was fabulous the only problem was that the wine prices were outrageous. I had a glass of Margaret River Chardonnay and we shared a bottle of 2004 Penfold's Koonunga Hill Shiraz for the absurd price of 685 RMB (\$91), but there were no alternatives if you wanted to have a reasonably good bottle of wine to accompany the great food. Total cost with tip was 1875 RMB (\$250), but it was an enjoyable experience and the food was really superb. Probably the second best dinner we had in Shanghai.

Hazara:

The restaurant's card describes the food as “North Indian Frontier Cuisine”. It is located on the same grounds as the “Face Bar” at 118 Rui Jin 2 Road, but I would leave it to the hotel concierge to write out the address in Mandarin and not really be concerned about addresses. This is another architectural gem done in beautiful taste. The food here was really outstanding and better than a prominent one star Michelin place we tried recently in London. In fact it was some of the best Indian food we have had. We had lamb with spices, chicken with a great curry sauce, king prawns with a terrific sauce, naan with garlic and cheese, a two star “kulfi” (a special Indian ice cream), and a great chocolate desert with kumquat, ice cream, and a tuile. I had a glass of Chilean Chardonnay and we shared a bottle of Australian 2002 Shiraz; both were excellent. Cost with tip was a reasonable 1236 RMB (\$165). The staff was very enthusiastic and attentive and conveyed the impression that they really liked what they were doing which helped to make it a most enjoyable evening for us. “Face Bar” and its restaurants are part of a trendy Indonesian-based venture. In fact many of the restaurants, bars, etc. in Shanghai are part of a Malaysian, Javanese, Singaporean, American, etc. chain. It seems that many countries are getting into the act to take advantage of the huge Chinese consumer base and the large number of tourist dollars that are spent here.

M on the Bund:

Located at Five on the Bund this was the first of the eclectic/fusion restaurants in Shanghai and remains one of the most popular. It, too, is a very attractive place with great views. The night we were there it was very busy and noisy, but the service was excellent. The menu is very interesting. We had seared tuna with sesame seeds, bottarga, eggplant, cumin and basil, and an Iranian stew of duck leg and breast with walnuts and pomegranate, and then a Sicilian seafood stew. The desert of a coconut syrup cake with lime curd and candied zest was also quite imaginative. While the food was competent it was not exceptional and nothing rated a star. The wine list was one of the best we saw in Shanghai. I had a glass of Australian Sauvignon Blanc and we shared a bottle of 2003 Col d'Orcia Rosso di Montalcino. Total cost with tip was 1402 RMB (\$187). Overpriced considering the quality of the food, but it was an enjoyable evening.

Ye Shanghai:

This is an attractive Shanghainese restaurant located in Xintiandi. The Drunken Chicken, chicken with pine nuts and sesame pastry, and the mango pudding were good, but not exceptional. However, three other dishes, the spareribs with honey and garlic, the green beans with garlic, bamboo shoots, and pork, and the pan fried eight treasures glutinous rice were worthy of a star. With a glass of Australian Chardonnay and a bottle of Spanish Tempranillo the cost was 949 RMB (\$126). This might be worth another try if you can get some suggestions on what to order.

Whampoa Club:

Also located at Three on the Bund, this restaurant is more Chinese than fusion, but with elements of both. We had deep fried baby squid, deep fried eel, Prosperity salad which had smoked fish, fish, greens and smoked salmon, duck in rolls with cucumber. These dishes were all just fair. The vegetables with oyster sauce and garlic was very good. The King prawns with wasabi was worth a star and the Sesame prawns with eggplant deserved two stars. So, one would have to say that it was at best a "mixed bag". We continued with our usual glass of Australian Chardonnay and a bottle of Australian Shiraz. Wine prices for anything decent were very high and the wine cost was about half the price of the entire dinner which was 1560 RMB (\$208).

South Beauty:

Sichuan cuisine is the specialty here. The Thai style shrimp salad, the shrimp with chilies, and the spare ribs were all quite average. But the grouper fried with black beans and the deep fried sesame balls with a black sesame paste in the middle were excellent. One would have to conclude that at the Chinese restaurants you have to know what to order; that is why our experiences were hit or miss. Cost here was a more reasonable 1003 RMB (\$134) including a Singapore Sling and a bottle of Shiraz.

Yong Foo Elite:

This Chinese Restaurant is at number 200 Yongfu Road, wherever that is. The only dish of note here was "sliced fresh weaver" which is a salt water fish; it was served with a great sauce that included some wasabi. Everything else was mediocre and the wild king prawns reeked with iodine and were sent back. The wines were good, but again very overpriced so the total cost was 1508 RMB (\$200). Not recommended.

LUNCHESES:

Crystal Jade Restaurant:

Crystal Jade is a very large Singapore based chain with over sixty locations in Asia. We had been to one of their places in Hong Kong because our favorite Dim Sum restaurant had gone out of business. We were not impressed. We have had Dim Sum in many places including Hong Kong, San Francisco, London, Singapore, New York, etc. Arlene says that I use the term “best ever” or similar terms too often, but here I go again. This is without question the best we have ever had; period. To put it to the test we ordered items that were our favorites, and remarkably, each one was better than any previous version. Over two visits we had sui mai, pea shoots, white carrot (turnip) cake with meat, fried taro balls, noodles, fried bean curd with shrimp, roasted duck, crispy bean curd with shrimp and pork, and crispy red bean pastry with sesame. I gave at least a star to every single item. We went twice to the one located right in the Xintiandi complex so I can't vouch for the other two that they have in Shanghai. Had we discovered it earlier in our Shanghai stay we would have probably gone three or four times. As the following notes will reveal we had some of the foulest tasting tea in Shanghai. I don't know whether it was the water or the variety of tea. But the tea at Crystal Jade was excellent. Our lunches were \$27 and \$30 and we averaged about eight items each time. Needless to say, a lot more than necessary, but it was so tasty. Definitely Dim Sum heaven. Evidently the word is out because it fills up before noon. The second time we made a reservation. As an added attraction you see into the kitchen and watch the noodle maker produce hand pulled noodles; he just keeps working the dough until magically thin noodles arrive. No cutting of any sore it done; quite amazing to see for the first time.

Guyi Hunan:

Hunan cuisine is one of the very spiciest of all the types of Chinese food, but we like spicy food so we did not waste much time in getting to this highly recommended place. It is located on 89 Fumin Lu, but again just have the hotel concierge write it out in Mandarin. The first time we went we had three dishes. The first was octopus and pork in a hot pot with garlic, ginger, and other wonderful flavors. It was worth two stars. Then short ribs in a hot pot; the beef itself was unusually good and lean. Lastly we had beans (two kinds) with chili and garlic. Both of these deserved a star. The desert of sesame paste dumplings in a wonderful broth and glutinous rice also rated a star. Cost was 210 RMB (\$28). An amazing value. It opens at noon and by 12:30 it is standing room only. The second time we had a hot pot with chicken and fresh bamboo shoots; it was the first time we had eaten real small bamboo shoots and they were fabulous as was the dish. We also had fish head with peppers which was good but a lot of work for very little return. Then we repeated the hot pot with octopus and pork (our favorite dish there) and the beans dish. They also serve fabulous peanuts. Because the tea is not to our taste we had beer so the price went up to 248 RMB (\$33). Needless to say this was our second favorite lunch in Shanghai.

Canton Chinese Restaurant on the 55th floor Grand Hyatt in Pudong:

This restaurant is in what is known as the world's tallest hotel topping out on the 87th floor. The views can be spectacular, but it was overcast when we were there so we can only imagine. A taxi to get there from our hotel in Puxi was only 14RMB (less than \$2.00). The restaurant has quite a few rooms, but they are all quite attractive. There is a wide array of Cantonese food available, but we opted for the Dim Sum and the thin noodles with dried abalone. We had the pan fried bean curd sheet filled with scallops and coriander, the deep fried shrimp dumplings, sautéed turnip cake with a special sauce, pan fried dumplings with minced pork and vegetables, and for desert

the red bean cake with coconut milk. Everything was very good and the noodles and the turnip cake were especially tasty. Cost was 305 RMB (\$41). Not up to the great “Crystal Jade” but very good and a nice quiet atmosphere.

Raffles City – Hot Pot place on the Fifth floor:

There are many restaurants in this huge complex, but we tried the Hot Pot place because it had been recommended. We ordered the “Wu Mizou Hot Pot” which has seafood, vegetables, and meat. It was ok, but nothing to get excited about. Again the tea was undrinkable so I had beer. At 263 RMB (\$35) it is no bargain

Bi Feng Tang:

No English was spoken at this local place, but there was an English menu. We ordered many things, but there was only one standout – the crispy fried rolls with shrimp and pork. The tea was undrinkable. Cost was 175 RMB (\$23).

Shanghai Dumplings:

This is undoubtedly the most famous of all the Shanghai foods. The best way I can describe them is that they are like a large ravioli or wonton filled with meat that is surrounded by broth. So when you eat them you have to be careful that the broth does not spill all over you. The best approach is to bite a whole in the dumpling, suck out the broth, and then eat the rest. We first had them in Suzhou at a very local place and they were very tasty and cheap. The hotel concierge sent us to another local place across from the hotel and they also were very good. We had heard of a famous place in the Yu Gardens Bazaar near the crooked bridge called Nanziang, and while walking the bazaar we ran into it. It was easy to find because the line waiting to get to the take out counter was enormous. If we had waited it may have taken an hour. A very nice Chinese lady living in the U.S. and visiting her mother offered to get us a dozen. They were really excellent, but I can't really say that they were any better than the others we had. Actually the ones in Suzhou at the hole in the wall place were probably the best.

SUMMARY:

The days flew by and we never had time to explore the contemporary art scene in the gallery district. Skyscrapers are going up so fast that the Shanghai we explored may be past history by the time we return. And it certainly is a place that I would like to visit again.