



finding ningbo

The eastern Chinese coastal city may be growing fast, but the metal and glass have yet to overshadow a rich and storied history. Marc Andrews spends a few days getting to know this relative newcomer to the country's tourist scene

pictures chad graham



The barman, JC, at Easy cocktail bar in Ningbo's Moon Lake Flourishing Garden district, twirls a bottle before catching it in the tumbler. I'm taking a break in this bustling entertainment area whose buildings riff off Ningbo's *san-ho-yuan* architecture, or "three-section-compound" – a style consisting of a central building with two perpendicular wings built with the local grey brick.

But "compound" doesn't do the area justice; there are plenty of atmospheric back alleys just off the main drag to dive in and explore. The emphasis here is on higher-end restaurants, spas and bars, along with the international coffee-shop chains that seem to breed like rabbits across the planet. For now, as with Ningbo as a whole, tourists have yet to discover Moon Lake Flourishing Garden.

JC, who hails from Luzhou in Sichuan Province, says things are starting to change in Ningbo, a thriving seaport with an interesting history. "It is the hometown of [20th-century nationalist leader] Chiang Kai-shek," says JC, pouring my whisky sour. "With the improving relations between China and Taiwan, that's important."

But its historical importance is only one of the reasons why this eastern city is worth a visit. Like most Chinese destinations, Ningbo is rapidly kissing the sky with modern buildings, yet if you search around here you'll find age-old pagodas,



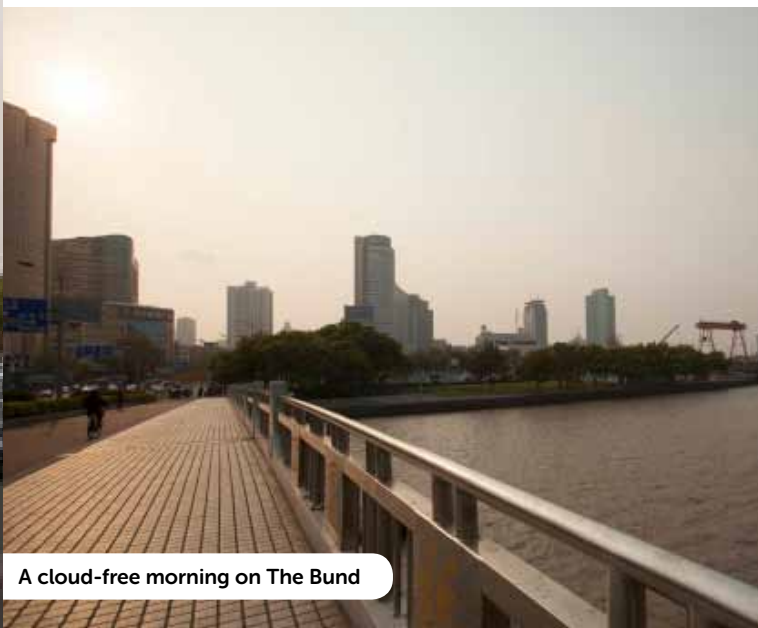
Ningbo is rapidly kissing the sky with modern buildings, yet if you search around here you'll find age-old pagodas and Asia's oldest library

Asia's oldest library and Western colonial-style buildings in various states of repair. Overlooked by many of the current crop of guidebooks, there is more than enough in the city centre to keep an intrepid explorer busy.

"You've got a good fusion of modern China with historic China," says Ryan Parker, acting head of international recruitment at the University of Nottingham's Ningbo campus. Smaller and quieter than nearby Shanghai or Hangzhou, Ningbo offers a link to the past but is not yet overrun by visitors.

Whetting your appetite

Ningbo literally means "tranquil waves", and it is the sea that has shaped its history, giving the seaport its current prosperity and no doubt dictating its future success. "There are three



A cloud-free morning on The Bund

Clockwise from left: the busy streets of Ningbo; the waterfront; local street food; and an old pagoda entrance



important aspects to Ningbo: Buddhism, the harbour and seafood,” says Tang Hongmei, deputy director of the Ningbo Tourism Bureau. And as I travel around the city, it is the sea I keep coming back to.

In Moon Lake Flourishing Garden I stumble across a metal engraving on the side of the Ling Ying Temple that shows much of Ningbo's history. English signage on cultural sites in Ningbo is patchy, and in this case lacking entirely. But I can clearly see the ancient vessels that plied the Silk

Road with items such as ceramics and bronze, as well as the sailing ships that opened up the Qing dynasty to foreign trade.

Chen Yumen, the inventor of mahjong, appears on the side of the temple playing the game he gave to the world, and the famous merchant Yang Fang is shown surrounded by a throng of busy traders. Also depicted are the Tianfeng and Xiantong Pagodas, and Haishu Lou (the drum tower) – all prominent Ningbo buildings that should be on any visitor's must-see list.

Ningbo's city centre is marked by the confluence of the Fenghua and Yuyao rivers, which then go on to form the Yong River further downstream. Tourist sights are largely split between those in Haishu district and the Lao Wai Tan (Old Bund) area, and are easily accessible by foot or bicycle.

Tianyi Pavilion is a good place to start exploring the Haishu sights. Dating back to 1561, this is the oldest private library in Asia and the third oldest in the world. Today, the collection of over 300,000 books is housed in a building completed in 1981, but the site is vast and has many of the buildings originally used by bibliophile politician Fan Qin and his family. There is also a display about the history of mahjong: terms used in the game borrow from Ningbo dialect, the name of the game itself meaning “sparrow”. Chen Yumen taught the »



I take the south exit of Tianyi Pavilion and discover a mosque that looks more like a Chinese temple



Clockwise from above: a local does tai chi; traditional temple architecture; waterways that brought trade to Ningbo



Finding peace is a walk in the park



game to foreign traders in Ningbo and Shanghai, helping this humble game take over the Chinese-speaking world.

I take the south exit of Tianyi Pavilion and discover charming backstreets near a mosque that looks more like a Chinese temple. Walking east, I soon find myself at Moon Lake Park. Harking back to the year 636 in the Tang Dynasty, the park runs like a tranquil river of green through the city centre, and houses a number of interesting features including Guandi Temple and the Lu family residence. However, it is the people that really bring the area to life. I run into a pensioner, Mrs Ge, gracefully swooping the air with a sword as she practises tai chi in front of a Taoist temple. Nearby some musicians are playing Chinese flutes.

At the top end of Moon Lake lies the Drum Tower that lends its Chinese name -Haishu - to the whole district. The structure dates back to the Ming Dynasty but has been rebuilt many times, and now sports an incongruous-looking Western-style clock tower added in 1935. »



The Ningbo Bund: Home of the first selfie pose?



From top:
revellers
exploring
Ningbo's
streets; the
Bund; local
cuisine is all
about the sea



The Ningbo Bund is 20 years older than its better-known Shanghai cousin, and there are remnants of the past including crumbling façades of Dutch and British colonial buildings and a police station from 1908

Bund for glory

The Lao Wai Tan, or Old Bund, is a party district by the river that also owes its origin to Ningbo's seafaring past. After the first Opium War in 1842, China was forced by the Treaty of Nanking to open up five ports, including Ningbo, to the British. Sailors need taverns, and the Bund became the go-to place for a pint and good time – a reputation it still holds today.

The Ningbo Bund is 20 years older than its better-known Shanghai cousin, and there are remnants of the past including crumbling façades of Dutch and British colonial buildings, the baroque-styled villa built by businessman Yan Xinhou, and the former police station dating back to 1908.

The Bund waterfront is a perfect place to laze away a sunny afternoon in cafés or restaurants like Eudora Station – but, as I discover, it is at its best at night. Bars fill to the beats of Filipino bands, and streetside barbecues satiate the hunger pangs of late-night revellers. “Lao Wai Tan is where you go if you want a party vibe, or quieter bars on the riverfront,” says Ryan Parker. “It is also a great place to sample the local food.”

Ningbo cuisine is, as you would expect, heavy on seafood, but it lacks the spice predominant in other Chinese regions. “We prefer the original »



Carved into stone, this dragon still turns heads

taste of the seafood with salt – we don't use heavy sauces," says local Fred Zhou, executive chef at Ningbo's Shangri-la Hotel. Seafood from the East China Sea largely comprises small shellfish, so clams and razor clams dominate plates. Zhou recommends salted crab, an acquired taste served raw and dipped in vinegar, along with deep-fried yellow croaker fish wrapped in bean-curd skin.

Tang yuan – sesame rice balls – are popular throughout China, but are said to originate in the city. "Tang yuan symbolises reunion on New Year's Eve," says Zhou. "Go for the famous brand in Ningbo called Gang Ya Gou ('vat duck dog')." Ningbo Museum houses a re-creation of the original Gang Ya Gou shop from 1926.

A city that has played an important role in Chinese history, Ningbo has embraced its position on the water, letting the currents bring it trade, new ideas and good fortune. "Both (Chinese) characters of Ningbo come from water," explains Zhou. "The weather, the culture and the food are all about the sea." ☺



Above: salted crab wrapped in bean curd skin.
Below: Ningbo's famous black sesame rice balls



t Tigerair flies to Ningbo from Singapore four times a week. Visit www.tigerair.com to plan your trip.

all you need to know

stay

Shangri-la Hotel

A well-appointed stayover with arguably one of the best views in all of Ningbo.

88 Yuyuan St;
shangri-la.com/ningbo

Fortune Bond Hotel

Business-oriented hotel with good facilities for a short stay in town.

455 Mayuan Rd; tel: +86 (0)574 8708 8888

Home Inn

Dependable chain with a central location. Basic, but has all the essentials for the budget traveller.

57 Zhongshan West Rd; homeinns.com/rjhotel/057409

eat

Yongshang Grandmother Bridge

Popular chain with seven locations serving local food at reasonable prices.

Nan tang laojie, 258 Nanjiao Rd; tel: +86 (0)574 5571 7177

Ganesha Indian Restaurant

Highly regarded authentic Indian

food. All meat used in the restaurant is halal.

336 Zhenming Rd; ganesha-restaurant.com

Eudora Station

Upmarket restaurant with great waterfront location. Serves mainly European food.

111-119 Waima Rd; tel: +86 (0)574 8764 7137, eudorastation.com

drink

Easy

Attracts a friendly local crowd with an emphasis on cocktails. There's also a Lao Wai Tan branch.

35 Moon Lake Flourishing Gdn, tel: +86 1360 574 5699

Shamrock

Irish-style pub popular with locals and expats alike, situated in Lao Wai Tan.

72 Zhongma Rd; tel: +86 (0)574 8766 0989

LBBS

Under-the-radar location with a homely atmosphere.

14-1 Dahe Alley, off Zhongshan East Rd; tel: +86 1860 661 7635