







# SEA-ING **NINGBO**

The sea is key to exploring this  
ancient harbour city

WORDS ■ MARK ANDREWS









A long procession steps over the smoke from burning straw as firecrackers break the solemnity. Done to stop the ghosts at a funeral from following the mourners home, customs like this are still alive in the area. Almost every village around Ningbo houses genuine old architecture, and Cicheng is a fine example. It sells itself on having more successful candidates (519 *jinshi*) in the imperial examinations than any other town in China, and is a bastion of clean government. Whilst the displays on these are fascinating, the real pleasure lies in strolling around town watching the old buildings still in use and the lives of the inhabitants ruled by the old ways.

Ningbo, better known for its industry and port, flies under the radar as a tourist destination. One of the world's ten largest ports, it is the sea that is key to exploring the city's history and sights. The Old Bund (Laowaitan) lies at the heart of the city on an isthmus created by the confluence of the Fenghua and Yuyao rivers, which then form the Yong River. Ningbo was one of the five ports opened up as a result of the first Opium War.





Ningbo's Bund is 20 years older than the one in Shanghai. Today, its architectural legacy of British and Dutch colonial buildings lays swing to one of the city's liveliest entertainment areas full of bars and restaurants. The Cathedral of the Sacred Heart is one of the oldest buildings in the area built in 1872. Still in daily use, it doubles as a popular backdrop for wedding pictures during the day, and is unceremoniously utilised as a car park by night.

Slender Moon Lake, offering a respite from the throbbing city, is Ningbo's cultural heart. Much of old Ningbo is within easy walking distance of this central park. Just to the west lies the Tianyi Pavilion – the oldest existent private library in Asia and the third oldest in the world. Built in 1561 by Fan Qin, a Deputy Defence Minister during the Ming Dynasty, it once housed 70,000 volumes. Today the extensive grounds feature old buildings and traditional gardens. Look out for the displays about *mahjong*. Famous Ningbo native Chen Yumen created the game we know today. In Ningbo dialect *mahjong* means sparrow.

To the east, the seven storey Tianfeng Pagoda (now dwarfed on Ningbo's skyline) was once the tallest building in the city. It still offers a good view although the current structure was rebuilt in 1982 due to the original tilting dangerously. Nearby is the upmarket Moonlake Flourishing Garden complex of restaurants and bars. Built in the traditional *san-ho-yuan* (three section compound) style there are some atmospheric back lanes with genuine old buildings



including the former homes of Chen Yumen, and Yang Fang who made his fortune facilitating trade between Chinese and foreigners.

Just beyond the north end lies the Drum Tower topped by a Western clock tower added in 1935. To the side lie the foundations of the Yongfeng storehouse uncovered in 2002 and one of the few Yuan Dynasty buildings discovered in the south of China. Central Ningbo is relatively easy to get around on foot or by bicycle. The only two subway lines that operate through the city intersect at the Drum Tower. More lines are under construction, including one to Cicheng.