

A city worth its salt

Classical gardens and architecture built off the salt trade make the Chinese city of Yangzhou a must-visit



A father and son enjoy the scene of the Heyuan in Yangzhou with its traditional style of architecture. PHOTOS: MARK ANDREWS



Dongguan Street (above) dates back 1,200 years.



Yechun Teahouse (left), seen through the arch of a bridge.

Mark Andrews

For most Singaporeans, Yangzhou is almost synonymous with fried rice. Even in China, knowledge of the city seldom extends beyond the dish.

This was not always the case.

Yangzhou was once one of the richest cities in the realm. But bypassed by modern transportation from around 1908, when the Shanghai to Nanjing railway was completed, it fell into obscurity.

However, this also means that much of its rich cultural heritage is still intact today for tourists wishing to discover an alternative destination in China.

Located just north of the mighty Yangtze River in the central part of Jiangsu province, it was the Grand Canal, the great arterial waterway linking Beijing and Hangzhou, which both made and broke the city's fortunes.

Access to the north-south and east-west trade routes on the waterway made Yangzhou an important hub for the sale of rice, salt and silk during the Tang dynasty.

But it was salt, a monopolised commodity subject to government taxation, which really built the city. Yangzhou's proximity to the marshes of northern Jiangsu that yielded sea salt allowed the city to prosper by using the waterway network to control distribution to seven nearby provinces.

Salt wealth rubbed off onto the architecture, a legacy that remains today.

Those who have visited Suzhou will find the carefully manicured southern-school classical style of garden at Geyuan (www.ge-garden.net) in Yangzhou familiar, but you will wonder where the crowds are.

Considered one of the four best gardens in China, the "Ge" in the garden's name comes from the shape of the Chinese character, which resembles the silhouette of bamboo leaves.

Entering from the north, a glade of bamboo, set among water features, beckons me to the central part of the compound.

Geyuan as seen today dates back to 1818 when Huang Zhiyang, a salt merchant, bought the land and set about redesigning the gardens.

The main rock feature is the central part of the garden, and it is divided into different scenes to allude to the four seasons.

Red maples accentuate yellow stones that represent mountains and valleys in autumn, for instance. Despite the "yuan" in its name,

meaning garden, Geyuan is far more than just a garden, as its southern part is dominated by the Huang family mansions.

Likely the richest family in their time in Yangzhou, the family's wealth can still be appreciated in the Nanmu Hall, which uses liberal quantities of precious nanmu wood, a durable softwood.

Exiting from the mansions, I find myself on Dongguan Street, which today is the touristy heart of the old town. It is 1,122m long and dates back 1,200 years.

The city itself celebrated its 2,500th anniversary in 2013. The street is lined with Ming- and Qing-style buildings and there are plenty of less busy alleys, with lots of atmosphere, to duck into.

At the eastern end, Dongmen is a towering gate that marks the point where merchants once entered the city from the Grand Canal.

Today, the high gate offers a good vantage over the streets of the old town.

A short distance from Dongmen is a statue of Marco Polo on horseback by Taizhou Road, which runs alongside the ancient route of the Grand Canal.

According to the Venetian's tale in *The Travels Of Marco Polo*, written around 1300, he served as an official in the city from 1282 to 1287.

Although no Chinese accounts corroborate the story, there is evidence, from both writings and tombstones, of a thriving Italian community involved in trade in the early 14th century.

One tomb well worth a visit, I discover on the final day of the three days I spend exploring the city, is the Mausoleum of the Western Han (98 *Pingshantang Donghu*).

Located in the forested hills to the north of city, it contains the burial chambers of Liu Xu, the first king of Guangling – the first settlement in Yangzhou – and his queen.

It was uncovered in 1979 and subsequently moved to this site.

The coffin, which is over 2,000 years old, is made from cypress and without nails. It utilises the Huangchang Ticou building style and such a structure and proportions were usually reserved for emperors.

Located a short walk from the tomb and covering more than 30ha, the Slender West Lake is arguably the city's premier attraction. Dating from the Qing dynasty, it links a series of smaller moats and private villas built by salt traders.

Its long slender shape is due to it originally being the course of the Baozhang River. While the lake in its current form dates back only to the mid-18th cen-



A man doing taiji in front of Changsheng Pavilion.

tury, properties from as far back as the Sui dynasty began modifying the landscape.

These were then linked during the Qing dynasty to welcome then emperor Qianlong on his southern inspections, when he toured the south of the country in a show of power and governance.

Although it is called a lake, it is just as much a park for relaxation. Weeping willows line the banks of the waterways and, in springtime, the parkland comes to life with jade-white quing flowers, the official flower of the city.

Given the large size of the park, it would be easy to spend a day exploring but, as I discover, the best sites are along the middle of the park.

Even on a cold winter's day, the Five Pavilion Bridge has no shortage of visitors.

Built in 1757, it combines the architectural styles of northern and southern China with its central twin-eaved pavilion flanked by four single-roofed pavilions on each side and set atop a bridge.

Nowadays, the bridge symbolises not just the park, but the city itself. Legend claims that the nearby White Pagoda, another of the park's 24 scenic spots, was built in one night in 1784 to welcome Qianlong on his inspection.

A replica of Beihai Park's structure in Beijing, the Yangzhou version is more elegant and graceful, locals say.

Yangzhou-style fried rice – rice is fried with prawns, ham, eggs and vegetables such as peas or bamboo shoots – is of course offered in restaurants. But it is actually baozi (steamed buns) which are the local obsession.

There is an old saying in Yangzhou, "zaochen pi bao shui wan shang shui bao pi", which translates as "in the morning, you put water on your skin and in the evening you put your skin into water".

Local inhabitants traditionally started the day off in teahouses serving baozi before rounding the day off in bathhouses.

Some swear by Yechun Teahouse (10 *Fengleshang Jie*), which dates back in its current form to 1877.

It offers 10 varieties of baozi, including sandingbao stuffed with pork, chicken and bamboo, and another with shredded turnip.

Also on offer are various Huaiyang-style shao mai and steamed dumplings.

Walking off one too many baozi by the side of the ancient Grand Canal, I pass by Changsheng Pavilion, which means "long life".

An elderly man is taking the pavilion's name literally and intently practising taiji.

Crossing back over to the west side of the canal, I call in at Lu's Former Residence (22 *Kangshan Jie*).

Built in 1897 by Lu Shaoyu, a salt merchant originally from Jiangxi province, it is the largest existing residence.

Covering nearly 10,000 sq m, it has more than 130 rooms and cost 78,000 pieces of silver to build.

Its construction just about marked the zenith of the town's fortunes before the Beijing-to-Shanghai railway eclipsed the importance of the Grand Canal. Today, the building plays host to an upscale Huaiyang-style restaurant.

Huaiyang cuisine is characterised by dishes that are not spicy and usually quite sweet, along with the use of local Zhenjiang vinegar.

Heyuan (www.he-garden.net), located nearby, for once is not the product of a salt merchant.

Built in the current form in 1883 by government official He Zhidao, it is again a fine example of a classical garden.

The residential buildings show the crossover of the times with Western elements creeping into the traditional style.

This is most evident with the furnishings, but can also be seen in the French-style shutters and fireplaces. A unique element is the covered corridor linking the buildings and spanning 1,500m.

In the gardens, I peer into the Moon In Water Pool. Sure enough, even in daytime, it is as if I see the moon's reflection, courtesy of the rock's trickery.

Rounding off my final day's exploration, I choose to take a leaf out of the locals' book. These days, the bathhouses are not so alive, but the pedicure and foot massage tradition remain.

Forgo the pedicure for soaking my tired feet in water before the pains are kneaded out, while I think about Yangzhou's past.

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GETTING THERE
Scoot (www.flyscoot.com) flies from Singapore to Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu province in eastern China. From Nanjing, infrequent trains from Nanjing Station to Yangzhou take about 50 minutes. Alternatively, frequent bullet trains from both Nanjing and Nanjing South station take from about 20 minutes to reach Zhenjiang Station, which is located almost opposite Yangzhou on the other side of the Yangtze, on the Nanjing-Shanghai route. Then from Zhenjiang Station, there is a frequent bus service across to Yangzhou. For Chinese train information, go to www.travelchinaguide.com/china-trains.

TIPS

- While Yangzhou is not as large as some Chinese cities, it is a good idea to stay near its centre.
- Central Yangzhou can be explored on foot, but hiring a bicycle from bicycle-sharing apps Mobike or Ofo is a good option.
- Do not expect any English to be spoken. If you cannot speak Mandarin and would like to take cabs, ensure that your destinations are written down in Chinese for the driver.

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