

TRAVEL

# Oriental Venice

**ZHUJIAJIAO  
WATER VILLAGE,  
30 KM FROM  
SHANGHAI,  
REPLETE WITH  
MANMADE  
CANALS AND  
CRISSCROSSING  
BRIDGES, IS A  
VISUAL FEAST**

Kalpana Sunder

It's like the kaleidoscopic backdrop of a kung fu movie. There are narrow lanes shaded by willows, which are made for strolling. We walk through a maze of stone paths crisscrossed by bridges of different spans built of wood, marble and stone, wooden boats lying carelessly, men with fishing poles slung across their shoulders, and the occasional cyclist weaving his way through children and pets playing in the dirt. The soft tones in the unfamiliar local dialect are in the background. It's a lot like Venice with its glistening canals — but Chinese style, with red lanterns and oriental signs. We are in Zhujiajiao Water Village, a mere 30 km from Shanghai.

Zhujiajiao is the perfect antidote to Shanghai's fast paced frenzied lifestyle. Shanghai is China's future; Zhujiajiao is a snapshot of China's glorious past. This ancient water city dating more than 1,700 years old was positioned on the south of the Yangtze River, and prospered through rice and clothing transported on its manmade canals. In the ups and downs of imperialistic rule it got relegated to the backwaters till recently, when it was developed into a tourist attraction.

The architecture is picturesque — Ming and Ching era buildings. The narrow streets are sandwiched between traditional wooden homes, with slate roofs, courtyards, and pointed eaves. The star attraction of this water town is its 36 bridges. We see the famous Fangshang Bridge, the largest of the 36 bridges. The name 'Fangshang' literally means 'setting fish free'. There are five symmetrical arches and a stone relief of eight dragons surrounding a pearl. According to local lore, a dragon once lived under the bridge and protected the village. There used to be a temple by the bridge where visitors would buy captive fish, turtles, etc and set them free after worshipping. Even today you can buy goldfish in a plastic bag or some turtles, and set them free for good karma.

Local residents greet us with a smile as they go about their routine. There are old, wizened ladies with bent backs holding baskets suspended on bamboo poles carrying luscious fruit. Some people sit on plastic stools cutting vegetables into symmetrical heaps. There is a throng of peddlers selling all kinds of street food. We see glutinous sweet rice stuffed in bamboo sticks, the local *chong zi* (steamed rice dumplings stuffed with meat and peanuts wrapped in bamboo leaves), freshwater crabs and an assortment of caramelised fruits inserted on skewers.

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

**Getting there:** Emirates flies direct to Shanghai Pudong Airport. A one-way trip costs about Dh2,500. Take a bus at the People Square to Zhujiajiao; taxis are also available, but can set you back about 150-200 yuan (Dh80-Dh110).

There is a man cleaning turtles; an elderly man has fallen asleep in a chair outside his home. These streets are the home of local residents and there seems to be little distinction between home and alley. Many doors are left ajar and we peek into kitchens where residents are busy whipping up a meal and a drawing room where an old wizened woman is bent over her afternoon meal in a soup bowl.

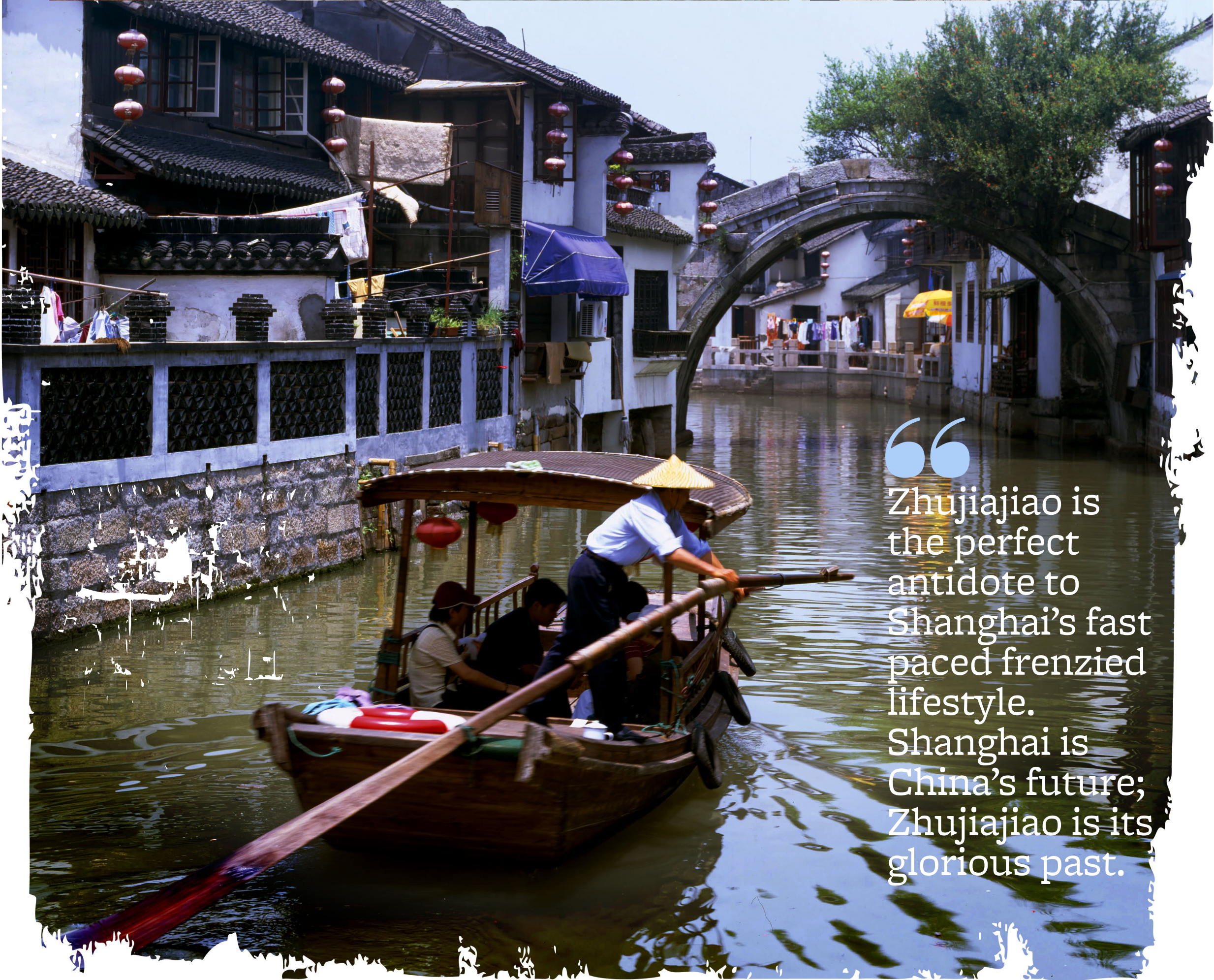
Most of the fronts of homes are souvenir shops. I'm seduced by the goods on offer: embroidered landscapes, traditional wooden combs in a bewildering array of shapes and sizes, lace fans, embroidered silk slippers, happy men of different sizes, sandalwood carvings, red clay teapots and kitschy memorabilia of the Communist era with false propaganda posters and the face of Mao on almost everything! Of course most local people are playing cards or mahjong on

makeshift tables or sipping tea at the tea-houses and don't pressurise us into buying anything.

We see ornamental tiles, animal motifs on houses and dragons and lions on bridges. The canals are filled with gondola-type boats operated by a single oar to push and steer as if cooking with a giant ladle in a boiling cauldron. There's a museum built by a carpenter two hundred years ago, showcasing residential life and traditional Chinese furniture. The Qing Dynasty post office here, built in European style has a letterbox outside decorated with a dragon coiling around it. Inside we see ancient antique postcards and evocative letters written on bamboo. In the distance is the tallest structure in this ancient town — the pavilion of the Kezhi gardens.

We walk past a Chinese medicine hall, which still dispenses remedies to local residents with exotic medicines and herbs in porcelain jars. We're told how this town has been a favourite of famous movie directors, and many movies and dramas have been shot in this picturesque Venice of China. Photographers and painters are attracted to its bohemian vibe and the unique life on the water. One of the few remaining bastions of ancient Chinese culture, Zhujiajiao has transported us to the Shanghai of yore where traders and pirates were once the only visitors.

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