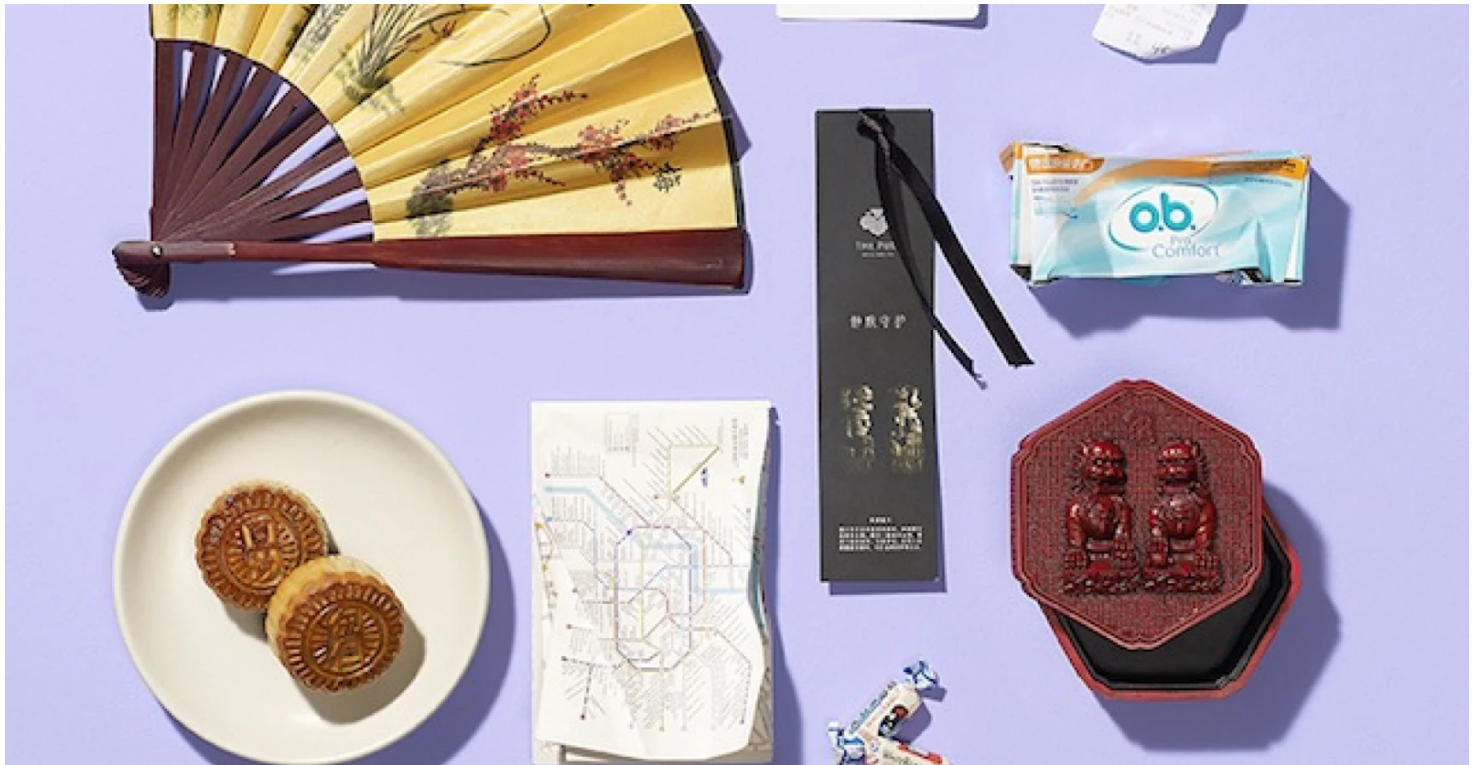

TRAVEL INSPIRATION IN THE MAGAZINE

By Cindy Chupack • December 09, 2013



AFAR

AFAR chose a destination at random—by literally spinning a globe—and sent writer Cindy Chupack on a spontaneous journey to Shanghai.



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The irony is not lost on me that as soon as I finished writing my book about marriage—a book that celebrates the fact that I had finally found someone to share my life with, get a dog with, start a family with—I agreed to travel by myself to anywhere in the world.

When I landed in Shanghai, I was still debating high-speed train versus taxi when I heard my name spoken by a man wearing a white Peninsula Hotel pillbox hat. He led me to a green Rolls-Royce, which deposited me at the art deco–inspired Peninsula Shanghai, the newest hotel on the historic strip known as the Bund, where my Grand Deluxe River Suite looked out across the Huangpu River to the futuristic Pudong district.

I had bought an air ambulance card in preparation for this trip, just in case my “spin” landed me in some war-torn, under-developed country. Instead, I was sent to the otherworldly metropolis of Shanghai. AFAR had arranged my first night’s hotel, but even my editor was surprised to hear that the Peninsula had comped a Rolls-Royce transfer and an upgrade.

I was now thinking it might take an air ambulance to get me to leave this hotel.

Everything I planned to see I could see through my floor-to-ceiling windows. I had marveled at a similar view on my computer a day earlier when I learned my destination, finding it amusing that what I thought was the tallest building in China, the Shanghai World Financial Center (which looks like a bottle opener if you had a 1,614-foot bottle to open) was uncomfortably close to the Jin Mao Tower (which looks like the Chrysler Building if it grew about 11 floors). These mammoth skyscrapers faced off like two boys in a schoolyard, trying to impress the girlish, pink glass-and-concrete Oriental Pearl Tower. But from my suite I could see a new kid bullying them both. The Shanghai Tower, which had a “topping off” ceremony while I was visiting, is now the tallest building in China (2,073 feet), and it’s already in danger of losing its title to Changsha’s planned Sky City, which is expected to climb to 2,749 feet in 2014.

How, I wondered, could a city of 23.5 million be so open to change when in the United States—and in my marriage—change (even a channel change) doesn’t happen without a lot of debate, opposition, negotiation, and compromise?

“That’s one of the good things about communism,” Cecilia told me over high tea under the high ceilings of the Peninsula lobby. Cecilia worked for the hotel as, I think, my Fairy Godmother. She kept arranging things

for me (a tour of the Bund, dinner reservations, and foolproof directions in Chinese for cab drivers) even after I changed hotels to explore another part of the city.

Until Cecilia mentioned it, I'd kind of forgotten I was in a communist country. I didn't feel my freedom limited in any way, except that I couldn't access YouTube. The fact that the Chinese can't watch "Charlie bit my finger—again!" explains why buildings get finished in less time than it would take me to find a dumpling on Nanjing Road.

In contrast to the dizzying pace of construction, something beautiful and slow happens every morning in Shanghai: the morning exercises.

My American expat tour guide, Patrick, mentioned the morning exercises as we explored the flower, bird, fish, and insect market, which I convinced him to bundle with my tour of the Bund on my third day in the city. As we walked past the birds for sale, Patrick explained, "Men bring them to the park during morning exercises so they can be with other birds and learn new songs. The bird who knows the most songs is the best." (Even the birds have to embrace change, I thought.)

At 7 a.m. the next day, I went to a park right behind my new hotel, the PuLi, where I saw several groups of locals waiting to start their morning exercises. On closer inspection, I saw they had already started.

Tai chi, when done properly—and by that I mean by Chinese people, in China—is so slow you can barely see the movement. Above the trees, modern towers gleamed, but here in the park there were tai chi practitioners, fan dancers, calligraphers dipping their brushes in water and painting characters on the

concrete as a meditation, and, as promised, four men, sitting on the edge of a patch of green, smoking and talking, and occasionally moving the lovely wooden cages containing their birds, presumably so they could learn new songs.

I say “presumably,” because not being able to speak or even in the slightest way fake the language makes it very difficult to communicate.

This had become clear my first morning, when I realized I needed a tampon. Thankfully, I was in a high-end hotel, so I could just call housekeeping. Or so I thought.

Housekeeping, confused by my request, offered to send a bellman. I asked if it could be a bellwoman. When she arrived in her white pillbox hat, she presented me with a dark wood box that held one sanitary napkin. I tried to explain/mime/write that I needed a tampon. I tried asking, “Tampax?” When I attempted to show her the difference online, she took a step back, horrified. I had ended up on a page about how to *insert* a tampon. It might have been the most intimate and awkward moment I will ever share with a woman from a different culture.

Fifteen minutes later, a woman from the front desk called, saying Tampax is not sold in China. I said, “No, no, any brand will do.” Finally, the woman in the pillbox hat returned with a box of O.B.’s, but before I could thank her, she said, “I’m sorry. These are made in Germany.” For a moment I wondered if she somehow knew I was Jewish; then I realized she was apologizing because they weren’t made in America. There’s a reason they call it a language barrier.

Even talking to my husband, Ian, at home was difficult, until I discovered halfway through my trip that it wasn’t nine hours later in Los Angeles; it was 15 hours earlier.

Just as the skyline suggested, I was in Tomorrowland.

More evidence of this time-space confusion surfaced when I decided to stroll down Nanjing Road, the main shopping street of Shanghai, to find a place known for its soup dumplings. Nanjing Road West is like Rodeo Drive on steroids. It took me 10 minutes to walk from one end to the other of Louis Vuitton, and another 10 minutes to walk past the city block that is Gucci. I finally had delicious Shanghai soup dumplings, xiao long

bao, at Din Tai Fung, a chain that, I learned later, has a location 45 minutes from my house in California.

For my last two nights, I decided to stay in the future. I made a reservation in the Pudong district at the just-opened Mandarin Oriental, the newest of the new hotels.

In contrast to the Bund, which feels like Europe or New York, Pudong feels like the moon. The space between skyscrapers looked as gigantic as the buildings themselves, and my hotel seemed to be at the outer end of outer space. When the assistant front office manager, Julia, showed me to my room and asked if there was anything else I needed, I surprised us both by responding, “I feel a little stranded.” She had meant, perhaps, extra coat hangers.

I decided for my last dinner, instead of retreating, I would go even further into the future and try to get into Ultraviolet, which, according to its website, is “the first restaurant of its kind attempting to unite food with multi-sensorial technologies in order to create a fully immersive dining experience.” It offers a 20-some-course set menu at a single 10-seat table in an undisclosed location. (A van picks you up and returns you.) Apparently, locals try and fail to get reservations three months in advance, so it was no surprise when I got the email saying there was no room for me at the table, but a huge surprise when it went on to say I could observe from the kitchen and eat every course with the chef.

Well, it was the most unbelievable meal I have ever had, with wildly inventive dishes that were never inventive just for the sake of invention. It was taste over technology, new because it was improved. An ocean scene (the scent of seaweed, a breeze, vaporized salt water, the sound of waves crashing) complemented oysters and “tea-weed crab melba,” the dish gorgeously paired with Lagavulin scotch whisky–Lapsang Souchong iced tea. A forest scene (trees projected on the walls, the smell of pine, the rustle of leaves) accompanied “truffle burnt soup bread.” But no matter how playful or profound the presentation, the food was the star. French chef Paul Pairet had considered all of the senses—sound, sight, smell, feel, and certainly taste. The only “enhancer” that wasn’t accounted for was the very human desire to turn to someone you love (or at least someone who loves food) and say, “Isn’t this egg Gruyère raviolo the most amazing dish you’ve ever had?!” And that’s all I wanted to do all night—have Ian by my side experiencing every once-in-a-lifetime moment with me in real time.

Maybe that’s marriage. All I knew was it was time to go home. I had seen tomorrow. I was ready to return to today.