

traveltraveltraveltraveltra

Edited by Tinja Tsang tinja.tsang@scmp.com



PERFECT 10

Delicious dumplings, fiery liquor, tunnels and deadly obsessions. Joshua Samuel Brown pedals around Xian

1 Cycling

Xian is an excellent city to explore by bike. Unfortunately, there aren't many places to rent them. The stretch of Yanta Road just southeast of the South Gate (marked on most tourist maps as the Xian Bird Market, which is just up the block) is the city's main bike market. With a little negotiation, you should be able to buy a serviceable bicycle for as little as 100 yuan

– and sell it back for two thirds of that when you leave – saving on cab fares and giving you more freedom to explore. Don't forget to buy a lock (Xian Bike Market, Yanta Road, southeast of South Gate, outside the wall).

2 The City Wall

While almost all Chinese cities were once surrounded by walls, those around Xian (built during the reign of the first Ming emperor in 1370-75) are the only ones to survive intact. Many ancient gates are well preserved, and visitors are welcome to walk or ride along the top of the walls. During festivals and holidays (such as the mid-autumn festival and lunar new year), the southern end of the wall becomes the place for fetes, fireworks and other festivities (entrance 10 yuan).

3 Da Ching Hwa Manchurian Cuisine

While most people don't come to the capital of the Middle Kingdom's central reaches for the cuisine of China's far northeast, this Manchurian restaurant (located on a side street close to the South Gate of the city wall) is an amazing find. It's decorated with antique swords, bows, saddles and other artefacts, and the food is excellent. There is a wide variety of delicious dumplings served with a dizzying array of sauces, savoury clay pot casseroles and strange concoctions of fruits and bitter gourds. The restaurant also serves a strong, hot, white liquor, based on a family recipe. Don't be surprised if a waitress dressed as a Qing dynasty courtesan brings you an unordered dessert – these are free of charge. Do be surprised at

your bill – a meal for four, including many shots of the mystery fire liquor, shouldn't come to more than 150 yuan (70 Wu Yue-miao men, west of South Gate, inside wall; tel: [86] 29 726 1618).

4 Great Goose Pagoda

Built in the seventh century (and rebuilt during the Qing dynasty), this 65-metre pagoda is one of Xian's most popular attractions and commemorates the Tang dynasty monk Xuan Zang (600-664), who is credited with introducing Buddhism to China. Walk 100 metres or so along the compound's western wall to the Underground Temple, a network of dimly lit tunnels and caves that sprawls for more than a kilometre, and was used during the Cultural Revolution to hide religious artefacts from Red Guards. After the frenzy abated, someone hit on the idea of turning the place into a museum, and there's enough down there to keep you busy for at least an hour (Great Goose Pagoda, south of city wall: 25 yuan to enter grounds; an extra 20 yuan to go to the top of the pagoda. Underground Temple: 15 yuan; tel: [86] 29 5531627).

5 Bell and Drum Towers

Located almost at the centre of the walled city, the Bell and Drum Towers are another of Xian's must-sees. These were originally built about 1380, rebuilt during the Ming dynasty and renovated again in the 1980s. You can enter the towers via an underground passage from the street, which is lined with modern shops and malls (the one to the west is among the swankiest in Xian).

6 Muslim Quarter

Every brick and stone in Xian's Muslim Quarter oozes with history, and many buildings date back to the 1500s. While most visitors stick to the southern end of the quarter, a stroll through the northern residential area is quiet and beautiful. Muslims and non-Muslims are welcome to visit the Great Mosque, which is among the largest in the country, and is built in a traditional Chinese style of platforms, pavilions and halls. Narrow alleys offer shopping bargains on goods from eastern China, as well as all points west along the Silk Road. The merchants aren't overly aggressive, but hard bargaining is the rule. The cuisines of Muslim China are well represented here – a favourite local snack is *ba bao mei gua jer gao*, a sticky, sweet cross between pudding and candy that's served on a stick.

7 Buying art

A cultural crossroads, Xian is an excellent place to shop for art. Northeast of the main South Gate, Shu Yuan Men is also known as "Calligraphy Street", and is

home to a plethora of shops selling scrolls, paintings, brushes and various *objets d'art*. Even if you're not in an acquisitive mood, the ancient street is an excellent place to spend a few hours. Lesser known and to the north in the Muslim quarter, a small gallery called Xian Traditional Chinese Painting sells exquisite hand-painted scrolls in a restored Ming dynasty courtyard house. The structure, which is 500 years old, also serves as an artist's studio, and is well worth the visit for the art and architecture (144 Bei Yuan Men; tel: [86] 29 723 2897). If you're feeling adventurous, there's an underground tunnel that stretches almost a kilometre, from the end of Shu Yuan Men, opposite the South Gate, to the Bell and Drum Towers. The old bomb shelter is sometimes closed because of flooding, but it's usually home to merchants plying their wares.

8 Banpo Museum

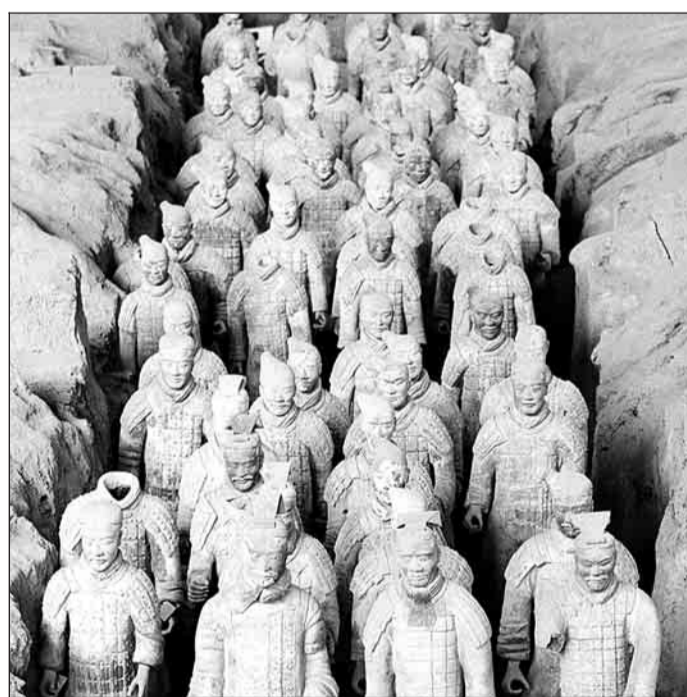
The Chinese are fond of touting their 5,000-plus years of history – and, since the discovery of this ancient settlement in 1953, they've been able to prove it. The Banpo Museum is named after the developed agricultural society that existed in the area between 5,000BC and 4,000BC. Years of research have provided a glimpse into the world of the matriarchal clan community that inhabited the area long before Xian existed. The museum presents the most complete reconstruction of an agricultural neolithic settlement in the world (east bank of the Chan River, east of Xian; reachable by bus routes 11, 311 and 105; entrance: 20 yuan).

9 Qianling Tomb

The dukes and emperors of ancient China shared with their Egyptian counterparts an obsession with death. The area around Xian is peppered with tombs and mausoleums. Of these, the Qianling Tomb (the joint final resting place of the emperor Gaozong and empress Wu Zeitan) is the best preserved. The tomb is so large it's referred to as a necropolis, or city of the dead (80km west of Xian on Liangshan Hill). Entrance: 31 yuan.

10 Terracotta Warrior Museum

To understand just how seriously an emperor could take his final resting place, visit this recently unearthed site (it was discovered in 1974) of the world's longest-standing army: the famous Terracotta Warriors. Created to protect emperor Qin Shi Huang (259-210BC) in the afterlife, the warriors occupy a series of pits covering more than 22,000 square metres. Each warrior is individually crafted, as are their horses and weapons. Being one of China's most visited sites, the Terracotta Warrior Museum is usually crowded, so try to visit on a weekday.



Hoard of hordes: But there's much more to old Xian (above) than its renowned terracotta warriors (left). Photos: Mark Ralston

in the know

Get there before the guidebooks do

Shanghai

Arch Bar & Cafe: A labour of love for Yale-educated, Taiwanese architect Leslie Chen, the cosy and relaxed Arch Bar & Cafe is the preferred watering hole for Shanghai's interior and graphic designers, architects, assorted creative types and wannabes. Housed in the preserved Normandie Apartments Building, a magnificent 1924 flat-iron structure lifted straight out of Chicago, Arch is far from the touristy nightlife ghetto of Xintiandi, and light-years from the hooker-trawling, neon-drenched bar strip of Maoming Nan Lu. With its soft, designer lighting, plum-velvet drapes and personable staff, it's the ideal nook for browsing *Wallpaper* and *Frame* magazines while munching on healthy salads or pasta dishes. Chen is studiously creative in keeping Shanghai's notoriously fickle punters smiling, regularly organising poetry jams, movie screenings in the basement cinema, cheap Belgian beer evenings and weekend parties (439 Wukang Lu, tel: [86] 21 6466 0807).

Club JZ: With its heyday in the roaring 1930s, Shanghai is a city associated with a swinging age of pink gins and jazz. But forget about any rebirth of cool. Musical historians tell us the colonial city's ballrooms never truly "swung", employing as they did the equivalents of the modern-day five-star hotel's lobby band. Recent years have been little better, with Shanghai's *faux* jazz joints serving up students from local music colleges just trying to make an honest buck and complete their studies. New kid on the block Club JZ, however, is shaking up the scene, with talented, enthusiastic musicians who don't just play, but actually seem to enjoy playing – sparring with each other, jamming and innovating every evening until the early hours, when the gin has done its job and the last Galoisie has been stubbed out (Room 102-103, 1111 Huaihai Zhong Lu. Tel: [86] 21 6415 5255).

Sasha's: Just a few years ago, Sasha's was one of Shanghai's most hopping restaurants and bars, serving not only jugs of cold beer, quality continental cuisine and good times, but a substantial dose of history, housed as it is in a three-storey villa in the leafy old French Concession. Once the tranquil home of T.V. Soong, eldest brother of the Soong sisters, the house later fell into the clutches of Mao Zedong's harridan wife, Jiang Qing, who made it the administrative headquarters for her revolutionary Chinese opera troupe in the 1960s. Now under new management, Sasha's is being

renovated by architects Hualie Mackey Partners Company, which plans to "put the sophistication back into one of Shanghai's most historical and delightful buildings". Sasha's new general manager is Ian Robertson, a no-nonsense Aussie who kept chic Face Bar at the forefront of the city's hedonistic dining scene for several years. Expect big things when the dust settles mid-February (11 Dongping Lu, at the junction of Hengshan Lu, tel: [86] 21 6474 6166).

The Propaganda Poster Art Centre: The four-storey, state-run Shanghai Museum on People's Square is a must-see on any itinerary. But for something quirkier, head for the basement of a nondescript apartment block on Huashan Lu, where tour guide Yang Peiming has established his own miniature museum, charting three turbulent decades in Chinese history (1949-1979) through colourful propaganda art. The few hundred posters exhibited are a mere fraction of the 5,000 in Yang's personal collection, but provide insights into misguided political initiatives such as the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s (which resulted in the most terrible famine in history) and the chaotic Cultural Revolution (which paralysed China from 1966-1976). The upbeat Happy New Year Show, on display until mid-February, highlights posters produced by the Communist Party every Lunar New Year wishing the masses bumper harvests and increased production and prosperity for the nation (Room BOC, Basement, Block B, 868 Huashan Lu, Shanghai. Usually open 10am-4pm daily, tel: [86] 21 6211 1845 or [86] 139 0184 1246 for an appointment).

Shanghai-tique: Although the grubby streets around Yuyuan Gardens are littered with ramshackle stores flogging production-line, *faux* Ming furniture and glazed pottery horses randomly but deliberately caked in yesterday's mud, no market in Shanghai can compete with Beijing's sprawling Panjiayuan antique market for Chinese curio and furniture shopping. Nonetheless, Shanghai's colonial past means it's the best city in China for searching out genuine, dark and mysterious art-deco furniture and knock-knacks from the late 1920s and 1930s. The finest place to find a pristine dressing table snatched straight out of an Agatha Christie novel, or a beaten-up leather suitcase that probably arrived in town via an ocean liner from Marseille is the dimly lit, moody and strangely romantic Shanghai-tique store. Don't expect any bargains. People are becoming bored with chinoiserie, and deco is a smash hit once again in the Paris of the East (699 Huashan Lu, tel: [86] 21 6249 5986). Gary Jones



The Propaganda Poster Art Centre charts three dramatic decades

DETOURS

For the price of a regular airline ticket, you can fly in a fighter jet. Greg Clarke samples the not-so-friendly skies above Victoria

It's like a scene from dozens of movies. The trussed-up fighter pilot strides across the runway, eases on his helmet, drops into the cockpit and prepares for take-off. But where the next scene would normally pan to eyes lit with steely determination, my peepers have wide-eyed fear written all over them.

I'm sitting next to 40-year-old pilot Darren De Roia in a Strikemaster MK88, one of the most successful fighters ever made. It's equipped with two machine guns and can carry 1,300kg of bombs. This one, built in Britain in 1972, was once operated by the New Zealand Air Force. Now, it's owned by

Australian Jet Adventures, which, for A\$1,500 (about HK\$9,000), offers budding Top Gunners the opportunity to take to the skies and experience what it might be like to engage in mid-air battle.

The runway stretches out before us. In the cockpit, the sound of a jet engine winding its way to power is barely audible through my flying helmet. Far louder is the sound of my heavy breathing through the oxygen mask, the requirement of which becomes all too obvious after take-off. De Roia fires the jet towards the end of the runway. Before I know it, we've darted into the air.

We climb, clinically and smoothly, slicing through the clouds and into the glistening blue above. Then, without warning, the world changes. The aircraft is now upside down and a vast expanse of blue is beyond my feet. Strapped in tight, there's no discomfort and the parachute under my rear makes quite a cushion. I can hear my breathing



become heavier by the second. De Roia flips the fighter again, and the sky is back where it's supposed to be.

"Want to try the loop?" he asks. It's a purely rhetorical question, as I don't actually have time to scream: "No!" De Roia pulls the joystick gently and points the jet's nose towards space. We are now flying vertically at a rate of about 14,000 feet per minute. We're in

the skies above Ballarat, about an hour (by road) northwest of Melbourne. The renowned 12 Apostles, on Victoria's southwest coast, are 15 minutes away, and De Roia repeats his perfected aerobically routine above them. The loop is like flying around the inside of a bottle.

We peak at about 12,000 feet and, as we start our inverted descent I look out through the

roof, beyond the breaks in the cloud. The paddocks below look scorched by the summer, squared sections of land more brown than green. But I've been warned not to look through the top of the canopy. Keep your eyes on the horizon (wherever that is) or out the front of the aircraft and the chances of being sick are less.

We exit the loop at about 500km/h, registering G-forces of

about 3.5. The Rolls Royce engine has a top speed of 834km/h, but it's hard to imagine moving any faster than we are. I try to lift my arms off my knees, but it's a struggle. My stomach is churning. Far easier is to tilt my eyes towards the airtight bag tucked into a pocket of my flying suit.

I regain a sense of composure when De Roia mentions that we're going to perform an "attack" on a set of isolated farm sheds. He executes a wingover (where jets peel away from each other). For a moment, we're 90 degrees to the ground, one wing pointing straight towards it. We dive towards the target, but it seems as if the ground is rushing at us. The guns' firing button is on the joystick between my legs. We release our "weapons" and start climbing, the sun streaming through the canopy. I can't see a thing, and my stomach has gone the way of the "bombs".

De Roia's clients are an eclectic lot. One man came from Japan, stayed for one week in Ballarat

and went flying every morning and afternoon. Another was a 90-year-old who said he wanted to experience the loop before he died. He went flying in his own suit, the knot in his tie impeccable.

The unflappable De Roia now turns us back towards Ballarat. As we approach the runway, three green lights come on in the cockpit. All the wheels are down. De Roia lines up with the middle of the asphalt. We touch down, skip over an uneven section of tarmac and stop 800 metres later. The fear is gone, replaced by an overwhelming sense of triumph. Although I may not be cut out for battle, it has been an exhilarating, once-in-a-lifetime way to find out.

Flights start at A\$1,500 for about 18 minutes of flying time. One-hour flights over the 12 Apostles are A\$3,300. Call Australian Jet Adventures on [61] 3 5339 2769 or visit www.austjetadv.com for more information.



This is your captain freaking: Darren De Roia (above) flies a mean Strikemaster MK88