

SUZHOU



Suzhou (苏州市, formally known as Soochow), is often referred to as the 'Venice of China' due to its numerous canals, picturesque gardens and relatively small (by Chinese standards) size. A tourist attraction for many who visit Shanghai, it has a more traditional feel than its neighbouring metropolitan giant and is historically a site for silk, culture and education. Located in the Jiangsu Province of China, about 100km north-west of Shanghai, it has easy train links to Nanjing, Hangzhou and Wuxi. Conveniently located for exploration whilst providing lots of tourist attractions of its own; as well as numerous schools, restaurants, museums and nightlife; Suzhou offers international comforts alongside more cosy Chinese experiences.



Teaching in Suzhou

China has a central education system and Suzhou schools are accordingly based on the national system of public education, offering primary schools, middle Schools, high schools and university. Education is highly valued and many parents will work hard or travel to get their children into the best schools or into extra classes. Consequently, as a foreign teacher you will symbolise a school's prestige or reputation. It is expensive and time consuming for schools to hire foreign teachers and often richer schools will have more foreign teachers than their poorer counterparts. Culturally test scores are important to parents and many schools, such as my own school, also offer boarding opportunities for students, with variation across the city between private and state schools and those with the best reputation.

The Suzhou Education Bureau and Teaching Support

Typically teachers working with Teach English In China work alongside the Suzhou Education Bureau/International Foundation School, so will have lots of support and guidance regarding their teaching. Although I personally worked independently with my school, rather than with the Bureau, friends and colleagues have commented that working with the Bureau can make 'life a lot easier' due to feedback, weekly meetings, class observations and reviews. The Bureau also organises accommodation, social events and provides a central point for communication, so is a useful support system for working abroad. However, having worked independently in Wujiang Pearl School and Kindergarten, I can stress that not working with the Bureau does not mean being unsupported. My school had a supervisor who assisted with bureaucratic affairs and I had teaching mentors in both the primary and kindergarten departments of my school. The main difference was that I had fewer assessments and while I gave open classes, I generally received less formal feedback for my teaching than teachers who worked with the Education Bureau.

As well as support from coordinators or the Education Bureau, Teaching Assistants or Class Teachers will also be in your class when you teach. Although their input, English fluency or assistance will vary, they can be a valuable source of advice. They can also be a link between your English classes and Chinese classes, or when required, a means of extra translation. In kindergarten, I was rarely without

teaching support because my students were so young. I often needed help if I wanted to translate more complicated instructions to my students (though fluency varied greatly amongst my colleagues) or simply if one of my pupils threw up, hurt themselves or couldn't yet manage alone. This was the case both for me as a foreign teacher and for Chinese teachers teaching in kindergarten because young children need more attention and help than older ones. With older students and in my Grade 1 Class, my teaching assistant took a more back seat role in the lesson (Chinese teachers have their own huge course loads and often more work than foreign teachers). Many of my friends in secondary school said that at a higher level more advanced students can also be utilised for translation rather than TA's.

Variations in age group, class size and behaviour – kindergarten to middle school: What to expect:

The age group, class size and abilities of pupils vary between schools, both at different grades, but also within grades and across the city. On average, most new teachers teach for about 18 hours a week (plus planning) and lessons last about 40 – 50 minutes (although in kindergarten and Grade 1 my lessons varied more dramatically from 20 minutes to 1 hour). Teachers are provided with teaching resources and textbooks. Class size can vary dramatically, but in China you can expect big classes of up to 40-50 students, and you may work in just one school or across a few different ones. Similarly, you may teach more than one subject – commonly English conversation, grammar and fluency, but potentially also maths and science. I choreographed a few dance shows, my friend Rebecca ran English club and extra conversation classes for more advanced learners and others have taught Physical Education, Phonics, Reading Comprehension, or as I mentioned – maths and science (still in English). Each school will have their own internal systems regarding foreign teachers but it is good to utilise your strengths if you are passionate about other subjects, sports, arts or literature and to develop strong connections with your colleagues, both foreign and Chinese in order to stay informed and learn from each other.

Whether you are teaching the alphabet, encouraging hesitant learners or practising classroom management, putting effort into the role will always produce positive results.

Travel in Suzhou

Travelling in and around Suzhou is very easy with one travel card that can be used on the metro, buses and to hire city bicycles. It is cheap and affordable and although Suzhou does not have its own airport, Shanghai Pudong Airport or Hongqiao Airport are both easily accessible on the train or by bus. Taxi's are also cheap, with a base rate of 12 yuan. Many foreigners and Chinese people also choose to travel on E-Bikes which can be purchased first or second hand in China.

Train – There are two train stations in Suzhou: Suzhou Railway Station (苏州站) and Suzhou North Railway Station (苏州北站). Suzhou Railway Station offers bullet trains to Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing, Tianjin, Chengdu and other places, as well as regular trains to places like Xian, Huangshan and Harbin. The north square of the station has a long distance bus terminal (with access to Shanghai airports) as well as a city bus terminal and taxi ranks. Suzhou North Railway Station offers trains to Beijing South, Shanghai Hongqiao, Nanjing South, Hangzhou and other destinations. In order to travel by train in China you will need your passport as a foreigner, but train travel is affordable, particularly if you book ahead at peak times such as Chinese National Holidays. You can travel to either train station using the metro, buses or taxis.

Metro – Currently Line 1 and 2 run across the city from Mudu Station to Zhongnan Jie Station and from Qihi Station to Sangtiandao – intersecting at South Guangji Road. Several new lines are also under construction as the Suzhou Metro/Subway is currently being expanded with plans for line 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7, some of which will open in 2017. A complete trip on Line 1 takes about 54 minutes, while Line 2 is a little longer with an entire single journey taking about 75 minutes. Ticket fares can vary from CNY2 to CNY8 and metros have ticket vending machines, or alternatively you can use your Suzhou Travel Card which can be topped up at any Family Mart or in the Metro.

Line 4, which will go to the Wujiang district, is set to open in April 2017 and line 3 to the Wuzhong district is currently under construction. For more information about new lines, timetables and tube maps go to <https://www.travelchinaguide.com/cityguides/jiangsu/suzhou/subway/>

Bus – Buses in Suzhou are regular and cost 1 or 2 yuan. You can use your travel card for these or alternatively try and have exact small change. Baidu maps is useful for navigating buses. All bus stops have travel information in Chinese characters and with a little practice they are a great way to navigate the city with several tourist lines also available.

Suzhou Attractions and Tourism

Gardens – Suzhou is famous for its numerous classical gardens, such as the Lingering Garden, Lion Grove Garden, or most famously, the Humble Administrator's Garden (Zhuo Zheng Yuan). These, although not as tranquil nor empty as one might romantically imagine, are beautiful sites of ancient Chinese gardening which utilise feng shui and provide an array of flowers, statues, windows and pavilions. The structures of the gardens normally convey the wills of their owners and although a little more expensive, having visited the Humble Administrator's Garden both with and without guides, I highly recommend visiting with someone who can inform you about the garden's history and meaning. The Humble Administrator's Garden for example has a section with four round windows, each of which represents a season. Additionally, many zig-zag bridges cross the water and follow Zen teachings.



Tiger Hill – Tiger Hill is the historic site of an ancient Pagoda, the Tomb of King He Lu as well as the Sword Testing Stone and Sword Pool. The area is a picturesque site for Suzhou Tourism and Buddhist Culture. There are also lots of food stands and you can get a boat from Tiger Hill to Shantang Jie Tourist Street.

Shantang Jie / Shantang Street – A fabulous long road selling tourist silks, crafts and ceramics with a traditional Chinese food market on one side. Shantang Jie can be accessed by water, bus or metro. It is well worth a visit, both at day and when it lights up at night.

Pin Jan Lu - Another pretty, old tourist street by the canal; Pin Jan Lu features cat cafes, honey pomelo tea, Locke Pub, food stalls and various shops of interest and beauty.

Mudu Ancient Water Town – Mudu is right on the end of line 1 of the metro and the water town is known for its peaceful atmosphere. Lingyan Hill is a nice climb on a sunny day. At the top of the hill you will find a small temple, and the ancient water town is known for its abundance of natural resources. Boat trips are also available in Mudu, with or without a singing guide!

Tongli Water Town – Another pretty water town, 11 miles from Suzhou City, Tongli is a site of ancient culture and Chinese heritage. Well worth a visit, (From Wujiang I cycled), it has been historically associated with poets, Confucian scholars, government officials and painters. An entry ticket allows access to 10 scenic spots including the Retreat and Reflection Garden, historic architecture and ancient bridges.

Suzhou Museum – Suzhou has a few museums including a silk museum, but this one is focused on Chinese history, ceramics and art from the Kingdom of Wu. Admission is free and the main permanent halls are themed on Treasures, Pagoda Relics, Elegant Life Style and the Paintings and Calligraphies of Wu Kingdom. The architecture of the building itself is also interesting.

The Culture and Expo Centre – Found in SIP (Suzhou Industrial Park), the Culture and Expo Centre has a cinema, art exhibitions and various shows. It is worth seeing what is on. During my time in Suzhou I went to a Ballet of Romeo and Juliet, A Christmas Market and a Salvador Dali Exhibition all at the Culture and Expo Centre.

There are of course other points of interest including a Zoo, an amusement park, more shopping streets and various temples, tea houses and many more gardens, so there is plenty of exploring to do!

Food and Nightlife in Suzhou

Food in Suzhou, and generally in China, is incredible! Suzhou has been known as the 'land of milk and honey' and more than other areas of China, it is famous for its baked goods and sweet breads. There are plenty of restaurants, street food vendors, cafes and high-street chains, offering varied Chinese cuisine as well as some western or international food choices. Hot pot restaurants, buffets, make-your-own-soup places, barbecues, bakeries and dumpling stands are all worth a try and, if you want less sweet bread, then Muslim food stands offer more savoury, delicious breads.



You will quickly gather your own favourite places, but picture menus and buffets are useful for dealing with language barriers, and I absolutely recommend street food vendors. Street food included some of my favourite food in China, and my personal recommendation would be to try a street food grilled aubergine (cooked in its entirety).

Brilliant Chinese restaurants can be found in abundance across the city, but if you are missing international food then there are also a few options. While Starbucks, KFC and Subway are inevitably also in China, (although with Green Tea Lattes and new menu options), Anne's Tea House in SIP offers traditional English cuisine, including Christmas day menus. Similarly you can find Italian, Mexican, Thai and Indian cuisine across the city. The Bookworm, is a famous bookshop, pub and cafe, selling English books as well as hosting conversation classes and its own summer festivals (Suzhoubury). It is also a good spot for pubs as it is located on Shiquan Street (十全街) known as Pub

Street with Jane's Pub Bar and The Drunken Clam just down the road in terms of popular expat nightlife. Other bars and clubs include The Camel, which is a sports bar, Ellen's, Syndrome, Pulp Fiction, Pravda and countless more. KTV is also a must-try in China. KTV is a popular karaoke experience, with private rooms which are decked in club like buildings with drinks and marble floors and all night opening hours. There are also Salsa classes in Suzhou and a large student community, so drinks, socialising and dancing feet are easy to find. Not to mention – Shanghai and all its bars and clubs are just on your doorstep!

In conclusion – Suzhou is a very friendly city for foreigners and a good option for those who are less keen to embrace the international mega-city of Shanghai. With beauty, culture and quaint streets, in a city about the size of London you will be sure to find something you like. It is a popular destination for foreigners and Chinese travellers alike, with well-documented history, and a satisfying juxtaposition of city lights and skyscrapers with traditional Chinese architecture. Happy adventures!

By Fabienne King, teacher in Suzhou, 2015-2016