

SUZHOU (苏州)



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.



ATTRACTIONS

Gardens – Suzhou is famous for its numerous classical gardens, such as the Lingering Garden, Lion Grove Garden, and 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 for a fee it is possible to get guided tours which will give you an insight into their history and symbolism. 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 and 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 ‘7 mile’ 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 during the day and when it lights up at night.



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.

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.



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, Tongli 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.

Mudu Ancient Water Town – Mudu is right at 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 and at the top of the hill you will find a small temple. The ancient water town is known for its abundance of natural resources and boat trips are also available in Mudu, with or without a singing guide!



The Culture and Expo Centre – Found in SIP (Suzhou Industrial Park), the Culture and Expo Centre has a cinema, art exhibitions and various shows. 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. It is worth seeing what's on!

Jinji Lake – Located in SIP, Jinji Lake is one of China's largest inner-city lakes (along with West Lake in Suzhou's sister-city Hangzhou). It is surrounded by fashionable shopping areas, the culture and expo centre, food stalls and a leisure gourmet area, Suzhou Amusement Park and bike lanes. You can hire bikes, trikes and tandems here and watch the laser light show on weekends.



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

FOOD

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 **bakeries** selling various sweet and savoury **moon-cakes**, **red bean buns** and various pastries. The **Green Tea Restaurant** serves ice-cream bread and **Momi Cafe** (a chain found in several Suzhou locations), offers tea, coffee and cake as well as various hand designed post cards, letter writing tools and a service allowing you to post letters to your future self. **Tea houses** are very popular in Suzhou and found across the city.



Restaurants and Chinese Food

In Suzhou, 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 and dumpling restaurants are all available.

Famous Suzhou dishes include **Squirrel Shaped Mandarin Fish**, water chestnuts, various animal shaped Dim Sum dishes, Sugar Porridge (Glutinous Rice Porridge), Chicken Feet and Suzhou-Style Fresh Meat Mooncakes. If you are looking for a recommendation, head to **YangYang Dumpling House** on Shiquan Street. It is fantastic, with picture menus and vegetarian options alongside famous dishes. (Suzhou also has entirely vegetarian restaurants in Li Gong Di and Suzhou Industrial Park).



International Food

Although Chinese food is wonderful, 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), **Ann's English Tea House** in SIP offers traditional English cuisine, including Christmas day menus. (The Vegetarian Christmas Dinner is pictured below, but classic options are also available). Ann's is run by a British ex-BBC Journalist who sells his own jade carvings in the restaurant. The walls are filled with prints from The National Gallery and with brunch, English tea and romantic dinner options, Ann's is worth visiting – head to Li Gong Di.



Similarly, you can find Italian, Japanese, Korean, Mexican, Thai and Indian cuisine across the city. **Kamal's** Indian Restaurant in the Student Area is popular (though a dive) and for a more upmarket Indian meal **Namaste Indian Restaurant** gets good reviews. There are various Italian Restaurants and pizza places including several **Papa John's** across the city and with a Marks and Spencer and other Western Supermarkets, you can also find shops selling ex-pat goods.

Street Food

Street food was some of my favourite food in China, and my personal recommendation would be to try a **street food grilled aubergine** (cooked in its entirety). From **chicken feet** (below) to **dumplings, stinky tofu**, and various pick and mix outdoor buffets, street food is available at all hours.



ACCOMMODATION

Suzhou Mingtown Suzhou Youth Hostel – (No 28. Pinjiang Road) near the Humble Administrator's Garden. £14 - £25 a night based on average rates for a Standard Room

Garden Hotel – (Daichengqiao Road), a 5 Star Luxury Hotel near the Master of Nets Garden. £76-£113 a night based on average rates for a Standard Room.

Starway Qianshengyuan Hotel - (Shantang Street). £14 - £34 a night based on average rates for a Standard Room.

ENTERTAINMENT

Shiquan Street (十全街) – Shiquan Street, also known as Pub Street contains numerous pubs and bars popular with ex-pats and locals including **Jane's Pub Bar** and **The Drunken Clam**.

The Bookworm – The Bookworm is a bookshop, pub and cafe, selling English books as well as hosting conversation classes and its own summer festivals (Suzhoubury). The venue in the past has hosted poetry readings, literary festivals, open mike nights and quiz nights.

Other bars and clubs include **The Camel**, which is a sports bar, **Ellen's, Syndrome, Pulp Fiction, Pravda** and countless more.



KTV - KTV is a popular karaoke experience with private rooms in club like buildings. Open during the day and into the early hours, the drinks, marble floors and selection of both Chinese and Western music makes it a popular location for dates, parties or an evening with your colleagues.

There are also **Salsa classes, Games Nights** and various **gyms, cinemas** and **art events** in Suzhou, due to the vibrant ex-pat and student communities. WeChat is fantastic for finding events and like-minded people. Not to mention – Shanghai and all its bars and clubs are just on your doorstep!

GETTING AROUND 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. Transport in Suzhou is very affordable.

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.

TRAVEL

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.

Suzhou – Beijing: 5 hours
Suzhou – Shanghai: 1 hour 15
Suzhou – Nanjing: 2.5 hours
Suzhou – Hangzhou: 1 – 3 hours
Suzhou – Jiujiang: 10-11 hours

Suzhou is a very friendly city for foreigners and 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!