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HOW TO SPEND AN ART DECO EVENING IN SHANGHAI

By: Dan Morey On: February 20, 2018

When I walk the streets of Shanghai, I pass simultaneously through three distinct cities.

The first is Today's Shanghai, a teeming metropolis of skyscrapers, shopping malls and manic traffic.

The second is Dream Shanghai. Childhood viewings of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Shanghai Surprise* left me with an everlasting image of Shanghai as a place of adventure—a city where anything goes. Later I saw Josef von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* and *Shanghai Gesture*, and Gong Li in *Shanghai Triad*. It was the Shanghai of the 1930s—decadent, dramatic, dangerous—that fueled my fantasies. Even now I tend to linger at the train station, waiting for Shanghai Lily to step off the Express clad in black feathers and a birdcage veil.

The third city I traverse is Historic Shanghai. While most of the movies that inhabit Dream Shanghai were filmed on sets and provide only illusions of the past, Historic Shanghai is concrete. As I cross the Garden Bridge or amble along the Bund in the shadow of the old Cathay Hotel, I'm visually experiencing Shanghai as it really was in the 1930s.

Architecture—particularly Art Deco, the modernist style that flourished from the mid-1920s to World War II—offers a direct link to 1930s Shanghai. It illustrates the city's "Golden Age" in brick and stone, and creates convergence points where Today's Shanghai, Dream Shanghai and Historic Shanghai meet. With Art Deco buildings as backdrops, you can become the star of your own '30s blockbuster. Here's how, in 15 easy steps.

1.

DECIDE WHO YOU ARE

Gangster? Jazz musician? Japanese spy? White Russian Count turned bartender? It's the 1930s, and Shanghai is controlled by various foreign powers, so possibilities

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abound. I typically go with "American adventurer," or the more specific "American archeologist in town to trade remains of first Manchu Emperor to crime lord for priceless diamond."

2.

Dress Accordingly

My Indiana Jones ensemble employs a simple yet stylish three-color scheme: White dinner jacket and shirt; Black trousers, vest, bowtie and shoes; Red carnation.

For a more disreputable look, try a linen suit with a battered fedora and loud necktie, preferably featuring a nude pinup girl, a la Sean Penn in *Shanghai Surprise*.

3.

Get Yourself a Gal (Or Guy, Girls)

She doesn't need to be some glamorous Bund Baby. You know that girl who works at KFC? The one who spends her lunch break sleeping face-down in the booth by the restrooms? She'll do.

4.

Dress Her Accordingly

If you're a man of means, take the young lady to a Lolo Love-type vintage boutique and let her run amok. If you aren't, head for one of those four-story fake markets and start bargaining. Either way, she'll need something sleek and silky, with jade Deco earrings and a Bakelite clutch.

At some point on your quest for couture, be sure to stop in the Shanghai No. 1 Department Store (Nanjing Road). This Art Deco masterpiece in granite opened in 1936 as Dai Sun, the largest and most opulent department store in China. Though communism took its toll, the store's interior is currently being restored to its original grandeur.

5.

Do Your Hair

You should already have a jar of Brylcreem in your tonsorial cabinet. Use it.

6.

Do Her Hair

Simply take your favorite 8×10 of Butterfly Wu or Marlene Dietrich down to the local salon. Don't forget the girl!

5.

Take Up Smoking

What self-respecting 1930s bachelor would hit the town without a pack of smokes? Bonus points for Double Happiness, Chien Men, or Hatamen brands. Antique ciggy case optional.

6.

Arm Yourself

While it's unlikely you'll require a pistol or dagger in Today's Shanghai, they should be carried for the sake of historical accuracy. Plus, you never know.

7.

Procure Transportation

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Ideally, this will be a Rolls Royce Phantom II. The driver will either be a uniformed brute with Kung Fu skills, or an adorable waif with a lead foot and a slew of catchphrases. If you can't manage this, be sure to bring plenty of bus fare.

8.

Start with Cocktails at the Park Hotel

The Park Hotel, an Art Deco gem and Shanghai's tallest building until 1983, was designed by Hungarian architect Laszlo Hudec in 1934. Hudec's story couldn't be more Old Shanghai. He was taken prisoner by the Russians in World War I, but escaped by jumping off a train in Siberia. He crossed the Chinese border and settled in Shanghai, where he designed some of the city's finest buildings.

The bar at the Park Hotel is dusky even at midday, and they serve a dark drink called the Night Shanghai, inspired by the classic Zhou Xuan tune. Observe the décor as you tipple: wood Deco tables and columns, black and white checkered floor, railings with geometric patterns. You can almost see a qipao-clad chanteuse on the smoky stage, breathing "Blue Moon" into a microphone.

9.

Gamble

The Park Hotel used to overlook the Shanghai Race Club's horse track. The racecourse is long gone, replaced by People's Square, and gambling in Shanghai is now illegal. But you're an adventurer, right? Today's Shanghai is full of seedy gaming dens where you can grapple with slot machines or play poker or mahjong, just like days of yore. Sure, there's the occasional city-wide gambling sweep (police shut down several thousand illegal casinos in 2014), but the chances of getting pinched are pretty slim. If a cop does attempt to apprehend you, just tell him you were accosted by a thug in Nanjing Road and taken to the gaming room against your will. If he doesn't buy that, tell him you're friends with the mayor. If he doesn't buy that, bribe generously.

10.

Observe Prostitution

The other big vice in Old Shanghai was prostitution. The city wasn't known as the "Whore of the Orient" for nothing. Like gambling, prostitution is now both illegal and extremely prevalent. But remember, you're on a date and therefore should only observe these activities—not participate in them. My advice is to point out a poorly disguised brothel to your date. While she snickers at the underdressed women sitting around the "beauty parlor," take note of the address for later use.

11.

Go to a Movie

Movies were big business in Old Shanghai. The city was home to a thriving film industry, and Chinese fans flocked to see Zhou Xuan in *Street Angels* or Butterfly Wu in *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*, the picture that started the frenzy for martial arts films. Western Shanghailanders watched the latest Hollywood hits in luxurious Art Deco cinemas, some of which are still in operation.

The Cathay Theatre, designed in 1930 by Czech architect C.H. Gonda, is in the French Concession, one of the best neighborhoods in Shanghai to view Art Deco architecture. At night, the cinema's vertical lines are bathed in light and its tall finial glows like a beacon, beckoning passersby to enter a world of fantasy and romance. With luck, you'll be able to catch a period piece, maybe even one set in Shanghai. I once attended a showing of *Lust, Caution* here, and nearly OD'd on nostalgia.

On Nanjing Road, a block from the Park Hotel, you'll find the Grand Theatre, another great Laszlo Hudec building. This deluxe cinema opened in 1933 and was equipped with personal translation devices in every seat so Chinese moviegoers

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could experience films from Hollywood, Berlin and Paris. The interior has retained its Art Deco splendor. Be sure to sit in the stunning first auditorium; it seats over 1500 and has a balcony, always the best place to be on a date.

12.

Have a Deco Dinner

There's no shortage of Art Deco-inspired restaurants in Shanghai: M on the Bund, Sir Elly's (in the Neo-Deco Peninsula Hotel), even a streamlined eatery called the Café Deco at Pudong Airport. But real vintage is harder to come by. One option is Wang Bao He. This restaurant has been operating in a Golden Age apartment block on Fuzhou Road since 1936, and is renowned for its boiled Shanghai Hairy Crab and crab roe pastries.

If tearing apart a crab while wearing a white tux seems like a bad idea, head for Broadway Mansions, the iconic Art Deco hotel beside the Garden Bridge. Its restaurant, Huang Pu Xuan, specializes in Huaiyang and Shanghainese cuisine. These styles favor sweet over spicy, so excessive sweating should not be an issue. This is important, as nothing dispels an air of suavity and elegance faster than a damp brow.

The last time I dined at Huang Pu Xuan, a team of servers hovered close by, ready to fulfill my every culinary whim. The eel and codfish were superb.

After dinner, retire to the British Lounge for a game of snooker. The table is original to the hotel, which was built in 1934. Back then snooker tables and balls were smaller, so playing at Broadway Mansions will give you an authentic taste of the game in colonial times.

13.

Deco Drugs?

During the 19th century, British trading companies amassed fortunes by importing Indian opium to China. Addiction became so problematic that the Manchu emperors issued edicts against its use, and fought two unsuccessful wars against the U.K. to stop its importation. Shanghai's last legal opium den closed in 1917, but "the Big Smoke" remained immensely popular. In the 1930s, Shanghai, the country's primary drug port, was riddled with illegal hideaways where Chinese and foreigners lolled about, sucking pipe after pipe of the soporific narcotic. Instead of British firms, the trade was now controlled by mobsters like "Big Ears" Du Yuesheng.

Opium and other drugs are still outlawed in China, and punishment can be severe. Although death sentences are regularly handed out for drug trafficking, it's common in Shanghai to encounter dealers on the streets and at clubs. Enforcement at the lower levels is lax, so if you really want to smoke some hashish (you're unlikely to find opium these days), you can obtain it fairly easily. But why take the risk? There isn't anything adventurous about lying around in a stupor.

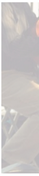
14.

Pay a Visit to Duolun Street

This pedestrian-only "culture street" was previously known as Darroch Road. In the 1920s and 30s, some of China's most famous writers, including Lu Xun and Ding Ling, lived here. The architecture of Duolun Street is eclectic, ranging from neoclassical to Islamic. There are even well-preserved traditional Shikumen houses in the area, an increasingly rare sight in Shanghai.

Old film star posters are on display, along with antique British mailboxes, and statues of the authors and celebrities who once inhabited the street. Ding Ling's sculpture captures the young writer at her moment of arrival in Shanghai: she sits on her suitcase and surveys the strange, new city.

Ding Ling had fled her home in Hunan province to escape an arranged marriage, and the story she wrote in 1927, "Miss Sophia's Diary," was revolutionary in China for



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its sexual and emotional frankness. Though the story focuses on interior rather than exterior observation, it very much captures the mood of Shanghai's Golden Age, when urban women were rebelling against the binding (foot and otherwise) traditions of Chinese culture.

15.

FIND SOME JAZZ

Jazz was the soundtrack of Old Shanghai. Musicians came from the United States, Britain and France to play in the city's bands, and a hybrid music called Shidaiqu developed. This combination of Western jazz (including a strong Latin influence) and Chinese folk attracted huge crowds to Shanghai's dancehalls and nightclubs.

One of the best places for jazz was playboy Victor Sassoon's Art Deco Cathay Hotel (1929) on the waterfront Bund. The Cathay (now the Fairmont Peace Hotel), with its distinctive copper pyramid roof, is still one of the Orient's premier hotels, and it still features live jazz.

The Peace Hotel's Old Jazz Band is very old indeed—most of its members are well over 80. They hold court in the Jazz Bar, where you can sip classic cocktails like the Shanghai Buck. The old-timers can be a bit shaky at times, but that only adds to the ambiance. A younger combo follows them, with a female vocalist. Professional dancers usually make an appearance as well. Feel free to join in.

For really topnotch jazz played in a Neo-Deco atmosphere, make your way to the Heyday Vintage Jazz Lounge on Tai'an Road. You'll hear some of the best jazz artists from China and abroad, including Coco Zhao and Anne Evenou.

This concludes your Art Deco night in Shanghai. When the lounge closes, grab your girl, rush outside, and leap into your waiting Rolls. Tell Short Round to hit it.

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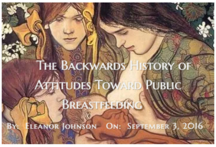

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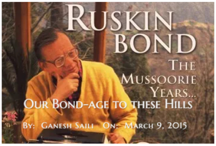

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