The most splendid city in the world

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MARCO POLO

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



WEST LAKE	LINGYIN TEMPLE	LEIFENG PAGODA	XIXI WETLAND
Inspired poets	*Built in 328 AD*	*Rebuilt in 2002*	*1,800 years old*

THE FOURTH LARGEST CITY IN CHINA

The most splendid city in the world

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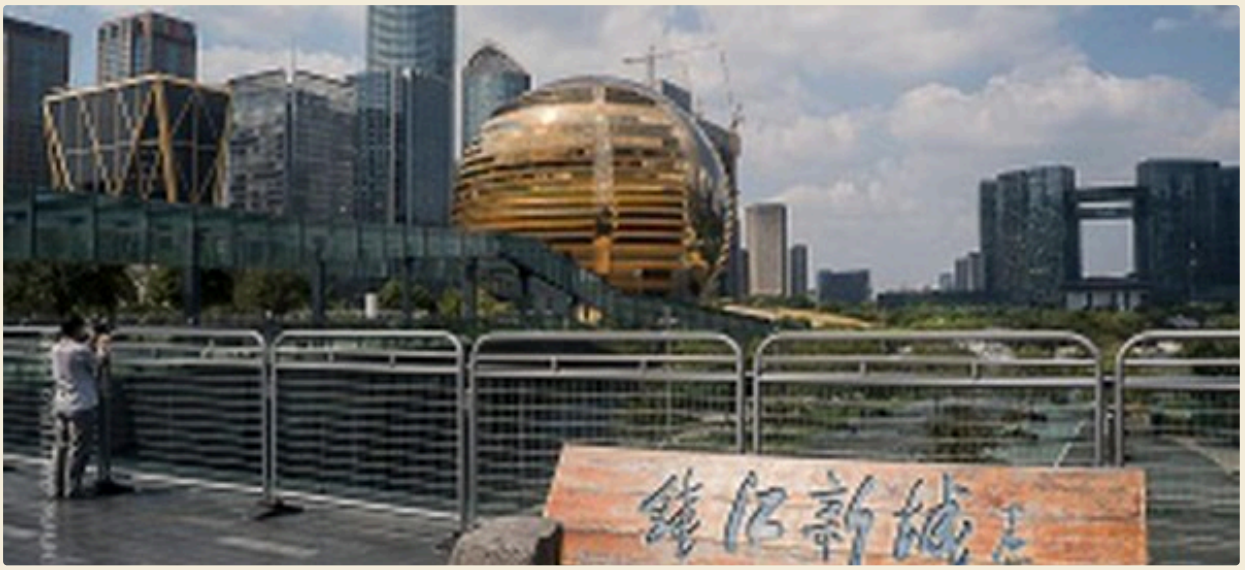
Hangzhou skyline

It was my first visit to China and I was very excited that I would be travelling to a city once visited by Marco Polo in the 13th century. I was there to envelop myself in a place that amazed Polo who described it as “the most splendid city in the world” – Hangzhou.

As the plane flew through the blue skies above the city, I got a glimpse of the beautiful vistas, green velvet forested mountains as well as a large lake and several waterways. I was curious to see this ancient city, which has evolved to become a major industrial hub in China. On a warm day, the sun was reflecting off the glass skyscrapers which rose like church spires across this vast city that had expanded to encompass the great West Lake.

I

SIGNS FOR THE G20 SUMMIT WERE EVERYWHERE



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My arrival in the city was shortly after the G20 summit. Before and during the summit, the whole city was shut down in preparation to host this major event involving the world's economic and political powers. China chose Hangzhou for the G20 summit as the symbol of Chinese culture, tradition, nature, technology and modernity to signify the positive image of a country that stands historically high on the world map of global powers.

There were signs, posters and banners related to G20 summit all over the city; in the airport, above the highways, on buses, walls and bridges. It seemed like a major festival had taken place there but it was actually a very important, high level political gathering. It certainly reflected the pride that the city felt by being selected for this auspicious event.

As we drove around the city, everything seemed to be fresh and new. The black asphalt in the streets had freshly painted white lines and I didn't see any bumpy roads. There were still floral decorations hanging from the bridges left over from the summit.

The enormous number of high skyscrapers along the West Lake indicated the prosperity of the ancient city. The shopping streets were full of western brand outlets. The brand new electric buses were silently circulating in the city. Luxury car showrooms were everywhere. You did not feel like you were in a communist country. I sensed being in a city with a definite European flavour. A clean and rich city surrounded by the same natural beauty that had inspired writers and poets through the centuries.

II

XIXI NATIONAL WETLAND PARK



off to explore Xixi



houses along the banks

The delightful setting of Hangzhou means it has several different sources of water activity. On the one hand you have West Lake and its hilly and mountainous backdrop, on the other hand you have the ancient Grand Canal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, dating back to the fifth century BC. Finally, in the eastern part of the city, there is the Qiantang River; a vital artery passing through this, the fourth largest city in China. An added attraction to the west of the city is the Xixi National Wetland Park. It is only 5 kilometres away from the town centre and the West Lake.

I headed off to explore the natural park of Xixi which dates back 1,800 years and was previously inhabited by fishermen and villagers. Waterways feed ponds, small lakes and marshlands which are scattered around the park, some of which are edged with palm trees. The eleven square kilometres of natural beauty are packed full of flora and fauna, which you can only appreciate when you take a boat trip. There are walkways, paths and stone bridges as well as a water village and many interesting sites and scenes. I sat in a wooden boat and had a smooth tour along narrow waterways. In an urban area old houses, traditional wooden villas, shops, teahouses, galleries, museums and an exhibition of Dragon Boats lay before me. The peace and tranquility of the park was very soothing and it was nice to escape the noisy populated city for a short while.

III

SOUL'S RETREAT



the Hangzhou of temples

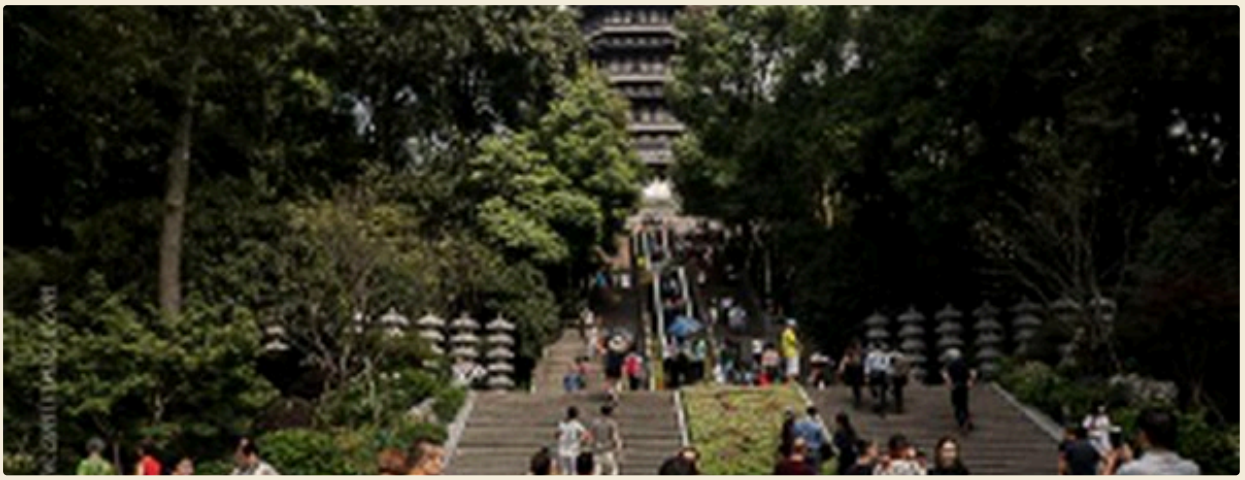
I returned to the city and drove around the West Lake where the most interesting sights, temples, pagodas, hotels, restaurants and teahouses are located. In the mountainous region northwest of the city is the Buddhist temple of Lingyin, one of the largest and the most famous temples in China. Built in 328 AD by the Indian Monk, Huili, it's called Soul's Retreat and attracts thousands of pilgrims and tourists from all over the world.

I entered through a huge, arched gate under the shadow of large leafy trees. On my left was Fei Lai Feng (it means the Peak that Flew Hither), a rocky green, limestone summit approximately 209 metres high. On the face below the peak, there are a large number of engravings including a delicate large smiley Maitreya Buddha and depictions of several animals such as a walking elephant, a hovering dragon, a fleeing tiger, and an escaping monkey. It is believed that these carvings were made a thousand years ago during the Song and Yuan Dynasties. It is so very distinctive from the nearby sandstone mountains. According to the legend, the summit flew from India as a sign of Buddhist power. There are also several caves and hollows within the peak itself.

In the Lingyin Temple opposite Fei Lai Feng there was a small gate leading to a large courtyard in a spiritual setting. There were several large colourfully painted old Chinese structures. The first building was the Heavenly Kings Hall with the big statue of the smiley Maitreya Buddha. There was a library and four other decorated halls with statues of Buddha and Buddhist saints which are open for prayers.

IV

SUNSET HILL



Leifing Pagoda

An early start next day took me to the West Lake but it was still full of locals who were exercising. Guides were preparing for their various tour groups to arrive. As I walked along the green paths through a tunnel of trees that led to the lake, I smelt a strong fragrance in the air coming from shrubs: it was the Yulan magnolia, one of many species that grow in the parks around the lake. But I only saw a few pink water-lilies surviving alongside the green algae in the ponds as it was not the right season to see those beautiful blossoms which normally flourish in the spring. I reached the Red Carp Pond where a huge number of golden fish swam around this pond. Large crowds of onlookers were standing on a wooden bridge feeding the fish.

Huagang Harbour is opposite the pond and it was from here that I caught a boat to see the rest of the waterway which is adorned with stone bridges, causeways, small islands, temples, pagodas, villas, palaces, gardens and colorful Chinese pavilions. It is no wonder that the lake has inspired many poets and writers.

Looking at a distant Pagoda from the lake, I was tempted to go there. The boat trip took me to Leifeng Pagoda, an octagonal five-story tower standing on the high mount of Sunset Hill overlooking the West Lake from the South. The original structure was built in the tenth century during the Song Dynasty, but collapsed in 1924 and was consequently rebuilt in 2002. The ruins of the old pagoda and some artifacts and relics found during the excavation can be seen in the first level. The legend has a love story associated with this Pagoda involving a white snake spirit and a mortal man. You can view the beautiful wooden carvings telling these stories on the inside of the pagoda. The visitors can take an elevator to the top of 72 metre high pagoda to have a panoramic view across West Lake and the distant city of Hangzhou.

V

THE LARGEST SILK MUSEUM IN THE WORLD



in the busy market area

I started my third day in Hangzhou by visiting the China National Silk Museum. The modern museum is the largest silk museum in the world, with permanent displays in the exhibition halls telling the story of Chinese silk and crafts of making silk. The museum also holds a large collection of textiles and is often used for research and education purposes.

I could see a bit of that ancient Chinese tradition and architecture in the shopping place of the Drum Tower Street adjacent to Zhongshan Lu shopping street. It is the best place to buy souvenirs from numerous shops and stalls and taste Hangzhou snacks such as duck heads and a variety of sweets.

Another must see attraction in the Drum Tower Street is Huqingyu Tang Chinese Medicine Museum. The museum provides information about the origin of herbal medicine and its development in China with the story of famous Chinese doctors. Located in what began as a pharmacy in 1874 it still functions as an herbal health care clinic and pharmacy.

VI

THE HEARTBEAT OF ANCIENT CHINA



boats on the waterways being overshadowed by Leifing Pagoda

Here the food is made up of many crispy light foods without oil and not too spicy. A variety of fishes and shrimps from the West Lake with small portions of rice is the main Hangzhou cuisine most served in sweet and sour sauce. The world famous Dragon Well tea, a kind of green tea with aromatic flavour and pleasant taste, is the national drink in China and is grown in nearby Longjing Village near Hangzhou. The farmers in the beautiful tea plantation fields around Hangzhou process the leaves from tea plants by hand after harvest. Marco Polo described the diet of the people in Hangzhou who "were accustomed to dainty living to the point of eating fish".

I really enjoyed my visit to Hangzhou, but I felt my journey wouldn't have been complete if I didn't find the heartbeat of ancient China; a heartbeat which has been framed in my head for years.

I was in search of that special traditional touch of Chinese lifestyle which makes it different to the rest of the world but it seems to have been lost in this modern city which has been very heavily westernised.



West Lake – image: Hangzhou Tourism Commission

PLAN YOUR JOURNEY

Take a boat trip on West Lake and an elevator to the top of the 72 metre high pagoda for a panoramic view.

For more of Reza's images of Hangzhou, go to www.purevisionjourneys.com/china.

Images (except image of West Lake) and story © Mohammed Reza Amirinia.

This is a longer version of a story that Reza wrote for the Daily Star late last year.

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