



Short cuts

Italy Renting a villa in Tuscany has become a hugely popular summer holiday option in recent years but now you can go one better by renting an entire hilltop hamlet. The cobbled streets of the Borgo San Biagio (pictured below) are lined with houses that sleep between two and six (up to a maximum of 20) plus there's a medieval tower with a roof-top hot tub, a pool and a chapel converted into a vaulted drawing room. The hamlet, which costs from £4,340 a week, is one of CV Travel's new collection of rental properties designed for "multi-generational, extended and blended families". The properties, from Wales to Morocco, all have separate buildings and communal areas, so groups can have a degree of privacy, then come together when they wish. www.cvtravel.co.uk

Namibia A vast new national park has been created along Namibia's coast. The Dorob National Park fills a gap between two existing parks and means that the entire country's coastline is now designated as protected national park, a world first. Together the coastal parks cover an area greater than Portugal. www.namibiaturism.com.na

Switzerland If even lying on a beach sounds like too much effort, perhaps you should try a new offering from the Grand Resort Bad Ragaz – the sleep holiday. The five-star spa, in the St Gallen canton of eastern Switzerland, has introduced a two-night "sleep diagnostics" break, during which doctors monitor your sleep patterns (including eye movements, sleep cycles, blood oxygen levels and so on) in order to diagnose problems and to help you sleep better in future. The package costs €2,643. www.resortragaz.ch

UK Qantas has triumphed in Business Traveller magazine's annual Cellars in the Sky awards. At a tasting in London, a panel of judges testing airlines' first- and business-class wines ranked Qantas best in six categories including best white, red and sparkling wines in first class and best overall cellars in business and first. American Airlines took the award for best business-class white, Air New Zealand for the best business-class red.

Nepal The first tourists to try what organisers are calling the world's longest, highest and most expensive trek will set out on Tuesday. The Great Himalayan Trail was conceived five years ago and the NGOs behind it hope it will ultimately stretch for nearly 3,000 miles through Bhutan, China, India, Nepal and Pakistan. The first section to be mapped and marketed to tourists is the 1,100-mile trek across Nepal, which will take 157 days and costs £20,490 (Alternatively the route can be broken into seven sections, from 18 to 34 days). The first group will begin walking this week but there is still limited availability for the second stage (starting March 13) onwards. www.worldexpeditions.co.uk

Tom Robbins



Hamlet Borgo San Biagio in Tuscany

People's republic of art deco

Shanghai, the world's most futuristic city, has suddenly discovered its past, writes Patti Waldmeir

Shanghai has long buried its history under skyscrapers but now the city is clearing away the communist debris from its colonial past to unearth its art-deco splendour. The Shanghaiese – famously too busy for history – have suddenly discovered that there is money to be made from it. So state-owned companies have invested billions of renminbi renovating colonial landmarks to transform the touristic face of Shanghai.

Luckily for the well-heeled visitor, some of the city's finest architectural gems have been reborn as hotels rather than as museums: with rooms and restaurants where the city once known as the "whore of the Orient" can be enjoyed – and not just ogled.

In Shanghai, retro is breaking out all over – from the Bund, the riverside commercial centre of the colonial city with its overtones of luxe and opium, to the plane-tree-lined French Concession, home to the best of the city's pre-communist residential buildings.

At the heart of the Bund stands the newly renovated art-deco Peace Hotel, famous symbol of all that was playful and decadent in old Shanghai. Brainchild and plaything of Victor Sassoon, a British-Iraqi trader of drugs, guns and property, it opened as the Cathay Hotel in 1929 and was the most luxurious hotel in Asia. Charlie Chaplin stayed there and one of his photographs was used to guide the restoration. Noël Coward finished *Private Lives* while in residence.

Owned by the state-owned Jinjiang International Hotels, and under management by Canadian luxury hotels operator Fairmont, it reopened in July after a three-year, \$65m renovation, as the Fairmont Peace Hotel. Heads of state may want to sample its presidential suite, for a cool Rmb100,000 (£9,400) a night, but even backpackers (if they leave the daypack at the hotel) can cop a glimpse of some of the hotel's landmark features, such as the rotunda, which (mercifully) survived the depredations of war and cultural revolution by being covered up for decades with gypsum board. The ancient strains of the *gu zheng*, a kind of Chinese zither, float through the octagonal space, lit by natural light filtered through glass stained in a distinctively art-deco tone of golden ochre.

The walls have been redone with bas-reliefs based on daguerrotypes of old Shanghai, and much of the glass had to be replaced, according to Jenny Laing-Peach, the Peace Hotel's historian. She said the hotel was "chopped up into little cubby-holes" when it served as an office building in communist Shanghai; and part of it became a department store.

But some original art-deco gems remain, like wrought-iron radiator covers, ornate fan lights above some exterior doors, and the Lalique glass in the hotel's Lalique corridor on the eighth floor. Also on the eighth floor is the Peace Hall ballroom, whose sprung-wood floor yields pleasingly to the modern step; Sassoon used it to stage many a decadent folly in the 1930s, including his famous Shipwreck Ball, to which one guest came clad in hair curlers, and another in a shower curtain.

Those who can neither stay the night nor wangle an invite to a latter-day Peace Hall



Revival From top: the Old Jazz Band in the Jazz Bar at the Fairmont Peace Hotel; the hotel's rotunda; a view of the Bund, with the Peace Hotel on the right

Jon Browning, Alamy

ball, can eat next door in the hotel's lavishly restored Dragon Phoenix restaurant, where eight layers of paint had to be removed to rediscover its turquoise and burgundy colour scheme.

Finish the night at the hotel's famous Jazz Bar: visitors to Shanghai during the bad old days before skyscrapers remember it fondly as the city's only surviving symbol of old Shanghai. The hotel has brought back the Old Jazz Band, including some of the original octogenarian musicians – a kind of Chinese Buena Vista Social Club. But on my visit their renditions of "Those Were the Days" and other old favourites sounded as if they had not tuned their instruments since before the revolution.

Take a few steps further down the Bund – enjoying a view across the river that Sassoon could never have imagined, to the skyscraper-strewn skyline of the Lujiazui financial district – and find at Bund no 2 the old Shanghai Club, reborn as a Waldorf Astoria Hotel.

This British gentlemen's club, which did a stint as a Kentucky Fried Chicken in the 1990s, has nothing like the nostalgia value of the Peace Hotel but it is the more beautiful restoration. (The hotel, owned by a state-owned company in which Jinjiang has a share, says Rmb2bn was spent on the renovation – that could explain it.) The views are better, the food is better, and cracks and discoloration in the lobby's Sicilian marble floor make it feel more authentic. The Waldorf says 80 per cent of its hotel is original; the Peace Hotel says it cannot quantify the original features but admits much was stripped, sold, destroyed or otherwise never recovered.

With its semi-circular cage-style lift restored (and operated by a lady in a bellhop outfit), the neoclassical lobby feels a bit like it might have been transplanted from Bath. But next door is a bit of vintage Shanghai history: the Long Bar, once the longest in Asia and the watering hole for Shanghai's best-loved gangster, Big Ears Du, and home to the new Oyster Bar.

Anyone who can spare Rmb7,500-Rmb14,000 a night should book suite 304 of the Waldorf: its corner bedroom has unparalleled views down the Bund as well as across to the neon-lit Pudong skyline. And for the guest who cannot bear to be disconnected from CNN even for an instant: the bathroom mirror is also a flatscreen TV. "Our guests like to watch TV while they brush their teeth," says the hotel's public relations manager.

But the Bund is not all there is to retro Shanghai: in the former French Concession is the newly opened Hotel Massenet, a renovated garden compound of 1920s villas that previously housed the richest of Shanghai's colonial citizens. Each four-bedroom villa rents for Rmb38,000 a night and has its own private garden and butler service. A hotel spokesman says it is the perfect venue for a businessman who wants to impress clients with a sense of culture and history. Deals can be signed in the library or toasted in the garden.

The hotel, part of a larger development known as Sinan Mansions, aims to ride the wave of interest in Shanghai's history to make a profit, says Fanny Leung, marketing vice-president of the Shanghai Sinan Mansions Management Company. But authenticity was clearly a small concern in its development: its banquet hall, formerly terraced housing for UK missionaries, was dismantled, turned 90 degrees, gutted and refurbished in European baroque.

Leung says preservation was simply not an option, for the banquet hall or for the villas: "With 14 families living in each house during the cultural revolution, how can I preserve it? I just have to modernise it," she says, noting that, "There are plenty of old buildings to visit in Europe".

Spencer Dodginton, a historian who runs bespoke architectural tours of old Shanghai, says: "In the English-speaking world people are very interested in the historical authenticity of old buildings: the Chinese are not that interested. For them it is the old story associated with the buildings that counts."

He says the primary goal of such developments is not to preserve Shanghai's fast-disappearing history but to make money. Xintiandi, Shanghai's first commercial historical preservation area – which has been criticised as inauthentic – has proved very profitable, so other Shanghai local governments want to get in on the action.

But whether the motives be pure or mercenary, bits of Shanghai history are being saved from the skyscrapers. After decades buried under the detritus of civil war, communism and cultural revolution, they are being saved in the name of capitalism. There could be worse reasons.

Patti Waldmeir is the FT's Shanghai correspondent

Additional reporting by Shirley Chen

Details

Doubles at the Fairmont Peace Hotel (www.fairmont.com/peacehotel) cost from Rmb2,600 (£246). Bales Worldwide (www.balesworldwide.com) offers packages: for example, three nights at the Peace Hotel, including flights from London and transfers, cost from £1,295 per person, seven nights cost from £1,895. The Waldorf Astoria (www.waldorfastoriahanghai.com) has doubles from Rmb2,550 (£241). The Hotel Massenet (no website, tel: +86 (21) 3401 9998) has villas from Rmb38,000 (£3,600). For Spencer Dodginton's architectural tours, see www.luxuryconciergeschina.com

ON FT.COM

See an online slideshow of Shanghai's retro revival at www.ft.com/retro-shanghai



The expert selection

No 2: British gourmet pubs

Eating out in British pubs used to involve crisps, pickled eggs and pork pies but today many can rival the smartest restaurants, and some are even winning Michelin stars. Here **Derek Bulmer**, a Michelin restaurant inspector since 1977 and long-standing editor of its UK guidebook until he stepped down last year to become a restaurant consultant, picks his five favourite British dining pubs.

The Hind's Head, Bray

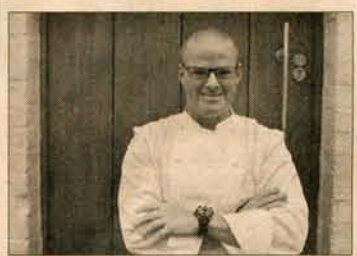
Just two weeks after opening, Heston Blumenthal's new London restaurant Dinner is booked solid for three months and reservations are being auctioned on eBay. But there is an easier way to experience the star chef's food.

Blumenthal also owns the Hind's Head, situated at the heart of the pretty village of Bray in Berkshire. With its wood panelling and log fires, the pub has a historic feel that oozes charm and character. But while it's located close to Blumenthal's Michelin three-star restaurant, the Fat Duck, it's light years away in terms of cooking style. Celebrating the best of British, the dishes here are classic with bold flavours and include traditional, comforting desserts. www.hindshheadbray.com

Hand & Flowers, Marlow

This picturesque Michelin-starred pub on the edge of a handsome Georgian town in Buckinghamshire serves arguably the best food in a

pub in the UK. Tom Kerridge cooks sublime meals that combine unpretentious British flavours with rustic French dishes and uses the very best local produce. The set lunch menu (£16.50 for three courses) offers some of the best value for money available anywhere. www.thehandandflowers.co.uk



Bold Chef Heston Blumenthal AFP

The Sportsman, Seasalter

Don't be put off by the shabby exterior, the unassuming interior and the situation on the coastal grazing marshes of Kent – this pub is all about the food. Everything here is homemade, with the bread, butter and salt being the highlights. There is sophistication and precision in the cooking that exemplifies Steve Harris's rare talent. www.thesportsmanseasalter.co.uk

Pony & Trap, Chew Magna

A cosy, whitewashed former cottage situated in the lovely Chew Valley with views over rolling countryside near Bristol. Josh Eggleton learnt his craft with the best chefs around the world and is now passionate about using only

the best quality products sourced as locally as possible. The cooking, which recently won a Michelin star, has classical British roots with international influences. www.theponyandtrap.co.uk

The Masons Arms, Knowstone

Having spent 12 years as head chef of the celebrated Waterside Inn, Bray, Mark Dodson upped sticks and moved his family to this thatched pub in a pretty village in the foothills of Exmoor. The cosy, beamed interior is full of character, and there are delightful views over the Devon countryside. The menu combines French and British classics and the cooking is both sophisticated and assured. www.masonsarmsdevon.co.uk



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