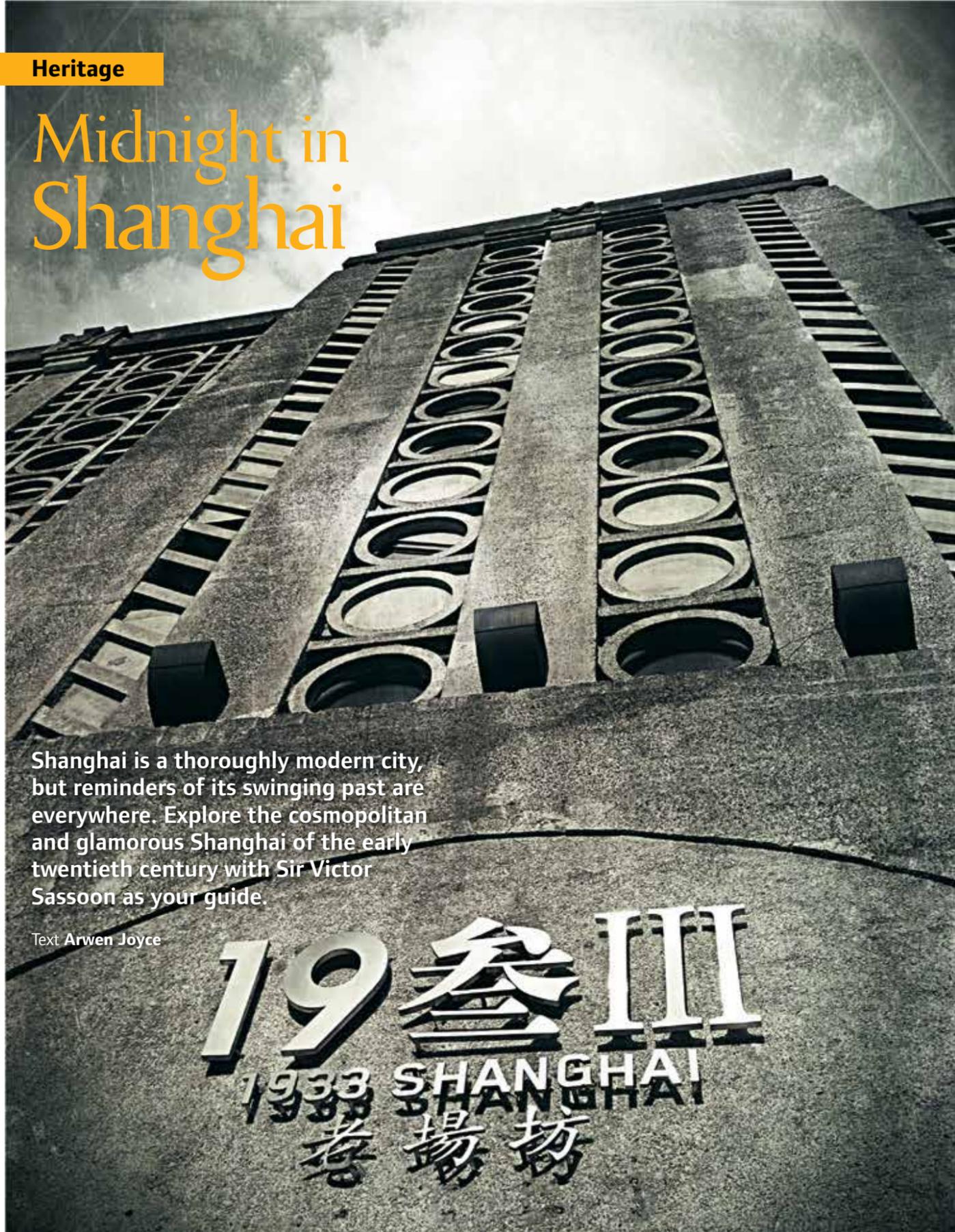


Midnight in Shanghai



Shanghai is a thoroughly modern city, but reminders of its swinging past are everywhere. Explore the cosmopolitan and glamorous Shanghai of the early twentieth century with Sir Victor Sassoon as your guide.

Text Arwen Joyce

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Arwen Joyce



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On the east bank of the Huangpu River in Pudong, Shanghai's main business district, glittering skyscrapers are popping up like Chinese mushrooms. Over there, it's 2012. On the west side of the river, imposing Art Deco and Neoclassical-style banks and hotels stretch for a mile along Zhongshan Road, otherwise known as The Bund. Over here, a gentleman in a drape-cut suit, leaning on a silver-tipped cane, would hardly look out of place.

I'm standing in front of No 12 on The Bund. Three archways support six soaring columns above me and a life-size stone lion guards a revolving door, still turning slowly from my recent exit. I have come to the 'City on the Sea' to get a feel for what is commonly considered Shanghai's golden age. What was it like to live in this port city turned international enclave as an expatriate during such an elegant, prosperous time?

Glamour of the East

In the 1930s, Shanghai was full of traders, sailors, adventurers, and people seeking refuge from the Great Depression, the Russian Revolution and Hitler's strengthening armies, among other things. Emigrating here was easy—no visa was required—and Shanghai soon became the wealthiest and most populous city in China. This is the Shanghai I've come to explore: the cosmopolitan and fashionable, glamorous and gritty, daring and debonair world of Sir Victor Sassoon and his contemporaries.

I've chosen Bund 12 Café, a 'masterpiece of period reproduction' according to my guidebook, as my first stop on this time-travelling tour. The address puts it on the second floor of the historic HSBC building, so I make my way into the lobby of the current tenant, Shanghai Pudong Development Bank with the taste of European coffee and pastries already on my lips. Marvelling at the gold-trimmed mosaics in the dome of the marble entrance hall, I look for a staircase to the second floor, but am soon shown the door by the bank's security guards who are not amused by my attempts to mime 'Where is the café, please?' Bund 12 Café has closed and I'm at a loss—I need a guide to 1930s Shanghai. Fortunately, I know just the man.

Man about town

Sir Victor Sassoon was early Shanghai's most famous Western businessman, and his influence on the city remains surprisingly intact. Less than a decade after arriving from Mumbai, Sassoon had leveraged his family's vast opium fortune to build stylish hotels, residences, cinemas, shops and offices throughout Shanghai's international settlements. If Sir Victor were to take a cane-assisted stroll (thanks to an injury

▲ Above: The Bund on Shanghai's waterfront, which has a number of Art Deco buildings, is popular with tourists. Below: A jazz bar in the newly refurbished Xintiandi neighbourhood.

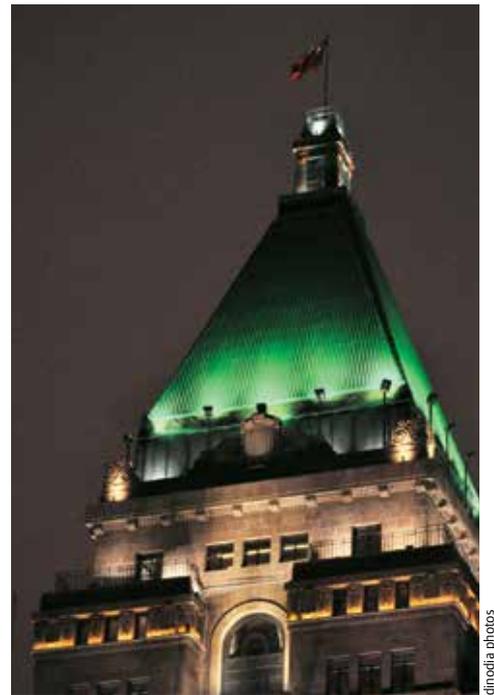
Facing page: Designed originally by British architects, 1933 Shanghai is located in the historic Hongkou district. Originally intended for use as a slaughterhouse, it has served as a medicine factory and cold storage facility and is now a 'commercial hub for creative industries'.



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sustained during World War I) down The Bund today, he would recognise almost every building.

A tour of Old Shanghai with Sir Victor would no doubt begin at his legendary Art Deco masterpiece, the green pyramid-topped Peace Hotel (formerly Sassoon House). The hotel has just emerged from extensive renovations but retains the original grand exterior and marble interior that Sassoon designed. Soon after I enter, my nose leads me to Victor's Café ('Nice of them to name it after me,' my imaginary guide remarks). I resist the display of pralines and settle on a croissant while Sir Victor reminisces about welcoming Charlie Chaplin, George Bernard Shaw and Somerset Maugham, among many others, through his lobby doors.

Up on the eighth floor, we enter an enormous ballroom that was once the venue for Sassoon's infamous costume parties. Sir Victor recalls a balmy evening in 1933 when his well-heeled guests arrived to the sounds of a swinging dance band. The theme of the evening was 'Shipwreck', and they had dressed in everything from a shower curtain to a flannel nightgown and curlers. I take a quick twirl on the white maple sprung-timber dance floor which, post-renovation, is as good as new and ready for the next gala.

Picking up speed

Sensitive to the mobility limitations of my apparitional companion, I procure a

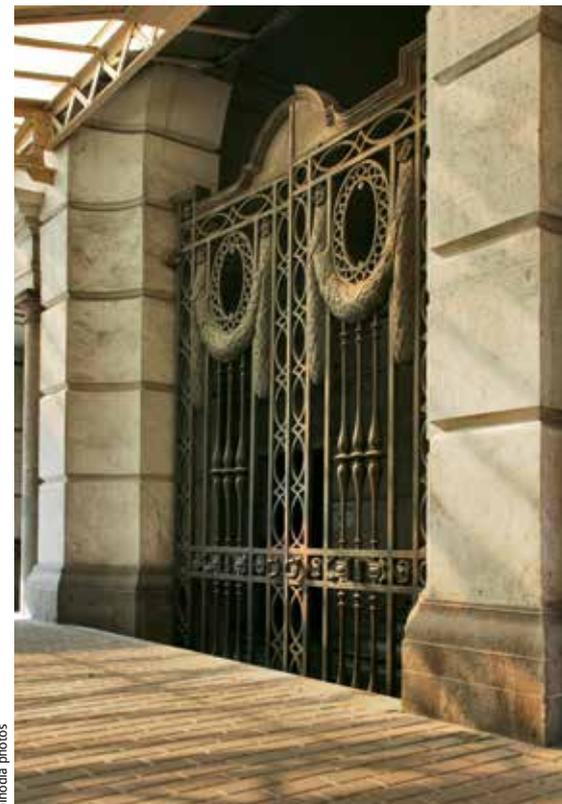
Sassoon leveraged his family's vast opium fortune to build stylish hotels, cinemas, shops, and offices throughout Shanghai's international settlements.

▲ Clockwise from above: An old jazz band performs at the iconic Peace Hotel; The eastern facade of the Peace Hotel sported a copper pyramid, now turned green with verdigris; The ornate gate of No 2, Shanghai Club Building on The Bund.

refurbished 1930s motorcycle, complete with a sidecar to continue our tour. With the wind in our hair, we zoom west from The Bund into the former French Concession (with an actual tour guide this time). The broad, leafy avenues, well-preserved stately homes, and shikumen courtyards here still look much as they did during Shanghai's golden age.

We buzz past a Germanic fairytale castle-turned-hotel built by a wealthy British merchant for his daughter in 1936. Heng Shan Moller Villa Hotel is flanked by manicured lawns and equine statues, something Sir Victor can appreciate as an avid horse racing fan. While not exactly elegant or understated, the floor-to-ceiling stained glass windows, dark wood and leather furnishings, and giant crystal chandeliers inside perfectly showcase the unbridled decadence of the era.

Another structure that represents the ultimate convergence of wealth and style in 1930s Shanghai is one that I'm certain Sir Victor never visited—the 1933 complex. A



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geometric, highly stylised concrete marvel, it served as Shanghai's slaughterhouse. Cattle, pigs and sheep were led up ramps to the higher floors only to emerge from the ground floor as rib-eye steaks and breakfast sausages. Now an arts and entertainment complex, the top floor has been reincarnated as a grand, if industrial, ballroom. The spiralling MC Escher-esque network of ramps and staircases is an eye-catching backdrop to the restaurants and galleries that occupy the space where abattoir machines once stood.

Vintage strolling

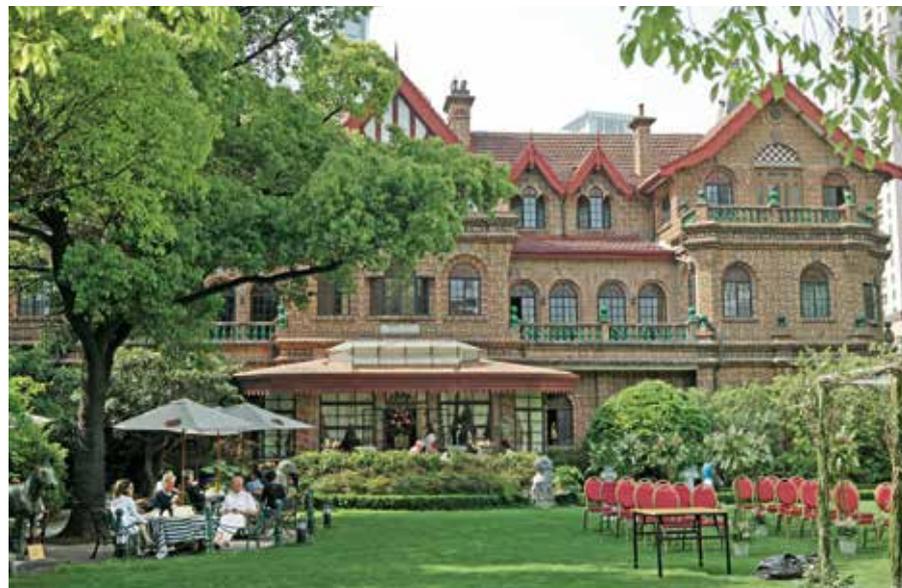
Back in the French Concession, we head southeast towards Tianzifang, a residential district off Taikang Road. Built in the 1930s, it was transformed by its residents six years ago into a commercial neighbourhood to avoid demolition. We wander through the tangle of narrow lanes and stone archways, choosing a place for lunch among the myriad small eateries, galleries and vintage boutiques. Unlike the rebuilt Xintiandi neighbourhood which has been face-lifted into a Disney version of a shikumen enclave, Tianzifang retains its authentic, slightly messy and dishevelled charm.

After shopping for vintage souvenirs, it's a quick hop up to Nanchang Lu Road to take a turn through Fuxing Park. There's not much left of Huangpu Park where Sassoon remembers spending leisurely Sunday afternoons, so this French-style expanse of lakes

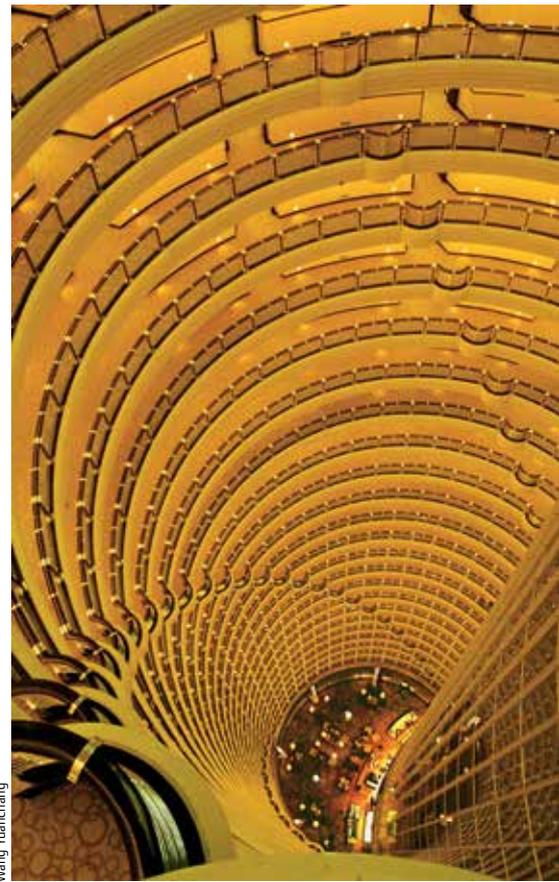


Wang Yuanchang

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and flower beds is a worthy substitute. Even better, it's open to everyone (Huangpu Park notoriously forbade entry to 'dogs and Chinese'), and on this fine afternoon, it is playing host to intense Chinese checkers matches near a tea stall. Further down the path, grandmothers perform slow motion Tai Chi moves as tinny music plays from a boom box.

While I'm grateful to Sir Victor for his invisible guidance through the Shanghai of yesteryear, I suggest trying something for dinner that he probably never ate—Chinese food. Despite the cuisine culture shock, he would feel right at home at 1931, an intimate French Concession restaurant decorated in vintage furniture and fabrics. Unlike Sassoon's Chinese cooks who only prepared Western food, the chefs here produce Shanghainese classics like sweet and sour spare ribs, crispy jellyfish and drunken chicken.

◀ Clockwise from left: The Heng Shan Moller Villa, once a European residence built in the Gothic style, is now a popular hotel; Even after its renovation, Moller Villa retains its Old World look; A look down the 88-storey-high Jin Mao Tower explains why it's name translates to 'gold luxuriance'.



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▲ Above: A view of the shikumen houses, which combine Chinese architectural elements with those of the West, and are found all around Shanghai.

Below: Pudong, the commercial district of Shanghai, across the Huangpu River, offers a fine counterpoint to The Bund's period architecture.



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Cocktail o'clock

Back on The Bund, I am perched on a bar stool behind 110 feet of mahogany at the Waldorf Astoria's Long Bar, my fingers tapping involuntarily to the soft sounds of Irving Berlin's *Puttin' on the Ritz*. This was originally the site of the Shanghai Club, a private British gentlemen's club, which opened in 1910, pre-dating Sassoon's arrival in Shanghai by 20 years. It looks

as fresh and elegant today as it did in its heyday, thanks to a recent facelift modelled on period photographs.

What would Sassoon do, I wonder, if he found himself here in the Shanghai of 2012, gazing out of the ground-floor windows of the Long Bar at the jarringly modern Pudong skyline across the river? The Shanghai World Financial Center, which resembles a 101-storey bottle opener, and the Oriental Pearl Tower dominate the view; cranes foreshadow the imminent arrival of more skyscrapers. I suspect, being the real estate mogul that he was, Sassoon would put in a call to his architects and get involved.

Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways has daily flights to Singapore from Chennai, Delhi (2 flights a day) and Mumbai. You can fly onwards to Shanghai with our codeshare partner, China Eastern Airlines. Alternatively, Jet Airways flies daily to Bangkok from Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai with onward connectivity to Shanghai via our codeshare partners China Eastern Airlines and Sri Lankan Airlines.

Accommodation

For a luxurious 1930s ambience, Peace Hotel (www.peacehotel.com.cn) on The Bund is a good bet. The Heng Shan Moller Villa (www.mollervilla.com) in the French Concession is a comfortable, affordable alternative oozing turn-of-the-century charm.

Travel tips

Book a city tour with Shanghai Sideways (www.shanghaisideways.com). A friendly and knowledgeable guide will pick you up on a vintage motorbike and show you parts of the city you'd never find on your own.

For more information:

Log on to www.meet-in-shanghai.net