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SUZHOU and NANJING

Five-day tour gives an in-depth look at two of China's "bucket list" cities.

TRAVELERS ADDING to their China bucket list will want to discover Suzhou (pronounced SOO-joe) in the Jiangsu province, just 70 miles west of Shanghai. Known as "the land of fish and rice" (the Chinese equivalent of "land of milk and honey"), this 2,500-year-old "water paradise" is a temperate locale known for its gardens, pagodas, canals, silks and craftsmanship, which can be seen throughout Suzhou's eye-popping architecture and as far as Beijing, where Suzhou's carpenters were courted to help build the Forbidden City and Summer Palace.

Marco Polo called Suzhou the "Venice of China" for its abundant canals, which for centuries were centers of transport and commerce. Every turn of a corner provides discoveries of ancient sites, and with well-orchestrated tours of both Suzhou and Nanjing (capital of Jiangsu province) by Suzhou Peace International Travel Service, visitors can cover significant ground on a five-day visit.

Day One

Check into the Marriott Suzhou, one of the only luxury hotels within the ancient city walls, and a central point from which to explore the top sites. The journey begins at Pingjiang Road, a nearly one-mile-long, narrow flagstone pedestrian street that dates back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Lined with old-style architecture, shops, teahouses and homes, this ancient street depicts life before motor vehicles. Stroll through time, sip tea while enjoying Pingtan performance of ballads and storytelling, and watch punt-boats glide by on the adjacent Pingjiang River.

Day Two

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, The Humble Administrator's Garden was originally built by a retired government servant as his private garden in 1509 during the Ming Dynasty and took a full 16 years to complete. At nearly 13 acres it is the largest private, classical garden in Suzhou, with one-third of the area covered by water dotted with lotus ponds, lily pads and sculptures with nearby pavilions given romantic names like "The Hall of Distant Fragrance." Landscape design includes peonies (the Chinese national flower), mimosas (Suzhou's city flower), papaya and persimmon trees, a bonsai garden, and Parisian blue glass imported during the Opium Wars to adorn one of 48 buildings. The detail, symmetry and symbolism of the garden is impressive, with 25 different lattice window patterns providing variant views.

Adjacent is the Suzhou Museum, designed by one of the city's most famous residents, architect I.M. Pei. Considered one of the top museums in China, it houses more than 15,000 pieces, focusing on ancient paintings and calligraphy, porcelain crafts and unearthed relics.

Of the thousands of canals in Suzhou, the most impressive is the Grand

The 13-acre Humble Administrator's Garden, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, dates to the 16th century and is the largest private, classical garden in Suzhou.

Canal, and no trip would be complete without a leisurely cruise down part of this 1,100-mile long waterway. Known as one of the most important engineering feats in China, akin to the Great Wall, it far surpasses the Suez and Panama canals and was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014. One can still see commerce along its shores and imagine the ancient trade route that made Suzhou silk famous. The canal has 186 stone bridges arch over it, with original city walls, walking paths, verdant gardens and weeping willows providing scenic pleasure. Trivia: There are a total of 200 bridges in Suzhou — the most in China.

Day Three

With 300 freshwater lakes in Suzhou, an excursion to Lake Taihu brings visitors to its largest body of water in the Jiangsu Province (third largest lake in China), where the locals live the "Taoist culture of relaxing and enjoying nature" amidst its 48 islands. Depending on the time of the year, the tour guide will lead an excursion to pluck the famed hairy crabs on a shallow boat, pick tea leaves or hunt for freshwater pearls. A stop at Luxiang ancient village is a step back 1,000 years to an original Song Dynasty water town explored through narrow alleys still bustling with commerce, local restaurants and water drawn from wells by locals. It has a rich history teeming with poets, painters, Confucian scholars and prime ministers, one of whose Ming Dynasty residences is preserved and included in the tour.

Back in Suzhou, discover the 90-year-old Embroidery Institute, housed within a labyrinth of pagoda structures, behind whose walls masters create Suzhou needlework art that dates back 2,000 years. There are fewer than 30 masters in Suzhou (of those, only two are men), carrying forth an ancient custom using silk strands that have been split into 48 microscopic threads. Masters must be at least 30 years old, usually retire by 45 from failing eyesight and create 10 pieces in a lifetime. The images are said to "rival nature," with some two-sided ones identical on both sides.

Evening includes a visit to the trendy SIP, or Suzhou Industrial Park, the center of which is Harmony Times Square. It is home to the world's largest Sky Screen, which runs the equivalent length of New York's Times Square and displays a range of animations, shorts and cartoons every night at 7 p.m. Adjacent, sitting in Jinji Lake, is the largest Ferris wheel in Asia, rising 400 feet above the water and draped in LED lights to provide onlookers with a show.

Day Four

If China is known for its silk, Suzhou is the original and most revered spot for silk production, gaining fame from as early as the Tang and Song Dynasties. The morning includes a visit to Suzhou Silk Factory, founded in 1926 and a place to see multiple phases of silk production.

Next is a three-hour coach ride to Nanjing, the original capital of China and current capital of Jiangsu province. Highlights include the resplendent Nanjing Niushoushan Cultural Park, opened in late 2015 to preserve the cultural treasures of Niushou Mountain, a centuries-old sacred Buddhist site at the original south gate of Nanjing. Its centerpiece is the grand Usnisa Palace, a glimmering gold dome housing an opulent palace that extends six subterranean floors that are so lavish in their sumptuous materials that guests must wear booties over their shoes. Deep below the earth is the Thousand Buddha Hall, an intricate, richly decorated gallery that leads to Ten Thousand Buddha

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Suzhou's ancient Pingjiang Road runs parallel to the Pingjiang River.

The Host Hotels

Marriott Suzhou: A grand lobby, restaurants, spa meeting room and private condominiums on lower floors, means every guestroom has infinite views at this luxury hotel. The rooms are large and well-appointed, with all the amenities one would expect from a Marriott, including a grand marble bathroom, separate soaking tub, and rainforest shower with a picture window and retractable shades, large desk, multiple outlets, an in-room safe, his-and-hers closet and a chaise adjacent with moveable table from which to work or enjoy room service next to a picture window. The daily breakfast buffet has endless varieties of local Suzhou cuisine, American favorites, exceptional fruits, fresh-squeezed juices, yogurts, pastries and more, with chefs on hand to prepare omelets and Chinese noodle soups to order. For those who wish to work off some of the breakfast, the indoor pool is an oasis of palm trees, chaise lounges, recessed lighting and underwater lily paintings set to inspire. A spa and gym are on the same floor. Service at this hotel is abundant and warm, with gracious employees speaking excellent English and standing ready to direct guests or help with any question.

Deluxe King Room at the Westin Nanjing affords panoramic view of the city below.

Westin Nanjing: Well-located in the heart of Nanjing on top of the Nanjing International Center, each room in this luxury hotel affords views of nearby Xuanwu Lake. All rooms are substantial in size and well-appointed with an entry foyer, teak wood his / hers closets, large marble bathroom with separate tub, rainforest shower, enclosed toilet, complimentary water, vanity kit, white tea aloe bath amenities and free Wi-Fi and high-speed Internet access, a seating area and desk filled with office supplies. Artwork, including framed Yuhua stones, is a nod to Jiangsu's Yangtze River location and its arts and cultural performances. The hotel's lobby is designed for guest interaction with a diamond fountain that emits the scent of white tea, atmospheric lighting and vivid botanicals, and a master embroidery artist who works on delicate nature scenes throughout the day (a gallery just behind has intricate pieces on display). A restaurant favored by locals is adjacent to the 9th floor (inside the Nanjing International Center) and serves authentic Huaiyang cuisine. To work it off, the hotel has an 82-foot heated pool and WestinWorkout fitness center.

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Corridor, nearly 100 feet high at its peak. A massive reclining gold Buddha is the centerpiece, surrounded by 30 other interpretations of Buddha. A worshipping palace is even deeper underground in a dark corridor symbolizing minds of disciples of Buddhism. The adjacent Usnisa Temple is a traditionally designed and exceedingly tranquil hillside monastery nestled in the trees.

Day Five

A must-see is Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Mausoleum, built in honor of the founder of the Republic of China and considered the Holy Land of the Chinese people both at home and abroad. A climb of 392 wide stone steps leads to stunning natural surroundings, unbeatable views over the city, and hundreds of Chinese tourists curious enough about foreign visitors to take a few pictures. Visitors will likely make a few friends while exploring the lush surroundings that lead past pine trees and tai chi practitioners to the Ming Xiaoling Mausoleum, one of the largest in China. Representing the best of Ming architecture and stone carving, the ancient site is another UNESCO world cultural heritage highlight on the tour.

Later that day, discover the Grand Bao'en Temple (also known as the Porcelain Tower), a Ming Dynasty-era pagoda and subsequent second Buddhist temple in China that was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Medieval Age. Construction took 100,000 laborers 17 years to finish, spanning the reigns of three emperors. A private guide leads the way along a 600-year-old path once reserved for the emperor, through excavated Buddha relics and up 331 steps of the pagoda that was reconstructed in 2007. The views from the top are breathtaking, as the guide points out historic sites, excavations and the ancient city wall.

Evening takes on a colorful, light-filled, leisurely cruise down the Qinhuai River, considered the mother river of Nanjing, and through the adjacent Fuzi Miao, built as a site to worship Confucius (the temple is still there) and Nanjing's most bustling cultural and commercial center since 1034. For the Chinese, it's the place to be in Nanjing.

Five days merely scratches the surface of sightseeing in Suzhou and Nanjing, but if your clients have limited time or more cities on their list, this excursion provides an energetic and colorful overview. Suzhou Peace International Travel Service coordinates all hotels, tours, meals, guides and transportation. Amy Ji is the deputy general manager. Contact by e-mail: jijennifer@vip.163.com, call 011-860-512-6811-5063, or visit www.szpgl.com.

–MICHELLE PAYER