

**T**he economic impact of the pandemic was felt all over the world as countries grappled with various measures to contain the disease.

In China, efforts to deal with the pandemic were among some of the most severe, with extensive lockdowns, closed borders and a zero-Covid policy.

Perhaps nowhere was this more apparent than in Shanghai, China's economic powerhouse, which accounts for up to 4 per cent of the country's GDP. Sitting strategically within the Yangtze River Delta, it has the busiest container port in the world, and is a huge exporter of parts for automobiles, electronic equipment, machinery and more. The city made headlines when the Omicron variant struck in March 2022 and an ensuing 70-day strict lockdown obliterated access to the city's seaports and airports.

The strict Covid policies caused a major decline in the country's manufacturing capacity, logistics and human mobility that

After almost three years of lockdown, China has reopened for business. We head to the country's commercial centre to find out what we've been missing...

# BOUNDS

had severe effects on global supply chains and the world economy.

China's GDP grew by just 3 per cent in 2022, its slowest pace since the mid-1970s, and below expected targets of 5.5 per cent – though this was still far ahead of many others. The UK, for example, experienced a GDP decline of 21.7 per cent in the same period.

Thankfully, in December 2022, China announced it would be reopening its borders – and by January 2023, Covid-zero was officially over, prompting a sigh of relief from the international community and a flood of visa applications (mine among them) in readiness for when flights resumed from the UK.

We didn't have to wait long. On 23 April, British Airways resumed daily flights from London to Shanghai, while

# SHANGHAI





on 1 May, Virgin Atlantic relaunched its direct route from Heathrow to Shanghai.

China Southern, whose domestic hub is in Shanghai, has also resumed flights to Heathrow, and China Eastern began operating flights from Shanghai to Gatwick in June for the first time since the pandemic.

The message is loud and clear: China has reopened for business – but is it business as normal?

Ray Chisnall, chair of BritCham Shanghai, is cautiously optimistic, saying: “Some organisations on both sides of the globe are waiting to be reassured it really is back to business as usual as it was pre-Covid, but the medium and long-term business prospects remain strong”.

Chisnall acknowledges that overall, it’s been a tough time for both British and Chinese businesses. “While some of our members had record years in 2021 and 2022, despite all the Covid-related challenges, the majority were negatively impacted, particularly in the travel and hospitality sectors.

“However, China remains one of the UK’s top trading partners, and while what we’ve seen so far has been limited in terms of travel to China by overseas VIPs and delegations, hopefully this will pick up over the coming months.”

Juha Järvinen, Virgin Atlantic’s chief commercial officer, is similarly buoyant about the country’s comeback. “We got the go-ahead to relaunch the route in January and went on sale on 2 February,” he says. “That meant we only had three months to sell, which is exceptionally short, but we reached around 70 per cent load factor for the summer, which is pretty good.

“The UK does over £100 billion worth of trade with China every year, and Shanghai is where the majority of commercial entities are based, so this route is very important for business travel. It’s the most cosmopolitan and international city in China, so it’s an attractive destination for UK travellers, and it’s also a gateway to the rest of China and beyond.”



## SIGHTS OF SHANGHAI

Aside from the business case for visiting the Chinese commercial capital, Shanghai has plenty to offer those in search of cultural, lifestyle and dining experiences, from the French Concession area packed with shops, restaurants, nightlife and jazz clubs, to the historic Bund that skirts the wide, silvery, snaking Huangpo river with stunning architecture.

I head to the Bund first, and at 9pm on a balmy evening, the city’s residents are out in force, doing an Asian-style *passeggiata*. Outside the Custom House, a magnificent 1920s neoclassical building topped with an elegant clocktower, one woman is clad

**ABOVE:** Delivering an Insta-worthy backdrop to photos, the Bund remains one of Shanghai’s biggest draws

in a princess-style gown, complete with tiara, twirling her skirt for her photographer companion. On a nearby corner, in front of the domed former HSBC HQ – which, like the Custom House, was designed by Hong Kong-based British architecture firm Palmer & Turner – a man dressed like Michael Jackson is moonwalking for video content.

Over in Pudong, Shanghai’s thrusting financial district on the other side of the river, a more alien *Blade Runner*-esque nightscape looms. Skyscrapers shimmer, their facades illuminated by colourful, pulsing neon lights. Sticking out like a needle is the *Jetsons*-like spindle of the

Oriental Pearl TV Tower, punctuated by an orb.

## DINING DELIGHTS

I get stunning views of both sides of the river from the rooftop bar of the Shanghai EDITION Hotel, where an international crowd are sipping cocktails. Whatever travails the city may have suffered during the pandemic, its drinking and dining scene appears to be healthier than ever, with numerous memorable dining experiences to be had.

Earlier, I’d enjoyed dinner at Canton Table, located in another heritage building overlooking the Bund. This slick, one-Michelin star restaurant oozes authentic, old-style glamour. Among paintings of Chinese

women in the 1920s, clad in silk cheongsams with a slick of red lipstick and marcel-waved hair, I feasted on delicious dishes such as scented tea-smoked mushroom rolls, barbecue crispy pork, and fresh fish broth with chrysanthemum.

Another incredible gustatory experience came from immersive dining space Liangshe, which serves a multicourse meal themed around the culture of the Tang dynasty. At around £300 a head, it’s not cheap, but getting a reservation is nigh-on impossible, such is its popularity and the fact it only has 16 seats. On arrival you are plunged

**BELOW:** An immersive dining experience at Liangshe, where projections dance on the walls and table

Bright orange carp appear to swim towards my plate for a course called ‘fish under the moon’



into semi darkness before a series of projections are shown on the walls and the long table, each reflecting an individual course. Bright orange carp appear to swim towards my plate for a course called ‘fish under the moon’ – an exquisite sliver of lionfish dressed with coconut milk – while a bed of foliage appears to grow to accompany a lamb meatball and sphere of roasted potato, which are hidden among a sheaf of (real) grass. It’s playful yet artistic, and utterly memorable.

I was also impressed with dinner at my hotel, the PuLi, a soaring slate, glass and polished teak edifice of 26 floors, tucked away just off the hectic Nanjing Road. Its main restaurant, Phénix, holds one Michelin star, thanks to executive chef Ugo Rinaldo, a Parisian who serves up classic, refined French cuisine. Frogs’ legs are indeed on the menu – accompanied by morels and a yellow wine sauce – as are *coquilles St Jacques* and *confit de foie gras*. It’s all exquisite and the elegance of the food fits in seamlessly with the elegance of the hotel.

## CULTURAL HIGHLIGHTS

It’s not that surprising to see first-rate French cuisine in the city – after all, France has a long-standing association with Shanghai that dates back to the 1840s. To find out more, I signed up for a guided jeep tour of the French Concession district with Thomas Chabrieres of Shanghai Insiders ([shanghaiinsiders.com](http://shanghaiinsiders.com)).

He recounted the city’s history, tracing back to the British victory in the First Opium War (1839-1842), where Shanghai became one of five Chinese ports opened up to foreign trade, and explained how the French established their own trade-based territory within the city.

Today it’s an entrancing, laid-back district, home to a mix of European and Chinese buildings and expansive, shaded avenues lined with leafy plane trees. Imposing villa-style houses vie with cafes, bakeries, homeware and concept stores for your attention (and camera), as locals cycle slowly by. →





Wander down narrow alleys and browse designer stores like Shanghai Tang in Xintiandi



## NEW HOTELS IN SHANGHAI

### MGM Shanghai West Bund

Located further down the Bund from landmarks such as the Customs House and the Peace Hotel, the MGM Shanghai nonetheless has a central feel and sits right on the Huangpu riverfront.

Occupying the 43rd – 56th floors of AI Towers, it offers 161 opulent guest rooms, several restaurants and a sky bar on the 57th – 59th floors. There's also a rooftop infinity pool and gym, all offering breathtaking views of the skyline.

**From £245 per night, [mgmshanghai.com](http://mgmshanghai.com)**



### UrCove by HYATT Shanghai Wujiaochang

Wujiaochang is one of ten dedicated business hubs in the city, so is ideal for anyone travelling for work.

The slickly designed UrCove has all mod cons, including self-service check-in, air quality monitors and a state-of-the-art air filtration system.

There are 199 spacious, contemporary rooms designed in soothing cream and beige tones, an all-day dining restaurant offering a Western menu, and UrCove Space, an expansive co-working area in the lobby.

**From £114 per night, [hyatt.com](http://hyatt.com)**



### Conrad Shanghai

Set back slightly from the Bund, this is Hilton's largest property in Asia, opened last year. Occupying a 66-floor tower, it incorporates 728 rooms, a selection

of restaurants – including Chinese, French and Spanish – a fitness centre and indoor pool, and a bar and lounge on the 64th and 65th floors. Needless to say, the views across to Pudong are excellent.

**From £143 per night, [hilton.com](http://hilton.com)**

**FROM TOP:** Tree-lined streets in the French Concession district; Xintiandi is home to designer boutiques and hip restaurants

We also pass one of two remaining Russian Orthodox churches in the city – émigrés fleeing the Russian Revolution were welcomed here, as were Jewish refugees who arrived during WW2, and contributed to the area's multicultural character.

The French Club, also known as the Cercle Sportif Français, is a two-storey, white stone, pillared building that opened in 1928 as a gathering place for – daringly at the time – both French and Chinese, and men and women. With a swimming pool, ballroom and extensive grounds, it was one of several places Shanghai's *beau-* and *demi-monde* came to see and be seen. Today it forms the facade of the Okura Garden hotel. From its panoramic 26th floor, I gaze out onto a tree-filled landscape where clusters of old-fashioned, low-rise Chinese homes known as *shikumen* (which means 'stone gate') dating from the mid-19th century, are overlooked by soaring modern buildings. In the 1930s, 80 per cent of the population lived in this kind of housing; now it's less than 10 per cent. Cranes dot the horizon, seemingly unable to build fast enough; the shikumen are prime property-development fodder. Over

the past few decades, bulldozers have increasingly encroached on these last bastions of the past, clearing them to make way for luxury apartment blocks, malls, and five-star hotels.

Thankfully, however, some of them are being preserved. The Xintiandi area is composed of restored and reconstituted shikumen, where you can wander around narrow alleys between designer stores such as Shanghai Tang and Diptyque, plus a host of cafes, bars and restaurants. Perhaps ironically, given its capitalist focus, it's also the location of the first national congress of the Chinese Communist Party, now a museum.

It's an attractive place, but in my eyes comes second to nearby Tianxifang, another renovated former residential area whose network of alleyways are more labyrinthine and picturesque, and whose small stores, boutiques and galleries feel more independent and artisanal.

Shanghai's blend of old and new is irresistible – in some corners, life moves fast; in others, the pace is leisurely and slow. But in all areas, there is plenty of evidence that Shanghai is indeed back to business as usual. **BT**