

TRAVEL & LEISURE



Rediscovering Shenzhen

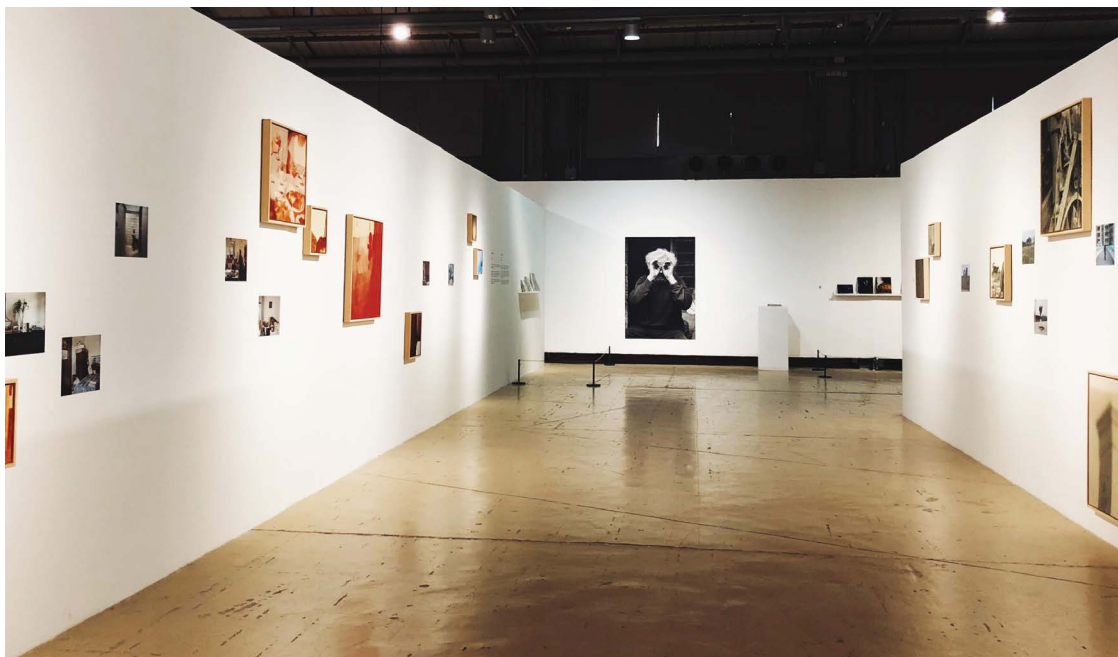
A weekend jaunt across the border on the new high-speed rail reveals there's more to China's Silicon Valley than tech

Move over Macau, there's a hot new destination for weekend and day-trippers from Hong Kong. It's a place that's been there all along, and one you can now get to in less time than it takes to get the ferry from Central to Cheung Chau island.

Shenzhen, which eschewed its former reputation as "the world's factory" for its new high-tech image, is also home to an eclectic array of artistic and cultural attractions for those interested enough to look.

Thanks to the high-speed express rail which opened in September 2018, the journey from Hong Kong to Shenzhen now takes just 12 minutes — a mere fraction of the hour and 40 minutes by MTR.

Keen to try out the new high-speed train, this AmCham staffer set off across the border to discover (or in this case, rediscover) what new things Shenzhen has to offer tourists since her last visit in the 90s.



Stumble upon funky murals, quaint bookshops and contemporary art galleries as you wander the leafy shaded streets of OCT-Loft, Shenzhen's answer to Beijing's 798 district

World explorer by morning

Get an early train from Hong Kong to make the most of the day. Exiting the Futian railway station in Shenzhen, head straight to Window of the World, a theme park of – mostly miniaturized – copies of world landmarks and arguably the city's most famous tourist attraction.

Built in 1993, the 48-hectare site is a quirky cross between open-air museum and amusement park. Arriving at the park gates, a not-so-miniature replica of the Eiffel Tower looms in the distance; an absurd

sight along Shenzhen's busy Shennan Avenue and a sign of things to come.

See the whole world by lunchtime — pose for a selfie in front of Angkor Wat, gasp at the absence of pigeons at St Mark's Square, then take a break by the Sydney Opera House.

Not all the park's attractions are in miniature. Reflect on the meaning of life while sitting on the steps of Chand Baori — a life-sized reconstruction of India's famous stepwell, or buy a bag of fish food and feed



Forget 80 days, go around the world in just one at Window (yes, window) of the World.



See the Taj Mahal and other world landmarks in miniature



The new high-speed train will transport you between Hong Kong and Shenzhen in just 12 minutes flat

the colorful koi at the Japanese garden. After some time you might forget you're actually in China... until sights of Chinese tourists wearing rented Victorian-style garb having a picnic in front of the mini-Taj Mahal bring you swiftly back to reality.

The rides inside the park are less advertised, and some people may not even realize they are there until they visit. The selection of rides, which includes a Grand Canyon-themed log flume and Amazonian bobsled run, is as random as the existence of the park itself. There is also a large indoor skiing area where you can rent some form of snow-sports equipment and fling yourself down a dry ski slope. Did we say random?

Art connoisseur by afternoon

Just 10 minutes away from Window of the World is OCT Loft, Shenzhen's answer to Beijing's famed 798 arts district. Like 798, OCT Loft is a government-supported cultural and arts project located in a former industrial zone that was preserved as a place to foster local creative industries.

Opened in 2005, the park is dotted with a number of warehouse art galleries and creative spaces that grows everyday, and is a must for lovers of

contemporary art. Stumble on vintage book stores and trendy tea shops in between galleries, stopping to gaze at the colorful murals painted on walls.

If classical oil paintings appeal more to your artistic sensibilities, skip OCT Loft and head straight to Dafen Oil Painting Village in Shenzhen's Longgang District. Travelers to Shenzhen during the 1990s may remember Dafen, which was founded in 1989 by a Hong Kong businessman and earned its reputation as the "world's oil painting factory" from producing 60 percent of all new paintings worldwide during that decade according to Al Jazeera.

Today 8,000 artists and their families still live and work in Dafen, daily churning out convincing copies of famous artworks and even, occasionally, their own. With dozens of finished paintings on display and the occasional artist at work in front of an easel, scenes along Dafen's streets are reminiscent of the oil painting shops of Hanoi's Old Quarter. Even if you're not after an imitation Van Gogh, it's interesting to watch the process.

City slicker by night

Once you've had your fill of art and culture for the day, unwind with a cocktail at the St Regis hotel's Decanter wine bar on the top floor of the 430-meter KK100 skyscraper. From your sky-high perch watch the setting sun slowly light up the urban sprawl of Shenzhen's CBD below. Acrophiles will love walking up the short flights of steps in the middle of bar till they reach what used to be the tallest point in the city until 2017, when the Ping An Finance Center stole its title.

Drop by COCO Park shopping and entertainment complex in Futian for a spot of dinner and shopping before heading back to your hotel. Known to some as the "Lan Kwai Fong of Shenzhen," COCO Park comes alive at night when the bars and restaurants heave with after-work crowds.

As for dinner, well, Italian food probably isn't the first thing that comes to mind when dining out anywhere in China. But sometimes, all you want is a pizza. Azzurro does pizza and does it well. A five-minute stroll across the road from COCO Park, Azzurro serves



COCO Park: A well-known shopping and entertainment complex in Shenzhen's Futian district. Children play on a ropes course as their parents look on



Artists hard at work inside Shenzhen's Dafen Oil Village

up authentic and homemade Italian food in a cozy, casual setting. It is currently the highest rated non-hotel restaurant in Shenzhen on Tripadvisor (#11 of 4,234 restaurants). Confused? Us too. Get an outdoor table if you can.



China travel tip Enjoy luxury stays for less

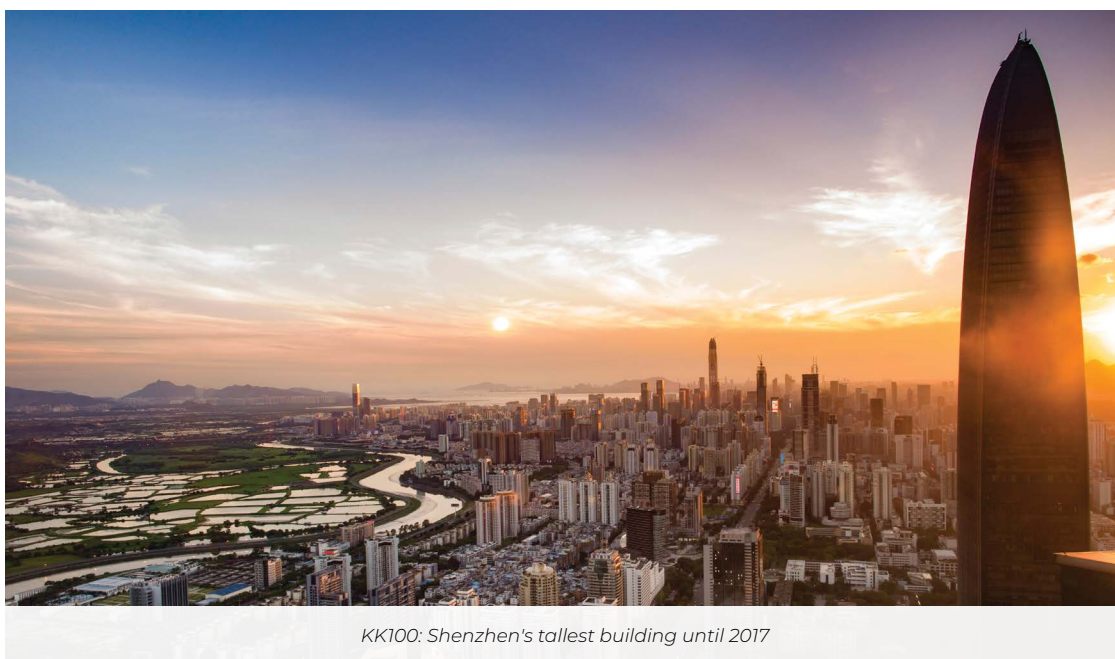
Travelers who enjoy the finer things in life will be pleasantly surprised by the bargains on offer at luxury hotel chains across mainland China. A stay at one of the big name five-star hotels in any mainland

Chinese city – think The Ritz-Carlton, St Regis, Four Seasons – costs a small fraction of what you'd fork out at any of their other global locations.

One night at the Four Seasons Hotel Shenzhen in a Deluxe King Room currently lists for HK\$1,310 on Booking.com; a night in same room type at the Four Seasons Hotel Hong Kong on the same dates will set you back HK\$4,100.

A night at the Four Seasons Shanghai (HK\$1,484) and Four Seasons Beijing (HK\$1,853) costs slightly more, but at bargain discounts nonetheless.

Of course there isn't an international standard for ranking five-star establishments, so hotels are essentially free to make their own claims. Luxury hotel aficionados may notice certain details amiss and can argue that these discounts are justified... but the rest of us aren't complaining!



KK100: Shenzhen's tallest building until 2017

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