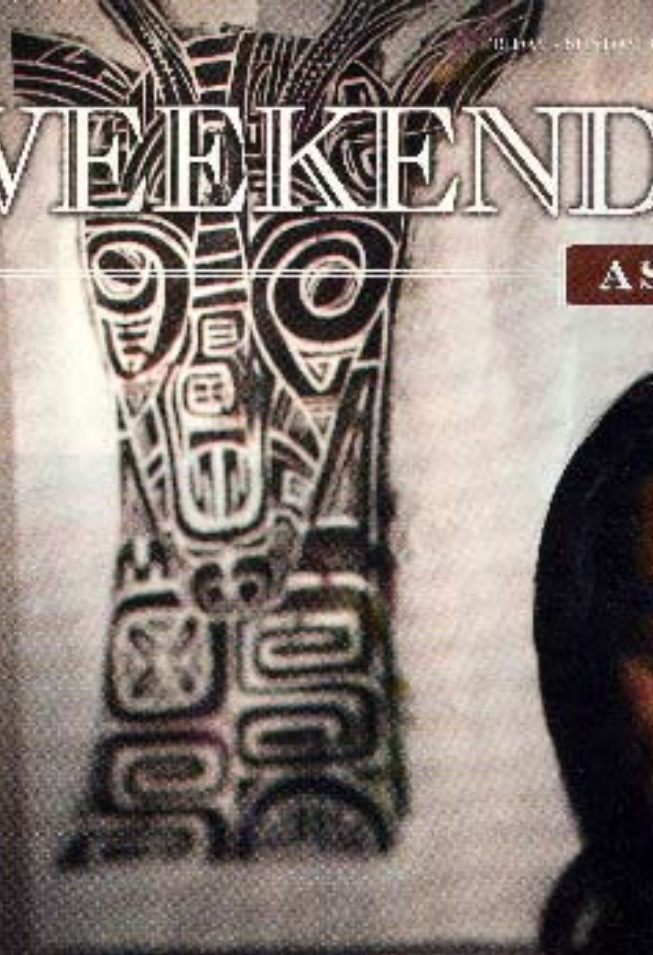


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ASIA



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AFTER HOURS:

SHANGHAI

In the newly spiffed French Concession, some echoes of the decadent city of old

By Dinny McMahon

Shanghai's nightlife is in the unenviable position of having to live up to its own decades-old reputation.

One of a handful of Chinese ports taken over by Western powers in the wake of the 19th-century Opium Wars, by the 1920s the city was riding high on a great

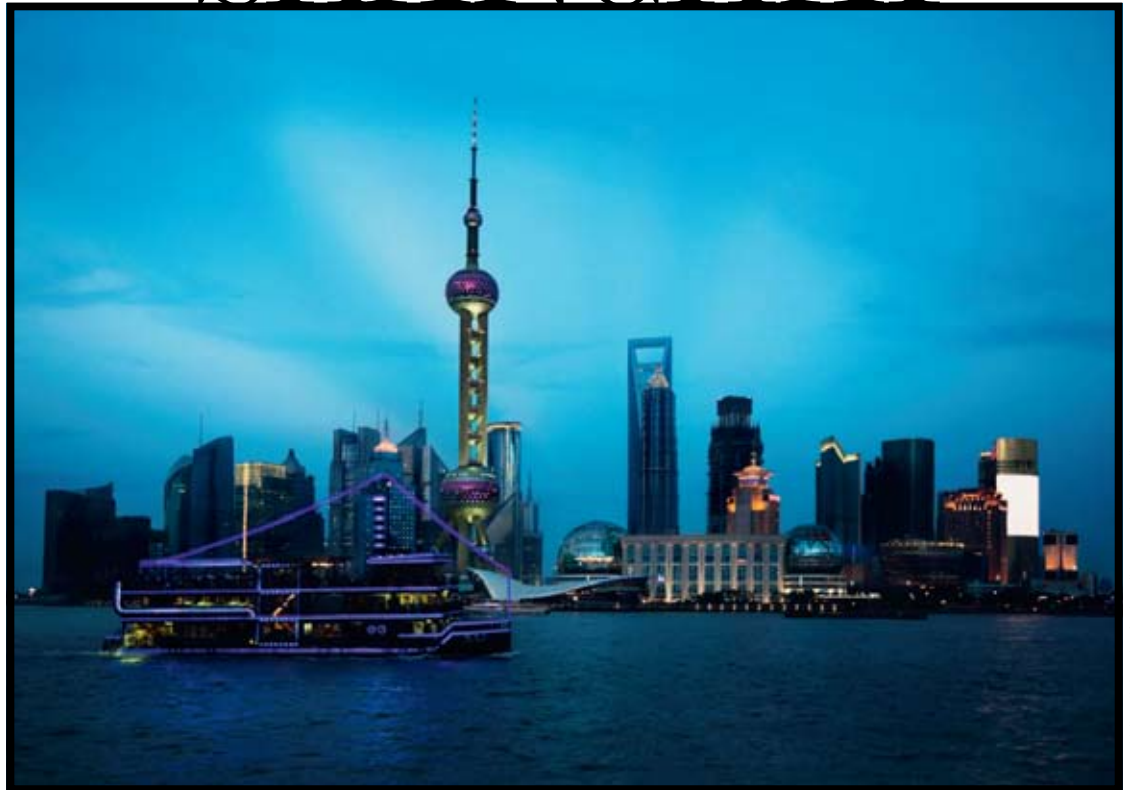
wave of global trade, secure in the knowledge that China was too poor and fractured to evict its foreign squatters, and reveling in the post-World War I *joie de vivre*. Home to a melting pot of financiers,

entrepreneurs and refugees from around the world, Shanghai became a byword for high living, decadence and debauchery.

Today the city is gradually reclaiming its status as a trading and financial hub, its spiraling skyline in historical continuity with the hulking colonial-era bank headquarters across the Huangpu River. And while the Chinese Communist Party may stand as a bulwark against the re-emergence of anything-goes revelry in its showcase city, Shanghai is also gradually reclaiming some of its old romance.

The Bund, the old financial district that lines the river's west bank, is home to some of the city's best bars, restaurants and views, and any hotel concierge can provide a list of top locations. But to the west, another area of the city is slowly staking a claim as the true romantic soul of Shanghai after years of neglect. And with the Bund converted into a construction site in preparation for the World Expo, scheduled to start in May, there's no better time to explore the hidden delights of the former French Concession.

The Concession was an area under French administration starting in the mid-19th century. The British and Americans at times had their own zones as well, but even today the French Concession stands out among



Newscom (6/11/10); Chad Ippolito for The Wall Street Journal (2); Mr. Willis

the formerly foreign-run areas for its narrow tree-lined main streets, picturesque villas and striking Art Deco facades. It's not exactly a slice of Paris—many of the best villas are hidden down alleyways, colonial-era buildings are obscured by bolted-on shop-front veneers, and there are frequent reminders of 30 years of haphazard development—but its charms hang on.

And the prospect of the Expo is helping spur improvements. The city government is kicking in with features such as new sidewalks, and private investors are doing the rest. Buildings that I've walked past for years without a second thought are being renovated to their 1930s glory.

"This is the only reason to live in Shanghai. Who wants to live in skyscraper land?" says Craig Willis, owner of Mr. Willis, a fairly recent addition to Shanghai's restaurant scene. Nestled in one of the city's quaintest streets, it sits in a newly created third floor above a strip of old shop fronts.

The food is best described as "modern Australian," a cuisine that takes its influences from everywhere. Mr. Willis himself was once head chef at Bennelong, a fine-dining restaurant in the Sydney Opera House, before moving to China eight years ago to work at M on the Bund, a Shanghai institution and still one of the city's best restaurants.

But the restaurant Mr. Willis—as the name would suggest—is his own project. "It's



After the sun sets on Shanghai, above, the curtain rises at the city's retro-burlesque house Chinatown, left.

selection of some 400 wines. Warm and cozy—with black wood floors and dark leather couches—Franck makes a perfect escape from Shanghai's cold, wet winter.

For a quiet drink after dinner, the area is dotted with Japanese cocktail bars. Some are so small they sit no more than 20 people, but have a range of spirits to keep any whiskey aficionado cooing. If you want to be sure of a seat, your best bet is the low-light, two-story Constellation 2, which evokes an older Shanghai without trying too hard. The bar runs the length of the room with densely packed spirit bottles illuminated on the wall behind it. Patrons lounge in stylish leather armchairs and sofas, and the barmen chisel the ice by hand, carving ice balls that slowly melt into your whiskey. The only thing first timers may find a little off-putting is the blue glow given off by clear drinks like gin and tonics, brought on by the subtle blue lights overhead—but as a rule they're soon choosing drinks specifically for their luminescence.

The best way to end an evening in Shanghai is with a trip to Chinatown. About 15 minutes by taxi from the French Concession and a little north of the Bund, it's a burlesque club—or at least as burlesque as the Ministry of Culture will allow—and a little slice of an older Shanghai

like a dinner party at Craig's house, but there are just more tables now," Mr. Willis says. The décor feels very homey as well, and theatrical lighting, focused on each table, provides an intimate feeling despite the crowd. And while the building itself may not be old, the rough wooden floor boards have been salvaged from an old villa on the Bund that was being demolished.

Less than five minutes away by cab is Franck, a French restaurant tucked down an alleyway behind a massive villa that still houses multiple Shanghai families. Owner Franck Pecol is the very model of a bistro owner: bald head, black-rimmed glasses and a turtle-neck. Although he no

longer works in the kitchen, he was a chef in Vietnam, Miami, Havana and around the Mediterranean before settling in Shanghai almost six years ago. "I love the feeling of riding my bike from home," he says. "I love the contrasts of this city."

Franck opened here in 2007 and Mr. Pecol is now expanding into the shop front next door where he is building a bar.

"A French restaurant in the French Concession makes a lot of sense to me," Mr. Pecol says. The menu, 40% of whose dishes may change from day to day (depending on the fresh produce available), is completely in French, but the waiters are happy to help with translations. There's also a



THE DETAILS

Franck
 376 Wukang Rd.
 (Ferguson Lane)
 ☎ 86-21-6437-6465
 Web: www.franck.com.cn
 Tuesday to Sunday,
 6 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. (last order)
 Brunch Saturday and Sunday,
 noon to 2:30 p.m.
 Closed Mondays

Mr Willis
 1/F, 195 Anfu Lu (near Wulumuqi Lu)
 ☎ 86-21-5404-0200
 5 p.m. to late
 Brunch Saturday and Sunday
 from 11 a.m.

Constellation 2
 ☎ 86-21-5465-5993
 2/F, 33 Yongjia Lu
 7 p.m. to midnight

Chinatown
 471 Zhapu Lu, Hankou District
 ☎ 86-21-6307-7607
 Web: www.chinatownshanghai.com
 Wednesday to Saturday,
 8 p.m. to 2 a.m.
 Show starts around 11 p.m.

At Constellation 2, the light comes filtered by shelves of bottles.

brought back to life. The venue is a drawing card in itself. Built in 1931 by the Japanese as a Buddhist-Shinto temple, it most recently housed an Egyptian-themed karaoke parlor. Co-proprietor Norman Gosney chose the spot after scouting all over town by bicycle. He and partner Amelia Kallman then turned the place into an homage to Hollywood's version of 1930s Shanghai.

"The thing I love about this town is that you go out and meet people," says Mr. Gosney. "You meet your investors at parties!" That's what saved the dream after the financial crisis sent the club's U.S. backers running. Now, he and Ms. Kallman—"Ms. Amelia"—are on stage four nights a week as part of an eclectic mix that includes a lounge singer, a troupe of six showgirls called the Chinatown Dolls and a towering MC who was formerly of the Welsh Guards. According to Ms. Kallman, the performers add two or three numbers a week, so even repeat visitors are likely to see something new.

Chinatown is more than the variety show—it's a party that involves the whole 200-capacity club and is more than likely to continue after the performers take their final bow at 2 a.m., the official closing time. "Come the end of the show, people have already been there four or five hours. Who stays anywhere four or five hours?" says a clearly delighted Mr. Gosney, no stranger to building clubs. He started in 1960s London and then moved on to New York, where the spots he built include the Slipper Room, a burlesque club that has been running for 10 years. And he knows what he wants, which is for his patrons to come dressed with a touch of class—or at least eccentricity. In a city that has its fair share of megaclubs pumping out the same anodyne music you

can find anywhere on Earth, Chinatown is pure Shanghai and the best option for those looking to avoid

the sneaker-set in the wee hours.

The greatest disappointment for visitors to Shanghai is that there's no single great sight to see—no Forbidden City, no Imperial Palace, no Harbour

Bridge. It's a city that needs to be taken as a whole, to enjoy the juxtaposition of new and old and of constant change. A night out will give you a taste of that better than any guided tour. And while a

visit to the Bund will give you a sense of Shanghai's style and grandeur, it's in the narrow back streets that you'll find some of the long-hidden charms of a decadent city.



Even under its very high ceiling, Mr Willis is somehow intimate.



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