



... the Wukang Mansion or Wukang Building in the French Concession Area of Shanghai.

given money to clear out, then moved to tower blocks in the suburbs. These multi-storeyed buildings loom menacingly over the shikumen; the new is devouring the old. Cranes are a common sight on the skyline, and in the past 12 months, international names like W, Aman and Bulgari have touched down on this booming, cosmopolitan city. My hotel, The Middle House, is the latest from the Swire group, which also owns the Upper House in Hong Kong; its slick aesthetic blends Italian and Asian style, a mix of Murano glass chandeliers, jade green bamboo tiles, and zen-like, poured-concrete-and-steel interiors. I'm ashamed to admit that if this is progress, I like it.

However, some contemporary architects are clearly influenced by traditional styles; the following day I head to Xintiandi, a buzzy retail and entertainment area thronged with a plethora of cocktail bars, cafes, restaurants and boutiques that are designed to look exactly like a collection of authentic shikumen. Here you'll find the overpriced likes of Shanghai Tang as well as lively karaoke bars (it also has the ironic distinction of being one of the most expensive places to live in the city, while also being located right next to the site of the first congress of the Communist Party of China). I check out an attractive, well-preserved rem-

nant of the real thing at the Shikumen Open House museum nearby, stuffed with artefacts – silk fans, jade pen-holders – from the affluent family who, a hundred years earlier, actually lived in one.

My last surprise is the profusion of green space throughout the city. Shanghai has dozens of parks, gardens and outdoor spaces that reinforce the impression that it's a calm, peaceful city. On a Sunday, however, in People's Park, south of busy shopping street, Nanjing Road, a sense of anticipation hovers in the air. That's because it's the setting for one of China's quirkiest traditions: the marriage market. Yes, if you're a lonely singleton, what could be better than having your own parents scrawl down your vital statistics (like your height, job, whether you have all your own hair...), pin these details to an umbrella, and basically tout you around to any and all takers, often without your knowledge? Still, if this is Shanghai, in all its East-meets-West, old-meets-new glory, well, I'm into it.

NEED TO KNOW

Virgin Atlantic flies directly from London to Shanghai; book via virginatlantic.com. Rooms at The Middle House start from £340 per night, including breakfast; themiddlehousehotel.com.



CYNEFIN RETREATS WYE VALLEY, HEREFORDSHIRE

Alex Dudok de Wit checks into an idyllic rural pod on the Welsh border

THE WEEKEND: They say Herefordshire's rural population hasn't grown since the Middle Ages. That's certainly the impression we get as we slip into the upper Wye Valley, where England meets Wales. The River Wye takes a few complicated turns, watering a patchwork of serene meadows and fields, while dense woodland crowds the hills behind them. What people we do see – a solitary farmer, a clutch of hikers – are small against the landscape. Leaving the road, we cross a centuries-old toll bridge (which is said to shelter a troll named Walter) to reach Cynefin Retreats.

THE ACCOMODATION: Four brand-new tubular pods lie in the shadow of a copse, spaced discreetly apart, facing the surrounding farmland. Inside our pod, it's all mod cons: fully equipped kitchen, plump sofa, wood-burning stove, snug floating bed. A hot tub sits on the decking outside. The whole space is unified by a tasteful burgundy-and-orange colour scheme and the pod's striking curved back. It has been built to eco-friendly specifications, with local timber; one side is given over to glass sliding doors which provide a sweeping view of the environment. From the sofa, we can see pine trees, birdhouses and horses. When a storm hits one morning, we watch it shake up the landscape, and it feels so palpably close that I'm almost surprised to find myself still warm and dry when it's gone.

THE FOOD: Cynefin's pods are self-catered, and a few basic foodstuffs sourced from the area are sold onsite – including marshmallows for the barbecue grill. Hay has several charming eateries, too. Our favourites are The Globe, which rotates



TOP TIP
The River Wye is home to giant sea lampreys a metre in length, which are capable of hurling rocks with their mouths.

daily between themed menus, and The Electric Cafe, which serves delectable veggie dishes to a soundtrack of desert blues from Timbuktu (Hay's twin town).

ASK ABOUT: Cynefin couldn't be better placed for ramblers: a bridleway runs right past our pod and up into the hills, through pastureland and cool woods. After a half-hour climb, we're rewarded with a panorama of the valley.

If we were fitter, we could continue along the Wye Valley Walk to the bohemian haven of Hay-on-Wye, and the Black Mountains beyond. Instead, we drive to Hay, noticing that the roads improve as soon as we enter Wales. The town celebrates literary culture all year round – not just during its wildly popular festival – and we spend a happy afternoon exploring the more arcane shelves of its second-hand bookshops. Becky, Cynefin's amiable housekeeper, is on hand to answer questions about the area.

AND AFTER THAT? The hiking trails that fan out from Cynefin are endless – but walking is not the only way into nature. The Wye is rich in salmon and trout, and fishing licences can be obtained at the toll bridge. Canoes are available for rental, too. History buffs can drive to the Gothic ruins of Tintern Abbey in the lower Wye Valley, while Hereford Cathedral's Mappa Mundi, a barmy medieval map of the world, makes for a great diversion on a rainy day.

NEED TO KNOW: Pods start at £150 per night for two people; a small child can join for an extra £20. Cynefin Retreats is 35 minutes by car from Hereford and 10 minutes from Hay-on-Wye. Find more details and book at cynefinretreats.com