

Time machine:  
Pingyao, China



# *Antique* CHINA

In a country where the past rarely gets in the way of the future, the “real” China can be hard to find. A battle is raging between old and new – and time may be running out for tradition-hungry travellers. **Matt Doran** visits the 2700-year-old city of Pingyao, possibly the last frontier.



## REMOTE CHINA

**AT 92, WAR VETERAN** and great-grandfather Yin Yi Zhou is a living treasure, eclipsing the average life expectancy of a Chinese man by almost a quarter of a century.

“There is something very special about this place,” he says to an interpreter in the rare Pingyao dialect, taking a sip of local rice wine. “It is like we are a time machine, a way back to China’s past. I am very happy that we have no cars here. We are not buried under the skyscrapers.”

When it comes to China’s past, Mr Yin is qualified: locals suspect he is the oldest resident in a place dating back more than 2700 years – and one that is almost certainly one of the world’s best-preserved ancient cities.

“People don’t change here,” he says, pointing out that it still costs only 10 Yuan (\$2) to have a decent haircut – although he warns that it is slightly more for tourists. “This might be the friendliest place in all of China.”

Illuminated at night by hundreds of hanging red lanterns, it may also be the most unique. It is one of only two cities in the country afforded UNESCO heritage protection, because in many ways it is a microcosm of the traditional old-world way of life.

**FOUNDED IN THE 14TH CENTURY**, the walled city of Pingyao is a window to the Ming and Qing dynasties. China once boasted thousands of such cities, but this is one of only a few to survive the country’s rampant modernisation.

“We have to value our local history and China’s cultural heritage,” says Peking University professor Wu Bihu. “That’s what foreigners come to see, not soaring skyscrapers and wide streets. China’s inbound tourism market is in a grave situation.”

Blame falls often on the country’s ubiquitous veil of smog, but tourism leaders say (privately) that China’s full-throttle urban



development policies are the real threat. In the world’s most bullish economy, indiscriminate development means the past only rarely gets in the way of the future. In response, tourism

operators are busily carving out a new niche. “Our clients are increasingly asking us to offer them something more than the Great Wall and Beijing’s finest crispy-skin duck,” says Sujata Raman, managing director of luxury tour operator Abercrombie & Kent. “We got together with the country’s most experienced local guides to pinpoint the best portals into the old world. What we can offer travellers in Pingyao is like nothing else in China.”

In the nearby city of Datong, as in many other parts of the country, planning officials who’ve spent decades hurtling toward the future are now feverishly trying to re-create the past. Too often, historical “relics” are torn down and rebuilt anew, and the result feels decidedly artificial.

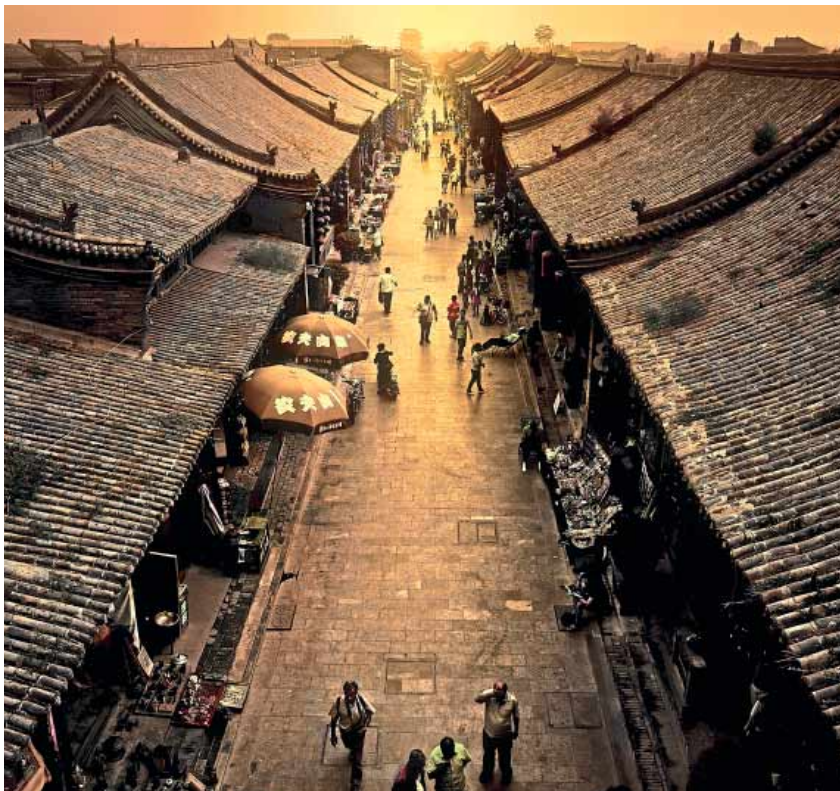
However, in Pingyao, the experience is as authentic as it gets. Men with donkeys arrive to collect the sewage, and the cobbled, red lantern-lit streets are rutted with their cart tracks. It is all in striking contrast to Beijing, where freeway motorists are punished with fines if they have the audacity to travel too slowly. >

**Ancient walls of Pingyao; replica of an ancient coin in courtyard of Tianjixian Museum (inset)**





Clockwise: Pingyao night market; street trader; market



More than a million tourists visit each year, the bulk of them from China. But this well-kept secret is about to be blown wide open. Some 715km south-west of Beijing, and without an airport, Pingyao was always difficult to get to. But a new high-speed rail link has slashed travel time from the capital from 15 hours to under four.

Most will be lured by the city's 6km of fortress wall – 12m high with 72 watchtowers, 3000 battlements and a 4m-deep moat. With six barbican gates, the structure resembles a tortoise, which represents long life in Chinese culture. Feng shui was critical to the design: the entrance gates are built at right angles to guard against evil spirits, rumoured to travel only in straight lines.

The wall provides a remarkable vantage point to appreciate the splendour of the Han architecture below – tiered towers and temples among a picturesque grid of imperial houses. Within the walls there are four main streets, eight smaller ones and 72 laneways – each of those numbers significant in Confucian philosophy. The tiled grey roofs of the Qing dynasty homes are near identical, curved like a set of crested waves, many decorated with ceramic dragons.

The roughly 2.6sq km town is home to around 50,000 people, many living in original shared-courtyard homes where little has changed since the time of emperors. Except now, in the modest one or two-room homes, satellite dishes and video games are just as common as generators and pit latrines, and women are increasingly finding work in the guesthouses and boutique accommodation springing up to meet the tourism demand.

“Tourism here is beginning to change our lives,” says Ren Xiao Yan, recently employed as a guesthouse cleaner. “We used to struggle to pay the small rent for our home (\$80 a year), but now the world is starting to realise what a unique part of China this is. Something you can not see anywhere else.”

From the watchtowers you can observe life as it might have been hundreds of years ago. Cars are banned within the walls, so most get around on bikes. And in the many makeshift stands and stalls, Pingyao does its trade. A young man with the grace of a violinist carves wheat noodles on a long wooden block (one of 108 styles of noodle on offer). A pensioner sits at a makeshift barber shop on a street corner, waving to tourists watching his public shave. Teenagers queue at the famed Pingyao fried-chicken store. A young mother walks home from the tiny supermarket, curd, cabbages and a 5kg bag of rice slung over her shoulder. Despite the enormous load, when she passes the bicycle repair store on Cheng Huang Street, she smiles and waves to the owner, Mr Shao. His father has run the store for 42 years. ➤



Unchanged for centuries: cars are banned on Pingyao streets; traditional ceremony (below)



✦ Abercrombie & Kent offers private and small-group tours in five-star luxury throughout China, specialising in Pingyao. [abercrombiekent.com.au](http://abercrombiekent.com.au)

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PINGYAO'S OTHER CLAIM TO FAME is as the birthplace of modern banking. It was a key city on the lucrative trade route from southern China and onwards to Japan and Russia – along which crates of silver were carted to pay for fine teas and silks. Enterprising businessmen devised a virtual-payment system, known as “drafts”, saving companies a fortune in security fees. In 1823, the Rishengchang Draft Bank became the first in China to issue cheques. Today, it is the most visited attraction in Pingyao, particularly the old counting rooms, silver vaults and opium dens for VIP clients. Coins are scattered throughout the brickwork at the entrance, remnants of what was once a show of extraordinary wealth to would-be customers.

“Soon after, 22 banks would spring up in Pingyao – more than half the banks in all of China at the time,” says Yoyo, a guide with Abercrombie & Kent. “But eventually, the wealth that propped up the Qing dynasty fell away with the collapse of the empire in 1911. But every coin has two sides. It was because of that poverty here that the heritage has been retained. This is why you don’t see skyscrapers and factories.”

Today, Pingyao is reinventing itself. Tourism numbers are rising rapidly, a blessing and a curse for Yang Jing, owner of the city’s first five-star boutique courtyard guesthouse, Jing’s Residence (from RMB1500/\$306, [jingsresidence.com](http://jingsresidence.com)). As a businesswoman, she longs for patronage, but not at the expense of the city she loves. “When I first visited this city, it was love at first sight. It’s like waking up 200 years ago. It is the only true surviving war city in Chinese history.”

Yang bought the courtyard home in 1998, captivated by the architecture. In its 260-year history, it has been home to a photography studio, an engine factory, an eye clinic and a silk merchant. Now it is a 15-room hotel offering travellers individually designed suites with bamboo floors, northern Chinese stone, rice-paper ceilings, and *kang*-style beds with silk and lacquer headboards. “City planning was done 1500 years ago and very little has changed. The electricity is still cut off in the summer and most of the city’s guesthouses still run on generators,” Yang says.

However, as tradition-hungry travellers look beyond the capitals, a tourist crush may be just around the corner. Quite literally, in Yang’s case, as Pingyao’s first nightclub opened only a few streets away earlier this year. “I pray this place stays true. In many ways, it is the heart of China. The past is alive here.”

But as the speakers thump to life at the nearby nightclub, the pertinent question is, for how much longer will this be the case?