



NEXT STOP

In Rising China, Centuries-Old Charm

By JUSTIN BERGMAN

JUST 250 or so miles to the west of the gleaming high-rises of Shanghai sits a window into a world hundreds of years old. Despite the dramatic upheavals brought by war, the Cultural Revolution and industrialization, the hamlet of Xidi, in the mountainous province of Anhui, along with other villages in the area, has managed to remain largely untouched since the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, starting hundreds of years ago. Wander the narrow, labyrinthine lanes and peek into the open-air courtyards of grandiose homes, with their wooden lattice windows, rock gardens, watercolors and calligraphy scrolls, and it can feel as if you are slipping back in time to the days of the Chinese emperors.

As more and more Chinese move to cities, the small villages of Anhui offer a respite. And perhaps even more surprising, young artists and entrepreneurs are embracing these spots with a renewed sense of pride in their modest scale and tangible sense of history.

After the sun begins sinking behind the whitewashed walls of Xidi's houses and the day-trippers board their buses home, the art students, visiting from the large provincial capital of Hefei and other nearby cities, linger overnight or for the weekend. Perched behind easels in the granite-tile lanes or on rocks in the shallow streams flowing through the village, they appear inspired by the classical architecture, which has all but disappeared in their skyscraper-studded cities. "Young people don't typically like this; they prefer big-city culture," said Wang Nanyan, an 18-year-old from Hefei. "But I'm different. I'm an artist — I like these kinds of buildings."

Two reasons these villages — about 20 of which are worth visiting, spread across the southern part of Anhui, an area roughly the size of Belgium — have retained their centuries-old charm are location and economics: they are set deep in the countryside of one of China's poorer provinces, where residents have lacked the resources to tear down



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the old and start anew.

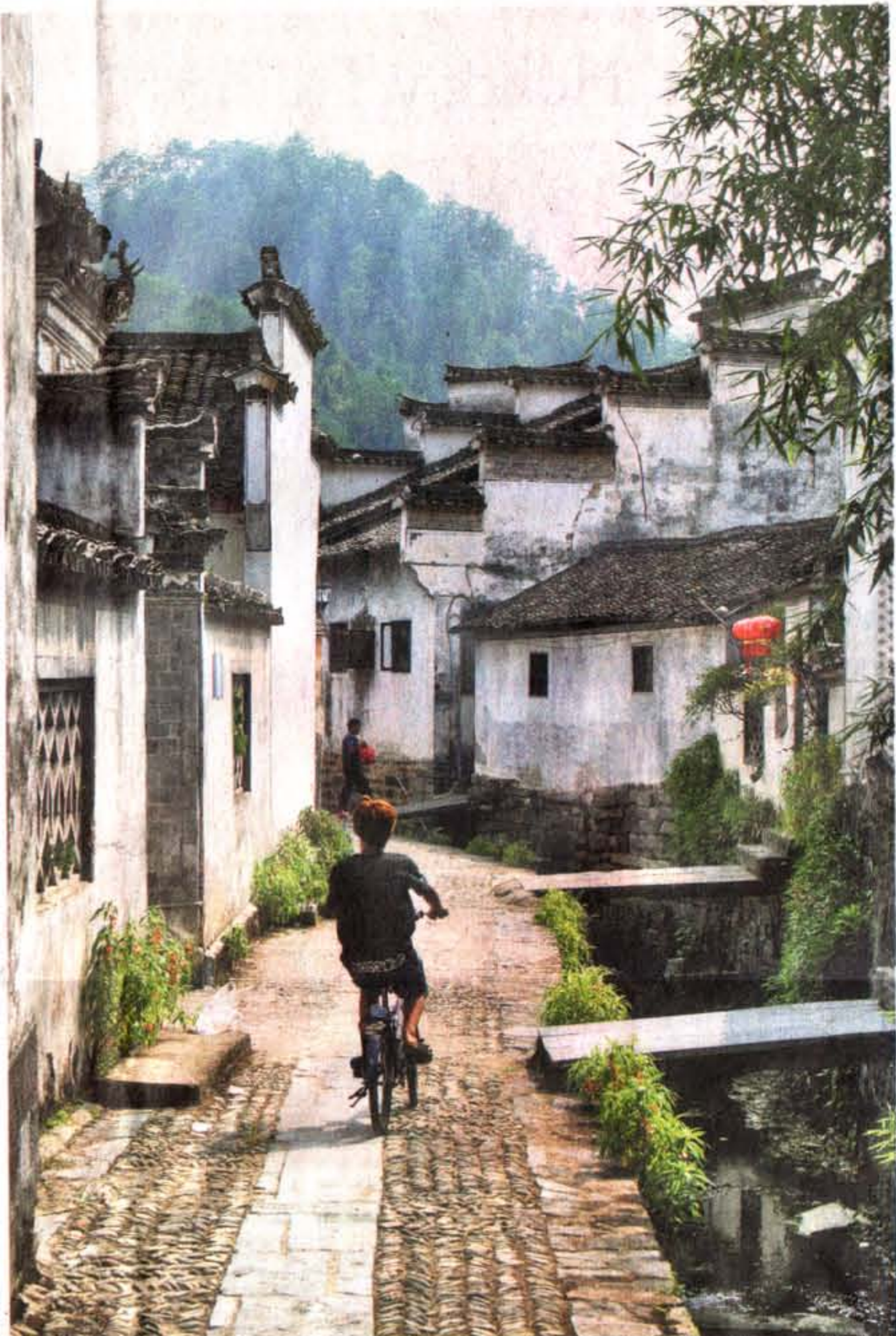
But preservationists have played a key role, too. In 2000, Xidi (pronounced shee-dee) and the nearby village of Hongcun were declared Unesco World Heritage sites. Rather than force residents out, Xidi officials wisely devised a plan to guarantee them a share of profits from entrance tickets to the town (104 renminbi, about \$16.60 at 6.25 renminbi to the dollar), as long as they maintained the traditional appearance of their properties. Seeing opportunities, entrepreneurs from other parts of China began to trickle in, snapping up rundown properties to refurbish and turn into shops and inns. The result is that tourism is booming — aided in part by the villages' proximity to another attraction, the famously striking Huangshan (Yellow Mountain), but mainly thanks to their historical and aesthetic appeal.

Xidi, in particular, has an illustrious history. Founded in 1047 by the Hu family, Xidi began to grow rich as a trading center during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). As the population swelled, the Hus gained power as imperial officials and built elaborate two-story compounds and giant archways, one of which still stands at the entrance to the town. The fortunes of the town began to decline after the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), but signs of Xidi's former glory still abound. (The name Hu, for one, is shared by about 80 percent of residents.)

The size of many of the former merchant homes still impresses. The most majestic were built in the 1600s and designed in the traditional Huizhou style (as the region was once known). Interior courtyards, filled with gardens and small fishponds, open on to formal meeting halls where portraits of ancestors hang from the highest points on the walls. Nearly every surface, whether wood or stone, is elaborately carved — the door frames, the braces supporting the ceiling beams, the second-story balconies. But perhaps the most distinctive features are the "horse-head walls" that bookend the rooftops, so called because the upturned edges of the multitiered walls resemble horses' heads.

Li Guoyu, an artist from Shanghai, was drawn to this graceful architecture when she started looking for a property to turn into an inn in the early 2000s. The one she settled on wasn't nearly as grand as others in Xidi — it was a teacher's home during the Ming dynasty and was being used as a pigsty when she found it. But Mrs. Li saw potential in the 400-year-old property. "Many people dream of finding a paradise, but they never really find such a place," she said. "But I did."

In 2006, she opened the Pig's Heaven Inn — named in honor of the building's one-time function. The hotel is modest in size, with five bedrooms, a small courtyard garden and a third-floor lounge with stunning views of the village's black-tiled roofs. But what it lacks in space, it makes up for in character: Mrs. Li has carefully appointed the interiors with antique chests, chairs and



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN BERGMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



FROM TOP LEFT An art student from nearby Hefei paints a narrow lane lined with Ming Dynasty-era homes in Xidi; there are no cars in the tiny hamlet of Xidi; in Zhaji, many homes and former temples are decorated with calligraphy paintings; lattice windows are typical of southern Anhui; guides give walks through rice paddies outside Zhaji.

look for my own childhood house, I wouldn't find it because it's gone already."

Most tourists focus solely on Xidi and Hongcun because of their Unesco status and proximity to each other, but there are other hamlets in the Anhui mountains that have equally exquisite architecture and, more important, a fraction of the visitors. One is Zhaji, a two-hour drive north of Xidi. The tiny village is also made up of whitewashed homes with black-tile roofs clinging to the banks of a muddy stream, but the houses here are far simpler, belonging mostly to farmers. There are few shops and restaurants and no art students. Locals dry peanuts on giant bamboo baskets in the sun and make their own tools. Xidi feels like Shanghai in comparison.

This rural idyll is exactly what Julien Minet was looking for when he became a homeowner in the area in the early 2000s. Mr. Minet, a Frenchman, had traveled around Anhui for years writing an ethnographic study on ancient villages for Unesco, and he took such a liking to Zhaji, he bought an abandoned Ming dynasty-era house in 2003 for the shockingly low price of 10,000 renminbi (about \$1,570). Needless to say, it was a fixer-upper. "The house had chickens living inside," he said. "But then I saw all the mountains outside. The panorama is just wonderful."

After an arduous three-year renovation — which included finding antiques from the area and the addition of a small pool ensconced in bamboo, essential for the region's scorching summers — he opened his three-bedroom guesthouse, Chawu, in 2006. Catering mostly to French tourists, including the occasional V.I.P. (a French education minister once stayed there), Mr. Minet aims to offer a traditional Anhui experience to his guests, with a personal tour of the village and "country food" cooked by one of his neighbors. His only concessions to the 21st century and his native France: free Wi-Fi and the pastries he serves beneath the chestnut tree in his garden at sundown.

Though he depends on visitors to make a living, Mr. Minet is mindful of the impact that tourism can have on the fragility of the region. In fact, when Lonely Planet guidebook writer contacted him, he requested that he not mention the village; as a result, Chawu is not listed in the book. "In other places, all the activity is around tourism, but here people still live the way they always have," he said. "It's not all about money. That's very important."

IF YOU GO



Chawu, a guesthouse in Zhaji.

XIDI

Round-trip flights between Shanghai and Huangshan City (also known as Tunxi) start at 580 renminbi (about \$93) on China's leading online flight aggregator, ctrip.com. Xidi is a one-hour journey by car from the Huangshan airport; the Pig's Heaven Inn can arrange a driver for 200 renminbi each way.

Pig's Heaven Inn (86-559-515-4555). Staff members speak only Chinese, so arrangements are best made by a hotel in Shanghai. Doubles from 360 renminbi per night.

ZHAJI

Round-trip tickets on the high-speed train between Shanghai and Nanjing start at 280 renminbi. Zhaji is a three-hour journey by car from Nanjing; Chawu can arrange for a driver for 700 renminbi each way.

Chawu (86-1370-518-7277; chawu.com). Doubles from 750 renminbi a person, per night, including all meals (minimum stay, two nights). Julien Minet can also arrange for a driver between Zhaji and Xidi for 500 renminbi each way.

wash basins, as well as cheerful touches like mirrors painted with Peking Opera stars, vintage floral wallpaper, and lanterns and birdcages hanging from the rafters.

A short time later, Mrs. Li purchased a second property in the nearby village of Bishan — a Qing dynasty merchant's home — which she transformed into a nine-bedroom inn and opened in 2008. She scoured the countryside to find in-

teresting antiques (including a spectacular red and gold Qing-era wedding bed for one bedroom), hung art by her son, Mu Er, on the walls and planted an organic vegetable garden in the back. She believes her restoration work has inspired her neighbors to fix up their properties, too. "Old houses have memories," she said. "When I'm old and pass this house along to my son, he'll remember his childhood here. If I go back and