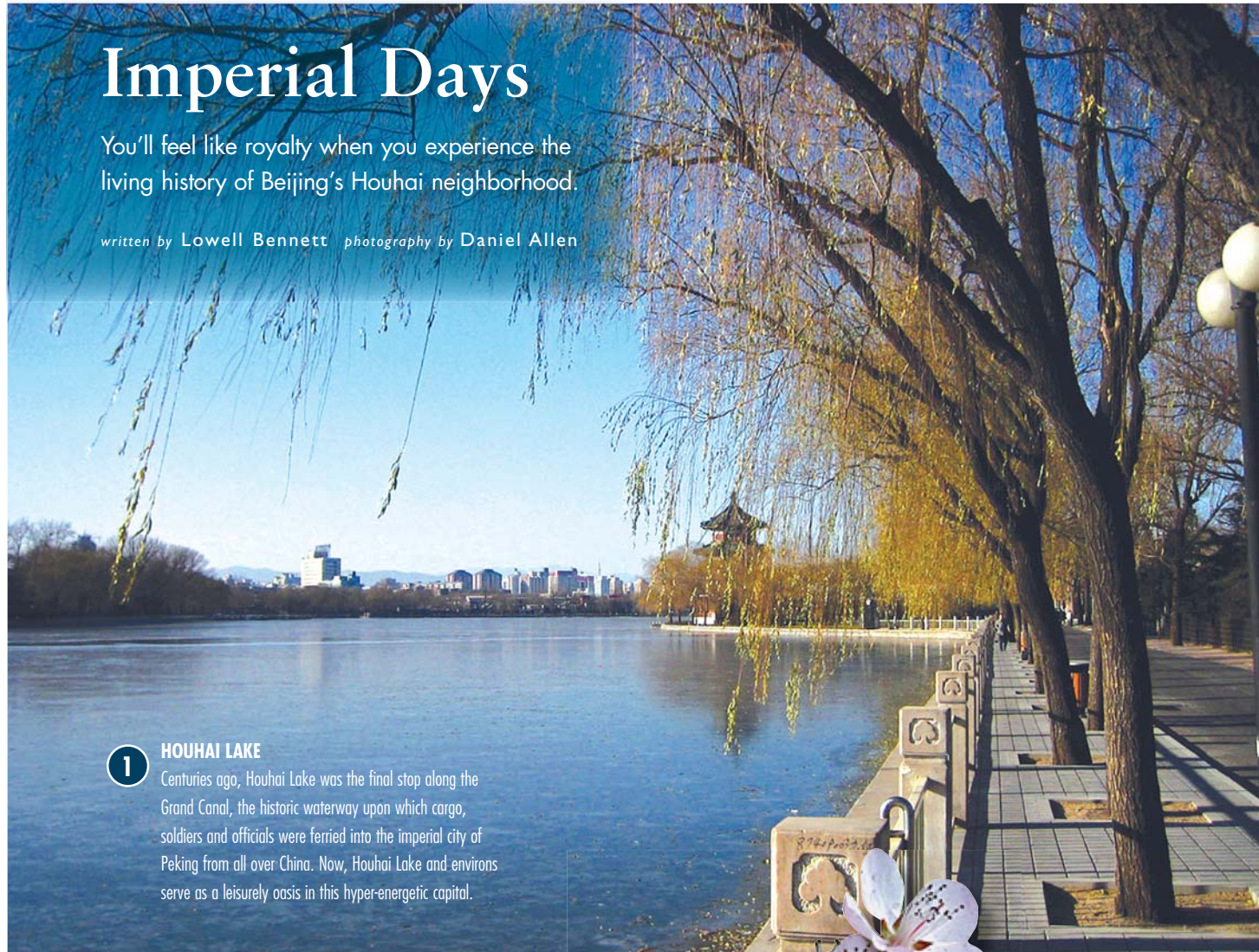


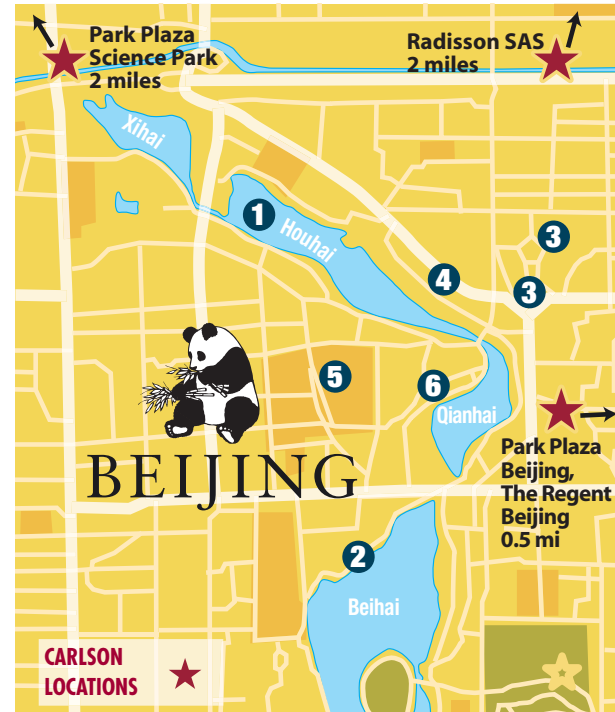
# Imperial Days

You'll feel like royalty when you experience the living history of Beijing's Houhai neighborhood.

written by Lowell Bennett photography by Daniel Allen



**1 HOUHAI LAKE**  
Centuries ago, Houhai Lake was the final stop along the Grand Canal, the historic waterway upon which cargo, soldiers and officials were ferried into the imperial city of Peking from all over China. Now, Houhai Lake and environs serve as a leisurely oasis in this hyper-energetic capital.



**6 LOTUS LANE**  
Edging Qianhai Lake is the cobblestone promenade of Lotus Lane. Here you can get a Starbucks fix, or wine and dine at some of the area's most upmarket restaurants, bars and nightclubs. In warmer months, these establishments set out alfresco seating, and the place is ideal for relaxing and people-watching of a very international sort.



Today, the Houhai area is popular with relaxing locals, Western expats and tourists from around the globe. They come for the distinctive shopping, dining, clubbing, boating and winter ice-skating. While expats and locals alike commonly refer to the entire neighborhood as "Houhai" (pronounced like "ho-hi"), the festive action actually wraps around three inter-connecting lakes: Houhai ("Rear Sea"), Qianhai ("Front Sea") and Xihai ("West Sea").

Overlooking these tranquil waters and the fringe of willow trees are a wide range of active food and beverage establishments, and lining the weblike network of ancient hutongs (alleys) nearby are residences of an earlier era, unique ethnic shops, traditional teahouses, and hole-in-the-wall cafés and cocktail lounges.



**2 BEIHAI PARK**  
Originally the site of a royal palace during the Liao Dynasty (907–1125), and renovated as an imperial playground for Kublai Khan in the 13th century, Beihai Park begins just south of Qianhai Lake and extends to the battlements of the Forbidden City. This lovely area centers on Beihai Lake and the landmark Bai Ta (White Pagoda), and here you can stroll along the tree-lined waterfront past gardens, imposing imperial architecture and elegant stone sculptures.

ILLUSTRATION: JOE LEMONNIER

**3 THE BELL AND DRUM TOWERS**  
A short stroll from the shore of Houhai Lake are the Bell and Drum Towers, each more than 45 meters in height. These served as official timekeeping installations during the Ming, Yuan and Qing dynasties (1271–1911). The structures were originally known as the Towers of Qi Zheng (meaning "orderly administration").

**4 YA'ER HUTONG**  
Just a few steps north of the Silver Ingot Bridge, where the Houhai and Qianhai lakes meet, is the exotic scene that is Ya'er Hutong. Within this network of alleys are authentic ethnic arts and crafts, ancient architecture, reminders of past political eras, friendly street-side vendors, unusual cafés, and half-hidden bars. It all comes together in a concentrated blast of local color and energy quite unlike any urban setting in the Western world.

**5 PRINCE GONG'S MANSION**  
Constructed in the late 1700s, the former home of Prince Gong is one of the most carefully preserved examples of Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) architecture in all of China. Here is a glimpse of the past, and of an imperial era's privileged class. The mansion was originally the home of He Shen, a young, handsome and purportedly very wise officer of the Imperial Guard assigned to Emperor Qianlong, who reigned from the mid-1730s to the mid-1790s.

**WHERE TO STAY**

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  - Park Plaza Beijing Wangfujing
  - Park Plaza Beijing Science Park
  - The Regent Beijing
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