

COOL





AS CATS

With a growing fashion scene, a friendly atmosphere
and an entire street themed around cats, Xiamen has been branded
China's new capital of cool. But does it live up to the hype?

By Jamie Fullerton
Photography Aurélien Foucault



FOR SOME, THE ESSENCE OF THE WORD “COOL”

can be found hidden in an urbanite's sculpted beard, fortified by single-origin coffee and soundtracked by expensive vinyl records featuring songs that are all available free online. For others, the opposite of contrived hipsterdom is what it's all about – to not acknowledge cool is to truly be cool.

Regardless of how it's defined, cool has been used a heck of a lot recently to describe Xiamen, the island city in China's southeastern Fujian province, right next to the Taiwan Strait. The city used to be largely known as a fishing hub, but recently CNN deemed it the country's "new capital of cool", followed by *The New York Times* and fashion bible *Vogue* both reporting on Xiamen becoming hallowed ground for fashionistas as opposed to fishermen.

Factors leading to this reputation include the obviously hip, such as a blossoming, cutting-edge fashion industry and the arrival of places like Fat Fat Beer Horse, a bar that has helped to bolster the city's lean craft beer scene. Others are less cliché, such as the opening of the world's longest bicycle skyway and a street dedicated to cats.

But is the cacophony of cool claims about a city of 3.5 million justified? I head to Xiamen to test its temperature.

I BEGIN MY HUNT AT SHAPOWEI ART Zone, a complex of handicraft centers, minimalist design-sporting shops, bars and nightclubs not far from Xiamen University. Opened in 2014 as part of the local government's attempts to gentrify the area, it used to be home to rustic houses owned by people working in the fishing industry. Now it's become Xiamen's trendiest hangout spot.

It's more of a shop zone than an art zone, really, dotted with retro-style shed-stores selling quirky and attractive trinkets. Nearby, skateboarders wearing clothes by influential local streetwear label atBetween trundle around a small skate park next to Fat Fat Beer Horse, Shapowei's flagship bar.

Fat Fat Beer Horse has certainly helped raise Xiamen's cool reputation since opening in 2015. Its steampunk-style architecture comes from the location's previous life as a fish processing plant – customers sip crisp and cold pilsner beneath enormous metal tubes that used to dispense cascades of ice.

"Xiamen has a very different cool to, say, Berlin or Beijing. Those cities are big and rough and have strong cultural scenes," the bar's owner, David Krings, explains, knocking back ale at the bar as he chats. The 40-year-old German has been living in Xiamen for six years. "Xiamen is smaller. The pressure isn't so high. People who have ideas can come here to fulfill them."

After downing a couple of pints, I head south of Shapowei, traversing through a tidal wave of students gushing down the coffee shop-lined Daxue Road, to put Krings' comment to Situ Zhiwei, the founder of café and bar Thank You. The place is even trendier than Fat Fat Beer Horse: colorful records are piled up behind the DJ booth, vintage furniture has been brought in from Tokyo and it is here that I'm served one of the best whisky sours I've ever had in my life.

"People here are more chill and less competitive," says Situ, who hails from the buzz-bustle metropolis of Guangzhou. Speaking from beneath his beanie hat after sliding a second cocktail my way, the 39-year-old adds that the geography of the island is a big reason for this breezy mentality. "Everything in my mind changed when I moved to Xiamen," he adds. "When I feel depressed and catch sight of the open sea, everything negative drops, and you relax."

It's hard to imagine the permanently smiling Situ being depressed about

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Views from Shapowei Art Zone; scenes from Daxue Road; a skateboarder at Shapowei Art Zone; Situ Zhiwei of Thank You; David Krings of Fat Fat Beer Horse; inside Fat Fat Beer Horse; streetwear label atBetween; the DJ booth at Thank You

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anything, aside from perhaps scratching one of his records. The friendly, open mentality that he and his wife, fashion designer Cotton Yu – who runs the label Mymymy – have poured into Thank You has made it the main meeting point for the city's young creative types. On my visit it's a flurry of neatly trimmed mustaches, ultra-light laptops and people wearing hats indoors.

AT THE CENTER OF THIS NETWORK IS the so-called Xiamen Gang, a group of young fashion designers who are helping the city's fashion industry punch above the weight a place of its size arguably should. Recently, Xiamen-based designers such as Mymymy's Yu, Liu Min – the founder of the Ms Min label – and Shangguan Zhe, who runs the Sankuanz label, have become popular across China.

Zhe is arguably the best known Xiamen-based designer of the group. Some of his menswear designs are pretty



out-there, such as the colorful prints and oversized jackets that characterized his Autumn/Winter 2018 collection. Other than achieving success at home, he has shown at London and Paris fashion weeks.

Vega Wang is another Xiamen-based designer who is a core member of this group, and who is doing similarly well thanks to her super-sleek, often minimalist designs. "I'm happy with the tag Xiamen Gang – to me, it means community," says Wang, who is 32. I meet Wang in her huge workshop and office in an unassuming gated residential area on the south coast of the island – through driving rain, we can just about see the ocean as we chat at her desk. Originally from Liaoning in the northeast, Wang worked in Beijing for seven years before moving here last September.

"I wanted to focus on life, not just work," she says. In 2014, she got so depressed in the capital that she named one of her fashion lines, "The Dark Night of the Soul", after it. But moving to Xiamen lifted the cloud. "In Beijing, when I got up in the morning I was already wearing armor to fight the day," she tells me. "Here I [wake] up by the sea."

Wang agrees with Krings and Situ about Xiamen's size helping to cultivate an atmosphere that's increasingly attractive to young creatives. The city is

**THIS PAGE,
FROM TOP**
Vega Wang;
Cotton Yu



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP
Wan Yifang and Sheng
Jiang; Baicheng beach;
Once Bookstore

big enough to provide access to all the logistical requirements an independent fashion brand needs to operate, but with studio rent far lower than in the likes of Beijing and Shanghai. It's still small enough to ensure that creative people easily find each other. "That feeling of community is something China seems to be missing elsewhere," says Wang. "We have community [in China], but the rules of the community belong to the government. But this local build-up of unity here – it's cool."

Zing! There's that word again – and totally unprompted, too. I ask Wang if she welcomes the "cool" tag being attached to Xiamen. She says she's more interested in the substance of what she and her peers are creating, but agrees that there's something special in the water here that others beyond the city's borders are fast catching on to.

"Culture is similar to a plant," says Wang, who could forge a career writing slogans for motivational posters should the fashion work ever dry up. "If you want the plant to grow well you need to give it a good field, have good soil. Art and design are not just about who is making it – it's related to the environment it's being created in."

Moving north, the quiet, sweeping highways that hug the south coast give way to taxi-crammed bustle as I pass through the shadow of the imposing Xiamen Petronas Twin Towers that for better or worse look like they should be jutting out of a man-made Dubai beach rather than an island in southeast China.

Entering Huli district, calm is restored. "It's relaxing and creative here," says Wan Yifang, 33, another member of the Xiamen Gang who, like Wang, runs an eponymous fashion label. Wan's studio is in a complex of work spaces that was converted from old factory buildings in early 2015. Next door is a studio run by her artist husband, 27-year-old Sheng Jiang, who makes



Fujian foodies

The stretch of Daxue Road, near Shapowei Art Zone, is full of trendy international and local cuisine spots. However, a more fun eating experience can be had a 30-minute walk north on Renhe Road, also known as Taiwan Snack Street.

Renhe Road is stuffed with fun street food options such as massive deep-fried squid on sticks, stinky tofu and garlic-covered shellfish, all served amid a bustling, swinging lantern-lit environment.

The street is just north of the Zhongshan pedestrian road, which also features reams of busy seafood eateries with proper seating, and almost as many dessert stores selling ice cream and sweet toast dishes.





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Scenes from Ding'aozai Cat Street, an entire stretch dedicated to cats



beautiful Buddha statues from wood, jade, porcelain and glass, and sells them to temples, private customers and shops.

"This building used to be a cigarette factory," reveals Wan, walking between plinths displaying Sheng's works. "Loads of designers and creative companies have moved here, so it's like we're all neighbors. It's got a [special] vibe."

Unlike the other people I've spoken to, both Wan and Sheng are from Xiamen. "I've been to a lot of places around China but there isn't anywhere like Xiamen," Sheng says. "It feels cozy, and I need somewhere cozy to create." Indeed, artists such as Sheng have an ever-increasing range of galleries in which to explore art, such as the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Zhangting Art Museum and the Qianji Gallery.

But I have to ask Sheng: does this make Xiamen unquestionably cool? "Well, there are many cool places in China, but Xiamen is always a place you want to come back to," he says with a chuckle. "It has a sense of belonging, rather than just being cool."

ZIPPING AROUND XIAMEN, MEETING THE trendy creative types gushing about its unique sense of chill, it becomes clear why the cool tag has been attached so firmly to the city.

BEYOND COOL

Three great trips to take from Xiamen

Hakka tulou

Fujian's *tulou* – huge square or circular rural buildings with central courtyards, some built by the Hakka people generations ago – are one of China's design wonders. Some offer homestay trips accessible via a three- to four-hour drive from Xiamen.

Kinmen island

Accessed via ferry from Xiamen, the villages on the Taiwanese island of Kinmen feature many great examples of traditional Fujian-style architecture. It's a great place to pick up quirky items such as knives made from locally sourced shells.

Gulangyu island

Just off the coast of Xiamen is this Unesco-designated gem. The island is a great place to walk around, with its old villas and mansions, as well as the country's only dedicated piano museum – a nod to Gulangyu's deep classical music heritage.





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THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Xiamen's bicycle skyway, the longest of its kind in the world; tea house Renwa; the city's coastal road

Geographical aspects of the island are key factors they keep coming back to – such as Baicheng beach, with its bizarre and brilliant elevated roads swooping directly above the sand, and the coast-hugging bike track beginning at the north of the beach strip. And not forgetting Ding'aozai Cat Street, a quirky place splattered with many statues and paintings of cats, plus a cat museum where the staff is seemingly required to wear fake feline ears at all times.

The city's old residential lanes, meanwhile, are marked with charming spots such as the rustic, paperback-stuffed Once Bookstore, said to be one of the most beautiful bookstores in China – thanks to its broken-in couches, old tilework and garden – and the nearby Renwa, a tiny tea house overlooking a tranquil, flower-adorned courtyard.

It is the city's 7.6-kilometer-long elevated bicycle road, or "skyway",

though, that is the new landmark pouring the most ice onto Xiamen's coolness pile. Designed by the Danish architecture firm Dissing + Weitling, it opened last year and is the biggest of its kind in the world, allowing cyclists to soar over car traffic and remain largely protected from rain by the bus transit line above it.

It's part and parcel of the Chinese government's big push to be the world leader in reducing pollution, and, of course, there are few things cooler than helping the environment. But to make my journey on the skyway as hipster as possible, I rent one of the retro-cool orange and silver Mobike shared bikes that litter the city.

I start pedaling from Hongwen, the southern tip of the route. The green-painted skyway is mainly flat, meaning that even with the Mobike's mildly laborious pedal pressure levels it's a breeze, aside from one final uphill stretch.

On this final wheeze-push before touching down at Xianhou, the other end of the track, I get overtaken by a pensioner riding a battered Flying Pigeon bike. Despite this slight embarrassment, riding the corner loops and swoops of the track is a truly wonderful way of seeing this fast-changing city.

Conclusion? Go to Xiamen: it's cool.