

AN ELECTRONICS SUPERCITY

THE CENTRAL CHINESE CITY OF CHONGQING, OFTEN REFERRED TO AS "THE NEW SHANGHAI" DUE TO ITS RAPID ECONOMIC GROWTH, IS A HUB FOR TRAVELLERS HUNTING FOR BARGAINS ON LAPTOPS, MOBILE PHONES AND CAMERAS.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JOHAN AUGUSTIN

Cranes work incessantly along the Yangtze and Jialing rivers flowing through the centre of Chongqing in central China. New concrete apartment blocks are rising in steady succession to provide housing for the constant flow of new arrivals moving here in search for work. Chongqing city has more than eight million inhabitants, while the province has a population of 32 million – in an area as big as Austria.

The growth is ongoing. According to the local customs administration, Chongqing's total volume of foreign trade rose by 24 per cent between 2012 and 2013. Many of the city's residents are employed in the electronics industry – one of Hewlett Packard's manufacturing bases, for example, which supplies laptops to the entirety of southwest China, is located within an hour's driving distance from the city. This US brand has around 30 retailers in the city of Chongqing.

The city's status as a tech hub is also noticeable to ordinary shoppers – and when it comes to purchasing electronics in Chongqing, the ability to bargain is important.

GADGETS FOR A STEAL

Saipo Electronic Market, a department store in the downtown commercial hub of Jiefangbei is known for offering the cheapest laptops in the country. Two

floors are devoted to cameras and four to other electronics. Here visitors can haggle the price down and get some accessories thrown in.

"Our prices are lower than in department stores and other shops – maybe a thousand yuan [€120] less than the average price for a computer," says **Min Wong**, supervisor at the HP department, adding that one reason for Saipo's low prices is the affordable rent for retail space.

Companies such as Apple, Lenovo and IBM fight for space on the steel and plastic shelves of Saipo – but what about the authenticity of US brands such as Apple, whose products are made in factories in Hong Kong?

"It's still the same product," says Wong. "The only difference is the warranty. If your iPad comes from Hong Kong, you won't get a warranty and the price will be 200 yuan less. You'll pay 3,400 instead of 3,600."

Customer **Zhang Lijuan**, shopping at the Nikon stand, says that retail prices for cameras in Chongqing are among the lowest in the country. "Much cheaper than in Shanghai," she says. "There are still few foreign tourists in Chongqing, but the Chinese know where to shop; they come to Chongqing from all over the country to buy cheap cameras," she says, adding that buying a camera here can save a shopper up to one thousand yuan.

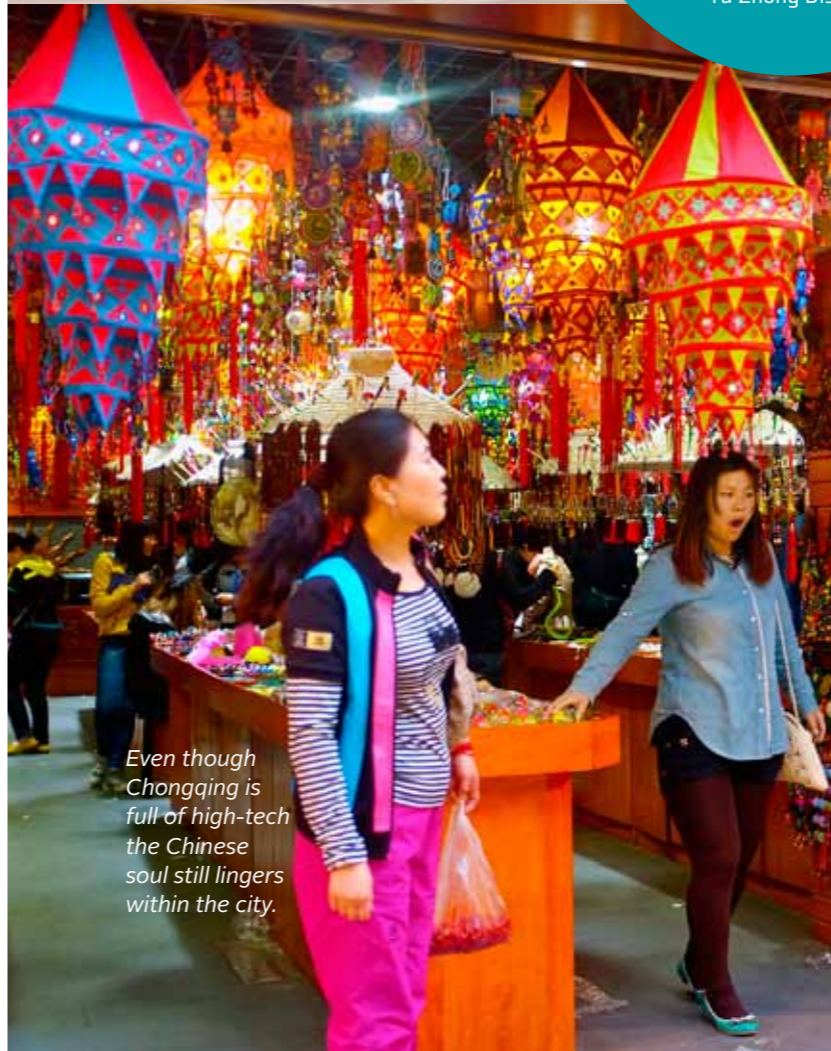
Chongqing is a transforming city with modern architecture and exciting buildings such as the Guotai Arts Center.

An employee at Saipo Electronic Market is checking the latest gadgets on his smart-phone.

COORDINATES

Saipo Electronic Market:
19 Lin Jiang Road, Yu Zhong District

Suning Electronics
Department Store:
177 Ba Yi Road,
Yu Zhong District



Even though Chongqing is full of high-tech the Chinese soul still lingers within the city.

WARRANTIES AND COPYCAT BRANDS

Electronics stores advertising top brands including Canon, Nike and Apple line the pedestrian street of Chongqing's commercial centre, just a stone's throw from Saipo. In this large shopping area, where an enormous Samsung sign lights up the night sky, the Suning Electronics Department Store offers five floors filled with everything from smartphones, computers and television sets to vacuum cleaners, coffee machines and appliances. Employees highlight the benefits of shopping here instead of the city's electronic markets.

"We offer better service and are totally honest. They'll trick you at the market, and you won't get a factory warranty or any customer support," says a salesperson wishing to be identified only as "John."

Labour Day is approaching and John is offering a 20 per cent discount on all of his Canon models, which is customary for many department stores right before Chinese public holidays. He displays a Canon Eos 60D for 7,000 yuan (less than €860) and a 600D for 4,000 yuan.

Lower prices and designs copied from global mega-brands are common here. A brand such as Huawei, whose smartphone models bear more than a passing resemblance to Samsung's Galaxy and Apple's iPhone, may not be mentioned as often as the two established

mobile giants, but the Chinese company is fighting for a market share. Their D2 tablets and android-based smartphones are several thousand yuan cheaper than the iPhone 5.

PAPER OVER PLASTIC

A group of Russian tourists touring China have found their way to Suning's camera department. They had heard about Chongqing's cheap electronics, but are still positively surprised.

"We've bought a couple of HP laptops and a Canon EOS 5D Mark III," says **Ivan Avdonin**. "You can't compare prices in Moscow with this; we just hope the quality lasts," he says with a smile, adding that bargain hunters should prepare by carrying enough cash. "Nobody accepts cards."

Chinese authorities have realised the city's shopping potential and are investing in Chongqing as the new hub of southwest China – one of the country's five national central cities, including Shanghai and Hong Kong. A new airport terminal is expected to be completed in 2015. Meanwhile the government is offering tax incentives and affordable commercial spaces to attract business from abroad. ●

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FINNAIR FLIES nonstop to Chongqing four times every week.
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BARGAIN
HUNTERS
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Are you searching for good deals on smartphones, computers or iPads? Head over to Suning Electronics Department Store.