

A CONTINENT WITH ONE FLAG

China

How to choose a slice of a country this size, what a day costs in RMB, and how to pay, connect, and cross the border in 2026.

p. 17 Which Great Wall section: Mutianyu, Badaling, or Jinshanling

p. 41 Set up mobile pay and beat the firewall before you fly

p. 44 The 2026 visa map: who walks in free and who still needs the L

45 PAGES

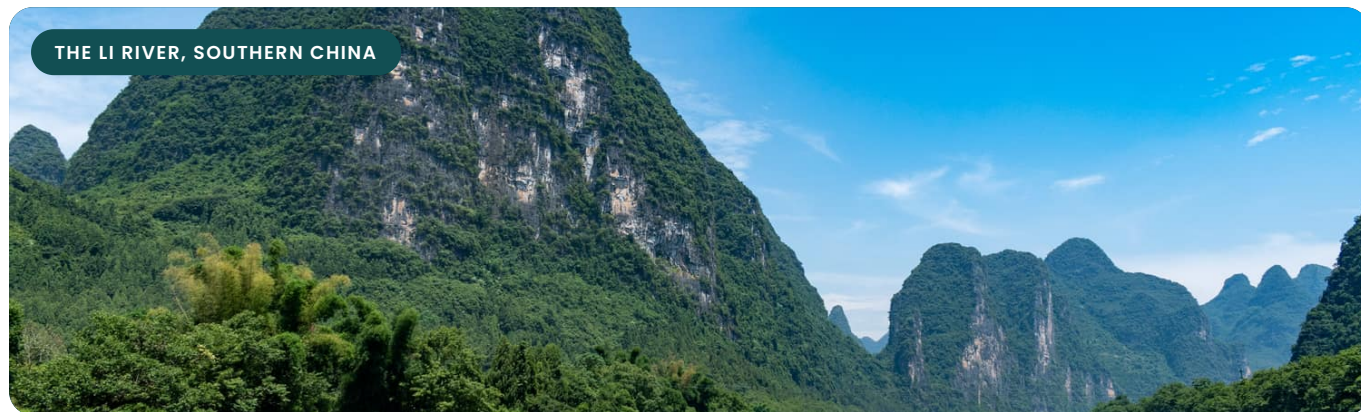
RMB PRICES

VISA: RULES VARY

EDITION 2026.06

Start here

why China is one decision, not one trip



THE LI RIVER, SOUTHERN CHINA

China is the size of a continent, so the first decision is not where to go but how much to leave out. The headline trip threads five places by high-speed rail: imperial Beijing, the terracotta army at Xi'an, the pandas at Chengdu, the karst rivers of the south, and modern Shanghai. This guide builds around that spine. What each leg costs in RMB, which famous sight earns the queue, and the logistics that catch every first-timer: paying without cash, getting online past the firewall, and a visa rule that changed sharply in 2026.

The shape of a trip

Two weeks covers Beijing, Xi'an, and Shanghai on the bullet train with room to breathe. Three weeks adds Chengdu and one landscape stop in the south. Trying for more turns the trip into a railway-station tour.

What a day costs

Backpacking runs about 35 USD a day, mid-range around 80, captured June 2026. Hostels and street food are cheap; intercity rail and big-city hotels are where the budget moves. The full receipt is on page 39.

Sort before you fly

Three things decide the trip: your passport rule (page 44), a working payment app, and a way online. China is logistics-heavy, and chapter 07 is the longest in the guide for exactly that reason.



DINNER IN CHENGDU



SHANGHAI, THE MODERN HALF

HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

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tap a line to jump straight there

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QUICK JUMPS

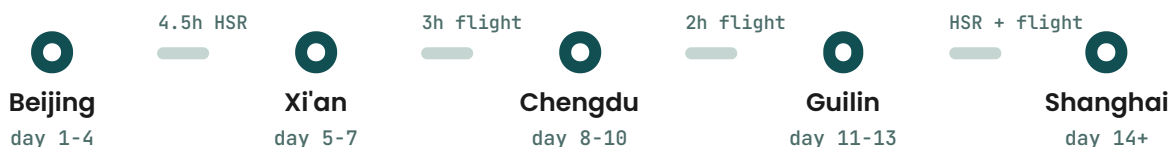
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Your trip on one page

14 to 21 days · 35 to 200 USD/day · best Mar-Jun, Sep-Oct

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip. The first-timer spine runs Beijing to Xi'an to Shanghai, two weeks, on the high-speed train; three weeks folds in Chengdu and one southern landscape stop. Budget from the bars below, not from five-star rack rates. Sort the three things at the bottom right before you fly, because in China they are harder to fix on the ground than anywhere else in Asia.

THE SPINE



BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker		35 USD
Standard		80 USD
Comfort		200 USD

BOOK FIRST

- 01 International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out **Aviasales**
- 02 High-speed rail seats, 2 weeks out **12Go**
- 03 eSIM that tunnels the firewall, before departure **Saily**

BEST MONTHS



China at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Culture

95

Food and drinks

90

Cities

90

Tourist infrastructure

85

Nature

85

Safety

80

Budget friendly

65

Budget travel

35 USD/day

Mid-range

80 USD/day

Luxury

200 USD/day

CULTURE

CITY

NATURE

ADVENTURE

FOOD

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-06

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP



01

The country and its scale

What China is, the five regions a first trip actually touches, and the one fact that shapes every itinerary: the country is the size of a continent.

IN THIS CHAPTER

What China is	07
The scale problem and high-speed rail	09

What China is

~1.41B people · 5 regions a first trip touches · one timezone

China holds about 1.41 billion people across a landmass close to the size of Europe, run on a single clock: Beijing time, UTC+8, from the Pacific coast to the edge of Central Asia. Beijing is the capital and the political center; Shanghai is the financial one. The travel reality is that no two-week trip sees more than a sliver. The infrastructure is extraordinary, with a high-speed rail network longer than the rest of the world's combined, but the distances are continental, so the planning job is subtraction. The defining truth of the trip is scale, and the next page is about nothing else.

CAPITAL

Beijing

~21M people

POPULATION

1.41B

56 ethnic groups

CURRENCY

CNY

1 USD = ~7.2 RMB

BEST MONTHS

Mar-Jun, Sep-Oct

spring and autumn

FIVE REGIONS, FIVE VERY DIFFERENT TRIPS



North: Beijing and the Great Wall

imperial capital · dry · cold winters

Where most trips start. The Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, the hutong lanes, and the Wall a couple of hours out of town.



Centre: Xi'an

ancient capital · Silk Road start · 4.5h by rail

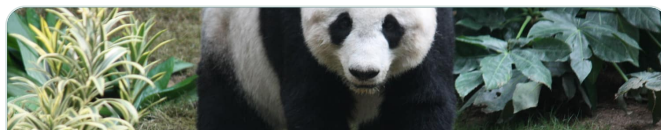
The terracotta army, an intact Ming city wall you can cycle, and a Muslim quarter that feeds the trip's best street food.



East: Shanghai and the water towns

modern hub · humid · the easy landing

The Bund, the Pudong towers, the classical gardens of Suzhou and Hangzhou an hour out. The most legible city for a first arrival.



Southwest: Chengdu and the pandas

Sichuan · tea houses · numbing spice

The panda base, the Leshan Buddha, and a hotpot culture built on the Sichuan peppercorn. The relaxed counterweight to the big two.

AND THE ONE THAT EARNS THE DETOUR

SOUTH

Karst country

Guilin, Yangshuo, Zhangjiajie

THE PULL

Landscape

limestone rivers, sandstone pillars

COST

A flight

off the Beijing-Shanghai line

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

CHINA

First-time China

14 days, mid-range, Beijing to Xi'an to Shanghai by bullet train

Solo backpacker

35 USD a day, hostels, 3 weeks adding Chengdu and Yunnan to the south

Couple or family

Three cities, pandas for the kids, comfort hotels, soft pace

THE COUNTRY

Landscape traveler

Guilin and Zhangjiajie front and center, cities as connecting points

The scale problem, and the train that solves it

a continent wide • 45,000 km of high-speed rail • pick a slice

Beijing to the far southwest is farther than London to Cairo. The instinct to "see China" in two weeks is the single most common planning mistake, and it ends in a blur of stations. The fix is the high-speed rail network, the G and D trains that cruise at 300 km/h, run to the minute, and turn what would be overnight hauls into an afternoon with a window. The table below is the real geography of a trip: pick two or three city-pairs you can connect in under five hours and let the rest wait for the next visit.

CITY PAIR	BY HIGH-SPEED RAIL	BY AIR	VERDICT
Beijing to Xi'an	4.5 hours	2h + airport time	take the train
Beijing to Shanghai	4.5 hours	2h + airport time	take the train
Xi'an to Chengdu	3.5 hours	1.5h	train wins on net time
Shanghai to Guilin	~9 hours	2.5h	fly
Chengdu to Zhangjiajie	~7 hours	1.5h	fly
Guilin to Yangshuo	90 min bus or boat	n/a	bus or river cruise

rail and flight times: scheduled services, captured 2026-06

THE RULE OF THUMB

Under five hours, take the bullet train: city center to city center, no security theatre, a seat you can work or sleep in. Over five hours, fly, because domestic flights are cheap and frequent. Build the trip as a short chain of sub-five-hour rail legs with one or two flights to reach the south. Three base cities in two weeks is comfortable; five is the ceiling, and only with the train doing the heavy lifting. How to actually book the seats is on page 43.



Second class on a G train is comfortable and cheap; first class buys more legroom, not more speed. Business class is a flat-bed luxury you rarely need.



Arrive at the rail station 40 minutes early. Stations are airport-sized, security is real, and the platform gates close before departure.

GO DEEPER

Where the country sits on the map in the [geography write-up](#), the cheap legs in the [domestic flights breakdown](#), and the full first-timer plan in the [14-day route](#).

02

Beijing

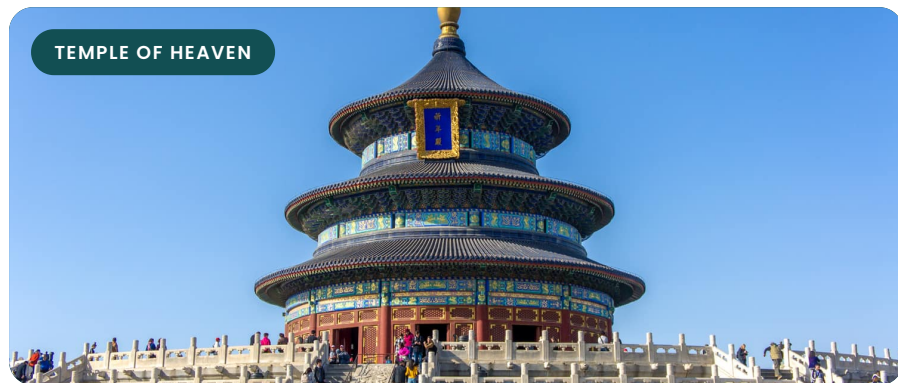
The imperial capital, the one Great Wall verdict that matters, and the day-trips and neighborhoods that turn three nights into the trip's strongest start.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Beijing in three days	11
Which Great Wall section	13
Day-trips and where to stay	14

Beijing in three days

capital • 3 nights minimum • the imperial core



Beijing is the imperial backbone of the trip and the reason to start here rather than in Shanghai. The center is a single north-south axis the emperors built their world along: the Forbidden City at the heart, the Temple of Heaven to the south, Tiananmen Square between. The subway is cheap, signed in English, and the fastest way across a city that does not reward walking between sights.

Three days is the floor. Day one is the Forbidden City from the south gate through to Jingshan Park, where the hill behind it gives the only view of the whole roofline. Day two is the Temple of Heaven at dawn, when retirees fill the grounds with tai chi and ballroom dancing, then the hutong lanes around the Drum Tower by rickshaw or on foot. Day three belongs to the Wall, on its own page over the leaf.



The Forbidden City caps daily tickets and sells out days ahead in peak season. Book online through the official account before you arrive; passport needed at the gate.



Air quality swings hard in winter. Check the AQI the morning of a Wall day; a clear blue sky after wind is worth reshuffling the plan for.

Forbidden City

Enter from the south, exit north to Jingshan; the hill is the only place you see the whole roof sea.

Temple of Heaven

Go at opening for the park life, not just the hall. The locals are the show.

Hutongs and Drum Tower

The grey-brick lanes around Nanluoguxiang and Houhai lake; eat here after dark.

Summer Palace

A lake and a hill of pavilions in the northwest; a half-day escape from the core.

READ ON

The full ranked list in the [Beijing city write-up](#), the palace plan in the [Forbidden City page](#), and the lake-and-pavilion route in the [most beautiful places breakdown](#).

Which Great Wall section to walk

the verdict most guides dodge • three real options out of Beijing

The Wall near Beijing is not one place but several restored sections, and the choice decides whether you get a ridgeline to yourself or a handrail crush. The honest answer for most travelers is Mutianyu: restored enough to walk safely, far enough out to thin the crowds, with a cable car up and a toboggan down. Badaling is the closest and the most crowded, the one tour buses default to. Jinshanling is the photographer's pick, partly wild, a longer drive, and worth it if a half-ruined wall vanishing into hills is the image you came for.

THE DEFAULT PICK

Mutianyu

~90 min from town

- Restored, safe, walkable
- Cable car up, toboggan down
- Crowded but spread out

THE EASY, BUSY ONE

Badaling

~70 min from town

- Closest to Beijing
- Direct train option
- The most crowded by far

THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S PICK

Jinshanling

~2.5 hours from town

- Part-wild, part-restored
- Few crowds, big views
- Longer day, more effort

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Mutianyu Great Wall guided hike with cable car

from 65 USD

5.0 (57 reviews)

9 hours

Beijing tea ceremony and calligraphy afternoon

from 79 USD

5.0 (57 reviews)

2.5 hours

Beijing dumplings cooking class with a chef

from 20 USD

5.0 (65 reviews)

1.5 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Day-trips and where to stay

prices per night, double room • base in Dongcheng for the core

Beijing rewards basing inside the old core. Dongcheng puts the Forbidden City, the hutongs, and a subway interchange within reach, and the boutique courtyard hotels there beat the towers near the airport on character and on walk time to everything that matters. Add a day for the Summer Palace or the Ming Tombs if you have a fourth night; both are half-day trips on the metro or a short taxi.

Beijing (Dongcheng)

hostel 14 USD mid 55 USD comfort 140 USD

The old-city core, walking distance to the Forbidden City and the hutong food. [See what a courtyard room near the lanes runs tonight](#), or sort a dorm bed through [Hostelworld](#) if you want the backpacker scene.

Hotels across the core and out toward the Wall, most with free cancellation while your dates are still moving.

[Find Stays on Booking.com](#)

THE HALF-DAY TRIPS WORTH A FOURTH NIGHT

Summer Palace

Imperial lakeside retreat in the northwest; a boat across Kunming Lake, pavilions up Longevity Hill.

Ming Tombs

The Sacred Way of stone animals pairs naturally with a Wall day on the same northern run.

798 Art District

A Bauhaus factory complex turned galleries and cafes; the modern counterweight to the imperial core.

MORE ON THE SITE The full set of picks in the [Beijing rundown](#), and the lake palace itself in the [most beautiful places page](#).

03

Beyond Beijing

Five stops that carry the rest of the trip: the terracotta army at Xi'an, modern Shanghai, the pandas of Chengdu, the karst rivers of the south, and the sandstone pillars of Zhangjiajie.

IN THIS CHAPTER

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Xi'an

ancient capital · 2-3 nights · 4.5h by rail from Beijing



Xi'an was the capital of eleven dynasties and the eastern anchor of the Silk Road, and it holds the trip's most jaw-dropping single sight: the terracotta army, eight thousand life-sized soldiers buried to guard a first emperor's tomb and only found in 1974 by a farmer digging a well. Pit 1 is the headline, ranks of warriors receding into the earth. Go early, before the noon coach crush, and budget a guide or an audio app; without one the figures are just rows.

The city itself earns the other day. The Ming-era walls are intact and broad enough to cycle a full fourteen-kilometre loop on a rented bike, and the Muslim Quarter behind the Drum Tower is the best street-food run of the trip: hand-pulled biang biang noodles, lamb skewers over coals, persimmon cakes fried in the lane.



☰
The warriors sit an hour east of town. Take the official tourist bus from the train station, not a taxi tout, and skip the jade-shop "free tour".

Terracotta Army
Three pits; start with Pit 1, the big one. Early entry beats the coach tours by an hour.

City Wall
Rent a bike at the South Gate and ride the full 14 km loop at golden hour.

Muslim Quarter
Biang biang noodles, lamb skewers, and the Great Mosque hidden in the lanes behind.

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Terracotta warriors and city wall day tour from 29 USD 5.0 (31 reviews) 8 hours	Terracotta warriors ticket with English guide from 59 USD 5.0 (53 reviews) 6 hours	Xi'an morning food and market tour by tuk-tuk from 58 USD 5.0 (54 reviews) 4 hours
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KEEP READING

Ten ranked picks in the [Xi'an write-up](#), the dig itself in the [terracotta army page](#), and the cave-temple carvings nearby in the [Longmen Grottoes page](#).

Shanghai

the modern hub • 2-3 nights • the easiest landing



PUDONG FROM THE BUND



YU GARDEN



On the Bund, the smiling "art student" inviting you to a private gallery or tea tasting is the city's classic scam. Decline and walk; more on page 49.

Shanghai is the legible China, the city that absorbs a jet-lagged first arrival most gently. The Bund is the set piece: a curve of 1920s banking houses facing the science-fiction towers of Pudong across the river, best at dusk when both sides light up. Behind it the former French Concession is the city to walk, plane-tree lanes over Art Deco villas, coffee bars, and the small museums of a city that has been cosmopolitan for a century.

The contrast is the point. Spend a morning in the classical Yu Garden and the old town around it, then an afternoon up the Shanghai Tower, the second-tallest building on earth, for the whole delta laid out below. Two nights covers it; three lets you fold in a water town like Zhujiajiao or a fast train to Suzhou's gardens.

The Bund

Walk the riverside promenade at dusk; the colonial facades behind, the towers ahead.

Yu Garden and old town

A Ming-era classical garden and the bazaar lanes around it; go early before the tour groups.

French Concession

Tree-lined streets, Deco villas, and the coffee scene; the city's best aimless afternoon.

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Small-group Shanghai old city walking tour

from 60 USD

5.0 (54 reviews)

3 hours

Shanghai food tour, ten dishes across five eateries

from 74 USD

5.0 (52 reviews)

3 hours

French Concession breakfast walking tour

from 77 USD

5.0 (156 reviews)

3 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

THE LONG VERSION

Twelve picks in the [Shanghai rundown](#), the riverfront in the [Bund page](#), and the garden plan in the [Yu Garden page](#).

Chengdu

Sichuan · 2-3 nights · pandas, Buddha, hotpot



Chengdu is the trip's exhale, the place to slow down between the heavy-hitter sights. The headline is the pandas: the Chengdu Research Base houses dozens of them, and the trick is to arrive at opening, around 7:30, while the animals are still feeding and active. By late morning they sleep and the crowds peak. The cubs in the nursery are the reason the early alarm pays off.

The city runs on tea-house time. Old men play mahjong under the trees at People's Park, ear-cleaners work the tables, and the food is the spiciest and most numbing in China, built on the Sichuan peppercorn. Hotpot here is a rite, not a meal. An hour and a half south, the Leshan Giant Buddha is carved seventy-one metres straight into a riverside cliff; see it from the boat for the scale.



Pandas are morning animals. Be at the base gate for the 7:30 opening; by 11 they are asleep and the paths are shoulder to shoulder.

Panda Base

Dozens of giant and red pandas; the nursery cubs at opening time are the whole reason to come.

Leshan Giant Buddha

The world's tallest pre-modern stone Buddha; take the boat for the scale, the stairs for the detail.

Tea houses and hotpot

People's Park by day, a numbing Sichuan hotpot by night. The mild broth side is not weakness.

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Mapo tofu cooking class with a market visit

from 69 USD

5.0 (19 reviews)

4 hours

Mahjong lesson in a local tea house

from 60 USD

5.0 (20 reviews)

4 hours

Chengdu panda base tour with hotel pickup

from 89 USD

5.0 (44 reviews)

4 hours

ON THE WEBSITE Twelve picks in the [Chengdu rundown](#), the cubs in the [panda base page](#), and the cliff Buddha in the [Leshan page](#).

Guilin and Yangshuo

the karst south • 2-3 nights • the river on the banknote



The Li River between Guilin and Yangshuo is the landscape Chinese painters have drawn for a thousand years and the one printed on the back of the twenty-yuan note. The peaks are karst, limestone towers worn into soft green cones above a slow jade river. The classic way in is a four-hour cruise downstream from Guilin, then a few nights in Yangshuo, the small town at the far end that long ago tipped from sleepy to backpacker-friendly.

Yangshuo is the better base. Rent a bike and ride the Yulong River valley among the rice paddies and water buffalo, take a bamboo raft on the quieter tributary, climb Moon Hill for the view. Skip the loud nightlife strip on West Street and the trip pays out in scenery. The Longji rice terraces, a couple of hours north, add a half-day of staircase fields cut into the hillsides.



The full Li River cruise runs Guilin to Yangshuo, downstream and one-way. Book a seat on the upper deck and bring sun cover; there is little shade.



Base in Yangshuo, not Guilin. The town is small and the valley rides start from the door; Guilin is just the gateway city.

Li River cruise

Four hours of postcard karst from Guilin to Yangshuo; the stretch on the banknote is near Xingping.

Yulong valley by bike

Flat lanes through rice paddies and bamboo rafts; the quiet half of the karst country.

Longji rice terraces

Staircase fields two hours north; greenest just after planting, golden before the autumn harvest.

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Longji rice terraces and Long Hair village day tour

from 100 USD

5.0 (20 reviews)

Two-day Guilin highlights, terraces and river cruise

from 269 USD

5.0 (15 reviews)

Private Guilin highlights tour with guide and car

from 599 USD

5.0 (48 reviews)

MORE DETAIL

Nine picks in the [Yangshuo rundown](#), the cruise in the [Li River page](#), and the staircase fields in the [Longji terraces page](#).

Zhangjiajie

the Avatar pillars · 2-3 nights · does it earn the detour?



Zhangjiajie is the field of three-thousand sandstone pillars that fed the floating mountains of Avatar, and the question is whether it earns a detour off the main spine. The verdict: yes, if dramatic landscape is what you came to China for, and you can give it two clear days. The pillars rise sheer out of forest and cloud in Wulingyuan park, reached by glass elevators and cable cars, and on a misty morning the place is genuinely unlike anywhere else.

The caveat is honest. It is a long way from everything, so fly rather than train, and the park is huge, ticketed, and built for crowds, with shuttle buses and queues for the lifts. Separate from the forest park sits Tianmen Mountain, with its cliff-side glass walkway and a road of ninety-nine hairpin bends. Two days lets you do both without rushing; one day means choosing.



Mist is the magic and the gamble. Spring and autumn give the best odds of cloud weaving through the pillars; a flat blue day flattens the drama.



The park ticket covers multiple days; keep it. The lifts and cable cars cost extra and have the longest queues midday.

03

Wulingyuan park

The pillar forest itself; the Bailong glass elevator lifts you to the famous Avatar viewpoint.

Tianmen Mountain

A cliff glass walkway, the world's longest cable car, and 99 hairpins to the cave gate.

Glass Bridge

A transparent span across the Grand Canyon gorge; skip it if heights are not your thing.

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Forest park and Avatar mountain private day tour

from 95 USD

5.0 (70 reviews)

9 hours

Tianmen Mountain and glass walkway day tour

from 92 USD

5.0 (21 reviews)

7 hours

Two-day forest park and glass bridge tour

from 310 USD

5.0 (34 reviews)

2 days

WORTH A READ

Ten picks in the [Zhangjiajie rundown](#), the cliff walkway in the [Tianmen Mountain page](#), and the span in the [Glass Bridge page](#).

04

What to do

Four threads run through any China trip: the food, the imperial and sacred history, the landscapes, and the modern megacities. This is how to read each one.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Food: the six calibration dishes	21
Imperial history and temples	22
Landscapes and nature	23
The modern megacities	24

Food: the six calibration dishes

eight regional cuisines · prices in USD · order these first

There is no single Chinese cuisine. The classic count is eight regional schools, and the differences are real: Sichuan numbs with peppercorn, Cantonese prizes freshness and steam, Beijing roasts, Shanghai sweetens. The tourist mistake is eating in hotel restaurants and chains. The food gets better and cheaper the more local the room looks, and a hole-in-the-wall with a queue out front is a safer bet than the menu with photos. Order these six early; they set the bar for everything after.



Peking duck Beijing kaoya
USD 21-42 · Beijing

Lacquered, crackling skin carved tableside, rolled into thin pancakes with scallion and sweet bean sauce. The trip's one splurge dish, and worth it at a duck specialist.



Xiaolongbao xiaoLongbao
USD 3-7 · Shanghai

Soup dumplings, a parcel of hot broth and pork in a pleated skin. Nip a corner, sip the soup, then eat. Rush it and you scald your mouth; that is the rite of passage.



Sichuan hotpot huoguo
USD 11-28 · Chengdu

A simmering chili-and-peppercorn cauldron you cook into yourself. Order the split pot with a mild broth on one side. The numbing tingle is the point, not a flaw.



Dim sum dian xin
USD 2-6 · Cantonese south

A spread of small steamed and fried plates over tea, strongest in the Cantonese south and Hong Kong. Point at the cart, share everything, pay by the stamped card.



Mapo tofu mapo doufu
USD 4-7 · Sichuan

Silken tofu in a red oil of fermented bean paste and peppercorn, the everyday Sichuan benchmark. Cheap, fierce, and a fast read on whether a kitchen can cook.



Kung pao chicken gongbao jiding
USD 4-8 · Sichuan

Diced chicken with peanuts, dried chilies, and a sweet-sour gloss. The one your home takeaway flattened; the real version is sharper and far less gloopy.

SEE ALSO The regional schools and what to drink in the [food and drinks rundown](#); what the same plate costs street and restaurant in the [budget breakdown](#).

Imperial history and temples

palaces, grottoes, sacred mountains • the spine of a culture trip



SUMMER PALACE, BEIJING

China rewards a little history before you go. Four thousand years of dynasties left a layered country: the Qin unified it and buried the terracotta army, the Tang made Xi'an the largest city on earth, the Ming built the Forbidden City and the Wall you see today. The headline imperial sites cluster in Beijing and Xi'an, but the deeper religious heritage hides in the cave-temple grottoes and on the sacred mountains.

The grottoes are the surprise. At Longmen near Luoyang and Yungang at Datong, thousands of Buddhas are carved straight into cliff faces, some of them taller than a house. The Daoist and Buddhist pilgrimage peaks, Mount Tai and Mount Emei among them, still draw the faithful up stone staircases at dawn. Pace the temple days: after the fifth golden hall they blur, so pick the three that carry a story.

The imperial core

Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven, Summer Palace: the Beijing set, all from one base.

The cave grottoes

Longmen at Luoyang and Yungang at Datong; cliffs of carved Buddhas, the deeper religious art.

Sacred mountains

Mount Tai and Mount Emei: pilgrim staircases, summit temples, and a sunrise above the cloud.



Most temples charge a small entry, often under 5 USD, and ask for shoulders and knees covered in the active prayer halls. Bring a light layer.



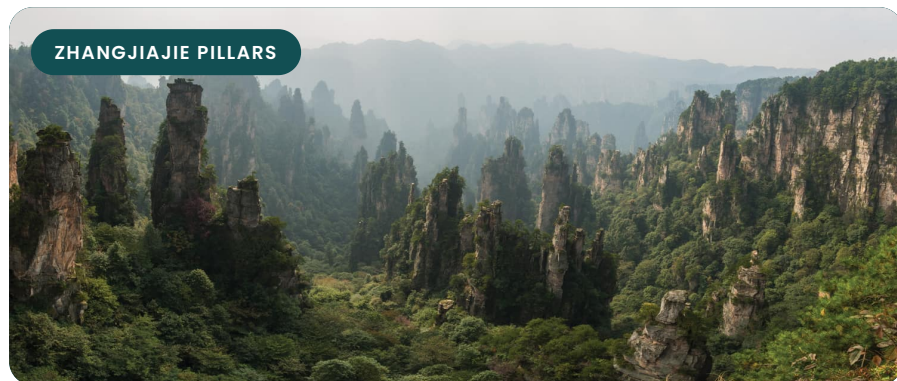
Sacred-mountain sunrises mean a pre-dawn climb or a night near the summit. Book the mountaintop bed early; they are few and fill fast.

DIG IN

The fifteen ranked sites in the [religious landmarks page](#), the carved cliffs in the [Yungang Grottoes page](#), and the pilgrim peaks in the [mountains rundown](#).

Landscapes and nature

karst, pillars, terraces, lakes · the trip's other half



China is as much landscape as it is history, and the scenery is concentrated in the south and west, away from the imperial cities. The two signatures are the karst, the soft limestone towers of Guilin and Yangshuo, and the sandstone pillars of Zhangjiajie, sheer columns standing out of forest and cloud. Both reward patience with the weather: mist makes them, flat sun flattens them.

Beyond those two, the country runs deep on nature for travelers with extra weeks. Jiuzhaigou in the far west holds turquoise lakes stepped down a forested valley; the Longji and Yuanyang rice terraces cut the hillsides into mirrors; Tiger Leaping Gorge in Yunnan is one of Asia's great two-day treks. None of these fit a first two-week trip, but any one of them rebuilds a second.



The big nature parks are ticketed and shuttle-bussed. Buy entry online a day ahead in peak season; on-site queues at the gate can run an hour.



Rice terraces have two looks: glassy water just after planting, gold just before harvest. Bare brown between is the off-window.

Karst rivers

Guilin and Yangshuo on the Li, the painting-scroll south; the most accessible big landscape.

Sandstone pillars

Zhangjiajie's Wulingyuan and Tianmen; a long detour, paid back on a misty morning.

Lakes and gorges

Jiuzhaigou's stepped lakes and Tiger Leaping Gorge in Yunnan; the second-trip wild west.

THE FULL PICTURE

The nine ranked parks in the [national parks write-up](#), the lake valley in the [Jiuzhaigou page](#), and the Yunnan trek in the [Tiger Leaping Gorge page](#).

The modern megacities

the other China · skylines, maglevs, and a cashless street life



PUDONG, SHANGHAI

The temples and pandas are only half the country. The other half is the most aggressively modern urban world on earth: skylines that rewrite themselves every decade, metros that put older systems to shame, a daily life run almost entirely through a phone. Shanghai is the showcase, but Shenzhen built a megacity from a fishing village in forty years, and Chongqing stacks itself up a river gorge in a way that has to be seen to be believed.

Treat the modern city as an activity, not just a transit stop. Ride the Shanghai maglev from the airport at 430 km/h, watch a light show on a riverfront, and notice that nobody around you is carrying cash. This is where the logistics chapter pays off: with a working payment app you move through these cities like a local, and without one you stall at the first turnstile.

Shanghai

The Bund, the towers, the maglev; the most legible introduction to modern China.

Chongqing

A city stacked up a gorge, with a monorail through a building and night views over two rivers.

Hong Kong

The Peak tram, the harbour skyline, and a passport-free entry that needs no mainland visa.



Big-city metros take a scan-to-ride QR in Alipay or WeChat. Set that up before you land and you skip every ticket-machine queue.



Observation decks sell timed tickets online for less than the door price, and dusk slots sell out first. Book the sunset window a day ahead.

GO DEEPER The stacked-city picks in the [Chongqing rundown](#), the harbour views in the [Victoria Peak page](#), and the wider hub in the [Shanghai write-up](#).

05

Routes

Pick a slice that fits your time, see the spine drawn on the real map, then the two routes that carry most first trips: fourteen days and twenty-one.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Pick your trip, six paths	26
The spine on the map	27
14 days, day by day	28
21 days, the longer loop	29

Pick your trip

how long, who with, how deep · six paths through a continent

The size of China makes the route a subtraction problem: how many cities can you connect well in the days you have. Find your row below. The fourteen and twenty-one day loops on the next spreads cover the first two paths in full.

FIRST TRIP · 7D · MID

Beijing, Xi'an, Shanghai sprint

USD 1,100 · all by HSR

- Beijing 3: palace + Wall
- Xi'an 2: warriors + wall
- Shanghai 2: Bund + gardens

FIRST TRIP · 14D · MID

The classic, plus Chengdu

USD 2,200 · rail + 1 flight

- Beijing 4 · Xi'an 3
- Chengdu 3: pandas + Leshan
- Shanghai 3: city + water town

COUPLE · 14D · COMFORT

Three cities, soft pace

USD 5,600 for 2 · 4-star

- Beijing 4: courtyard hotel
- Xi'an 3: private guide
- Shanghai 5: French Concession

BACKPACKER · 21D · BUDGET

Cities plus the karst south

USD 1,500 · hostels + HSR

- Beijing 4 · Xi'an 3 · Chengdu 3
- Guilin + Yangshuo 4
- Shanghai 3

FAMILY · 14D · MID

Pandas front and center

USD 6,400 · family of 4

- Beijing 4: Wall + science museum
- Chengdu 4: panda base
- Shanghai 4: tower + Disney

LANDSCAPE · 18D · MID

Cities light, scenery heavy

USD 2,900 · rail + 2 flights

- Beijing 3 · Xi'an 2
- Zhangjiajie 3 · Guilin 4
- Shanghai 2 to fly home

READ ON

Full day-by-day versions online: the [7-day route](#), the [14-day route](#), the [21-day route](#), and the [28-day route](#).

The spine on the map

Beijing to Shanghai, the way the trip actually runs

Drawn on the real geography, the trip makes sense at a glance: a northern start in Beijing, a hop inland to Xi'an, a swing southwest to Chengdu and the pandas, a drop into the karst country at Guilin, and a finish on the east coast in Shanghai. The big distances, Chengdu to the south and out to Zhangjiajie, are the ones to fly; the rest is high-speed rail.



The Beijing to Xi'an to Shanghai triangle is all sub-five-hour rail. Add the south only if you have three weeks and a tolerance for a couple of flights.



Plan the route to end where you fly out. Beijing and Shanghai both have long-haul hubs, so an open-jaw ticket saves a backtrack.

MORE ON THE SITE

Plan the rail and flight legs through [12Go](#), or read the full first-timer plan in the [14-day route](#).

14 days, the route worth flying for

Beijing · Xi'an · Chengdu · Shanghai

The classic first trip, refined. Book the high-speed seats and the one Chengdu flight through [12Go](#) a couple of weeks ahead; the rest decides on the ground. Set up your payment app and eSIM before day one, because they unlock everything from the metro to the museum ticket.

1 Arrive Beijing

PEK · day zero

Land, metro or taxi to a Dongcheng courtyard hotel. Test the payment app on a hutong dinner. Sleep off the jet lag.

2 Forbidden City

Beijing · booked entry

South gate through to Jingshan hill for the roofline view. Afternoon Temple of Heaven, evening in the lanes.

3 The Great Wall

Mutianyu · full day

Out early to beat the coaches, cable car up, walk the ridge, toboggan down. Back to Beijing by evening.

4 Rail to Xi'an

4.5h G train

Morning bullet train. Afternoon cycling the Ming city wall, evening eating through the Muslim Quarter.

5 Terracotta army

Xi'an · early start

Tourist bus to the pits before the noon crush. A guide or audio app turns the rows into a story.

6 Fly to Chengdu

~1.5h flight

Short hop southwest. Afternoon in a People's Park tea house, evening at a split-pot hotpot.

7 Pandas, then Shanghai

base + flight east

Panda base at opening, back for bags, afternoon flight to Shanghai. Days 8 to 14 settle into the east coast.



Days 8 to 14 are Shanghai and the Yangtze delta: the Bund, Yu Garden, the tower, plus a day trip to Suzhou's gardens or a water town.



Tight on time? Drop Chengdu and run Beijing, Xi'an, Shanghai by rail in seven days. The pandas are the first cut, not the cities.

21 days, the longer loop

the classic plus the karst south and a landscape stop

Three weeks is where China opens up. The same imperial spine, then a real run through the landscape south: the Li River, the Yangshuo valley, and a Zhangjiajie detour if the pillars are calling. The legs to the south are flights; everything north and east is rail.

1 **Beijing, days 1-4** the imperial start

Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven, the hutongs, and a full day at Mutianyu on the Wall.

5 **Xi'an, days 5-7** 4.5h HSR south

The terracotta army, the city wall by bike, and the street food of the Muslim Quarter.

8 **Chengdu, days 8-10** 3.5h HSR or short flight

Pandas at dawn, the Leshan Buddha by boat, and a slow afternoon in the tea houses.

11 **Zhangjiajie, days 11-13** ~1.5h flight

Two days in the pillar forest and on Tianmen Mountain. Skip this leg if mist odds are low or time is short.

14 **Guilin and Yangshuo, days 14-17** flight + river

The Li River cruise, the Yulong valley by bike, and the Longji terraces as a day trip.

18 **Shanghai, days 18-21** flight to the coast

The Bund, Yu Garden, the tower, a water town, and the maglev out to the airport for the flight home.



If you want the south but not both stops, keep Guilin and drop Zhangjiajie. Guilin is the easier, gentler, more reliably scenic of the two.



Book the inter-region flights as you go, not all upfront; domestic fares are cheap and frequent, and plans shift on a trip this long.

06

When to go

Spring and autumn win, winter and high summer lose, and there is one hard rule above all: avoid the national holiday weeks, when the whole country travels at once.

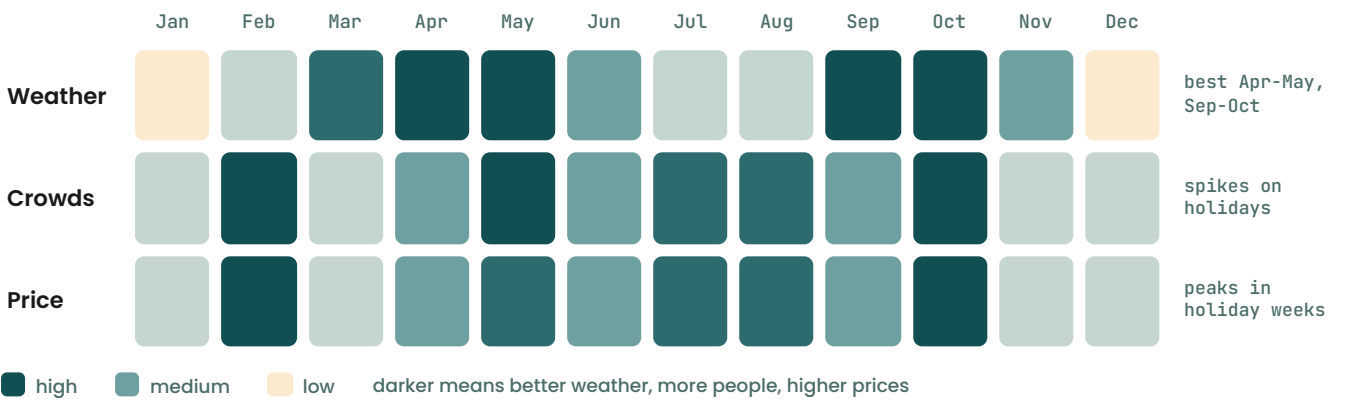
IN THIS CHAPTER

Weather, crowds, price	31
What a day in China costs	32

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · the two windows that work

China runs to two good windows: spring, March through June, and autumn, September into October. Both bring mild air and clear-enough skies across most of the spine. Winter is cold and grey in the north; high summer is hot, humid, and the peak of the school holidays. The single most important timing rule is the one the weather chart cannot show: avoid the Golden Week holidays, when 1.4 billion people travel inside their own country at the same time.



source: country-comparison best months Mar-Jun, Sep-Oct · captured 2026-06

THE HARD RULE: AVOID THESE WEEKS

AVOID

National Day, early October

The biggest Golden Week. Sights hit capacity, trains sell out weeks ahead, prices double. The single worst window.

AVOID

Labour Day, early May

A shorter national break, but enough to pack every major site and spike hotel rates. Travel the week after instead.

AVOID

Lunar New Year, Jan-Feb

The largest human migration on earth; transport jams and many small businesses close for a week or more.

KEEP READING The month-by-month detail in the [best travel time guide](#), and the exact holiday dates in the [public holidays page](#).

What a day in China costs

three travel styles • itemised • captured 2026-06

China is cheaper than its skylines suggest at street level and pricier than Southeast Asia once you sleep and ride well. Food and metros stay low whatever your budget; the spend moves to hotels and intercity transport. The three receipts below are a real day, bed to nightcap, at backpacker, standard, and comfort levels.

A DAY IN CHINA	A DAY IN CHINA	A DAY IN CHINA
* backpacker *	* standard *	* comfort *
hostel dorm11.00	3-star double, half35.00	4-star double, half110.00
street breakfast2.00	cafe breakfast5.00	hotel breakfastincl.
noodle lunch3.00	restaurant lunch8.00	restaurant lunch16.00
local dinner5.00	dinner with drinks14.00	dinner, good table30.00
metro + walk2.00	taxi + metro7.00	private driver, half day25.00
one sight entry6.00	sights + audio guide8.00	private guide / incl.
beer at the hostel3.00	share of rail leg3.00	tourabove
water + snacks3.00		cocktails x219.00
TOTAL / DAY~35 USD	TOTAL / DAY~80 USD	TOTAL / DAY~200 USD
country-comparison data • 2026-06	country-comparison data • 2026-06	country-comparison data • 2026-06

Run the same numbers for your own dates, group size and currency in the free budget calculator on pack-lightly.com.

Open the Budget Calculator

 The gap between tiers is the room and the transport, not the food. Eating well is cheap at every level; the bed and the bullet train move the number.

 Almost every line above is paid by phone. Cash is for the rare stall that has not gone digital; carry a little, lean on the app for the rest.

07

Practical: pay, connect, cross

The longest chapter on purpose. China is the most logistics-heavy country in this series: mobile payment, the firewall, the trains, and a visa rule that turns on your passport.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Pay, apps, and the firewall	34
Getting around: rail, metro, flights	35
Money and payment	36
Connectivity and the 2026 visa	37
Etiquette	38

Pay, apps, and the firewall

the three setups that make or break a China trip · do them before you fly

This is the page that separates a smooth China trip from a stalled one. Three things must work from the moment you land: a way to pay, a way online, and offline maps. None of them behaves the way it does elsewhere in the world. A Western SIM that roams will hit the Great Firewall and lose Google, WhatsApp, and Instagram; a foreign credit card is refused almost everywhere; and the maps app you trust will be wrong. Set all three up at home, in the order below.

01

pay

Mobile pay with a foreign card

Install Alipay or WeChat Pay before departure and link an international Visa or Mastercard; both have supported foreign cards since 2023. Verify your passport in the app at home, where the screens are in English and there is no queue. This is the single most important step: street stalls, metros, and taxis all run on the scan.

02

connect

An eSIM that tunnels the firewall

A travel eSIM that routes through Hong Kong or Singapore keeps your usual apps working inside China, which a local SIM does not. Install it before you fly and switch it on when you land.

Set up a Saily eSIM

03

navigate

Offline maps and a backup plan

Google Maps is unreliable behind the firewall and its China data is poor. Download offline maps before you go, and keep the eSIM as your route around blocked services. A second eSIM is cheap insurance.

Add a backup Airalo eSIM



Do the payment-app passport check before you fly, on hotel wifi. Verifying a foreign card from inside China, on a Chinese network, is far slower.



A roaming home SIM partly dodges the firewall but burns data fast and drops apps without warning. A travel eSIM that tunnels out is the reliable fix.

THE LONG VERSION

Data plans compared in the [eSIM write-up](#), the cash-versus-app reality in the [currency rundown](#), and the budget model in the [budget breakdown](#).

Getting around

high-speed rail · how to book a train · metro · domestic flights

Intercity travel in China is excellent and cheap, but booking it is the part that trips up first-timers. The high-speed rail is the backbone, and seats are tied to your passport, so plan a little ahead. Inside cities the metro is fast, signed in English, and paid by scan. Distances over five hours are for the plane.

MODE	BEST FOR	HOW TO BOOK	PAY
High-speed rail (G/D)	under 5h city-to-city	app or 12Go, 2 wks ahead	card or app
Domestic flight	over 5h, reaching the south	airline app or aggregator	card or app
City metro	everything inside a city	scan-to-ride QR	Alipay / WeChat
Taxi / DiDi	late, loaded, or off-metro	DiDi app in English	in-app

fares and modes: scheduled services, captured 2026-06

HOW TO ACTUALLY BOOK A TRAIN TICKET

Tickets go on sale around two weeks before departure and the popular legs, Beijing to Xi'an, the Shanghai routes, sell out in peak season. Book through the official rail app or a service like [12Go](#) that handles the foreign-passport step for you, and carry the passport you booked with: it is your ticket. Collect a paper ticket at a station window or, increasingly, scan your passport straight through the e-ticket gates. Arrive 40 minutes early, because stations are vast, security is airport-grade, and the platform gate closes a few minutes before the train leaves.



A G train is the fast bullet service; a D train is slightly slower and cheaper. For the spine legs, the G is worth the small premium.



DiDi is the local rideshare and runs in English. It removes the broken-meter haggle entirely; book it rather than flagging a street taxi.

ON THE WEBSITE

The cheap air legs in the [domestic flights breakdown](#), road rules and driving in the [traffic page](#), and the wider plan in the [14-day route](#).

Money and payment

a cashless country • the yuan • cash as backup, not default

China is the most cashless major economy on earth. Day to day, locals pay for everything by scanning a QR code in Alipay or WeChat Pay, from a metro gate to a street-corner jianbing. A foreign credit card is refused almost everywhere outside international hotels, so the payment app from page 33 is not optional. The currency is the yuan, also called renminbi or RMB, at roughly 7.2 to the US dollar.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Dorm / 3-star / 4-star room	USD 11	USD 35	USD 110
Street meal / restaurant	USD 3	USD 12	USD 30
Local beer	USD 1.50	USD 4	USD 9
Major sight entry	USD 6	USD 10	USD 20
Metro ride	USD 0.50	USD 0.50	USD 0.50

indicative 2026-06 • full per-category numbers in the budget guide

CARRY A LITTLE CASH ANYWAY

Keep a few hundred yuan as backup. A handful of small vendors, rural stalls, and the odd temple still take only cash, and a dead phone with no charge leaves you stuck if the app is your only money. Pull yuan from a bank ATM (Bank of China, ICBC) rather than the airport exchange desk, which gives a poor rate. Tell your bank your dates so the withdrawal is not blocked, and always choose to be charged in yuan, not your home currency, when a terminal offers the conversion. China is also still partly a cash-tipping-free culture: tipping is not expected and rounding up is plenty.



When a card machine offers "your" currency, decline and pay in yuan. The dynamic-conversion rate skims 4 to 7 percent off the top.



Keep your phone charged. In a cashless country a flat battery is a flat wallet; a power bank is a payment tool, not just a luxury.

MORE DETAIL The yuan and exchange traps in the [currency rundown](#), and what a full day costs by style in the [budget breakdown](#).

The 2026 visa map, and getting online

rules vary sharply by passport • check yours before you book

This is the page to read before you buy a flight, because China's entry rules changed sharply in 2026 and now turn on your nationality. There is no single answer. Many European passports walk in visa-free for thirty days; a long list of nationalities can transit visa-free for up to 240 hours; and US travelers and several others still need a tourist L visa arranged in advance. Confirm your exact passport rule against the official portal before committing to dates.

MANY EU PASSPORTS

30-day visa-free

no visa, no fee

- Unilateral scheme, tourism + business
- Confirm your country is on the list
- Passport valid 6+ months

MANY MORE NATIONALITIES

240h transit free

no visa, onward ticket

- Up to 10 days, 60+ ports
- Needs a flight on to a third country
- Stay within the eligible regions

US AND OTHERS

Tourist L visa

~185 USD, arrange ahead

- Apply before you fly
- Up to 60 days per entry for US
- Passport valid 6+ months

GETTING ONLINE ON ARRIVAL

Connectivity ties straight back to the visa: whichever way you enter, a Western SIM that simply roams will hit the firewall and lose its usual apps. The fix is the travel eSIM from page 33, one that tunnels through Hong Kong or Singapore, installed before you fly. A local China SIM gives cheap data but no way around the blocks, so it suits a long stay only if you pair it with your own tunnel. For a two or three-week trip, the eSIM is the clean answer.



Passport rule: at least six months validity beyond your arrival date, and a blank page for any visa or stamp. Renew now if you are close.



Visa-free transit needs proof of an onward flight to a third country and limits where you can travel. Read the conditions before you rely on it.

WORTH A READ

The current per-passport rules in the [visa page](#) and the live [visa checker](#), plus what to bring online in the [eSIM write-up](#).

Etiquette: the short list

first four save face • last four save friction

Eight things that matter. The first four touch on the social rules around face and respect; the last four are everyday friction-savers. Everything else, you can read from the room.

DO

Take a business card with both hands

Receive and give cards, gifts, and change with two hands and a small nod. It reads as respect.

DO

Let your host order and pour

Meals are shared from the center; the host orders. Refill others' tea before your own.

DO

Cover up at temples

Shoulders and knees in active prayer halls. A light layer in the bag handles it.

DO

Carry your hotel name in Chinese

A screenshot in characters gets a driver there in one glance. English alone often will not.

DO NOT

Make someone lose face in public

Raising your voice or correcting someone openly backfires. Keep complaints calm and private.

DO NOT

Stand chopsticks upright in rice

It echoes funeral incense. Rest them on the holder or across the bowl instead.

DO NOT

Push political talk with strangers

Sensitive topics put locals in an awkward spot. Read the room and let them lead.

DO NOT

Expect to tip

Tipping is not customary in restaurants or taxis. Rounding up is the most you need.



Translation apps that work offline are worth the download. English fades fast outside the big cities and the main sights.



A friendly stranger with great English steering you to a private tea ceremony or gallery is the classic city scam. Be polite and walk on.

SEE ALSO

Traditions, religion and the full etiquette context in the [culture write-up](#), and what to pack for city, temple, and trail in the [dress code page](#).

08

Safe and smart

China is physically very safe; the real risks are tourist scams and paperwork. Plus the live tools, the cut-out cards, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Safety, scams, and the numbers	40
Eight Mandarin phrases	41
Take the live tools with you	42
Print cards: cut, fold, take	43
Sources and a note on the links	44

Safe streets, two scams, and the numbers

violent crime is rare • the grifts cluster around tourists

China is one of the physically safest countries you can travel: violent crime against visitors is very rare, cities are well-lit and policed, and walking alone at night is normal. The real risks are not muscle but a small set of tourist scams in the big cities, plus the bureaucracy you have already met in chapter 07. Know the two grifts below and you sidestep the money most travelers actually lose.

SCAM 01

The tea-house ceremony

Friendly young locals with good English invite you to a traditional tea tasting nearby. The ceremony ends with a bill for hundreds of dollars and a door that does not open until you pay.

The fix: never follow a street invitation to a private tea house, gallery, or bar. Suggest a public cafe instead and watch the interest evaporate.

SCAM 02

The art-student gallery

On the Bund and around big sights, "art students" practising English steer you to a pop-up exhibition where mass-produced scrolls sell as their own work at wild markups.

The fix: there is no student gallery. Decline politely and keep walking; the pitch only works on a stopped tourist.

BONUS

The unofficial taxi

At airports and stations, a driver offers a "fixed" fare far above the meter, or a rideshare with no app trail. The real risk is overpaying, not danger.

The fix: use the DiDi app or the official taxi rank. The fare is set in-app and there is nothing to haggle.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

POLICE

110

nationwide

FIRE

119

nationwide

AMBULANCE

120

nationwide

DIG IN The full safety picture for 2026 in the [safety breakdown](#), hospital and pharmacy picks in the [healthcare page](#), and shots to sort in the [vaccinations rundown](#).

Eight phrases that change how locals respond

Mandarin (pinyin) · the same phrases print on page 43

Mandarin is tonal, so a phrase app that plays the audio beats reading the pinyin cold. Even a clumsy attempt warms a room outside the big tourist sites, where English thins fast. These eight cover most daily moments.

ENGLISH	MANDARIN (PINYIN)	NOTES
Hello	ni hao	universal greeting
Thank you	xie xie	say it freely
Yes / No	shi / bu shi	"bu" negates most things
How much?	duo shao qian?	point at the item too
Too expensive	tai gui le	market haggling opener
Not spicy please	bu yao la	vital in Sichuan
Where is the bathroom?	xi shou jian zai nar?	"xi shou jian" = washroom
Help!	jiu ming!	emergencies only



Save your hotel name in Chinese characters in your phone before the first night out. Drivers read the screen in a glance; pinyin alone often stalls.



These same phrases print as a wallet card on page 43. Cut it out and keep it with your room key.

THE FULL PICTURE

Customs, religion, and how to read a room in the [culture write-up](#).

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same China data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

China: ~35 USD/day backpacker, ~200 USD/day comfort.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/budget-calculator/)



Best Time to Travel

Best: Mar-Jun, Sep-Oct. Avoid the Golden Weeks.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/)



Visa Checker

China rules vary by passport: visa-free, transit, or L visa.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/visa-checker/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/visa-checker/)



What to Eat and Drink

Xiaolongbao from 3 USD, plus the regional dishes with prices.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/local-food-and-drinks/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/local-food-and-drinks/)

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale • credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

MANDARIN • ESSENTIALS	
Hello	ni hao
Thank you	xie xie
Yes / No	shi / bu shi
How much?	duo shao qian?
Too expensive	tai gui le
Not spicy please	bu yao la
Where is bathroom?	xi shou jian zai nar?
Help!	jiu ming!

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EMERGENCY • CHINA	
Police	110
Fire	119
Ambulance	120
Pay apps	Alipay / WeChat
Rideshare	DiDi
My hotel:	_____
Address:	_____
Insurance #:	_____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live China hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/china/



Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the hotel.



Ask reception to write your hotel name and address in Chinese characters on the back. Drivers read it in one glance.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source

WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, a data-led approach from a performance-marketing background. Every number in this guide is checked against a source listed below; where a price or a rule moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it. China's visa picture in particular shifts, so verify the entry rule for your passport before you book.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Country scores and costs: Pack Lightly country-comparison dataset, captured 2026-06.
2. Best months: country-comparison best-travel-time scoring (Mar-Jun, Sep-Oct), 2026-06.
3. Visa policy: official China visa portal and 2026 unilateral and transit schemes, retrieved 2026-05-15.
4. Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured 2026-06.
5. Rail and flight times: scheduled services, captured 2026-06.
6. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, checked 2026-05.
7. Pack Lightly China cluster pages, retrieved 2026-06: [visa](#) · [budget](#) · [safety](#) · [best travel time](#) · [eSIM](#)

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored on a regular cycle. Budget figures use the country-comparison cost estimates of 35, 80, and 200 USD per day at backpacker, mid, and comfort levels; the best-month window comes from the same dataset. Each is stamped with its capture date where it appears.

What this edition covers: first release on the v2 design standard, weighted toward logistics because China demands it. Next planned update: December 2026. Not covered in depth here: Tibet permits, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong and Macau as separate entries.

Photo credits. Every photograph is sourced from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons or public-domain license. The full per-image list, with each photographer and license, is on the next page. The cover shows the Great Wall at Jinshanling. Tour data and prices come from the Viator Partner API, captured June 2026.

Image credits

every photo, its author and license

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1. **Dim sum assortment spread.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 2.0.

2. **Forbidden City Beijing courtyard.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 3.0.

3. **Giant panda clear portrait.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 3.0.

4. **Great Wall of China sweeping ridge.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 3.0.

5. **Kung Pao chicken dish.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 3.0.

6. **Leshan Giant Buddha cliff.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 2.0.

7. **Li River karst limestone peaks.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 2.0.

8. **Mapo tofu dish in clay pot.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

9. **Peking duck being carved and served.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 2.0.

10. **Shanghai Pudong skyline panorama.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

11. **Sichuan hotpot spread.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

12. **Summer Palace Longevity Hill and Kunming.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 2.0.

13. **Temple of Heaven Hall of Prayer.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

14. **Terracotta Army main pit.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 2.0.

15. **Xi'an Bell Tower.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 2.0.

16. **Xiaolongbao soup dumplings in steamer basket.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

17. **Yu Garden Shanghai classical garden.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 3.0.

18. **Zhangjiajie sandstone pillars in mist.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured June 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

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This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands December 2026 and replaces this file at the same download.