

China Travel Guide

China is a land of ancient wonders and modern marvels, where imperial palaces stand alongside gleaming skyscrapers, and bullet trains zip past rice paddies unchanged for centuries. With 5,000 years of history, diverse landscapes from tropical beaches to frozen tundra, and a culture that's both deeply traditional and rapidly evolving, China offers an unparalleled travel experience.

This comprehensive guide covers everything you need to know for your China adventure — from the practicalities of visas and mobile payments to cultural etiquette and hidden gems. Whether you're a first-time visitor or returning for another look, we've got you covered.

Before You Go

Passport & Documentation

Ensure your passport is valid for at least 6 months beyond your planned departure date from China. You'll need at least one blank visa page. Make photocopies of your passport, visa, and travel insurance, and store them separately from the originals.

Best Time to Visit

Spring (April-May): Pleasant temperatures, cherry blossoms, and fewer crowds. Ideal for most regions.

Summer (June-August): Hot and humid, especially in southern China. Peak tourist season. Great for Inner Mongolia and northern regions.

Autumn (September-October): The best time to visit. Comfortable weather, beautiful fall foliage, and clear skies.

Winter (November-March): Cold in the north, mild in the south. Great for Harbin Ice Festival and Sanya's beaches.

Avoid These Dates

- **Chinese New Year** (Jan/Feb) - Everyone travels; accommodations expensive
- **Golden Week** (Oct 1-7) - Massive crowds at all attractions
- **Qingming Festival** (April) - Increased domestic travel

What to Pack

- **Electronics:** Power adapter (Type A, C, or I), portable charger, unlocked phone
- **Clothing:** Comfortable walking shoes, layers for temperature changes
- **Health:** Prescription medications with copies of prescriptions, basic first aid
- **Documents:** Passport copies, travel insurance, hotel addresses in Chinese
- **Money:** International credit cards (Visa/Mastercard), some USD for exchange

Health & Vaccinations

No specific vaccinations are required for China, but ensure you're up to date on routine vaccines. Consider hepatitis A and B, typhoid, and Japanese encephalitis depending on your itinerary. Air quality can be poor in major cities; bring masks if you have respiratory sensitivities.

💡 **Pro Tip:** Purchase travel insurance that covers medical evacuation. Healthcare quality varies, and serious cases often require transfer to Beijing, Shanghai, or Hong Kong.

Visa Guide

Tourist Visa (L Visa)

The L Visa is the standard tourist visa for China. Here's what you need:

- Valid passport (6+ months validity, blank visa pages)
- Completed visa application form
- Passport-size photo (48mm × 33mm, white background)
- Flight and hotel bookings or invitation letter
- Proof of sufficient funds

Processing Time: 4-5 business days (regular), 2-3 days (express)

Cost: \$140-\$160 for US citizens, varies by country

Validity: Usually 90 days from issue date, stays of 30, 60, or 90 days

144-Hour Visa-Free Transit

Many travelers don't realize they can visit China for up to 144 hours (6 days) without a visa if transiting to a third country. This applies in:

- **Beijing & Tianjin** - Capital region with Great Wall access
- **Shanghai, Jiangsu & Zhejiang** - Yangtze River Delta
- **Guangdong Province** - Guangzhou, Shenzhen area
- **Chengdu** - Sichuan province gateway
- **Chongqing** - Mountain city with famous hotpot
- **Xiamen** - Coastal Fujian province
- **Wuhan** - Central China hub
- **Kunming** - Yunnan province gateway

✅ **Requirements for 144-Hour Transit:**

1. Confirmed onward ticket to a third country (not returning to origin)
2. Valid passport from eligible country
3. Stay within the permitted region

15-Day Visa-Free Countries

Citizens of Singapore, Brunei, and Japan can enter China visa-free for 15 days for tourism.

30-Day Visa-Free Countries (As of 2025)

China has expanded visa-free access to citizens of multiple European and Asian countries. Check with your local Chinese embassy for the current list, which includes France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Malaysia, Thailand, and others.

⚠️ **Important:** Always verify visa requirements with the Chinese embassy in your country before traveling. Policies change frequently.

For detailed visa information, visit our [complete China Visa Guide](#) →

Essential Apps

China is a mobile-first society. Without the right apps, you'll struggle with even basic tasks. Download and set up these apps before you arrive.

Payment Apps (Essential)

💰 **Alipay (支付宝)**

The most widely accepted payment method in China. Essential for everything from street food to hotel bookings.

1. Download Alipay and select "International User"
2. Verify with your passport and phone number
3. Link your international credit card (Visa/Mastercard)
4. Set up facial recognition for security

WeChat Pay (微信支付)

Integrated into WeChat, China's "everything app". Many vendors only accept WeChat Pay.

1. Download WeChat and create an account
2. Go to "Me" → "Services" → "Wallet"
3. Add your international card
4. Complete identity verification

Navigation Apps

- **Amap (高德地图):** Best map app for China. Works offline, shows metro, buses, and walking directions.
- **Baidu Maps:** Alternative with more POI data. Chinese interface only.
- **Apple Maps:** Works in China with local data. Good for English speakers.

Transportation Apps

- **DiDi (滴滴出行):** China's Uber. Works with international cards. Essential for getting around.
- **12306:** Official high-speed rail booking app. Book tickets in advance.
- **Trip.com:** Good for domestic flights and hotels. English interface.

Communication Apps

- **WeChat (微信):** WhatsApp + Instagram + Facebook rolled into one. Everyone uses it.
- **Pleco:** Best Chinese dictionary app. Essential for language help.
- **Google Translate:** Download Chinese offline pack. Camera translation works well.

For detailed app setup guides, visit our [Essential China Apps Guide](#) →

Money & Payments

The Cashless Reality


China has leapfrogged cards and gone straight to mobile payments. In major cities, you can go weeks without seeing cash. Street vendors, taxi drivers, and even temples accept Alipay and WeChat Pay.

Payment Methods Ranked

1. **Alipay/WeChat Pay:** Accepted everywhere. Set up before you arrive.
2. **Cash (RMB):** Still accepted but inconvenient. Bring small bills.
3. **International Cards:** Only at major hotels, upscale restaurants, and malls.
4. **UnionPay:** China's card network. Some international cards work.

Setting Up Mobile Payments

Both Alipay and WeChat Pay now support international credit cards. The setup takes about 10-15 minutes and requires passport verification. Do this before leaving home so you can test it works.

 **Pro Tip:** Carry a small amount of cash (200-500 RMB) as backup. Some places in rural areas or very small vendors may not accept mobile payments.

Budget Planning

Travel Style	Daily Budget	Includes
Budget	\$50-70 USD	Hostels, street food, trains
Mid-Range	\$100-150 USD	3-star hotels, restaurants, flights
Luxury	\$200+ USD	5-star hotels, fine dining, private tours

ATMs & Currency Exchange

ATMs are everywhere, but international cards only work at major banks (Bank of China, ICBC, China Construction Bank). Withdraw larger amounts to minimize fees. Exchange counters at airports give poor rates; use banks in the city.

For detailed payment setup, visit our [China Payment Guide](#) →

Transportation

High-Speed Rail (高铁)

China's high-speed rail network is the world's largest and fastest. Trains run at 250-350 km/h (155-217 mph), connecting almost every major city. It's often faster than flying for routes under 1,000 km.

Booking Tickets

- **12306 App:** Official app. Lowest prices but Chinese interface.
- **Trip.com:** English interface. Small booking fee.
- **Station Ticket Windows:** Bring passport. Limited availability.

✓ **Book 14-30 days in advance** during peak seasons (holidays, summer). Tickets sell out fast on popular routes like Beijing-Shanghai.

Classes of Service

- **Second Class:** 5 seats per row. Comfortable, affordable.
- **First Class:** 4 seats per row. More legroom, quieter.
- **Business Class:** 3 seats per row. Lie-flat seats, premium service.

Domestic Flights

Flying makes sense for long distances (Beijing to Urumqi, Chengdu to Lhasa). Major airlines include Air China, China Eastern, China Southern, and Hainan Airlines. Book through Trip.com or airline apps.

Metro Systems

Every major city has an extensive metro system. Tickets cost 2-10 RMB. Use Alipay's transportation code for quick entry. Metro apps show real-time arrivals in English.

DiDi & Taxis

DiDi is China's ride-hailing giant (similar to Uber). It works with international cards and has an English interface. Taxis are still common and cheap, but drivers rarely speak English — have your destination written in Chinese.

For comprehensive transport details, visit our [**China Transportation Guide**](#) →

Where to Go

Beijing (北京)

China's capital blends imperial grandeur with modern ambition. Must-sees include the Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven, Summer Palace, and of course, the Great Wall. Allow 3-4 days minimum.

- **Best For:** History, culture, architecture
- **Days Needed:** 3-4
- **Don't Miss:** Great Wall at Mutianyu, hutong neighborhood walks

Shanghai (上海)

China's most cosmopolitan city. The Bund's colonial architecture faces Pudong's futuristic skyline. Great for shopping, dining, and nightlife. The perfect blend of East and West.

- **Best For:** Modern China, nightlife, shopping
- **Days Needed:** 2-3
- **Don't Miss:** Yu Garden, French Concession, evening Bund stroll

Xi'an (西安)

The eastern terminus of the Silk Road and home to the Terracotta Army. The ancient city wall, Muslim Quarter, and pagodas make this a history lover's paradise.

- **Best For:** Ancient history, food culture
- **Days Needed:** 2-3
- **Don't Miss:** Terracotta Warriors, city wall cycling, Muslim Quarter food tour

Chengdu (成都)

Famous for pandas and hotpot. Chengdu's relaxed pace, teahouse culture, and spicy cuisine offer a different flavor of China. Gateway to Sichuan's natural wonders.

- **Best For:** Pandas, food, relaxed atmosphere
- **Days Needed:** 2-3
- **Don't Miss:** Panda Breeding Base, hotpot dinner, People's Park teahouses

Other Notable Destinations

- **Hangzhou:** Beautiful West Lake, tea culture, near Shanghai
- **Guangzhou:** Cantonese cuisine capital, historic trading port
- **Shenzhen:** Tech hub, theme parks, shopping
- **Chongqing:** Mountain city, hotpot, Cyberpunk vibes
- **Guilin:** Iconic karst landscapes, Li River cruise

Explore all destinations in our [Complete Cities Guide](#) →

Food & Dining

Chinese cuisine is incredibly diverse, with each region having its own distinct flavors, techniques, and specialties. Food is central to Chinese culture — embrace it.

The Eight Great Cuisines

- **Sichuan (川菜):** Bold, spicy, numbing (mala). Signature: Mapo Tofu, Kung Pao Chicken
- **Cantonese (粤菜):** Fresh, delicate, dim sum. Signature: Roast duck, steamed fish
- **Shandong (鲁菜):** Salty, crispy, seafood. Signature: Sweet and sour carp
- **Jiangsu (苏菜):** Sweet, braised, delicate. Signature: Lion's Head meatballs
- **Zhejiang (浙菜):** Fresh, light, seasonal. Signature: Dongpo Pork
- **Fujian (闽菜):** Umami, soups, seafood. Signature: Buddha Jumps Over Wall
- **Hunan (湘菜):** Hot, sour, smoked. Signature: Chairman Mao's Red Braised Pork
- **Anhui (徽菜):** Wild game, braised, rustic. Signature: Braised Turtle

Street Food Culture

Some of the best food in China comes from street vendors and night markets. Look for busy stalls with high turnover — that's your guarantee of freshness.

Dining Etiquette

- Wait for the host to start eating
- Never stick chopsticks vertically in rice (death symbol)
- Tap two fingers on table when someone pours your tea (thanks)
- Share dishes family-style; use serving spoons

- Tipping is not expected in mainland China

💡 **Vegetarian Tip:** China has excellent vegetarian options, but communication is key. Learn to say "我吃素" (wǒ chī sù - I'm vegetarian). Buddhist restaurants are widespread and excellent.

For detailed food guides, visit our [Chinese Food Guide](#) →

Culture & Etiquette

Understanding Chinese culture enhances your experience and shows respect. Here are the essentials for navigating social situations.

Greetings & Introductions

- A nod or slight bow is appropriate for first meetings
- Handshakes are common in business settings
- Address people by their title and surname (e.g., "Manager Wang")
- Business cards should be presented and received with both hands

Gift Giving

- Gifts are given with both hands
- Avoid: clocks, umbrellas, white flowers (death associations)
- Good choices: fruit, tea, alcohol, souvenirs from home
- Recipients may refuse once or twice before accepting (politeness)

Dining Etiquette

- The host pays — don't fight it too hard
- Wait for elders to start eating first
- Don't flip fish (bad luck for fishermen)
- Leave a little food on your plate (shows generosity of host)

Temple & Religious Sites

- Dress modestly (cover shoulders and knees)
- Ask before photographing monks or worshippers
- Walk clockwise around Buddhist temples

- Keep voices low; turn off phone sounds

Common Taboos to Avoid

- Don't give a clock as a gift (sounds like "attending funeral")
- Don't write names in red ink (death association)
- Don't stick chopsticks upright in rice
- Don't give white flowers (funerals)
- Don't discuss Taiwan, Tibet, or Tiananmen (sensitive topics)

For comprehensive etiquette guides, visit our [**Culture & Etiquette Guide**](#) →

Safety Tips

China is one of the safest countries for tourists. Violent crime is rare, and you can walk around major cities at night without worry. However, be aware of these common issues:

Common Scams

- **Tea House Scam:** Friendly locals invite you to tea, then present huge bill
- **Art Student Scam:** Students invite you to see their art, pressure to buy
- **Counterfeit Money:** Check large bills carefully, especially taxis
- **Overcharging:** Agree on prices before taxi rides or services

Emergency Numbers

110

Police

120

Ambulance

119

Fire

12301

Tourist Hotline

Health Tips

- Don't drink tap water — stick to bottled or boiled water
- Air quality can be poor; consider masks on bad air days
- Carry a basic first-aid kit
- International hospitals exist in major cities (better English, higher cost)

⚠️ **Travel Insurance:** Essential for China. Ensure it covers medical evacuation. Treatment at international hospitals can be expensive.

For comprehensive safety information, visit our [China Safety Guide](#) →

Internet Access

The Great Firewall

China blocks many foreign websites and apps, including Google, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and many news sites. Here's how to stay connected:

VPN Solutions

- **Before Arrival:** Download and set up your VPN (some VPN sites are blocked in China)
- **eSIM Options:** Services like Airalo and Holafly include VPN access
- **Reliable VPNs:** ExpressVPN, Astrill, VyprVPN (check current reliability)

Staying Connected

- **Local SIM:** China Unicom or China Mobile. Data is cheap. Buy at airport.
- **eSIM:** Convenient, set up before arrival. Includes VPN in many cases.
- **Pocket WiFi:** Rent at airports or online. Good for groups.

✅ **Best Practice:** Use an eSIM with built-in VPN (like Airalo's China eSIM) for the easiest experience. Set it up before you land.

For detailed connectivity guides, visit our [China Connectivity Guide](#) →

Sample Itineraries

7-Day Classic Route: Beijing → Xi'an → Shanghai

Day 1-3

Beijing: Great Wall, Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven, hutongs

Day 4-5

Xi'an: Terracotta Warriors, city wall, Muslim Quarter

Day 6-7

Shanghai: The Bund, Yu Garden, French Concession

10-Day Cultural Journey

Day 1-3

Beijing: Imperial sites + Great Wall

Day 4-5

Xi'an: Ancient capital highlights

Day 6-7

Chengdu: Pandas + hotpot + teahouses

Day 8-10

Shanghai: Modern China + day trip to Hangzhou

14-Day Comprehensive Tour

Add Guilin/Yangshuo for stunning landscapes between Chengdu and Shanghai, or include Zhangjiajie (Avatar mountains) for nature lovers.