

ABOUT CHINA

China offers geographic diversity, spectacular landscapes and differing climates across a vast land. It is the world's fourth largest country and home to the planet's largest population with over 1.3 billion people. The west of the country is characterized by huge mountain ranges and remote deserts. The eastern provinces are home to flatter and more fertile terrain. Renowned natural attractions include the Himalayas – home to the world's highest mountain – and the Tibetan Plateau which lies at an average altitude of 5,000-meters. Many of Asia's great rivers including the Yangtze, the Yellow River and the Mekong originate from the Tibetan Plateau. At 6,437-km long, the Yangtze is the third longest river in the world and it has carved dramatic gorges that lead to flood plains and giant lakes before it spills out into the ocean. The far northwest of the country is a massive, desert land that contains China's lowest point; the Turpan Depression. The endless grasslands of northern Inner Mongolia offer the chance to experience life in a lush, flat landscape that is dotted with traditional yurts. The southwest is characterized by huge limestone landscapes such as the Stone Forest near Kunming and Guangxi's incredibly beautiful sea of karsts towering between Guilin and Yangzhou. Other notable natural attractions in this region include the steep Tiger Leaping Gorge in Yunnan. The far south is home to China's best beaches, most of which are to be found on the sun-kissed tropical island of Hainan. China has a wealth of travel and tourism opportunities – the only limits are time!

FAST FACTS

AIRPORTS

Beijing Capital International Airport, Shanghai Pudong International Airport, Shanghai Hongqiao International Airport, Hong Kong International Airport and Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport are the major international airports in China. International air transportation in mainland China is frequently linked through Shanghai, Beijing, or Guangzhou. Beijing Capital International Airport is situated 27- km northeast of the city center and this facility experiences the maximum volume of passenger traffic every year. More and more 'secondary' cities in China now have direct international flights such as Chengdu, Chongqing, Xian, Wuhan, Kunming, Hangzhou and Xiamen.

ARRIVAL / DEPARTURE INFORMATION

Besides a passport that is valid for six months, with two blank pages remaining, visitors need to acquire a visa in advance. Long-term visas are generally not granted at the border. Visa applications typically take three to five working days to process; however, this can be cut to one day if the applicant applies in person and pays an additional fee. "L" (tourist) visas are valid for between one and three months. Usually one month is granted. Double and multiple entry tourist visas are also available at some consulates. Applicants should apply at their nearest consulate. Usually, the visit must begin within three months of the date of issue of the visa. Application for a visa requires the completion of an application form that can be downloaded from many consular websites or acquired by mail. Temporary restrictions may be placed, sometimes for years at a time, in areas where there is unrest and a further permit may be required to travel to these areas. Some consulates indicate that an onward airline ticket or itinerary is required, or that applicants have proof of sufficient funds.

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One passport photograph is required, as well as one for any child traveling on a parent's passport. Once in China, visas can usually be extended for a maximum of 30 days at the Aliens Entry-Exit department of the Public Security Bureau (PSB) in most major towns and cities. Again visa extension processing times and requirements vary from place to place, and while some PSBs will issue an extension on the spot, others will take up to five working days to process. The easiest place to apply for a mainland visa is Hong Kong, where there are several China visa options. Single-entry tourist "L" visas valid for 30 days are easily obtainable, as is the double-entry version. Multiple-entry "F" visas are also easy to obtain via Asian Trails and without the letter of invitation required to obtain them in the applicant's home country.

Nationalities of 45 countries can now also visit Beijing, Shanghai and other main cities without a visa after the government introduced a 72-hour (Beijing) / 144-hour (Shanghai) visa-free transit policy. Tourists holding third country visas and plane tickets can apply for a transit without visa (TWOV) at the airport. The country list includes the USA, most European nations, as well as Japan and Russia. Visitors have to register at a police station within 24 hours of their arrival. The 72 hours' / 144 hours' timeframe is calculated from the moment visitors get their transit stay permits.

Visitors are required to show confirmed onward travel arrangements to another destination, other than the country of departure prior to their China arrival. For more information, contact Asian Trails China or check out the following, most up-to-date [web link](#).

All the above information may change without prior notice. It remains the traveler's responsibility to check visa requirements before traveling.

BUSINESS HOURS

Offices are generally open from 9-am to 6-pm but are closed Saturday and Sunday. Most shops, restaurants and transport systems offer the same service seven days a week. Shops are typically open from 8-am to 8-pm.

BANKS

Bank opening hours vary widely; most are open Monday through to Friday from 9-am to 5-pm, with lunch hour from 1 to 2-pm; Saturday business hours are generally 9-am to 1-pm. For most destinations it's usually a good idea to exchange at least some money before you depart your home country so you can avoid the less favourable rates you will get at airport currency exchange desks. There is no legal private money changing service in mainland China and rates are fixed at all outlets nationwide on a daily basis. You can change money at branches of the Bank of China, or at desks administered by the bank in your hotel, or at major department stores in larger cities. Hotel exchange desks will usually only change money for their resident guests. They are open seven days a week. While there is an abundance of ATMs in China, some may not accept foreign cards. Traveller's checks are only accepted at selected branches of the Bank of China, at foreign exchange desks in hotels, and at some department stores.

CLOTHING

Obviously pack clothes that are appropriate for the time of year and destination within the country as China has differing climatic conditions across its vast territory, ranging from tropical heat to frozen mountain plateaus. If embarking on a package tour it is best to pack one formal outfit for formal dinners, or operas, etc. For example, if you visit Xian you will have the opportunity to attend the formal Tang Dynasty Music and Dance Show. Smart casual is the norm for hotels and restaurants in the larger business cities.

CURRENCY

Yuan, also known as RMB (Renminbi, or "People's Money") come in note denominations of ¥100, ¥50, ¥20, ¥10, ¥5, ¥2, and ¥1, which also appears as a coin. The word yuan is rarely spoken and sums are usually referred to as kuai qian, ("pieces of money") usually shortened to kuai. Notes carry Arabic numerals as well as numbers in Chinese characters, so there is no fear of confusion. The next unit down, the jiao (¥.10), is referred to as the mao. The smallest and almost worthless unit is the fen. The most useful note for everyday transactions is the ¥10, so keep a good stock.

CUSTOM ALLOWANCES

The following goods may be imported into China without incurring a customs duty:

For Mainland Chinese nationals, Hong Kong and Macau residents:

- 200 cigarettes and 1 bottle of spirits.

For overseas Chinese and foreigners:

- 400 cigarettes and two bottles of alcoholic beverages (up to 75cl each).

CHINA (Do's and Don'ts)

China is renowned as a welcoming country with tolerant people but some common courtesies are as follows:

Dos in China

- Be punctual as being on time shows respect for other people.
- Remove your shoes when entering a private Chinese home.
- Always greet the eldest person in a Chinese family first and then everyone else in order of seniority.
- Keep calm when dealing with officials, especially if tense situations arise. Getting angry will lead to an ugly, face-losing situation.
- Present things to people with both hands, to show that what you are offering is the fullest extent of yourself, especially with business cards.
- Eat what your host offers and orders. It is considered rude to refuse.
- Fill your companion's tea cup when it is empty, especially if your companion is older than you. Leave your tea cup half-full if you have had enough.

Don'ts in China

- Don't write anything in red ink. Red ink is traditionally used for letters of protest.
- Don't leave your chopsticks upright in your bowl as this action is associated with funerals. Use the special rests provided.
- Don't point the bottom of your shoes/feet at someone.
- Don't point your finger at someone.
- Don't touch someone's head – this is the most sacred part of the body.
- Don't give clocks or books as gifts. The phrase "to give a clock" in Mandarin sounds too much like "attend a funeral" and "giving a book" sounds like "delivering defeat".
- Don't be overtly affectionate in public places.
- Discuss local politics or other issues of sensitivity.

ELECTRICITY

The electricity used in all parts of China is 220 volts, alternating current (AC), 50 cycles. Many hotel rooms have different configurations to accept different foreign plugs. Adapters with two or three flat pins are available in department stores and good hotels often provide these free of charge.

ENTERTAINMENT AND NIGHTLIFE

The entertainment in China is as diverse as the country itself. The big cities are home to sophisticated nightclubs, high-end restaurants and cool bars that reflect the cosmopolitan clientele that inhabit these cities. Smart casual attire is the usual dress code. Other options include cultural shows such as Chinese opera performances, acrobatic shows and martial arts displays. For a more relaxed affair, head to a traditional Chinese tea house.

FOOD

Practice your skills with your chopsticks and grab a phrasebook and you will be ready to dive into China's mixed pot of regional cuisines. China offers a culinary adventure of a magnitude you would expect in a country so large and diverse. Not only are there hundreds of delicious dishes to sample, exploring the cuisine of the different provinces gives an insight into the characteristics of each particular locale. Venues to eat Chinese food range from opulent restaurants to hawker street stalls. If a place is packed, chances are it is worth trying out the food. Cantonese food is the most widely known internationally. This cuisine typically features an abundance of fresh seafood cooked in light sauces and side dishes of rice, meat and vegetable served in clay pots. Dim sum is a Cantonese favorite featuring a huge selection of miniature buns, spring rolls, and dumplings. Northern cuisine is typified by the use of salt, garlic, ginger, and onion and hearty staples of steamed buns, noodles, pancakes and dumplings filled with pork, leek or cabbage. The highest form of Northern cuisine is the opulent Mandarin-style plum sauce-soaked Beijing Duck. Spicy Sichuan dishes pack a punch through the use of the region's powerful chillies. Some of the best known and tastiest Sichuan dishes are gongbao jiding (chicken with chili and peanuts), mapo doufu (spicy tofu), and spicy hotpot dishes (huoguo). Western-style food is widely available and Beijing and Shanghai offer every world cuisine cooked to the highest standards.

HEALTH

Advanced facilities, often staffed by foreign doctors, prevail in the bigger cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. If medical treatment is needed outside of these destinations, try to head to the largest hospital in town. Foreigners who do end up in provincial facilities often get special treatment, but this cannot be guaranteed. Standard inoculations should be up-to-date for polio, diphtheria, and tetanus. Visitors may also need inoculations against typhoid fever, meningococcal meningitis, cholera, hepatitis A and B, and Japanese B encephalitis. If arriving in mainland China from a country with yellow fever, you may be asked for proof of vaccination. Tuberculosis is making resurgence in many regions and due to the explosive growth of the canine population; rabies is also on the rise again, although the risks in mainstream tourist areas are generally minimal.

HOTELS

As the tourism industry advances in leaps and bounds, there is an increasing range of choice, especially in larger cities, with an abundance of up-market international chains and trendy boutique-style hotels. Beijing, Shanghai and the other larger cities have an abundance of luxury properties with all the main global hotel chains represented. Check with Asian Trails to get the best deals through our online booking system and expert local knowledge, especially when travelling during peak holiday periods. The larger hotels offer a wide variety of restaurants, bars, swimming pools and other recreational facilities. Most of the staff at key positions (front office, reception, restaurants etc.) speaks excellent English. During check-in you will be asked to complete a registration card. The hotel will also ask for an imprint of your credit card as a guarantee for extra services such as meals, drinks, etc. Ask the cashier to return this slip upon checkout. Please check that you receive meal coupons (where applicable) when given the room key. General check-in is from 2-pm and check out time is 12-noon. If you require a late check-out (extra costs may apply) check with the reception beforehand.

INSURANCE

It is essential to take out a medical insurance policy before traveling as treatment will not be administered without proof of payment, or evidence of a comprehensive travel insurance policy. The travel insurance should cover air ambulance or scheduled airline repatriation for an emergency evacuation.

INTERNET

Internet connection is widely accessible in China via Wi-Fi in hotel rooms, lobbies, and cafes. However, this may not be so when travelling off the beaten track.

LANGUAGE

There are six major languages called Chinese and there are in addition a host of dialects. The official national language of China is Mandarin (Putonghua; “common speech”), sometimes called Modern Standard Chinese, and viewed in mainland China as the language of administration. While many people speak their own local version of Chinese for everyday communication, most have been educated in Mandarin, which is the language of Beijing and the North.

PEOPLE

Chinese people are very diverse in their country of origin. The Han Chinese constitutes an average 95 per cent of the country’s population. The remaining five per cent are made up of 55 other ethnic groups. The three largest minority groups include the Tibetans, the Uighurs who live in Xinjiang province in northwestern China, and the Mongolians who live on the northern grasslands of Inner Mongolia.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

China has two Golden Week holidays when travel is very congested as the mass migration of workers returning home takes place. This puts immense pressure on accommodation and public transport systems. These are the National Day holiday; and the Spring Festival holiday. Tourist sites are open and overbooking can occur at short notice on public holidays and our Asian Trails guides will give our clients the best advice about the ongoing situation. The dates of national holidays and various long weekends may change every year.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

The first thing to do upon arrival is to buy a map. Even though few of these are bilingual they are useful for navigation. Hotel staff can mark where you want to go and then show this to the taxi driver. Because of the country’s vast size, it is best to take domestic flights between the different tourism destinations. Air travel is becoming increasingly popular as the country undergoes an economic boom; the government plans to build 100 new airports by 2020 costing an estimated USD\$64 billion. The train is still a great way to travel as railway journeys tend to be more scenic than the endless highways. Trains are also more comfortable and train stations tend to be located much closer to city centres than airports. The railway sector is undergoing a major transformation: there are 200-kph trains between Shenzhen and Guangzhou; 300kph tilting trains are already actively used; the world’s highest altitude railway that runs to Lhasa was recently opened; and the world’s first commercial maglev (magnetic levitation) is in operation between Shanghai and Pudong airport.

China’s highway system, non-existent over 20 years ago, is also developing rapidly and journey times by road between major cities have been dramatically cut. Asian Trails provides clean, safe and modern airport transfers and inter-city travel with a modern fleet of vehicles with trained guides. Taxis are plentiful in major cities. Always make sure the driver resets the meter, especially if he has been waiting in a queue.

RELIGION

China has been a multi-religion country since ancient times. Confucianism is an indigenous religion which became the guiding ideology for feudalism society but it did not develop into a national belief. However, it has made the culture more tolerant to others and enabled other religions to be brought into the country. According to recent surveys, 85 per cent of Chinese people have religious beliefs. The three principal religions in China known as the “Three Teachings” – Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism – are inextricably linked and you will often find elements of all three of these religious disciplines in a single temple.

SAFETY

Serious or violent crimes against foreigners are very rare but travelers should remain vigilant for petty theft, especially in areas off the beaten tourist track. As a global rule, never leave belongings unattended and always maintain a firm grip on cameras and shoulder bags. Leave expensive valuables at home and always use hotel safety deposits boxes or in-room safes for valuables.

SHOPPING

Ranging from bustling traditional markets to glitzy ultra-modern malls, China has an abundance of shopping opportunities that differ widely across this vast country. Beijing is renowned for pearls and silk in the Hongqiao Market. Shanghai’s South Bund Fabric Market is famous for its handmade suits. Chengdu sells some of the best green tea on the planet and when in Xinjiang check out the exquisite jade.

STREET STALLS AND MARKETS

Fascinating markets are in abundance across China. Panjiayuan Jiuho Shichang in Beijing is a huge outdoor market held on weekends. This market stocks the best selection of all things Chinese including reproduction Ming furniture, traditional clothing worn by many of China's ethnic minorities and Mao memorabilia. South Bund Fabric Market in Shanghai stocks fine fabrics such as silk, cotton, linen, wool, and cashmere at very competitive prices. Many stalls have their own in-house tailors who can make a suit at rates that are less than half what you would pay at retail outlets. Yide Road Wholesale Market in Guangzhou is one of the most colourful markets in a city that is awash with bustling markets.

TELEPHONE

All hotel phones have direct dialling and most have international dialling. Hotels are only allowed to add a service charge of up to 15 per cent to the cost of the call and long-distance rates within China are low. To use a public telephone you'll need an IC (integrated circuit) card (aaisei ka), available in convenience shops and market stalls. Avoid expensive roaming charges on your mobile telephone; it is far cheaper to buy a "pay as you go" SIM card on arrival in China. These are available at airports and train stations, and you can buy top-up cards from service provider shops, as well as news kiosks and post offices in larger cities.

TIME ZONE

The whole of China is on Beijing time. The country is GMT + 8 and does not operate on a daylight-savings system.

TIPPING

Tipping for good service is nowadays expected in China. Tipping the guide and driver on your transfers and tours should depend on how satisfied you are with the excursion. Hotel porters should be tipped for carrying bags to the room. In other cases, it is totally up to the individual when and how much to tip. The Chinese do not tip, but those used to dealing with foreigners (five-star hotel bellboys), or involved in the tourist trade (bus drivers, guides, tour leaders) are familiar with tipping and are unlikely to refuse a tip if it is offered. Tipping in restaurants, cafes and bars is not customary.

WATER

Tap water in mainland China is not drinkable but can be used for brushing teeth. Use bottled water, widely available on every street, and provided free in the better hotels.

WEATHER

As the fourth largest country in the world, with the second-lowest inland depression and some of the planet's highest peaks, climatic conditions vary widely. The far Northeast shares the same weather patterns as Siberia. The far Southwest has the same sub-tropical climate as northern Thailand. In the North, early spring and late autumn are the best times to travel, with warm dry days and cool dry evenings. During March and April, winds sometimes bring sand in from the Gobi Desert and topsoil from high ground to the northeast of Beijing. In the South, November to February brings a welcome drop both in temperature and the high humidity. The Southeast coast is subject to occasional typhoons from June to September which can close down businesses. Central China has some of the country's most severe winters along with hot summer temperatures. Tibet has spring-like temperatures but a blisteringly hot sun in the summer, while the dry winters are far milder than most people expect. The Northwest regions have the greatest range of temperatures, with hot summers and very cold winters, but it is also largely dry.

EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBERS

Police dial 110; Emergency Medical Services dial 120; Fire service dial 119; Traffic accidents dial 122.

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