

China (People's Republic of China)



Location: Asia

Status: UN Member Country

Capital City: Beijing

Main Cities: Guangzhou, Guilin, Hangzhou, Kunming, Nanjing, Shanghai, Suzhou, Xi'an, Yangzhou

Population: 1,350,000,000

Area: 9,596,960 km²

Currency: Renminbi (RMB)

Languages: national: Mandarin (Putonghua)

Religions: Buddhist 80%

Calling code: +86

Drive on the right

China invokes the same curiosity and feeling of wonder and puzzlement that Egypt does. Shrouded in mystery for a long time, ruled by majestic emperors and having contributed so much to history, science, alternative therapies and medicine, art and many more, there is every reason for you to want to visit China. In 2011, the number of international travelers to china hit an impressive 12 million. You too will love this massive country with its massive population of more than 1.3 billion people.

Traveling to China is no small feat. There are so many languages, cultures and beliefs that even the veteran, seasoned traveler will be rattled. From the Wall of China that was last upgraded in 1368, to the massive Tiananmen Square with the Mao Zedong portrait, there is so much to see in China. There are the Karst Mountains in Yangzhou and the Paradise on Earth in Hangzhou. One, two or even three long trips are not enough to see even half of this majestic country.

Best time to go

Because of the vast size of this country, different people may have to travel at different times depending on the region they want to explore. However, for the first time travelers, the best time to go there is during autumn, that is, from early September to late October. Then the temperatures are ambient, ranging from 50⁰ to 70⁰F. During this period, there is little or no rainfall.

General Information

Passport and visa

You must have a visa and passport that is at least 6 months from the expiry date. The Tourist Visa (L) is issued to aliens going to the Peoples Republic of China for tourism. It is important that you keep your passport with you when you are traveling in China. For safety, make sure that you have a photocopy of your passport on your person somewhere.

Money

The official currency of China is the Renminbi, in most cases referred to as the Chinese Yuan. Usually, visitors are allowed to carry up to 5000 US dollars, but any more than that, they will be required to have the relevant paperwork. It is advisable to keep some US dollars with you, but change some of your currency into RMB. You will need your passport to change currency at the bank. You can also carry your ATMs with you, but be ware of the transaction charges like domestic currency conversion levies. Popular logos like Visa and MasterCard are widely accepted in China.

Post and telecommunications

Hotels in China will allow you to send postcards back home. China Post handles all postal needs both locally and internationally. A postcard, parcel or other mail can be sent via three post means. Air is the fastest. It is expensive but mail takes 7 to 15 days top be delivered to the recipients. Surface Air Lifted (SAL) is next, slightly expensive but takes longer. Mail will be transported by air between countries and then by sea, land or whatever is applicable to the recipients' point of collection. The third one is the Surface mail that is transported via sea, rail or land. It can take many days, but it is very cheap.

Calling abroad is easy but expensive. Internet access is available in all major tourist places and you will find WiFi in most cafes in more built up areas.

Transportation

China has a well-established transport network. However, the available means may not be enough to meet everyone's travel needs, especially during the holidays when everyone is traveling home to their kin. In the larger cities, there are light rails, metro and maglev train systems. *chángtú gōnggòng qìchē (long distance buses)* are the best form of transport in China. With the number of express highways increasing, long distance bus travel is becoming even more convenient than rail travel. Buses are the most convenient way to get around and the fares are very affordable. However, the traffic jams can be nasty. Allow enough time for the bus journey if you are going to catch a train or a plane. Forget self-drive car hires unless you are used to the kind of freestyle driving you will find here. Taxis are readily available, but for your sake, ask for a receipt and always choose a decent looking taxi, with the meter prominently displayed.

Health and Safety

Climate

Climate in China is very diverse, because this is a big country. Springs can be warm, pleasant and with little rain in some parts like the north of China, but in others like in the north east, spring can be cool and dry. In others, there could be a little rain.

Some parts like the western interior can experience extreme heat in summer, yet others can experience just 19° of temperature. Temperature in the East Coast can go to 35 degrees. It will be hot and humid.

Winters can be bitterly cold, especially in the North East, sometimes going to as low as -20°. Fall can be very cold in some places, yet in others like the north, the conditions will be similar to spring.

Health and wellbeing

There are excellent health facilities in China. Always go to the largest hospitals in the big cities, as they will have better services. Carry your own tissue paper, as public toilets may not provide the same. In addition, bring your alcohol wet wipes.

If you suffer from a chronic condition, let your doctor list down as much information about your illness as possible and carry that note with you always. In addition, when you get to Beijing, Guangzhou or Shanghai, buy a first aid kit and over the counter medication that you think will be necessary or carry your first aid kit and medication from home.

Vaccinations

Before travelling to China, please ensure you have adequate protection against disease. Contact your doctor for the latest medical advice on the vaccinations you need, no less than two months before your departure.

Travel insurance (compulsory)

We do everything possible to ensure a safe and enjoyable trip. However, travel inevitably involves some risk and this should be recognised by holidaymakers. Travel insurance is a cost effective way of protecting yourself and your equipment should any problems occur such as cancelled trips, delays, medical emergencies, baggage loss or damage. It also gives you peace of mind. Please make sure your travel insurance covers all activities planned on your trip.

Culture & Customs

Etiquette and cultural differences

If you speak just one or two words of Mandarin, the Chinese will be very delighted. Always introduce yourself with a big smile. The etiquette in China can be something of a shocker to you. If you are introducing yourself formally, state your full name, place of work and position. If informally, give your full name and a simple greeting. If you are introducing other people, juniors are introduced first, then the seniors. Women are introduced first, then the men. The host is always introduced before the guest.

Always use two hands when giving something, even business cards.

There is no dress code per se in China, but it should not be too revealing. Easterners are very conservative and even if you are on the beach, try not to wear a too skimpy bikini. The Chinese love color red.

Politeness is a universal language. Be polite, even when you are exasperated. Don't point fingers and try not to use gestures unless you have studied their meaning first. China is a very old oriental country. A gesture may mean something in the western countries and an entirely different thing in the East.

Food and drink

Chinese food can be hot and spicy, but all the same, it will give your palates a run for their money. It will be very exciting. When you get to a restaurant, ask to see the English as well as the Chinese menu because some restaurants are known to overprice food for tourists. You should never tip in restaurants or even in taxis. In addition, always look for a hotel that serves Chinese as well as western food. It may not be a good idea to go Chinese all of a sudden especially if you are not used to it.

Once you start sampling the local fare, you will love it. Staple food in China is mostly wheat and rice. However, there are many more types of foods like sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes and legumes. The other most common dishes that you will find include fried bitter melons, noodles cooked with tomato and egg sauce, seasoned potatoes, black fungus with sliced pork (sautéed) and eggs. There are many more. In addition, there are KFC's, McDonalds and Pizza Hut's. You need not go hungry in China.

Water

It is not advisable to drink tap water in China. Bottled water is recommended but do check the expiry date before opening. Ice is widely used and is produced with treated water.

Public holidays

New Years Day on January 1 every year

Spring Festival that depends on Lunation

Qing Ming Festival - April 4 or 5

June Solstice - 21 June

May Day - May 1st

Dragon Boat Festival - 5th of every 5th lunar month

Mid Autumn Day - 15th day of the 8 lunar month in Chinese calendar

Arbor Day - 12th every year

Spring Festival - first day of the first lunar month

Lantern Festival - 14 February

National Day - October 1st

Double Seventh - August 2

These are just a few. There are many more of them, including the ethnic minority festivals.

Helpful tips

Donations and gift giving

Although there is poverty in certain areas of China, please read the following points about donations and gift giving.

Do not give money to people begging, especially children. This reinforces the belief that begging is an acceptable way to make a living. If children make money from begging, their parents are less likely to send them to school. Children working on the streets are also vulnerable to abuse. Giving money and goods to beggars can accentuate an unequal relationship between locals and visitors, with tourists being seen as purely money givers.

Do not give sweets to children in villages that we visit.

Do not feel that you necessarily have to give material things. Sometimes, giving your friendship, time and interest to locals can be the best gift of all.

Tipping

Tipping is a personal matter and travellers are encouraged to tip any amount they feel is appropriate. For your convenience, we have included a suggested tipping guide below:

Bellboy: 1 - 2 Yuan per suitcase / bag

Chambermaid: 2 - 4 Yuan per day

Guides: 10 - 15 Yuan per day for guides (depending on group size and performance)

Drivers: 10 Yuan per day, per person

Restaurants: in smart establishments you may find that the tip is already included in the bill. In local restaurants tips are not expected but you may wish to leave loose change on the table.

Price guide

Generally, things are cheap in China. However as a tourist you will get overcharged if you are not careful. Haggling is considered a sport when it comes to non-food products. Always stay calm and polite and you'll be surprised at the discounts you may get. Be aware that many items for sale on street stands are counterfeit.

Street food

Baozi: RMB 3

Rice dish: RMB 3 - 6

Restaurants

Western dishes: from RMB 15

Local dishes: from RMB 8

Drinks

Soft drinks RMB 1 - 2

Beer: RMB 5 - 7

Fruit juice: RMB 2 - 3

Water: RMB 1 - 1.5

Other Items

DVDs (real): RMB 10 - 20

SIM card: RMB 10

Mobile phone: from RMB 100

Pre-departure checklist

Travel insurance

Passport with at least six months validity from date of entry

Photocopy of passport

Visa or visa on arrival

Vaccinations

ATM cards/travellers cheques

All relevant tickets

Reconfirmed flights

Lightweight clothing

Long-sleeved shirts and trousers (recommended for evenings)

Electrical adaptor: 220V, 50Hz; 2 pin plugs

A small bag/backpack for day and overnight trips

Appropriate shoes for trekking, cycling and walking

Insect repellent

Sunscreen

Medication/first aid kit

Please note: *Domestic airlines impose restrictions on baggage at approx 20kg maximum, so travel lightly where possible. Also be aware that train and boat cabins have limited space.*