

A destination that inspires, fascinates and bewilders travellers with its rich, diverse and often mysterious landscape, culture and traditions. It's one of the world's oldest and most magnificent civilizations which are experiencing extraordinary modern transformation.

China's multi-millennial history has been a tumultuous one. One of the world's earliest civilisations, it was ruled for thousands of years by imperial dynasties until the overthrowing of the Qing dynasty in 1911. The civil war in 1945 defined the China of today, ending with the defeated Nationalists fleeing to Taiwan, while Mao's victorious Communists founded the People's Republic of China. The Cultural Revolution in the 1960s effectively closed the country. However, China has made up for lost time since the 1990s: it now boasts the world's fastest growing major economy and its main cities are emerging as cosmopolitan global centres.

China's scenic natural wonders make for fantastic hikes and views. One of the best is Tibet's Qomolangma Nature Reserve (around Everest). There are also a number of UNESCO World Heritage sites to explore, including Mount Taishan mountain park, Huangshan Mountain's fog-shrouded rocky precipices, Buddhist mountain Emei Shan and Jiuzhaigou Valley's lakes and waterfalls.

Beijing, the capital, cultural center, with much to do and see. As well as the Forbidden City, Beijing is home to a large number of first-rate attractions including Tiananmen Square, the world's largest public square; circular 15th-century Temple of Heaven; The old city wall gates; traditional hutong alleys and courtyards; and beautiful Beihai Park. 13 of the dynasty's 16 emperors were buried in the Ming Tombs, they lie just outside Beijing and are an easy stopping off point on a day trip from Beijing to the Great Wall.



Great Wall of China, built over 2,000 years and stretching over 5,400km (3,375 miles), contrary to legend, cannot be seen from space! The restored stone and brick Badaling section stands 8m (26ft) high and 6m (20ft) wide, and is the closest to Beijing, 70km (44 miles) away. A slightly less touristy section lies a little further away at Mutianyu. Here, you can take a cable car up to the wall and bobsled down. It's also possible to hike a 5km (3 miles) route along the steep Simatai section.

From Chengdu, you can visit the holy Buddhist mountain of Emei Shan and the spectacular Grand Buddha of Leshan, carved out of a cliff. At 71m (225ft) high, it is so enormous that 100 people can fit on its instep. There's also the panda breeding and research centre.

Guangzhou, one of most prosperous and liberal cities in the south, near Hong Kong

Guilin,popular destination for both Chinese and foreign tourists with sensational mountain and river scenery

Hangzhou, famously beautiful city and major center for the silk industry

Kunming, capital of Yunnan and gateway to a rainbow of ethnic minority areas

Nanjing, a renowned historical and cultural city with many historic sites

Shanghai, the cosmopolitan atmosphere of soaring skyscrapers contrast the European-style Bund waterfront, art deco laneways of the former French Concession and traditional delights like Yuyuan, an ancient Chinese garden surrounded by a touristy shopping bazaar, also home to the Temple of the City God.

Shilin Stone Forest. Take a day trip from Yunnan capital Kunming to see one of southwest China's most celebrated natural attractions. The Shilin Stone Forest's limestone rock columns resemble petrified trees

2,500-year-old Suzhou is China's own Venice. Its streets lining the Grand Canal and famous water gardens are a delight. Gardens include the Humble Administrator's Garden and the Garden of the Master of the Nets. Buy exquisite Suzhou silk fabrics and embroidery.



Xi'an, the oldest city and ancient capital of China, home to ten dynasties including the Han and the Tang, terminus of the ancient Silk Road. Xi'an's Terracotta Army is made up of 6,000 ancient life-sized warriors and horses. They were buried with Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di, who first united China in 200 BC. Also visit the Big and Small Wild Goose Pagodas and the old city walls.

See the monumental carved Buddhist effigies of Yungang Caves, near Datong, or carved effigies and monuments in Luoyang's fifth-century Longmen Buddhist Caves. At Bingling Lamasery, near Lanzhou, you'll find 34 early Buddhist caves whilst Dunhuang's Mogao Caves have some of China's oldest Buddhist shrines.

You can travel to many of these cities using the new fast trains. In particular, the Hangzhou - Shanghai - Suzhou - Nanjing line is a convenient way to see these historic areas.

Western style pubs are becoming increasingly popular across the country. Especially in the more affluent urban centers such as Shenzhen, Shanghai, and Hangzhou one can find painstakingly recreated replicas of traditional Irish or English pubs. Like their Western counterparts most will have a selection of foreign beers on tap as well as provide pub food (of

varying quality) and often feature live cover bands. Most of these pubs cater to and are frequented by the expatriate communities so you should not expect to find many Chinese in these places. Be aware that imported beer can be very expensive compared to local brew. Karaoke is a huge oriental passtime.

Chinese cuisine has a very long history and is renowned all over the world. Cantonese (the style most Westerners are most familiar with) is just one regional style of Chinese cooking. There are eight major schools of Chinese cuisine, named after the places where they were conceived: Anhui, Fujian, Guangdong, Hunan, Jiangsu, Shandong, Sichuan and Zhejiang.



The climate is extremely diverse, from tropical regions in the south to subarctic in the north. Hainan Island is roughly at the same latitude as Jamaica, while Harbin, one of the largest cites in the north, is at roughly the latitude of Montreal. North China has four distinct seasons with intensely hot summers and bitterly cold winters. Southern China tends to be milder and wetter. The further north and west one travels, the drier the climate. April/May and September/October are the best time to travel in China, as the weathers are generally warm and comfortable. As a result, these are the peak seasons for tourists and could be busy in most of the attractions. In the mid-summer months most parts of China become quite hot. Winter seasons are generally cold in northern China with sub-zero temperatures in the area like Beijing in the months of December and January.