



# China

With all the excitement of the Beijing Olympics beckoning this summer, we take a tailor-made inspirational journey to discover highlights beyond China's capital city

**The Peoples' Republic of China is a complex place, where communism clashes with capitalism and tourists can enjoy the best of both.**

**In China's cities you'll enjoy fine dining and every modern amenity you can think of, while in rural areas, there are traditional cultures and vast tracts of untouched scenery. But it's not an easy place to travel in: there are vast distances to be covered and communicating with locals can be frustratingly difficult.**

**Read on for our advice on tailoring your expectations and how to make the most of your holiday there.**

## GETTING THERE

Air China ([www.air-china.co.uk](http://www.air-china.co.uk)) and British Airways (BA, [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) offer direct flights from and to the UK, taking 9-11 hours. We were quoted £448 by Air China for a return trip in May 2008, compared to £628 by BA. You may find cheaper deals by going through a consolidator such as Flight Centre ([www.flightcentre.co.uk](http://www.flightcentre.co.uk)) or Trailfinders ([www.trailfinders.com](http://www.trailfinders.com)).

If you don't want to start your tour in Beijing, direct flights are also available to Shanghai, Hong Kong and via Amsterdam to Chengdu ([www.klm.com](http://www.klm.com)).

## Tour operators

The easiest way to get around China is on an all-inclusive escorted tour, organised from the UK, either in a small group or organised privately. Most itineraries will include a few days in Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an, Chengdu and Guilin. Two options which are often offered, but which will increase the cost of

your tour significantly, are the Yangtze River Cruise through the Three Gorges, and a visit to the Western Chinese province of Yunnan, on the border with Tibet. We took both of these options and found them to be highlights of our tour, well worth the extra expense.

Despite what you may hear to the contrary, even after its flooding in 2009, we think the Three Gorges will still offer cruisers the chance to see some of the most dramatic scenery in China.

## Abercrombie and Kent

[www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)

**China Direct** [www.chinadirect-travel.co.uk](http://www.chinadirect-travel.co.uk)

**China Holidays** [www.chinaholidays.com](http://www.chinaholidays.com)

**Cox and Kings** [www.coxandkings.co.uk](http://www.coxandkings.co.uk)

**CTS Horizons** [www.ctshorizons.com](http://www.ctshorizons.com)

**Jetlife** [www.jetlife.com](http://www.jetlife.com)

**Kuoni** [www.kuoni.co.uk](http://www.kuoni.co.uk)

**Magic of the Orient**

[www.magicoftheorient.co.uk](http://www.magicoftheorient.co.uk)

**Saga** [www.saga.co.uk](http://www.saga.co.uk)

**Transindus** [www.transindus.co.uk](http://www.transindus.co.uk)

**Wendy Wu** [www.wendywutours.co.uk](http://www.wendywutours.co.uk)

## Yangtze River cruises

If you want to book your Yangtze River cruise independently, we have used and can recommend China Regal Cruises. The peak season for cruises is in the months of April, May, September and October. There are no sailings in January or February, and very few in March. Sailings depart every couple of days, but get booked up early, so it's best to plan and book ahead (European office tel +49 895 170 3290, [www.chinaregalcruises.com](http://www.chinaregalcruises.com)).

A four-day, three-night cruise from Chongqing to Yichang during the 2008 peak season costs US\$508 per person (off-peak \$357), based on two sharing a cabin.

## GOOD PLACES TO STAY

Prices listed in this Factfile (in US dollars) are for the cheapest double room, including breakfast and taxes, in May 2008.

Tour operators may offer cheaper deals for the larger hotels. All these hotels accept Mastercard and Visa and are open all year.

Hotels tend to be large and lacking in individual character, mainly because the widespread mostly domestic tourist market is a relatively new phenomenon.

Those which we recommend either have some character, or are particularly well situated. Hotels which are graded as



A comorant fisherman on a bamboo raft on the River Li

**For the full magazine report on China,  
see p42 of the May 2008 issue of Which? Holiday**

five stars will not have the same standard of facilities as a five-star hotel in the West.

### Lijang | Grand Lijang Hotel

Tel +86 888 512 5878

The location of this hotel, right on the edge of Lijang's old town, is ideal for strolling out to visit the town's restaurants and orchestra hall in the evening. Some rooms on the north side have views of the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain range and although the hotel is only three stars, both rooms and bathrooms are large and comfortable. **\$58 (£29)**

### X'ian | Bell Tower

Tel +86 298 760 0000

[www.belltowerhtl.com](http://www.belltowerhtl.com)

Although very comfortable, it's the excellent location of this large hotel which is its main selling point. Situated right in the centre of town opposite the town Bell Tower, the rooms are unexciting, but adequate, and have English language television channels, including BBC World. **\$108 (£54)**

### Yangshuo | Paradesa Resort

Tel +86 773 882 2109

[www.ys-paradesa.com](http://www.ys-paradesa.com)

This is the only international hotel in Yangshuo, and is located on the pondside in the centre of the old town. From your breakfast table you can watch an old timer doing a cormorant fishing display for the tourists, then take a break in the hotel swimming pool or use one of their bicycles to explore the town. Rooms are comfortable and have all mod cons. **\$134 (£67)**

You may see people practising their daily exercises in city parks



### Zhongdian | Gyalthang Dzong Hotel

Tel +86 887 822 3646

[www.coloursofangsana.com](http://www.coloursofangsana.com)

Your arrival at this boutique hotel is nothing special: the approach is via a dual carriageway alongside muddy scrubland. Once inside however, you're served tea to help you acclimatise in the calm of a cobbled courtyard and the hustle and bustle of modern China becomes a distant echo. In the bedrooms, rich hues of orange, rust and maroon combine with ethnic textiles and raised platform beds to create Tibetan style decor, incorporating the 'Endless Knot' motif, one of the eight symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. There's also a spa, restaurant and valley views. This was one of the few hotels we stayed in with any character at all. **\$100 (£50)**

**In a country with such diversity of exciting cuisine, it's well worth making the effort to seek out the places where locals go to dine**

### PLACES TO EAT AND DRINK

Most upscale restaurants have menus in English including dishes that should be suitable for vegetarians. You are not expected to tip in restaurants. Many of the restaurants you will visit on a guided tour are large scale impersonal affairs with buffet-style offerings, but in a country with such diversity of exciting cuisine, it's well worth making the effort to seek out the places where locals go to dine.

Ask your tour guide or hotel receptionist for recommendations. We particularly enjoyed meals at the following places:

### Chengdu | Shi Zi Lou Restaurant

Chengdu is famed for its hot pot restaurants, with many of them located on the kitsch Qing and Ming style Qintai Lu (road). Shi Zi Lou restaurant, translated by my guide as 'Lion's Pavilion', is beautifully decorated with gold and black carved lacquer furniture and plenty of private function rooms for those doing business deals over dinner.

A hot pot meal consists of choosing a base soup (we opted for half spicy, half normal) and then selecting separate ingredients from a huge menu to cook in the soup over a gas fired cooker on your table. Choose from the sublime (beef, mushrooms) to the bizarre (refined goose intestine, rabbit's kidneys, 'astronaut's food').

This is not a meal to rush as fishing around in the soup bowl with chopsticks to find the ingredients you've put in there to cook takes some time! Expect to pay **£9** for soup with six ingredients, plus beer and green tea.



A girl in traditional costume in Tiger Leaping Gorge

### Xi'an | Defachang Hotel

Right beside the Bell Tower is this giant and jolly dumpling house, located above a neon lit hotel and shopping centre. It's a popular choice for big parties of local families and businessmen, who dine at high volume and at high speed! On the first floor is a café-style eaterie with Formica tables where you can choose from dozens of types of dumpling dishes and squeeze on to a table where you can.

For the uninitiated, we recommend heading for the restaurant upstairs, where for around **£8**, you'll feast on a set tasting menu of 14 different types of dumplings, soup and green tea.

Lots of gesticulation is necessary as none of the staff seemed to speak English, but that's all part of the fun!

### Yangshuo | Pure Lotus Vegetarian

Die Cui Rd

[www.yangshuoren.com](http://www.yangshuoren.com)

Catering more for the tourist market than our other recommendations, this restaurant offers a wide range of very palatable vegetarian dishes, such as sweet and sour aubergine or stir fried cashew nuts with lily bulb. Main course prices start at less than **£1**.

### SOUVENIRS AND SHOPPING

Paintings, jade, pearls, silk, ceramics and antiques all make good souvenirs. Except in department stores, bargaining is the norm. Fake reproductions of antiques, jade and gems are the norm, so make sure you know what you are buying. Unless you're particularly petite, take all the clothes you might need with you – our researcher is a UK size 10/12 and was told by one guide that it would be hard to find clothes to fit!

**TIP** When bargaining for souvenirs in Yangshuo, wait until early evening to make your purchases, when all the daytrippers have left.



The opulent interior of the Songzanglin Monastery

## REFLEXOLOGY

This is available in most big hotels for a charge of around £28. However we visited a local centre recommend by our guide which was much better value (£6 plus £1 tip), and a more entertaining experience! Tropical Palace Amusement Centre Chang'an Road, Xi'an.

## USEFUL INFORMATION

**Time Difference** UK + 8

**International dialling code** 0086.

If calling any of the numbers in this factfile while in China, add an initial 0.

**Internet** Internet prices range from 20p per minute in up-market hotels to 50p per hour in local internet cafés. Some, but not all, English language websites were available.

**Post** A stamp for a postcard costs 40p.

**Television** Some of the hotels we stayed in had English language channels such as BBC World, but several, especially in the Western province of Yunnan, had no English language channels.

**Language** Mandarin is the main language, with English spoken in tourist hotels, though not always to good standard.

**Visas** British citizens need to arrange a tourist visa (valid

for three months from arrival) to enter China. You can print off an application form from the Chinese embassy website (Tel 090 0188 0808 – a premium rate number, [www.chinese-embassy.org.uk](http://www.chinese-embassy.org.uk)), but if applying yourself, applications can only be in person at the embassy in London or the Consulate-General offices in Edinburgh or Manchester.

The standard processing time is four days, and costs £30. Visas can only be arranged by post if through a visa agency such as [www.uk.cibt.com](http://www.uk.cibt.com) or your tour operator.

**When to go** Arriving during spring or autumn will be more pleasant than in the middle of summer and winter when temperatures are more extreme than in the UK. The cities you visit may or may not suffer from smoggy air.

■ Northern China (Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an): the best time to visit is in spring (March-May) or autumn (September-October). Winters are sunny but cold, with little rain. Summer is hot and humid and has frequent rainfall.

■ Southern China (Yunnan Province, Guilin): Spring (April) and autumn (October) are the best times to visit. Mountainous areas of the Yunnan Province can be cold and can experience sudden changes in temperature, though in Guilin winter is mild.

■ Central China (Shanghai, Yangtze Three Gorges): Summer (April-October) is long, hot and humid.

■ Western China and Tibet (Sichuan, the Silk Road): Summer (June-September) is hot and dry, though nights can still be chilly. Travel is not advisable in winter due to freezing temperatures and icy conditions.

■ Currently, the Chinese population take their annual holiday on three specified 'Golden Weeks' – around Chinese New Year, in the first week of May and the first week of October. Popular sights tend to get especially swamped then, so avoid these dates if possible.

**Who goes there?** Couples and singles who are fairly adventurous travellers. China isn't ideal for families, as the distances to travel are long and the food may be a problem. China is not geared up for wheelchair users, though parts of Beijing and Shanghai are improving. Discuss your individual needs with a tour operator.

**Safety** See [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk) for the latest advice on travelling in China.

**Health** For specific advice on recommended vaccinations, see your GP, visit a travel clinic or check The National Travellers' Health Network and Centre ([www.nathnac.org](http://www.nathnac.org)). Always drink bottled water and avoid salads and ice. We were recommended to take malaria tablets only for parts of the Yunnan province in south-west China.

## Money matters

■ The currency is the Renminbi, also known as the Yuan (¥) and is available for purchase in the UK before you leave. The exchange rate we have used in this factfile is £1 = ¥13.8.

■ ATMs are widely available in hotels and Bank of China branches. Mastercard and Visa are readily accepted in most hotels, shopping centres and upscale restaurants. We recommend taking a mixture of credit cards and cash.

■ Daily costs: dinner for two (smart restaurant) £14, budget meal for two £2, bottled water 15p, a day's bicycle hire in Yangshuo £1 (£7 with a guide), bike hire on Xi'an's city walls £1.50.

## Tourist information

China National Tourism Office

Tel 020 7935 9787

■ [www.cnta.gov.cn](http://www.cnta.gov.cn)

## CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

■ As part of our private tour we had a different guide in each area we visited. We found there were some topics which many were reluctant to discuss (human rights) and others which they were all happy to discuss (the one child policy, the benefits of the Olympic Games).

■ Don't be surprised if you see staff such as hotel receptionists with numbers on their lapels, instead of name badges.

## GUIDEBOOKS

- **Collins China Map**, £5.99 (ISBN 0-00-716416-5)
- **Rough Guide to China**, £17.99 (ISBN 1-84353-479-7)
- **Blue Guide to China**, £19.99 (ISBN 0-7136-4247-5)

