China

Pre Tour Information

Whispers of Ancient Dynasties...

Those who think they've seen it all have not been to China. More a continent in its own right than a country, China's diversity, not only in terms of geography but also culture, defines this vast nation. From glacial mountain passes to tranquil water villages and a multi-coloured patchwork of cultures in between, while China has seen dramatic development in recent decades, it continues to balance rapid modernisation with deep-rooted traditions and complex regional realities. Across its rich culture, heritage, and breathtaking landscapes, opportunities for exploration abound.

The central plains of China, with their historic sites such as the Terracotta Army and the Great Wall, form the centrepiece of the country. Branching out into the perimeters and awaiting the more adventurous travellers are the snow-capped peaks and unique minority cultures of the southwest. In China's deep south, why not make the most of some of the most scenic hiking and biking routes in Asia through the stunning Guilin mountains scenery that the term 'picture postcard' does not even begin to do justice to?

In China, you will find locals who genuinely enjoy meeting visitors from around the world. Whether you come to China for the thrill of mountain biking through paddy fields or to immerse yourself in traditional tea culture, the one constant is that the opportunities for genuine interaction with the Chinese people will leave a lasting positive impression. For those looking for a destination that will quench their thirst for thrills, China is the answer.

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Managing Expectations

Travelling to China is exciting, but it comes with a few surprises. The internet is restricted, paperwork is everywhere, and even simple tasks can work a little differently than expected. From firm hotel beds to unexpected GPS glitches, unfiltered local feedback, and a national love for karaoke, there are a few quirks to be aware of before you arrive. Here's what you need to know to be prepared – and to make the most of your trip!

The Great Firewall – Imagine landing in China, pulling out your phone to check Google Maps, and… nothing. No search results, no WhatsApp messages, no Instagram updates. Welcome to the Great Firewall! The internet in China is tightly controlled, meaning many sites and apps you rely on are blocked. Locals use their own versions – WeChat instead of WhatsApp, Baidu instead of Google – but if you want access to your usual digital comforts, you'll need a VPN–just make sure it's installed before you arrive, as most VPN websites are blocked in China. Be aware that VPN use is technically restricted, though commonly used by many travellers. Otherwise, prepare for a forced digital detox!

Bureaucracy and Paperwork – Checking into a hotel? Buying a train ticket? Visiting certain regions? Get ready for a mini admin marathon. China loves paperwork, and even the simplest task can require multiple forms, passport scans, and identity checks. Just go with it – smile, hand over your passport (again), and embrace the process, if nothing else, consider this a crash course in Zen.

Sleep Like a Warrior – Lying on a hotel bed in China might feel like landing on a wooden bench. No, it's not a mistake – firm mattresses are the norm. Many believe sleeping on a hard surface is better for posture and health. If you're not used to it, a folded blanket can work as a makeshift mattress topper, or you can always ask for a bit of extra cushioning or just embrace it – your back might thank you (eventually).

No Google Maps Accuracy – Due to government-imposed coordinate offsets, foreign mapping apps like Google Maps often display locations inaccurately, sometimes off by several hundred metres. Local apps like Gaode (Amap) or Baidu Maps are more reliable, but mainly in Chinese. Your hotel might appear in the middle of a river, or your restaurant could be "relocated" to a nearby park. Local mapping apps like Amap (Gaode) or Baidu Maps work better, but they're mostly in Chinese. If you're relying on Google, be ready for some creative detours – or just ask a local for directions and enjoy the adventure!

Queuing is Optional – In crowded places like metro stations or train ticket counters, forming an orderly line is more of a suggestion than a rule. If you politely wait your turn, you might be waiting forever. The key is to move with purpose – elbows out if necessary. It's not rude, it's just how things work. In busy places like metro stations, queuing can be a bit chaotic. While it's improving in cities, don't be surprised if people move ahead assertively–it's not considered rude, just part of the rhythm.

Squat Toilets and BYO Toilet Paper – Public toilets in China often mean squat toilets, and toilet paper isn't always provided. Always carry tissues and hand sanitiser.

Weird Food (for You, Not Them) – Chicken feet, duck blood, and whole turtles aren't unusual menu items. Meat dishes often come with bones still in, so chew carefully. What seems strange to you is comfort food to someone else.

Unfiltered Feedback – If a stranger comments on your weight, height, or skin tone, don't take it personally – it's just conversation. In China, direct observations about appearance aren't considered rude. If you have unique features, expect stares, whispers, and possibly requests for a photo (sometimes without asking). If you feel like a celebrity, embrace it!

Warm or No Drinks – The default in China is hot tea or warm water, even in the peak of summer. Many believe cold drinks are bad for digestion, so tea or warm water is often preferred, especially in homes or local restaurants. Bottled soft drinks may still be served at room temperature unless specifically chilled, so ask if you want it cold. If you need ice, specify – but don't expect much!

The Love of KTV – Karaoke (KTV) is more than a fun night out – it's a national obsession. Private rooms, disco lights, and endless song choices mean there's no escape once you're in. Even if you swear you can't sing, expect to take the mic at some point. Just pick a song and go for it – enthusiasm is more important than talent!

Every Day is an Adventure – From futuristic cities to ancient villages, misty mountains to neon-lit megamalls, China is a country of extremes. You can hike the Great Wall, slurp hand-pulled noodles in a back alley, watch pandas nap, or sing your heart out at KTV – all in a single trip. It's a place where history and modernity collide in the most unexpected ways. Keep an open mind, embrace the chaos, and you'll have an unforgettable adventure!

General Travel Information

Local Emergency

- Fire and rescue services: Call 119
- Medical emergencies: Call 120 or go directly to the hospital.
- Police: Call 110 or go to your local police station.

Note: Emergency operators may not speak English. If possible, have a local assist you when calling.

Consular & Embassy Assistance

We strongly advise all travellers to take a proactive approach to their safety and well-being by familiarising themselves with the contact details and address of their local embassy within their destination before embarking on their journey. Knowing how to reach your embassy can provide invaluable support in case of emergencies, unexpected situations, or the need for consular assistance. This essential information ensures that you're well-prepared and equipped to navigate any challenges that might arise during your travels. Your embassy is your lifeline in a foreign land, offering guidance, assistance, and a sense of security while you explore new horizons.

Staying in Touch

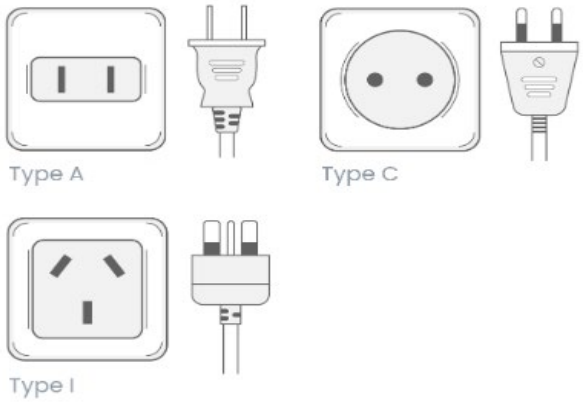
Before departing your home country, check with your phone supplier to see if it is compatible with the mobile phone networks in the countries that you are travelling to, and how much it will cost to use it abroad. In some of the more rural reaches of China, cell phone coverage is not possible.

Mobile Phones: Major local providers include China Mobile, China Unicom, and China Telecom, offering physical SIM cards and increasingly, eSIM options for travellers at airports and major cities. Ensure your phone is unlocked and supports the GSM network and eSIM capability if applicable. Local SIMs and eSIMs offer affordable data plans, but international roaming can be costly. Download WeChat, as it's widely used for messaging, payments, and communication. Note that Google services, WhatsApp, and some other apps may be restricted, so consider downloading a VPN before arriving. 4G coverage is extensive, but rural areas may have limited signal strength.

Note: WhatsApp is banned in China. For staying in contact with your guide and local support we recommend downloading the app WeChat.

Wi-Fi: Wi-Fi is widely available in China, particularly in hotels, restaurants, cafes, airports, and major tourist spots. Most public Wi-Fi networks require registration with a Chinese phone number for access. In hotels, Wi-Fi is typically free, but speeds can vary. In larger cities like Beijing and Shanghai, Wi-Fi speeds are generally reliable, while rural areas may experience slower connections. Be aware that many popular websites and apps, including Google, Facebook, and Instagram, are blocked due to government regulations. A VPN, downloaded before entering China, can help access these restricted services while using Wi-Fi networks.

Electrical Voltage & Plug Adaptors



All power sockets in China provide a standard voltage of 220V with a frequency of 50Hz. You can use your equipment safely if it supports 220V–240V.

China uses power outlets and plugs of types A, C, and I. Type I is the most common in hotels, while types A and C may appear in older buildings. Check your accommodation's sockets before you travel.

If you don't have a multi-voltage adaptor, most hotels can lend or sell one, and universal adaptors are widely available at airports and electronics stores. A universal adaptor with a built-in voltage converter is your best bet for different socket types across regions.

Responsible Tourism

We believe strongly in low-impact or rather positive-impact tourism. Broadly speaking, this means that we aim to minimise the negative aspects of tourism on the local cultures and environments that we visit and highlight the positive aspects. Please visit our website for further details and suggestions on how you can be a responsible traveller. https://www.crooked-compass.com/responsible-tourism/

Facts & Figures

Language

The official language of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is Putonghua, meaning 'common speech,' which is known in English as Mandarin Chinese. While English is spoken in larger cities, especially in tourist areas, many locals may have limited proficiency. Taking the time to learn a few basic phrases in Mandarin before your trip can greatly enhance your experience and interactions. Your efforts will be appreciated and can lead to more enjoyable and meaningful connections during your travels.

Time Zone

China adopts Beijing Time (GMT+8) as its standard time across the entire country. It does not observe daylight saving time, remaining consistent throughout the year. This means China is 13 hours ahead of New York, 12 hours ahead of Toronto, and 2 hours behind Melbourne.

National Holidays

China has several national holidays that can significantly impact travellers due to increased domestic travel and potential service disruptions. The major holidays include **Chinese New Year** (late January to mid-February), **Qingming Festival** (early April), **Labour Day** (May 1), **Dragon Boat Festival** (June), and **Mid-Autumn Festival** (September).

During Chinese New Year, cities are often bustling, with many businesses and attractions closed for a week as families gather for celebrations. Train and flight tickets can be sold out well in advance, so plan accordingly.
Labour Day, typically a three-day holiday in early May, also sees a surge in domestic tourism, with popular destinations crowded.

Useful Phrases

Hello: 你好 (nǐ hǎo)

Thank you: 谢谢 (xièxiè)

Yes: 是 (shì)

No: 不是 (bù shì)

Please: 请 (qǐng)

Excuse me / Sorry: 对不起 (duìbuqǐ)

How are you?: 你好吗？(nǐ hǎo ma?)

I don't understand: 我不懂 (wǒ bù dǒng)

Where is...?: ...在哪里？(... zài nǎlǐ?)

How much is this?: 这个多少钱？(zhège duōshǎo qián?)

Remember that while these phrases can be helpful, the local language and culture may vary across different regions of China. It's always a good idea to be respectful and open to learning more about the local customs and expressions.

Health & Safety

Medical Supplies

This is one adventure where you don't want to forget your medications; it may be hard to get them in the remote reaches of China.

- Pack medications in your carry-on bag to avoid loss and to have them handy. Ensure any liquids or gels are less than 100ml.
- Keep medicines in their original, labelled containers for a quicker security screen at the airport and a better experience if you get stopped by customs while overseas.
- Bring copies of your prescriptions, written using the generic drug name rather than a brand name, to be prepared for any unforeseen loss of your medications.
- Carry a letter from your doctor explaining the medications you are using and that they are for personal use.
- Consider bringing a filled prescription antibiotic for gastrointestinal illness, electrolytes, and motion sickness medicine if you are susceptible.

Crooked Compass highly recommends that you travel with your first aid kit.

Please refer to a travel vaccination specialist for the most up-to-date advice about vaccinations for your destination(s). We encourage you to check with your healthcare provider and take their advice based on your current state of health.

Please follow the link to check the TravelVax website:
👉 TravelVax (https://www.travelvax.com.au/)

Medical Care

International-standard medical services are expensive and often limited to major cities like Beijing or Shanghai. Outside these hubs, healthcare can be basic, with limited medication availability and language barriers. Rural clinics may lack trained staff and essential supplies, and hygiene standards can vary significantly. Hospitals and doctors may ask for an up-front cash payment before treating you. This includes emergency care and medical evacuation from China can be very expensive.

Water Safety

Tap water in China is generally unsafe to drink due to contamination and outdated infrastructure. Even if boiled, it may still carry trace heavy metals or pollutants. Stick to bottled or filtered water from reputable sources and avoid using tap water for brushing teeth. Avoid ice in drinks unless you can confirm it has been made with purified water. Many hotels and guesthouses provide kettles in rooms for boiling water – a standard practice across the country.

Food Safety

Street food is a vibrant and delicious part of the Chinese experience, but caution is needed. Choose busy stalls where food turnover is high, and make sure your meal is freshly cooked and piping hot. In rural areas, food hygiene can be inconsistent – stick to well-cooked dishes and avoid raw salads or anything washed in tap water. When eating seafood, opt for reputable restaurants, especially along coastal areas.

Dietary Considerations

Special dietary requests are required to be notified to us at the time of booking. Although we will use reasonable endeavours to accommodate requests, we cannot guarantee requests will be met by suppliers. It is your responsibility to check that meals and beverages do not contain any allergens.

Managing special diets in China can be challenging, particularly outside major cities.

Gluten-free travellers must be cautious: soy sauce (which contains wheat) is used extensively, and gluten-free options are rare. Carrying a dietary card in Chinese explaining your needs is very helpful.

Vegetarians and **vegans** will find some traditional dishes like stir-fried vegetables and tofu, but meat-based broths, hidden seafood (like oyster sauce), and cross-contamination are common. Buddhist restaurants ("素食" – sùshí) offer more reliable meat-free meals.

Dairy-free travellers will find it relatively easy, as dairy is not a staple in most Chinese cuisine. However, watch out for milk powder or sweetened condensed milk in desserts and drinks. Supermarkets in large cities stock international products and allergy-friendly snacks. With group meals or in smaller towns, it's best to explain your dietary needs clearly and repeatedly or have a local guide assist you. Regional cuisines vary widely – for instance, Yunnan Province offers a broader range of vegetarian dishes compared to more meat-heavy regions like Inner Mongolia.

Altitude Sickness

If on your travels, you ascend altitudes higher than 2000m, you may feel some effects of altitude. Even if you've been to high elevations previously, you could have a different reaction each time. For most people, the symptoms are mild and will pass in a day or so.

You should take it easy, avoid smoking and alcohol, and drink plenty of fluids. Some people take altitude sickness medication, starting when they arrive or one day before. Don't take sleeping medications, as they suppress respiration. The most common symptoms are lightheadedness, shortness of breath, headache, nausea, sleeplessness, and loss of appetite. If these are bothersome, you should start taking medication. Even though you may experience a decreased appetite, force yourself to eat soups and some basic foods.

If these 'normal' altitude symptoms become unmanageable, you must inform your Trip Leader. Please let the leader know if you experience any of the following: serious difficulty breathing, mental confusion, a severe and unremitting headache, continued difficulty breathing after a period of rest, or poor physical coordination.

TIP: Even if your risk is medium to low, it may be worthwhile to bring a medication with you so that you have it on hand for immediate use if needed. No one wants to buy medication they don't need, but on the other hand, no one wants to interrupt their trip for a doctor's visit.

Altitude in China

You may encounter high-altitude conditions in several parts of western China, especially if your journey includes Tibet, Qinghai, or parts of Yunnan and Sichuan. Lhasa sits at 3,650 metres and is often the first stop for travellers exploring the Tibetan Plateau. In Yunnan, the town of Shangri-La sits at 3,200 metres, with nearby alpine routes reaching even higher. In Sichuan, popular locations such as Daocheng and Litang climb above 3,700 metres. Qinghai's capital, Xining, is at 2,275 metres, with surrounding areas rising over 4,000 metres.

Safety & Security

Reasonable Precautions

- Travellers are advised to exercise good sense, take some reasonable precautions, and avoid irresponsible behaviour like carrying too much cash and displaying valuables like cameras, phones, and expensive jewellery
- Always exercise caution
- Do not take unnecessary valuables with you
- A money belt or something similar, worn close to your body, is the best way to carry passports, airline tickets, and money
- DO NOT leave any valuables in ANY hotel room, please use SAFETY DEPOSIT BOXES - items are left at the individual's risk
- Pickpockets operate everywhere, particularly in tourist areas and crowded markets. You must always exercise care
- Be aware that anything left unsupervised may be liable to theft

Travel Advisories

Please use the link below to check the Smart Traveller website and register your travel:

👉 Smart Traveller (https://www.smartraveller.gov.au)

LGBTQIA+

All travellers face risks overseas. Risks can be higher for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTQIA+) people in some destinations. It's your responsibility to get the facts first and take steps to reduce your risks.

👉 Advice for LGBTQIA+ travellers (https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/before-you-go/who-you-are/LGBTQIA)

Drug & Alcohol Policy

Under no circumstances are any illegal drugs allowed on any part of the trip. Anyone discovered in possession of any such drugs will be asked to leave the tour immediately without question or refund. Remote communities and some cultures are deemed as 'dry', meaning that no alcoholic drinks may be purchased or consumed. Please be respectful of this.

Entry Requirements

Crooked Compass does not provide visa or health advice. The information in this section is for general guidance only.

Please ensure you check and comply with visa requirements for the country you are visiting. For the most accurate and up-to-date information, contact your nearest embassy or consulate. If you need assistance, we recommend using a specialist visa agency such as CIBT Visas.

Visas

If applicable, you must obtain the appropriate visas before embarking on your trip. Country entry regulations can change daily; your travel agent can provide you with visa information. Please consult your relevant embassy for all details, such as opening hours or costs. Certain visas cannot be obtained on arrival, and during the peak months, it may take longer than normal to get them. Please allow extra time to do this. Crooked Compass encourages the use of a visa specialist service such as CIBT Visas to ensure you have the correct and up-to-date information surrounding visa requirements for your destination(s). Visa and other entry and exit conditions (such as currency, customs, and quarantine regulations) can change at short notice.

EACH CLIENT IS SOLELY RESPONSIBLE FOR OBTAINING ALL NECESSARY VISAS BEFORE JOINING A TOUR. Crooked Compass does not accept responsibility for changes in regulations or requirements for visas. The information provided is given in good faith.

Insurance

Travel insurance is compulsory for all Crooked Compass itineraries. You must be covered for personal accident, medical expenses, cancellation, curtailment, repatriation, and more. In remote areas, your policy must include helicopter evacuation in case of emergency. Be aware that many adventure activities – such as trekking, white-water rafting, or bungee jumping – are often excluded from standard insurance policies. If you plan to join such activities, please check your coverage or purchase additional protection. We also recommend keeping a photocopy of your insurance documents separate from the original while travelling.

Global Rescue

Have you considered evacuation coverage? Crooked Compass partners with Global Rescue, a world leader in medical and security evacuation and advisory services. Unlike most standard travel insurance, Global Rescue offers field rescue from the point of injury or illness, anywhere in the world.

👉 Global Rescue

Passports

- Must be in good condition
- Must be valid for at least 6 months after your scheduled return
- Must have 4 blank pages
- By law, you must carry your passport at all times when travelling in China

We recommend you carry colour photocopies of key documents, including the photo page of your passport, plus any applicable visas, air itinerary, credit cards, and an alternative form of ID. Add emergency phone numbers like your credit card company and the number for your travel insurance plan. Store copies separate from the originals.

Money Matters

The official currency of mainland China is the **Renminbi** (RMB), abbreviated as **CNY**, though it's commonly referred to as the **yuan**, especially outside of China. The term **renminbi** translates to "people's currency" and was first issued in 1948 when the People's Bank of China was established. The yuan is the basic unit of renminbi, similar to how pounds are the unit of sterling in the UK. The most commonly used banknotes are ¥1, ¥5, ¥10, ¥20, ¥50, and ¥100, with smaller denominations of jiao. Locally, the yuan is also known as **kuai**, a colloquial term akin to "buck" in Australia.

Currency: Renminbi
Currency Code: CNY (CNH, RMB)
Central Bank: People's Bank of China
Currency Symbol: ¥ (Yuan)
Sub Unit: 角 (Jiao)
Nicknames: Kuài, Mao
Banknotes: ¥1, ¥5, ¥10, ¥20, ¥50, ¥100
Coins: 1角, 5角, ¥1

While the yuan is widely accepted in mainland China, it's not the official currency in Hong Kong or Macau, though exchanges are common, and the yuan might be accepted in some locations. Additionally, in certain regions of China, like Tibet and Inner Mongolia, local words such as *gor* (Tibetan) or *tugreg* (Mongolian) may be used to refer to money, but the official currency remains the yuan (CNY). These are regional terms for currency, not separate units.

Be aware that some countries are more expensive than others and that if you are travelling through several, your expenses will vary enormously. Similarly, there will be some days when you spend nothing at all and others when you exceed your budget.

It is often a good idea to have a small amount of the currency of the country you are visiting before arrival. This will cover you for any initial expenses at or from the airport.

Cash

Cash is still widely used, although digital payments are increasingly popular. Although digital payments such as WeChatPay and Alipay are becoming more common, cash is still accepted. Consider having cash on hand for markets, street vendors, and rural areas where card payments are uncommon. Always check the notes for authenticity, as counterfeit money can circulate. It's advisable to have smaller denominations for ease of transactions, as many vendors may not have change for larger bills.

Alipay

In China, mobile payments are widely used, with apps like Alipay allowing you to scan QR codes to pay for goods and services. You can use mobile payments at retailers, vending machines, and even to transfer money to other people. Many small shops at tourist sites are unattended, allowing you to select items and pay using Alipay without needing assistance. In some places, mobile payments have replaced cash entirely, making transactions more seamless and efficient.

ATMs

ATMs are widely available in cities, providing convenient access to cash withdrawals. Most ATMs accept international cards like Visa and MasterCard, but it's essential to check for a plus sign (+) or a compatible logo on the machine. Be aware that some ATMs may have withdrawal limits, and fees may apply. Not all ATMs offer English language options, so proceed with caution if you're unfamiliar with the process.

Fun Fact: The Chinese yuan (CNY) features unique designs, including images of famous figures like Chairman Mao. Interestingly, the banknotes are printed with a special security feature: a watermark of Mao that becomes visible when held up to the light.

Banks

Banks are generally open from Monday to Friday, with some branches open on Saturday mornings. Major banks include the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, China Construction Bank, and Bank of China, which offer services such as currency exchange and cash withdrawals. It's wise to carry your passport for identification when using banking services and be aware that international money transfers can take several days to process.

Credit cards

Credit cards like Visa and MasterCard are accepted primarily in major cities, upscale hotels, and larger restaurants. However, smaller businesses, street vendors, and rural areas often prefer cash or mobile payments. Be cautious of potential foreign transaction fees from your bank when using your card abroad.

Notify Card Providers

Many credit card companies and banks have fraud alert departments that will freeze your card if they see suspicious charges, such as charges or withdrawals from another country. To avoid an accidental security block, it is a good idea to notify your credit card company and/or bank that you will be using your cards abroad.

Tipping Culture

Tipping is not a common practice and is generally not expected with a couple of exceptions. Service charges are often included in bills at restaurants, particularly in major cities. In some tourist areas, a small tip for exceptional service may be appreciated, but it is not obligatory. When using taxis, rounding up the fare is a courteous gesture, though not required. If you choose to tip, keep it modest, as excessive tipping may be viewed as inappropriate or unnecessary in local culture. In high-end hotels and restaurants, tipping is becoming more common.

High-end restaurant: 10% of the bill
High-end hotel porter: a few dollars
High-end hotel housekeeper: a few dollars per day

A note about tipping your guide and driver: We realise that tipping is a sensitive subject for all travellers. Although guide and driver tips are widely accepted, we would like to stress that this is at your discretion. While everyone is recommended to tip based on services rendered, our clients often ask us to provide some basic guidelines. Our suggestion is **USD6-8** per day for your tour guide and **USD3-4** per day for your driver (payable in local currency). Generally, the driver may sometimes receive a tip of 30-60% of what the main guide receives. In places where roads are rough and dangerous, the driver may sometimes receive an equal amount of tipping as the main guide.

Everyday Expenses

Costs can vary by location and type of establishment, so use this as a general guideline. When budgeting, consider that prices in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai may be higher than in smaller towns. Always check for any service charges included in restaurant bills and carry small denominations for street food and local markets.

Item	Approximate Cost (RMB)
Bottle of water	¥2 - ¥4
Coffee at a café	¥20 - ¥50
Local beer	¥4 - ¥15
Imported beer	¥15 - ¥30
Massage (1 hour)	¥100 - ¥300
Souvenir (small item)	¥20 - ¥200
Movie ticket	¥30 - ¥80
Street food meal	¥5 - ¥15
Meal at a mid-range restaurant	¥50 - ¥150

Money Requested on Tour

Whilst every precaution is taken to ensure all services as per your itinerary are pre-paid before your arrival, in areas where tourism is still being developed, you may, on occasion, be asked for additional funds for incidentals such as fuel and water. Under no circumstances are you to part with cash to any crew or local person claiming to work for Crooked Compass. Should you be requested to provide such funds, please contact the emergency contact number immediately for support. Crooked Compass is unable to take responsibility without prior authorisation from head office for monies handed over to the crew or local persons.

Getting There

Airports

China's main airports serve as vital international and domestic gateways, facilitating travel across the vast country. The busiest include Beijing Capital International Airport (PEK), known for its extensive global connections, and Shanghai Pudong International Airport (PVG), which offers a wide range of international flights. Other key airports include Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport (CAN), Chengdu Shuangliu International Airport (CTU), and Hong Kong International Airport (HKG), which, while not in mainland China, is a major access point. Expect long queues and security checks, so allow ample time for your travels.

Shanghai Airport

At Shanghai airport, the metro connects the terminals, and you'll need to allow at least 1.5 hours to clear customs. The process includes a temperature scan, fingerprinting at a booth to get a printed ticket, and another scan at passport control. It takes about 1 hour to travel from the airport to the city.

Arriving at China:

You will be met on arrival at your entry destination point by our representative. Staff are not allowed in the baggage collection area at the airport, but they will be waiting for you outside the terminal. Once you collect your luggage, our representative will be standing outside the arrivals terminal doorway exit holding a sign with your name on it for easy recognition.

Departure Tax

Departure taxes for China should be included in your international flight ticket.

Border Crossings

The most significant land border crossings include the ones at Hong Kong, which has its visa policy; the Friendship Pass at the China-North Korea border; and the port of entry at Kazakhstan, which is a common route for those travelling via the Silk Road. Additionally, popular rail crossings, such as those from Mongolia, connect via the Trans-Mongolian Railway, offering a scenic route into Beijing.

Internal Flights

When flying domestically in China, you'll primarily use major carriers like China Southern Airlines, China Eastern Airlines, Air China, and Hainan Airlines. Internal flights are generally efficient, but delays are common, especially during peak travel seasons like holidays. It's essential to arrive at the airport at least two hours before your flight, as security checks can be lengthy. Many airports, particularly in larger cities, have limited English signage, so downloading a translation app can be helpful. Baggage allowances typically range from 20 to 30 kg for checked luggage, depending on whether you are travelling economy or business. It's advisable to confirm with your airline.

Standard commercial airline baggage restrictions apply for all internal flights within China. Usually, this is 20kg for economy passengers, which will include checked luggage as well as one piece of carry-on luggage. Excess luggage can be stored in your hotel. Passports are required for travel on domestic flights, and you should arrive at the airport two hours before your scheduled departure time.

Many of our tours run without changes but please be advised that due to weather and other unforeseen circumstances domestic internal flights may not always run to schedule or on time. Your trip leader will keep you informed of any schedule changes as they happen.

Important Notice: Power Bank Restrictions
The Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) has introduced strict regulations concerning power banks on domestic flights. Only power banks that display a valid “3C” (also known as CCC) certification mark are allowed on board. Devices without this certification cannot be carried in hand luggage, checked baggage, or even sent via courier services. Any uncertified power banks found during security screening will be confiscated.

Fun Fact: China’s airports are among the busiest in the world. While Beijing Capital International Airport (PEK) once held the top spot, it’s now surpassed by newer hubs like Guangzhou and Beijing Daxing. Still, PEK handles tens of millions of passengers annually–that’s more than the entire population of many countries!

Getting around by Train

At large city train stations in China, security screenings are similar to airport procedures, with long queues, though passengers are often directed to the front of the line for quicker processing. Aerosols over 120ml are not permitted on trains, and items like nail polish or hair dye are restricted to 20ml, with a maximum of two boxes of matches or lighters. Trains typically stop for only 3 minutes at stations.

High-speed trains have one Western-style and one squat toilet, and some offer a dining carriage or kiosk. These trains can reach speeds up to 350 km/h but are often slower in practice. It’s possible to book a ticket without a reserved seat. Luggage porters, identified by red caps, can assist by taking your luggage from your vehicle, loading it onto the train, and meeting you at the destination to transfer it to your vehicle, though this service is not available at all stations.

For luggage storage, high-speed trains offer overhead shelves, limited space behind the back row of seats, and small racks that typically hold 6-8 items.

Climate

China's vast size and varied geography mean you'll experience a remarkable range of climates across the country. In the far north, places like Harbin experience bitterly cold, dry winters where temperatures can plunge well below freezing. Meanwhile, the tropical island of Hainan in the south basks in hot, humid conditions year-round.

Western China, particularly regions like Xinjiang and the Tibetan Plateau, features arid deserts, towering mountains, and high-altitude conditions, bringing thin air and dramatic temperature shifts between day and night. Along the east coast, including cities like Shanghai and Beijing, expect a humid, temperate climate with hot, sticky summers and chilly, brisk winters.

Rainfall patterns vary sharply: southern China sees heavy monsoon rains from May to September, often leading to flooding, while the interior deserts can go months without significant precipitation. Typhoons can occasionally affect the southeast coastline from July through September, impacting travel plans.

If you are travelling across multiple regions, you'll need to prepare for everything from sweaty, humid heat to dry desert winds and icy mountain air – often within a single journey.

Month	Avg High °C	Avg Low °C	Record High °C	Record Low °C	Rainfall (mm)	Rainy Days (days)
January	2	-8	14.3	-22.8	0.1	0
February	5	-5	25.6	-27.4	1.7	0.2
March	12	2	29.5	-15	5.2	1.1
April	20	9	33.5	-3.2	17.1	2.6
May	27	15	41.1	2.5	32.7	4.3
June	30	20	41.1	9.8	73.5	8.1
July	31	23	41.9	15.3	133	11.6
August	30	21	39.3	11.4	105	9.9
September	26	15	35.2	3.7	46.1	5.7
October	19	8	31	-3.5	17.9	2.8
November	10	0	23.3	-12.3	6.1	0.8
December	3	-6	19.5	-18.3	0.3	0

(Beijing – Monthly Climate Averages)

Seasonality

China experiences four distinct seasons: a cold winter, a warm spring, a hot and humid summer, and a cool autumn, with variations in climate and weather patterns depending on the region.

Summer (June to August) brings hot and humid conditions across much of the country. In the south, cities like Guangzhou and Shanghai see temperatures ranging from 25°C to 35°C, along with frequent rain and high humidity. Coastal areas, such as Hong Kong, are prone to typhoons, especially in late summer. Northern cities like Beijing and Xi'an experience drier heat, with temperatures between 25°C and 40°C. If you prefer less intense conditions, consider visiting western regions like Tibet or Xinjiang, where the weather is generally dry and warm. Always bring a lightweight, waterproof jacket and/or an umbrella even during the height of summer – this should prepare you for anything!

Autumn (September to November) is generally mild and pleasant, making it an ideal time to visit. In northern cities like Beijing and Xi'an, temperatures range from 10°C to 25°C, with dry, crisp weather and clear skies. Southern regions, such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, are cooler and less humid, with temperatures from 15°C to 25°C. While typhoon season may extend into early September along the coast, conditions improve as autumn progresses. If you prefer cooler climates, autumn is a great time to explore scenic areas like the Great Wall or Zhangjiajie.

Winter (December to February) brings diverse conditions. In the north, cities like Beijing and Harbin experience freezing temperatures from -20°C to 5°C, with heavy snowfall, perfect for winter activities like skiing or the Harbin Ice Festival. Central areas, such as Xi'an, are cooler, with temperatures ranging from -5°C to 10°C. In contrast, southern regions like Guangzhou and Hong Kong are much milder, with temperatures between 10°C and 20°C. Western regions like Tibet and Xinjiang face extreme cold, with temperatures often dropping below -20°C. In remote northern parts of Xinjiang, lows can occasionally approach -40°C, though this is less common in major travel hubs. If you prefer milder conditions, consider southern or central destinations at this time of year.

Spring (March to May) offers mild, comfortable weather across most regions. In northern cities like Beijing and Xi'an, temperatures range from 10°C to 25°C, with blooming flowers and fewer crowds, making it an ideal time to visit. Southern areas like Guangzhou and Shanghai are warmer, with temperatures between 15°C and 28°C, though rain becomes more frequent toward late spring. Dust storms may occur in northern regions, particularly in March. If you prefer drier conditions, visit in April or explore western areas like Xinjiang, which stay relatively dry and cool throughout the season.

Fun Fact: China spans climates from tundra to tropical beaches! In the same January week, Harbin freezes at -30°C while Sanya, on Hainan Island, bathes in 27°C sunshine. Pack your swimsuit and snow boots – it's all possible!

Travel and Terrain

Travelling across China means navigating an immense range of landscapes – from the sprawling Gobi Desert's dusty plains to the lush karst mountains of Guilin, and from the soaring Himalayas to the bustling megacities along the eastern seaboard. With terrains shifting dramatically between regions, travellers must be ready for everything from smooth expressways to rough mountain trails. While China boasts world-class transport links in major areas, reaching remote or rugged destinations often demands a more adventurous spirit – and sometimes, a sturdier vehicle.

General Road Conditions
Road quality in China varies dramatically depending on the region. In major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, the roads are wide, modern, and well-maintained, with heavy traffic a constant feature. Expressways connect most key urban hubs, and toll roads are common.

However, once you venture into western provinces like Xinjiang or Qinghai, road conditions can quickly deteriorate. Expect potholed surfaces, gravel roads, and occasional washouts, particularly after rain or snowmelt. Rural mountain areas, including sections of Sichuan and Yunnan, may have narrow, twisting roads prone to landslides in the wet season.

One of the spectacular experiences while driving through China includes watching the stark shift from neon-lit highways to winding mountain passes, desert crossings, or ancient cobblestone village streets – sometimes all in a single day.

Main Travel Routes
China's main travel corridors are built around an impressive network of expressways (G-series highways) and high-speed rail lines.

- The Beijing–Shanghai Expressway is a key north–south artery linking the capital to the economic powerhouse of Shanghai.
- The Lanzhou–Ürümqi Expressway spans deserts and mountain ranges, providing critical access across western China.
- The high-speed train routes, like the Beijing–Xi'an and Shanghai–Kunming lines, offer fast, reliable travel, reducing journeys that once took days into mere hours.

Road journeys often reveal dramatic scenery – from rice terraces in Guangxi to the sandy dunes of Inner Mongolia – offering a real sense of China's geographical diversity.

Challenging Terrain or Remote Areas
Certain areas in China pose significant challenges to travellers:

- The Tibetan Plateau: Travel here means tackling high altitudes (often above 4,000 metres), rough unpaved roads, and extreme weather shifts. 4WD vehicles are necessary for remote villages and monasteries.
- The Taklamakan Desert: In Xinjiang, sandstorms can sweep across highways, and fuel stations are sparse across long distances.
- The Karakoram Highway: This legendary route to Pakistan crosses dizzying mountain passes. The Khunjerab Pass section is officially closed to all vehicles from 30 November to 1 May, though secondary stoppages from snow or landslides commonly occur. Landslides during the wet season frequently strain the route.

- Yunnan's mountain roads: Particularly in the rainy season (May–September), roads can become slick, muddy, and sometimes impassable without local knowledge and appropriate vehicles.

Please note that while we have given guidelines in our itinerary, getting from one place to another can take longer than expected. A short drive on the map might turn into a slow crawl due to congestion, road conditions, road closures, or random delays. Roads that were operating at the time of printing your documentation may no longer be accessible at the time of travel, and a one-hour journey may turn into a four-hour expedition. Travel times vary not just because of distance but also because of road conditions and traffic behaviour.

Suggested Packing Items

As you will experience a wide range of temperatures and weather conditions, we suggest several layers of clothing. If you like to hand-wash your clothes, look for fabrics that will dry out overnight. You can buy clothing designed especially for travel, with features like wrinkle-resistant fabric or built-in sun protection. Merino clothing is wonderful for layering, keeping you warm and cool, as well as being incredibly multi-purpose. Merino clothing does not sweat or retain odour. Dress on this trip is functional and casual, consisting of basic pants or everyday skirts, shirts, and sportswear. Your dress should be somewhat conservative, to be respectful of the local, traditional culture. A hat is recommended.

Travel Documents & Money:

☐ Passport (with photocopies)
☐ Travel insurance (with photocopies)
☐ Airline tickets (e-ticket number)
☐ Cash in AUD & your local currency (small denominations for tipping)
☐ Credit Card & ATM Card (See Money Matters section)
☐ Money belt or secure travel pouch
☐ WeChat Pay or Alipay Account (linked to an international card): Mobile payments are extremely common across China – far more accepted than cash or cards in many places, even for small purchases.

Luggage & Bags:

☐ 1 soft-sided bag (medium size approx. 80–100 litres) – for group tours
☐ Daypack (10–20 litres) – for daily essentials like water, camera, and snacks
☐ Lightweight reusable shopping bag (for markets or day use)

Clothing & Footwear:

☐ Shirts: A mix of short and long-sleeved breathable fabric (cotton/linen)
☐ Pants: Loose-fitting, lightweight trousers (avoid tight jeans for comfort)
☐ Comfortable walking or hiking shoes (sturdy for uneven terrain)
☐ Socks (moisture-wicking recommended)
☐ Wide-brim sun hat or visor
☐ Lightweight scarf or shawl (for religious sites, sun, or dust protection)
☐ Light rain jacket or windbreaker with hood (for unexpected cool weather)
☐ Light cotton or wool sweater (for cooler evenings)
☐ Fleece jacket or heavy sweater
☐ Swimsuit & cover-up
☐ Comfortable sandals or flip-flops (for beach and casual wear – not for sightseeing)
☐ Sunglasses

Health & Personal Care:

☐ Prescription medications (enough for the trip)
☐ Sunscreen & lip balm (high SPF)
☐ Insect repellent
☐ Electrolyte tablets or powder (prevents dehydration from heat)
☐ Reusable water bottle with filter

☐ Personal first-aid kit (pain relievers, Band-Aids, antihistamines, diarrhoea relief, rehydration salts, etc.)
☐ Daily essentials: toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, hairbrush/comb, shaving items, deodorant, shampoo, conditioner, etc.
☐ Hand sanitiser & antibacterial wipes
☐ Pocket-size tissues (for toilets without paper)
☐ Wet wipes or facial mist (refreshing after sightseeing in the heat)
☐ Dramamine or motion sickness bands
☐ Face masks: Air quality can be poor in certain cities, especially Beijing and northern industrial areas, during winter. Disposable or reusable masks can be very useful for sensitive travellers.
☐ Prescription note (for medications): Some prescription drugs require a doctor's note to clear customs smoothly.

Tech & Gear:
☐ Camera (with spare batteries & SD cards)
☐ Charger for devices & power bank (for areas with limited charging access)
☐ Plug adaptors
☐ Small flashlight or headlamp
☐ Spare eyeglasses/contact lenses
☐ Translation app (offline version): Useful for signs, menus, and casual communication. Google Translate with Chinese downloaded offline, or apps like Pleco, are very helpful.

Optional Items
☐ Gifts from home (for hosts or guides)
☐ Small notebook & pen (for journaling or note-taking)
☐ Snacks or energy bars (useful during long travel days)
☐ Small padlocks (for securing luggage)
☐ Earplugs (useful for light sleepers)
☐ Binoculars (for sightseeing or wildlife viewing)
☐ Sewing kit & hand wash laundry soap (e.g., bar of sunlight soap)
☐ Travel journal
☐ Hand fan or battery-operated mini fan
☐ Small thermos flask: Hot water is readily available almost everywhere – hotels, airports, even trains – but cold drinking water is less common. A thermos helps you always have safe drinking water.

Footwear: You'll be on your feet a lot during the trip and walking over some rough and slippery surfaces. We recommend you wear sturdy walking shoes, light hiking boots, or similar supportive sports shoes that offer good traction.

Baggage Whilst on Tour

Our baggage allowance policy stipulates that each traveller is allowed to bring no more than 20kg of luggage per person. To ensure smooth logistics and efficient use of space in our vehicles, we recommend opting for a soft-sided bag, as it offers greater flexibility when packing the vehicles. This is particularly important for group tours and larger private groups. It's important to note that some of the accommodations you may be staying in might not have lifts or porterage services available. Being able to manage your luggage is crucial.

Culture & Etiquette

Chinese culture is one of the oldest and most complex in the world, deeply rooted in traditions, philosophies, and social norms. Central to Chinese life is Confucianism, which emphasises family values, respect for elders, and social harmony. You'll find that family plays a vital role, with multi-generational households common in both urban and rural areas. Festivals, such as the Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival, are celebrated with enthusiasm, featuring traditional foods, vibrant decorations, and various cultural performances.

Social Interactions

In China, interactions are often formal and respectful, especially during first meetings. It's customary to greet with a nod or slight bow – firm handshakes are becoming more common in business settings but can feel overly assertive elsewhere. Personal space tends to be narrower than in Australia, and locals may stand closer during conversations. Public displays of affection, such as hugging or kissing, are uncommon, particularly in rural areas. Politeness is conveyed subtly – loud voices and excessive gestures are typically frowned upon.

When visiting homes, it's customary to remove your shoes at the door. Offering and receiving items (like gifts or business cards) with both hands shows respect. Age and seniority are highly regarded – address the eldest person first in any group.

Religion & Traditions

Although officially a secular country, religious traditions play an important role in daily life. Buddhism, Taoism, and ancestral worship remain deeply rooted, alongside Islam and Christianity, in certain regions. You may hear temple bells at dawn or encounter locals burning incense for good fortune.

Major festivals like Chinese New Year, the Mid-Autumn Festival, and the Dragon Boat Festival transform the atmosphere – expect busy streets, family reunions, and widespread travel. During these periods, it's respectful to greet people with phrases like "Xīnnián kuàilè" (Happy New Year).

Dining Customs & Gift-Giving

Meals are communal affairs, often revolving around shared dishes. It's polite to wait for the host to start eating before you begin. Chopsticks should never be stuck upright into a bowl of rice – it resembles funeral offerings and is considered deeply unlucky.

Gift-giving is a common way to express thanks or goodwill, especially during visits. Gifts should be wrapped neatly and presented with both hands. Don't be surprised if your gift is initially declined out of politeness – insist once or twice, and it will usually be accepted. Avoid giving clocks, handkerchiefs, or white flowers, as they are associated with mourning.

Unusual Customs

You might notice locals spitting in public or speaking loudly in busy markets – these behaviours, while jarring, are normal in certain parts of China and not intended to offend. Queueing etiquette can also be different; in crowded areas, a certain amount of jostling is common, and patience will serve you well.

Dressing Respectfully

Please use your discretion and be sensitive to cultural differences in the countries you visit, in particular, visits to religious buildings and when taking photographs. Your tour leader will advise you of any specific customs to observe.

In urban areas, casual attire is generally acceptable but avoid overly revealing clothing. In temples and religious sites, wear modest outfits that cover your shoulders and knees. If you plan to visit rural areas, consider more conservative styles to blend in with local culture. Always observe local dress codes, especially during festivals or formal events, to ensure you feel comfortable and respectful.

Photography

Please remember, we are guests in the countries through which we travel and may inadvertently cause offence by taking photos or videos without first asking permission. Always be respectful of local customs and follow your guide's advice.

Photography is strictly forbidden at sensitive areas such as borders, military sites, and some government buildings. These zones are closely monitored, and signage will indicate restrictions.

In rural areas, always ask permission before photographing individuals, especially children. Many temples and religious sites have specific rules regarding photography–check posted signs and respect all guidelines.

Do's

- When giving or receiving items, such as gifts or business cards, use both hands as a sign of respect. This is particularly important in formal settings.
- Use titles and family names when addressing someone, especially in business contexts. For example, "Director Wang" or "Professor Li" is appropriate. First names are generally reserved for close friends.
- When dining, it's common to encourage others to eat first and to offer dishes to fellow diners. This demonstrates generosity and respect for communal customs.
- Even simple greetings or expressions of gratitude in Mandarin can go a long way. Locals appreciate any effort to communicate in their language.
- The pace of life in China can differ from Western expectations. Traffic and crowds are common, so practice patience and remain calm in stressful situations.

Don'ts

- Pointing at people or objects can be considered rude. Instead, use your whole hand to gesture or subtly direct attention with your chin.
- Avoid discussing politics, human rights issues, or other sensitive subjects, especially with new acquaintances.
- While holding hands is generally acceptable, more intimate gestures, such as kissing, are less common and may draw attention.
- Dining is often a leisurely experience in China. Avoid hurrying through meals or asking for the bill prematurely, as this can be seen as impolite.
- Chinese communication often relies on indirectness and subtlety. Instead of directly saying "no," many may express themselves in a more nuanced way to maintain harmony.

Cultural Nuances

- The concept of personal space may differ in China. Expect closer physical proximity in crowded areas, and try not to step back in discomfort, as this may be perceived as unfriendly.
- If offering gifts, remember that it's customary to refuse them at least once before accepting. This exchange is part of the polite ritual of gift-giving.

- If someone pours tea for you, it's polite to tap your fingers on the table as a gesture of thanks. This subtle action shows respect for the person serving you.

Daily Life & Essentials

Accommodation

Accommodation in China is diverse, culturally rich, and occasionally unpredictable, offering everything from luxury skyscraper hotels to courtyard homes steeped in dynastic charm.

In cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, four- and five-star hotels typically follow international standards. Expect modern amenities, sleek interiors, and professional (if occasionally brisk) service. Many front desk staff speak some English, though this is less common outside major tourist areas. Rooms usually include bottled water, slippers, a kettle, and a toothbrush set–considered essentials for domestic travellers.

In ancient towns such as Lijiang, Pingyao, or Dali, boutique hotels often occupy restored heritage buildings like siheyuan (traditional courtyard residences). These properties are rich in atmosphere, with wood-panelled interiors, tiled roofs, and peaceful inner courtyards. However, rooms may be smaller, layouts more unusual, and modern comforts slightly reduced, with limited heating in winter and narrow staircases often the norm.

In more remote regions, such as Guizhou, Sichuan, or Yunnan, accommodation may come in the form of family-run guesthouses or nongjiale (farmstays). These are typically simple but welcoming, offering a genuine connection to local life. English is rarely spoken, bathrooms may use squat toilets or open wet-room layouts, and beds are usually very firm. While facilities are basic, the warmth of rural hospitality can leave a lasting impression.

For something different, you might find yourself staying in a desert yurt near Dunhuang, a monastery guestroom in the mountains of Sichuan, or an eco-lodge in the rainforest of Xishuangbanna. These stays often come with shared bathrooms, minimal insulation, or natural ventilation instead of air conditioning. But they also offer a rare window into communities and environments few travellers see.

Key Considerations for Staying in China

- Hot Water: Readily available in cities, but in remote areas, it may be restricted to specific hours. Thermoses with boiled water are commonly used and often provided in guest rooms.
- Power Reliability: Urban hotels have stable electricity. Rural areas may experience occasional blackouts–backup generators are not always available.

- Climate & Insects: Mosquitoes are common in summer, especially in southern provinces or near rivers and rice fields. Some lodgings offer mosquito nets or plug-in repellents, but packing your spray is wise.
- Noise Levels: Cities can be loud, with traffic, late-night karaoke, or early street vendors. Buddhist or Daoist temples may ring gongs or play chanting music from sunrise. Earplugs are worth packing.
- Bathrooms: Western-style bathrooms are generally found in higher-end hotels in major cities, but squat toilets and wet-room layouts are still common in budget hotels and rural areas. Wet room designs (with no separate shower stalls) are frequent.
- Beds: Chinese mattresses are often extremely firm, sometimes just a wooden platform with a thin pad. Some guesthouses can provide extra blankets or padding on request.
- Check-in & Check-out: Standard check-out is usually midday. Early check-in or late check-out flexibility varies and often comes with a fee.
- Cultural & Religious Influences: Quiet hours aren’t always enforced. During major festivals like Lunar New Year or National Day, hotels can book out months in advance. In Tibetan or Muslim-majority regions, alcohol restrictions may apply, especially during religious holidays.

Cuisine

Food plays a major part in Chinese culture, and the country's diversity is best showcased through its culinary variety. Each region has its own unique flavours and cooking techniques, contributing to a rich tapestry of dishes that reflect local ingredients and traditions.

The major schools of Chinese cooking include Sichuanese, known for its bold, spicy, and peppery flavours; Shandong, which tends to be heavier and saltier, often utilising seafood and grains; Cantonese celebrated for its sweetness and emphasis on fresh ingredients; Jiangnan, which features lighter and fresher dishes, often with an emphasis on seasonal produce; and Hunanese, which rivals Sichuan in spiciness but often incorporates a variety of cooking methods. These categories only scratch the surface, as centuries of culinary evolution have given rise to thousands of local dishes, each with distinct flavours and techniques.

Street food culture is also vibrant, with vendors offering delicacies like jianbing (savoury crepes), dumplings, and skewered meats. Major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu are renowned for their street food scenes, providing an opportunity to sample regional specialties at affordable prices.

Western food is available in most major cities, ranging from fast-food chains to upscale international restaurants. However, many Western visitors find that even if they don't enjoy Chinese food back home, they can't get enough of authentic dishes after experiencing them in China. The balance of flavours, textures, and presentation in traditional Chinese cuisine is often a revelation.

Beverages play a significant role in meals as well. Beer is common in China, with most regions producing their lagers. Tsingtao and Snow Beer are popular brands. For those with a stronger palate, baijiu, a potent grain-based spirit, is widely consumed and often served during toasts and celebrations. Non-alcoholic beverages such as tea, considered an essential part of Chinese hospitality, and orange squash are ubiquitous, providing refreshing options for diners.

Overall, the culinary landscape in China is as diverse and rich as its culture, offering endless opportunities for exploration and enjoyment for travellers.

We've carefully selected safe restaurants and food outlets for group meals. When exploring independently, street food can be delicious but choose stalls with high turnover and freshly cooked items. Avoid pre-cut or unpeeled raw fruits and vegetables unless washed with purified water. Fruit you peel yourself is usually safe.

Fun Fact: The traditional Chinese calendar features an entire festival dedicated to food – the Duanwu Festival, also known as the Dragon Boat Festival. Celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, it honours the ancient poet Qu Yuan and is marked by the preparation and consumption of zongzi, sticky rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves. These dumplings are filled with various ingredients, such as sweet red bean paste or savoury pork, and are a delicious symbol of the festival. The festival also includes exciting dragon boat races, making it a lively celebration of food, culture, and community!

Shops & Souvenirs

When exploring shops in China, you'll find a diverse range of products, from traditional handicrafts to modern goods. Popular souvenirs include silk products, tea, ceramics, and intricate bamboo items. In cities like Beijing, the Silk Market offers a wide selection of silk garments and accessories, while Yuyuan Garden in Shanghai is renowned for its beautiful jade and teapots.

Bargaining is a common practice in markets and street shops, so don't hesitate to negotiate prices – start by offering about 50% of the asking price and work your way up. For authentic experiences, consider visiting local artisan workshops, where you can witness traditional crafts being made.

Be aware of cultural symbols, as some items may carry meanings beyond their appearance. For example, items featuring dragons symbolise power and authority, while pandas represent peace and friendship. Always check customs regulations before purchasing items, especially antiques or animal products, to avoid issues when leaving the country.

Please be aware that it is your responsibility to transport any souvenirs or artefacts you purchase during your trip. Avoid asking guides or locals to handle this on your behalf unless you are using a registered international courier service with tracking and insurance. Ensure that any items you plan to ship, or check meet your home country's customs, quarantine, and import regulations.

Crooked Compass is not able to take responsibility for the transportation or delivery of any goods organised and purchased on tour by you.

Toilets & Bathrooms

In China, toilet facilities can vary significantly, especially between urban and rural areas. Many public restrooms feature squat toilets. It's advisable to carry toilet paper, as it is often not provided, and some places may have pay-per-use facilities. In major cities, you'll find Western-style toilets in shopping malls, hotels, and tourist attractions. Always check for cleanliness before use, as standards can differ. Additionally, remember to dispose of used paper in designated bins rather than flushing, as plumbing systems may not handle it well. Being prepared will enhance your experience while navigating this aspect of travel.

💡 *Pro Tip:* Always carry toilet paper, hand sanitiser, and a small bottle of water just in case!

Guides

Megaphones are banned at several major attractions in China, particularly in Beijing, though their use remains common in other areas. It is common for group tours to provide headsets with earphones, allowing the guide to offer continuous commentary throughout the tour. Guides may also use flags at times to help navigate you through the crowds in larger cities. Private tours or small groups will just be the guide speaking directly to the clients.

Crowds

Crowds are unavoidable in major cities and tourist locations, particularly from May to October, which is peak season. During this time, the crowds can feel overwhelming, especially in popular areas like Shanghai and other major tourist spots. No matter how serene or beautiful the location is, you'll often encounter megaphones, which are simply a part of the experience. While headsets and following flags may seem less appealing, they are practical tools for keeping groups together and ensuring everyone can hear the guide, especially when navigating through large crowds. It's best to embrace these aspects as part of the adventure.

Recommended Reading

TRAVEL & CULTURE

"*Wild Swans*" by Jung Chang
A powerful memoir spanning three generations of Chinese women, offering a compelling insight into life in 20th-century China – from warlord rule to the Cultural Revolution.

"*River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*" by Peter Hessler
An engaging account of an American Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in a small town on the Yangtze River in the 1990s. A rich portrait of rural China in transition.

"*The Last Days of Old Beijing*" by Michael Meyer
A fascinating narrative about the destruction of traditional neighbourhoods in Beijing as the city modernises in preparation for the 2008 Olympics.

HISTORY & POLITICS

"*The Search for Modern China*" by Jonathan D. Spence
A comprehensive and accessible history of China from the Ming Dynasty to the post-Mao era.

"*China in Ten Words"* by Yu Hua
A mix of memoir and political commentary from a celebrated Chinese novelist, reflecting on key themes like “People,” “Leader,” and “Disparity” through personal stories.

"*Mao: The Unknown Story*" by Jung Chang & Jon Halliday
A controversial but deeply researched biography of Mao Zedong and the impact of his rule.

FICTION & LITERATURE

"*To Live*" by Yu Hua
A poignant novel about a man’s fall from wealth to poverty during the Cultural Revolution. Also adapted into an award-winning film (banned in China).

"*The Good Earth*" by Pearl S. Buck
A Pulitzer Prize-winning classic depicting rural life in pre-revolutionary China through the story of a poor farmer and his family.

"*Waiting*" by Ha Jin
A quietly powerful novel set during the Mao era about a doctor who waits 18 years to marry the woman he loves.

CHINESE PHILOSOPHY & TRADITION

"*The Analects*" by Confucius
A foundational text of Chinese philosophy, exploring ethics, duty, and social harmony. Numerous modern translations are available with commentary.

"*Tao Te Ching*" by Laozi
The core text of Daoism, filled with poetic reflections on balance, nature, and the flow of life.

Recommended Viewing

FEATURE & DRAMA FILMS

Caught by the Tides (2025) – Dir. Jia Zhangke
A stunning blend of fiction and archival footage spanning 21 years. Reflects on rapid social and technological change through intimate personal stories

An Elephant Sitting Still (2018) – Dir. Hu Bo
A poignant, multi-protagonist drama set in northern China. Its slow pacing and 4-hour runtime explore despair and hope amid urban decay.

Still Life (2006) – Dir. Jia Zhangke
A Golden Lion–winning film chronicling life in a town being submerged by the Three Gorges Dam project. Visually poetic and deeply human

DOCUMENTARIES
Up the Yangtze (2007) – Dir. Yung Chang
A moving portrait of individuals displaced by the Three Gorges Dam, highlighting China's rapid transition.

Under the Dome (2015) – Dir. Chai Jing
A groundbreaking exploration of China's air pollution crisis that went viral online before censorship

The Chinese Mayor (2015) – Dir. Zhou Hao
Follows Datong's mayor navigating urban redevelopment and the social impact of forced relocations

The Gate of Heavenly Peace (1995)
A comprehensive documentary on the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, featuring archival footage and interviews

Final Word

Travelling through China is a profound journey into a civilisation that has shaped human history for millennia. Here, ancient traditions live alongside astonishing modernity – a morning spent walking through centuries-old alleyways might be followed by an afternoon train ride on a futuristic high-speed railway.

You'll feel the heartbeat of China in its bustling morning markets, where the air is filled with the scent of steamed dumplings and the chatter of haggling voices. You'll sense it in the quiet reverence of a Buddhist temple, incense curling into the sky, and in the jubilant roar of dragon dances during vibrant festivals.

Whether you're marvelling at the silent grandeur of the Terracotta Warriors, standing atop a remote stretch of the Great Wall, or sharing a steaming hotpot meal in a family home, China invites you to connect – not just with its landscapes, but with its people, stories, and rhythms of life. The hospitality you'll encounter, often wrapped in small gestures and quiet kindness, leaves an impression long after your journey ends.

From misty mountains and vast deserts to glittering skylines and hidden villages, every encounter in China adds a brushstroke to an unforgettable portrait – a place where past and future are painted side by side.

Prepare for sensory overload, heartfelt moments, and memories that will stay with you well beyond the final farewell.

At Crooked Compass, we believe in taking you beyond the ordinary, uncovering the stories, landscapes, and traditions that many travellers miss.

We'd love to hear about your experience! If you enjoyed your journey, please consider leaving a Google review to help fellow travellers discover what makes China and Crooked Compass special. You can share your thoughts here:
👉 Review us here

We also encourage you to share your photos and stories with us on social media so we can follow along on your adventure!

Facebook: @Crookedcompasstravel #FollowADifferentPath #crookedcompass
X: @CrookedCompass #FollowADifferentPath #crookedcompass
Instagram: @crooked_compass #FollowADifferentPath #crookedcompass

Emergency Contact Procedure Reminder and Information

Ensuring the safety and well-being of our guests is of paramount importance to us at Crooked Compass. We would like to take this opportunity to remind you about our emergency contact procedure and where to find your contact details, as well as provide guidance on what to do in different emergency situations.

Local Crooked Compass 24/7 Assistance Contact can be found on your detailed itinerary. This is the **first point** of contact for any concerns or queries whilst in destination for all types of assistance.

Emergency Services Page 6 in this document.

Notify Crooked Compass (Non-Urgent)
For any non-urgent enquiries, please contact our office within Australian office hours (Mon – Fri, 9am – 5.30pm AEST) on +61 2 8089 1370 or via email info@crooked-compass.com

Consular Assistance Please familiarize yourself with your local embassy's details before travel.