

TRAVELING IN CHINA

WHAT TO EXPECT – WHAT NOT TO EXPECT – WHAT TO BRING

Anyone traveling to China for the first time can find planning and packing for the trip a little daunting. Although China is one of the oldest cultures in history, many of us in the West know little about the country or the people. The following information will help you understand more about the wonderful experience that awaits you in China. Bon voyage!

Accommodation

Hotels in China are rated with a system of stars with a five star rating indicating the highest accommodation standard. East West Travel Group insists on providing superior accommodation in four or five star establishments. All hotels are comparable to above average business hotels in North America and feature clean, comfortable, modern rooms with fully western bathrooms, air conditioning, television, telephones, daily maid service and laundry services. In all cases, the front desk staff will speak some English. All hotels feature currency exchange at the front desk where moderate amounts of major Western currencies can be converted into RMB. All hotels also have business centers.

Accommodation is based on double occupancy in twin-bedded rooms. Single rooms and suites are available but are subject to a surcharge.

Busses

All group ground transportation is by road coach. These vehicles come in various sizes and are modern, clean, comfortable and air-conditioned. As luggage compartments are relatively small by North American standards, a dedicated luggage truck will be provided when necessary.

Electricity

The electrical current in China is 220 volts. Any traveler bringing electrical appliances made in North America must ensure that they are dual voltage (i.e. there is a switch allowing the appliance to operate on either 125 volts or 220 volts). Although some outlets are designed for North American two-flat-pin plugs, they will not accept three prong plugs. It is best if all travellers bring electrical plug-in adaptors for European-style two-round-pin plugs.

Emergency Contacts

While no one likes to predict an emergency, they do occasionally happen. Chaperones and tour leaders should have a comprehensive list of emergency contact information for everyone on the trip, including adults. In addition, the addresses, phone numbers and possible contact personnel for your country's Embassy or Consulate(s) in China should be carried by all chaperones and tour leaders.

Equipment

Groups with equipment (musical instruments, costumes, props, etc.) are provided with a dedicated cargo truck. This truck is a late model vehicle with a hard shell box, which is driven by a professional driver. Assistance with loading equipment on and off the truck will also be provided if necessary.

Flights

Although East West Travel Group does not arrange international flights to and from China, we do arrange domestic flights within the country should your itinerary require them. All internal flights are booked on

regularly scheduled major carriers using modern equipment. Many airport announcements as well as those made on the aircraft while in flight are in English.

Food

One of the best aspects of traveling in China is the food. Many urban Chinese eat in restaurants on a regular basis and sharing meals with family and friends is one of the most important activities on holidays and special occasions. The Chinese are very proud of their culinary traditions and are anxious to have foreign visitors taste their most famous dishes. However, they also understand that visitors will not necessarily eat some of the more exotic offerings. East West Travel Group will ensure that travelers experience the best of Chinese cuisine in clean, reputable restaurants with excellent food cooked in authentic ways.

All meals in China are served family-style with large dishes placed on a rotating glass centerpiece. Forks and spoons will be made available to those who are uncomfortable with using only chopsticks. Tea is served with all meals and is made from a wide range of flowers (e.g. jasmine) and other plants. This tea is safe to drink as the water has been boiled. To maximize food safety, other beverages will be limited to bottled water and soft drinks.

East West Travel Group appreciates that visitors will miss some food that is unusual in China. For this reason, all breakfasts will include some western food like bread, pastries, eggs and coffee. We will also ensure that vegetarians are accommodated at all meals and will work with travelers who have other dietary concerns or allergies. In consultation with tour leaders, we will also plan several fast food lunches at McDonalds, KFC or Pizza Hut. Bottled water will be available on busses and in hotels and we will work with tour leaders to ensure that snacks are available to ensure everyone on the tour is well nourished and hydrated.

Guides

East West Travel Group, in association with the China International Travel Service (CITS), arranges for both national and local English-speaking guides to accompany you on your tour. National guides accompany the group for the entire tour while local guides are specific to each city or area visited. All guides are experienced, courteous, informative flexible and fun. On average, one national and one local guide will be provided for each bus.

Hygiene

China is a populous, developing country that is experiencing phenomenal changes as it is transformed from a third to a first world country. Pollution controls are not as strict as in developed countries so air and water pollution is common. In order to minimize health concerns, follow these simple rules:

- Don't over-exert yourself in smoggy, hot and humid summer weather
- Never ingest tap water. Use bottled water even when brushing your teeth
- Carry hygienic hand wipes and use them frequently
- Never eat food from a street vendor or eat unpeeled fruit

Public washrooms in China can be a shock to anyone who has not experienced Asian-style toilets before. Although some public facilities feature western-style toilets, most do not. Travelers should be prepared to use them when necessary (just pretend you're camping). Always have a small store of tissues or toilet paper on hand as many public facilities frequently run out. All bathrooms and public washrooms in hotels have western-style toilets.

Insurance

All travelers to China must carry travelers medical insurance. The purchase of travel or cancellation insurance is useful but expensive. Please inquire about rates and terms from your local travel agent. All individuals and/or the group itself are also strongly advised to purchase equipment and/or instrument insurance.

Internet

All hotels on your tour have business centers with internet access. The hours of operation, number of terminals, charges associated with usage and speed of each connection varies. Internet cafes exist in all major cities and they are very inexpensive. However, they are not necessarily close to hotels or are staffed by English speakers.

Language

The official language in China is the Beijing dialect of Putonghua, also known as Mandarin. Every Chinese citizen speaks Mandarin, as this is the language of instruction at all schools throughout the country. English is also taught in all schools from the primary grades through high school. However, few Chinese students are able to converse with native English speakers and are aware of their limitations in the language. When they hear English being spoken by foreigners, they will often stop to listen intently and try to understand what is being said!

Luggage

Restrict all checked bags to a maximum weight of 20 kilograms. This is not a guideline but a hard and fast rule that is strictly enforced on all internal flights and trains in China. Oversize charges are steep and luggage compartments on even the most modern busses and trains are quite small. Travelers will have a much better trip if they are not saddled with heavy, cumbersome bags full of items from home. You will be bringing much more back with you so plan to take a second, unfilled soft bag from home or plan to purchase a second piece in China. Arrangements can be made to ship larger souvenir items home, if necessary.

Carry-on items for internal and overseas flights must be restricted to 1 piece (not including a handbag) that weighs no more than 10 kilograms. The dimensions must be no larger than 23 cm wide x 40 cm high x 55 cm across.

Medical Considerations

It is strongly advised that all travelers to China visit a travel clinic before they leave and be vaccinated for typhoid, hepatitis and any other diseases recommended by the travel specialists. Bring all prescription and over the counter medications with you in its original packaging.

The most common ailments suffered by those who travel to China are stomach-related and have directly related to how careful travelers are with regards to hygiene. East West Travel Group meticulously inspects restaurants and ensures bottled water is available at all times. Travelers should also be careful by following these guidelines:

- Keep hands as clean as possible by using travel wipes and gels that they carry with them at all times
- Refrain from putting fingers in or around your mouth
- Never eat food purchased from a roadside stand or restaurant
- Always eat freshly cooked food

- Never eat unpeeled fruit
- Have a small store of kleenex and/or toilet paper on hand at all times
- Carry your own supply of anti-diarrhea non-prescription medication with you at all times (i.e. Imodium)
- Carry your own supply of anti-diarrhea antibiotics as prescribed by your family doctor or travel clinic (i.e. Cipro)

Tour leaders must carry a medical information form for each traveler with them and it is recommended that one of the travelers is a certified medical practitioner (doctor, nurse, etc.). All hotels used on the tour have in-house or on-call medical personnel should an emergency arise.

Money

China is still primarily a cash culture. Travelers to China must keep this in mind when planning their trip as relying on being able to use credit cards, travelers' cheques and bank machines to finance the purchase of food, souvenirs and other items is not advisable. Although there is growing acceptance of credit cards (particularly Visa, Mastercard and American Express), most shops and restaurants do not accept them for payment. Not all travelers' cheques are recognized in China so make sure you double and triple check that they can be cashed before purchasing them. Also, they must be cashed at banks, major hotels or currency exchange centers but these facilities can be inconveniently situated or have restricted hours. Bank machines that are linked overseas are few and far between even in the major centers. Never rely on being able to use bank machines to obtain cash.

The official currency of China is the Renminbi or People's Money, which is most commonly abbreviated in writing and verbally as RMB. It is not possible to pre-purchase RMB outside of China and it is prohibited to take RMB out of the country. This makes it necessary to take spending money in the form of a major international currency (like US dollars, Canadian dollars or British Pounds) into China and have the necessary amounts converted there. Please note that you must bring crisp, new bills for exchange. Regardless of where you get currency exchanged for RMB, bank notes that are marked in any way, torn or heavily creased will be rejected. Make sure everyone is aware of this before departing on tour.

There is no limit to the amount of foreign currency that can be brought into China even though it should technically be declared upon entry into the country. The good news is that the value of the RMB is pegged to the US dollar so this means that conversion rates are virtually identical in banks and hotels. To find out what current conversion rates are, log onto The Universal Currency Converter at www.xe.com/ucc.

Other Documentation (Permissions for underage travelers)

It is necessary that all groups with individuals under the age of legal consent (18-21 years depending on your local legislation) carry documentation authorizing them to take these individuals on the tour. These documents should be original copies signed by both parents and legal guardians. Chinese officials will not ask to see these documents but it is becoming more common for North American and some European customs and airline officials to ask for them.

Packing

If you are traveling between May and September, pack lightly. The weather will be hot and humid. Between October and April, the weather is considerably cooler, especially in the north. As a general rule,

never pack a suitcase weighing more than 20 kg. Not only will it be difficult to carry, most airlines no longer allow heavier bags especially on domestic flights.

Here is a checklist of important items to pack:

- Cool cotton casuals (summer months) preferably hand-washable
- Light winter jacket, sweatshirts, sweaters (winter months)
- Comfortable walking shoes (athletic shoes)
- Performance clothing (as outlined by your own ensemble)
- Hat for sun protection
- Film for camera
- Batteries
- All toiletries including toothpaste, deodorant, etc. (difficult to find in China)
- Travel alarm clock
- Small electrical appliances (hair dryer, etc.) that have dual voltage for 220v
- Electric plug adaptors for European-style twin round pins
- Hygienic hand wipes
- All prescription medications
- Extra pair of glasses
- Mosquito repellent
- Sun screen
- Imodium
- Dehydration tablets
- Umbrella (if traveling between June & August)

Passports

Passports are your official identification while in China and must be carried by travelers or chaperones at all times. All hotels are required to register passport information for each guest on check-in and passports are checked several times at all airports for international and internal flights. The loss of a passport is a serious matter and must be reported immediately to the holder's Embassy or Consulate as well as:

Beijing Municipality Public Security Bureau
Foreigners Section
85 Beichizi Jie
Beijing
Tel: 553102

Performances

Although most performance details will be handled by your tour leaders in consultation with East West Travel Group and our Chinese concert promoters, there are a few aspects of performing in China that will be new. For the most part, Chinese audiences applaud relatively quietly and in very short spurts. This does not mean they are not enjoying the performance, it is just their usual custom to applaud sparingly. A standing ovation is very rare since such demonstrations of emotion are not encouraged.

It is also common to see small numbers of people leave during a performance. They are not necessarily indicating they boredom or displeasure. They have simply seen enough of the performance and feel it is time to go home! Some audiences in China are also noisier than others. Sometimes, in less cosmopolitan cities, audiences can be very noisy by Western standards. Again, this is not meant to be rude. The

audience members are simply commenting to their neighbours on all the details of the performance. Their behaviour is similar to what we associate with movie theatres particularly because many concert venues sell drinks, snacks and even popcorn in the lobby.

Security

China is a very safe country with an extremely low crime rate, strict gun control and tight national security. Even though travelers should be careful with their cash, passport and personal valuables, theft is relatively rare. Travelers need not worry about the threat of terrorism, as it is virtually unknown.

Chinese Customs officials strictly control items arriving and departing the country. There are serious penalties for anyone breaching the guidelines. A complete and current list of customs guidelines can be found at www.cnto.org

Shopping

Shopping in China can be very rewarding. An enormous range of products are available for sale in outdoor markets, shopping centers and roadside stands. To maximize your buying power and shopping enjoyment, keep the following in mind:

- Most open-air markets and many independent shops work on the barter system. Using a calculator to communicate, the vendor will ask for a price. Always refuse to pay this price and offer to pay between one third and one half of his/her asking price. After that, use your bartering skills to agree on a price but don't be afraid to walk away from the transaction if you are not happy with the negotiation. The Chinese will not be offended!
- Copyright laws are still relaxed compared to elsewhere so be wary of vendors claiming they are selling brand name and designer items. In many cases, they will not be authentic.
- Street vendors can be very aggressive, and in most cases, sell very poor quality goods. It is recommended that you not buy anything from them.

Telephones

Phone service in China is very good but it can be a challenge to travelers simply because it doesn't always work exactly as we expect it to. All written and spoken directions are in Mandarin and access can be different depending on what province you are in. Here is a summary of your best bets for staying in touch while traveling in China.

- Calling Cards from your home provider – using a calling card from your home long distance provider is often the best and most reliable way to stay in touch by telephone. However, make sure you understand how to use the service, where it works in China (what areas and on what types of phones) and how much it will cost per minute.
- Phone Cards purchased in China - pay as you go calling cards can be purchased in some stores. However, some of them can only be used in the province you buy them in. Others cannot be used on every type of phone. The primary instructions for all calling cards are in Mandarin with access to English instructions on some, but not all, phones. Instructions for every type of card are slightly different and occasionally, you may be sold an invalid phone card. All this makes the phone card option unpredictable and frustrating at times. When it works, it's great. When it doesn't, it's frustrating, time-consuming and expensive.
- Cell phones - North American and European cell phones will not work anywhere in China. Some GSM and tri-band phones work in some large cities but they are very expensive and they are still prone to unpredictability in some areas. Cell phones purchased in China work wonderfully...but you have to live in China to be able to set up a billing account.

Traffic

China is a highly urbanized country with well over 1 billion people, millions of cars, trucks and busses and hundreds of millions of bicycles and carts. The dynamics of traffic flow follow rules but they can be very different from those in other countries. As a general rule, exercise caution and never assume pedestrian right of way.

Visas

All travelers to China must have visa. Visas are granted by your nearest Embassy or Consulate of the People's Republic of China and are not difficult to obtain. The appropriate application form, passport and processing fee are submitted to the Embassy or Consulate along with your letter of invitation and processing fee. Within a week or less, passports are returned with the visas inserted. Please note that groups intending on performing while on tour must obtain an "F" class visa. The appropriate documentation and permissions to support this application will be supplied to the group by the Hebei Huihuang Cultural Exchange Organization.

It is important to note that all passports submitted for visas must be valid for a minimum of 6 months from the date of travel. They must also contain at least one full blank page. If one of these conditions is not met, the passport will be rejected even though the visa has been approved.

Fun Facts

Manners: The Chinese value politeness very highly so always be gracious in your dealings with them. However, being polite does not mean that you shouldn't barter firmly with vendors or give up your place to others in crowds. Similarly, you might find that certain Chinese individuals will stare at visitors especially if they are blonds or redheads. This is not meant to be rude but is merely an expression of interest and curiosity.

Time: All of China is on the same time zone (Greenwich Mean Time + 8 hours)

Measurements: All measurements are in the metric system

Names: Chinese names state the last name first and the first name last. It is best to use both names when addressing a Chinese person using their Chinese name. However, many have English names as well.

More Information

Here are some useful websites for anyone wanting additional information about China:

China National Tourist Organisation
China Internet Information Center
China Today News Service
China maps

www.cnto.org
www.china.org.cn
www.chinatoday.com
www.maps-of-china.com