

Experience the underground music scene, staggering scenery and explore beyond the Terracotta Army.

CHINA

Where Nomads Go

Contents

WELCOME	3
Essential China	4
HISTORY & CULTURE	6
5 Ancient Chinese Villages	8
Yin and Yang in Southern China	12
Ancient Crafts in Suzhou	14
China's Underground Music Scene	18
Xi'an: Beyond the Terracotta Army	24
EATING	26
5 Chinese Food Experiences	28
Tracing the Delectable Journey of Soup Dumplings	32
JOURNEYS	38
Traveling the Ancient Tea Horse Route	40
Guizhou's Alien-searching Radar Dish	46
The Backroads of Gansu and Sichuan	48
Exploring the Yungang Grottoes and Hanging Monastery	52
ADVENTURE & NATURE	54
Jiuzhaigou National Park	56
Scuba Diving the Great Wall of China	60
An Undiscovered Alternative to Yangshuo	62
A Secret Surf Mecca on Hainan	66
China's Ode to Siberia	68
NEED TO KNOW	72
Handy Tips for First-timers	73
Getting Around	74
Learn Some of the Local Lingo	75
Climate & Weather	76
Staying Connected	77

World Nomads' purpose is to challenge you to harness your curiosity, be brave enough to find your own journey, and to gain a richer understanding of yourself, others, and the world.



WELCOME

Get off the beaten path and experience China, the World Nomads way. Our travel writers take you to the depths of Panjiakou Reserve to see a submerged section of the Great Wall, experience surf culture in Houhai Bay, taste authentic Chinese food across the country, and discover extraordinary landscapes you'd never think were in China.

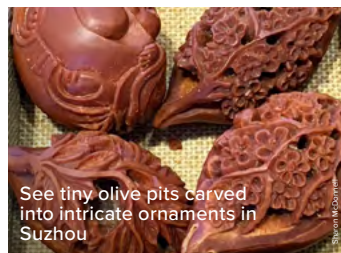
We can't possibly cover all of China in a handful of pages, and we aren't going to try. Instead, this guide offers a series of windows into China – with a focus on the undiscovered and less-visited areas of the country, we want to inspire you to explore parts of China you never knew existed.

China - Where Nomads Go also includes a useful Travel Safety Guide to help you navigate the world safely and bravely. Off you go.



ESSENTIAL CHINA

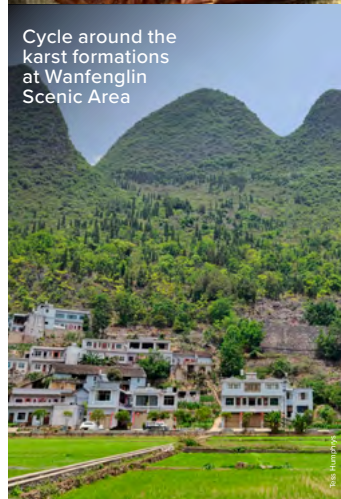
Don't miss out on these unexpected Chinese destinations, experiences, and adventures.



See tiny olive pits carved into intricate ornaments in Suzhou



Try soup dumplings everywhere you go



Cycle around the karst formations at Wanfenglin Scenic Area



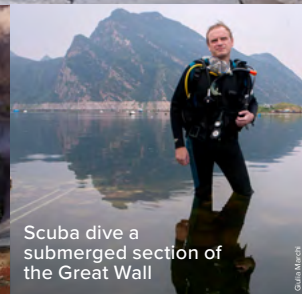
Listen out for extraterrestrial life in Guizhou



Discover the quiet village of Xitang near Shanghai



Travel the Ancient Tea Horse Route



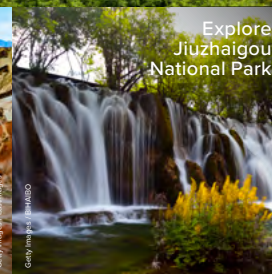
Scuba dive a submerged section of the Great Wall



Learn to surf at Houhai Bay



Wonder at the rainbow landscapes of Zhangye Danxia Geopark



Explore Jiuzhaigou National Park

HISTORY & CULTURE

Guilin, Yangshou, Guangxi

China's history and culture is as diverse and fascinating as its landscape, with millennia-old monuments and ancient villages existing alongside the glass and metal of its megacities. But there is room for the old and new worlds in this cultural mash-up, with traditional crafts and festivals, historical villages preserving and practicing the old ways even as emerging artists in the underground music scene.

5 ANCIENT CHINESE VILLAGES

China is renowned for its cutting-edge megacities, yet it is also one of the oldest civilizations on the planet, and in its ancient hamlets Ronan O'Connell finds traditional life continues.

Yangmei

Needing respite from the noise of Nanning, the biggest city in Guangxi Province, I hop on a local bus to Yangmei, 25mi (40km) away. But, despite a modest travel time of 90 minutes, on arrival it feels as if I have arrived in a different era. With its cobblestone alleys, historical temples,

graceful pavilions, time-worn stone bridges, charming merchant houses, and peaceful riverside setting, Yangmei village is something of a time capsule.

More than 1,000 years old, Yangmei was a key commercial port during China's Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) Dynasties. Today, it's a sleepy town of fewer than 5,000 people, many of whom are elderly. The 18th-century shophouses surrounding the village square sell spices, tea, herbal medicine, and comfort foods such as delicious Laoyou rice noodle soup, a bargain at US \$2 a bowl. It's so good I find room for a second.

Yangmei bulges with history. What fascinates me most are its winding lanes. Along one, I find 200-year-old homes constructed from a quirky mix of powdered limestone and sticky rice soup. Another lane boasts the modest brick and wood building that was once home to two of the leaders in China's pivotal 1911 Revolution, which ended the Qing Dynasty.



Chengyang

There are no cars in Chengyang, a village in a remote valley in the southern Chinese province of Guangxi, which borders Vietnam. That's because the main entrance to this Dong-minority village is accessed via a narrow, wooden bridge that spans the Linxi River. The Chengyang Wind and Rain Bridge is a 260-foot-long (79m) structure, built in 1912 with only pedestrians in mind.

Walking across this bridge today, I pass several middle-age women selling scarves and handicrafts. They are members of the

Dong tribe, one of the 55 ethnic minority groups of China. Chengyang has been home to the Dong people for more than 1,000 years. Locals live in stilted wooden homes, and feed their families by growing rice, sweet potatoes and wheat, and still practice ancient Dong customs.

Traditional dances dedicated to the Goddess Sama are performed in the village square most days at 10am. After being lucky enough to catch one rousing performance, I am invited into a local's home to enjoy a classic Dong meal – sticky →

The Chengyang Wind and Rain Bridge was built in 1912 with only pedestrians in mind



rice with pickled vegetables, followed by a spicy hot pot.

To get here, catch a 35-minute train from Guilin (the tourist hub of Guangxi Province, 60mi (96km) from Chengyang) to Sanjiang South bullet train station. From Sanjiang, catch a taxi to Chengyang.

Xitang

They are large and beautiful numbers; 122 stone laneways, 104 ancient bridges, nine canals, and 2,500 years of history. This is Xitang, one of eight renowned water villages, 50mi (80km) southeast of downtown Shanghai. I had previously avoided Xitang assuming its proximity to Shanghai would mean it would be flooded with visitors. But then, I learn the

Find inspiration for your next adventure with **Explore**



difficulty of reaching it via public transport from Shanghai, and that the 50mi (80km), US \$40 one-way taxi fare, is enough to discourage most travelers.

Xitang is picture perfect. Row boats glide along its canals, passing beneath majestic arched bridges flanked by stately stone buildings with high-pitched roofs and decorative eaves.

It's very hot when I visit in April, so I stroll under the town's *langpings* – long, covered walkways that hug its canals. When the sun's fury wanes, I fork out US \$15 for a 30-minute rowboat ride along Xitang's waterways. Then it's time to savor a personal favorite – pork dumpling soup – enjoyed in an old restaurant looking out at one of the most charming places in China.

Anren

I couldn't find any direct buses to Anren from Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, and my taxi driver hasn't a clue how to get there. Luckily, my phone's GPS knows the way and, a US \$30 fare later, we've traveled 40mi (64km) to Anren, an hour from downtown Chengdu.

More than 1,400 years old, Anren is renowned for its 27 mansions, constructed in the early 1900s, when Anren was controlled by Liu Wenhui, a local warlord. The mansions are a unique blend of intricate European-style stonework and the decorative arches and courtyards associated with traditional Chinese architecture.

While perusing a museum set up inside one of his former homes, I read the story of how Liu Wenhui had dozens of local farmers killed so he could build the mansions on their land. It's a grim tale, but the mansions are spectacular. So, too, are the three old streets alongside them.

About 100 ancient wooden buildings are scattered along Yumin, Shuren and Hongxing streets. Locals live on the upper floors and, from their ground-floor shops, they sell clothes, handicrafts, and Sichuan souvenirs including brocade silk. Others run family restaurants serving some of the spiciest food in Asia – the Kung Pao chicken left my tongue numb for what felt like hours.

Ciqikou

Chongqing epitomizes the dizzying rise of modern China. One of the world's fastest-growing cities, in the past 20 years it has exploded from a modestly sized urban center to a monstrous metropolis of more than 20 million people. Yet, somehow, amid this frenzied growth, Ciqikou, a 1,700-year-old neighborhood, just 7mi (11km) from downtown Chongqing, has survived.

Ciqikou made its name as a porcelain-producing village in the 1400s. While it is



undoubtedly visited more than the other villages on this list – most of its historical shophouses now cater to the tourism industry – it is still very interesting.

Ciqikou's architecture is authentic, with many Qing Dynasty-era structures remaining, notable for their multi-tiered rooves. Its layout is labyrinthine, with its alleys looping and winding, ascending and then descending. I got lost several times. In contrast to the flat, grid-structured town planning we're now used to in Western cities, this chaos is delightful.

To get here, hail one of Chongqing's ubiquitous yellow taxis, and within 15 to 20 minutes, you'll be in Ciqikou – the only part of Chongqing city that doesn't look like the future.

More than 1,400 years old, Anren is renowned for its 27 mansions, constructed in the early 1900s, when Anren was controlled by a local warlord

Yin and Yang in Southern China

Tai chi novice **Sarah Duff** discovers that these simple poses are challenging to mind and body.

Meditating isn't easy for me at the best of times, but throw in 93°F (33°C) heat, high humidity, holding an exhausting standing pose for 20 minutes, and clearing my mind becomes impossible. Sweat drops roll down my back, my legs are shaking like elastic bands in a breeze, and my arms – held up in a semi-circle as if I'm hugging an imaginary tree – feel like they're about to fall off.

Instead of energy flowing through my body and my mind emptying, I'm doing 60-second countdowns in my head to help the time pass – and to keep from collapsing in a sweaty heap.

It's the first morning of a three-week immersion in the martial art of *taijiquan* (tai chi) at a school in a tiny village in the province of Guangxi, southern China, and I'm not quite sure what I've signed up for. I've never practised *taiji* (tai chi) before coming to China, but my partner, Joe, has been a long-time practitioner of the martial art. For years, he's tried convincing me to do what many consider one of the best exercises for longevity and mind-body health.

China – the birthplace of *taiji* – seems like the perfect place for me to start.

The first thing I learn is that *taiji* is a lot harder than it looks. After each morning's gruelling, 20-minute standing qigong meditation, we move on to learning the Chen-style *taiji* form, a sequence of 74 moving postures in the Chen family style. Our teacher and co-founder of the school, the soft-spoken Master Ping, is in his early 30s and has practiced for more than 20 years. When he demonstrates the postures,

which flow seamlessly from one to the next, he's mesmerizing to watch: graceful and fluid, with startlingly quick snatches of power.

Then it's my turn to try. Simple-looking postures – with names like 'White crane spreads its wings' – reveal themselves to be extremely challenging. I thought my mind-body coordination and flexibility weren't too bad, considering all the years of yoga I've done, but in this *taiji* class I'm clumsy and unmalleable. Instead of the feeling I am supposed to have of water coursing through my body, I feel like my limbs are made of dry, heavy clay.

After three hours of practice, our class of eight breaks for lunch, sitting in a group in the school's kitchen around a wooden table laden with steaming white rice, tofu in chilli sauce, stir-fried egg and tomato, and steamed greens. We have time to rest after lunch, during which I often lie down on my wooden plank bed in my monastically

simple room just off the training courtyard. Afternoon training is another three hours, followed by communal dinner, and then an early night's sleep.

As the days pass in this intensive routine, I make slow progress, getting the hang of each posture before moving on to the next one. It takes all my concentration to remember the sequence and transition through the movements with the precise alignments that Master Ping demonstrates. In these moments, I don't have the mental space to think about anything else. My hamster-wheel brain goes from multi-track thoughts to directed attention in an intense kind of mindfulness.

I learn, as the course progresses, that *taiji* is a kind of meditation in motion. While the martial art is only a few hundred years old, the Taoist philosophical principles it's based on date back 6,000 years. In Taoist belief, the universe and everything in it derives from the interplay of the opposing forces of yin and yang. *Taiji* explores this dualism in the body by trying to find a balance between tensing and relaxing muscles, in line with exact body mechanics. This is what's thought to give *taiji* its numerous mind and body benefits, which range from improved strength and agility and reduced inflammation to decreased levels of anxiety and stress.

As much as I enjoy the challenges of *taiji*, I also love my time in this beautiful rural area. In between morning and afternoon sessions, I wander around the tiny village of Jima, comprising just a few houses and small shops, and practice my few words of Chinese with the friendly, elderly locals. On



weekends, when we have time off training, I explore the surrounding landscape, renowned in China for its jewel-green rice paddies and hundreds of karst mountains covered in thick foliage. I rent a bicycle to ride through sleepy villages to the town of Yangshuo, where I hike to the top of Green Lotus Mountain for a dramatic panorama of the Li River winding its way through the finger-like pinnacles.

It's only in my last few days of classes that I experience a kind of breakthrough. Under Master Ping's gentle guidance in these hours and hours of practice, I've developed a muscle memory for the movements and the form, which means I'm now able to concentrate more on trying to cultivate a sense of relaxation in my limbs. My feelings of frustration have passed, and, in their place, there's quiet focus.

I've completed my goal of learning 18 of the 74 postures of the form, and while I still haven't even begun to feel the yin and yang forces in my body, or the flow of *qi* (the Chinese concept of energy), I do feel more connected to my body, more grounded, and just that bit calmer in my mind – even when I'm not practicing. I couldn't ask for a better introduction to the deep and complex world of *taiji*.

Instead of the feeling I am supposed to have, of water coursing through my body, I feel like my limbs are made of dry, heavy clay

Feel more when you travel, with **Stories**



After each morning's gruelling, 20-minute standing qigong meditation, we move on to learning the Chen-style *taiji* form, a sequence of 74 moving postures



ANCIENT CRAFTS IN SUZHOU

In Suzhou, near Shanghai, **Sharon McDonnell** learns about the extraordinary detail that goes into the unique Chinese crafts of olive pit carving, fan making and silk embroidery.

Suzhou, a 2,500-year-old city, 70mi (112km) west of Shanghai, is famous for traditional crafts, from silk embroidery to wood carving, jade, and olive pit carving – a local practice that has been going on here for centuries (along with the carving of walnut shells, lotus seeds, and fruit pits).

Olive pit carving

This craft uses the olive pit (or stone) as a tiny canvas for highly intricate and detailed carvings to create a miniature 3D work of art. The best-known olive pit carving was created in 1737 and depicts a boat with eight people, furnishings and 300 characters from a Chinese poem. That masterpiece can be seen in Taiwan's National Palace Museum. As I'm in Suzhou, I want to see this tiny precision craft for myself, having thoughtlessly tossed out olive pits for years.

I head to Zhoushan, a village of olive pit carvers near Taihu Lake in Suzhou's western suburbs. Here, 10,000 people make a living from this craft, including 3,000 artisans in more than 100 workshops (the rest are in sales and packaging).

I watch in disbelief as an artisan, working with a tiny chisel and magnifying glass, meticulously cuts, whittles and sculpts designs into a pit, like it's jade or wood; I feel as though I'm observing eye surgery.

This craft uses the olive pit (or stone) as a tiny canvas for highly intricate and detailed carvings



The Humble Administrator's Garden in Suzhou



Carved Olive Pits

I ponder the finished pits, which show faces, deities and flowers, and recall an award-winning masterwork, with a dragon and clouds on one side, and Buddha on the other, which sold for US \$16,000 in 2014. A saleswoman tells me the artisans use gan lan olives from southern China.

Silk embroidery

Renowned for exquisite craftsmanship, vivid glowing colors and delicate designs, silk embroidery is one of China's four major embroidery styles. I see this artwork for the first time in an exhibit at the Humble

Administrator's Garden, one of Suzhou's UNESCO-designated gardens. Here, I see 'paintings' of flowers and landscapes, that upon closer inspection turn out to be embroidery. The next time, it's in the gallery of Yao Jianping, a woman embroidery master, where I see the astonishingly realistic portraits of animals, humans, landscapes and birds.

At the Suzhou Embroidery Research Institute, I watch the women at work, often copying a photograph. One silk thread can be split into 48 strands, barely visible to the naked eye, and 1,000 different types of →



Fan making

Embroidery
Research Institute
in Suzhou

threads, and more than 40 types of stitches are used.

The craft's highest form, double-sided embroidery, displays a different design on each side. Suzhou was a silk capital of China for centuries, and its high-quality silk was used for royal clothing and bedding. At Suzhou Silk Museum, I get to see masterpieces depicting dragons, flowers and clouds on royal robes, and read about the history of the Silk Road and how silk is made. At Suzhou No. 1 Silk Factory, there's a film about the short, but intensely productive life of the silkworm, whose cocoons are boiled, their silk filaments unspooled by machines, and then woven on looms.

Fan making

Sandalwood folding fans, ornately carved from the fragrant wood and decorated with paintings and calligraphy, are another ancient Suzhou craft, produced in more than 16,000 different styles. At the Fan Museum, China's biggest fan is on display – it's 32 inches wide (82cm) – and depicts a variety of Buddhist scenes on both sides.

At the Sheng Feng factory, patterns are drawn, burned into the wood with an electric iron, and then the pre-punched holes are sewn into shapes depicting landscapes, gardens and people. Before, fans were familiar to me only in cheap paper versions – I now see a traditional carved wood fan is a thing of beauty.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE:
The bullet train takes 30 minutes from Shanghai



UNFORGETTABLE

Qurban Festival, Xinjiang

The musty smell of livestock fills the city air long before I watch a large herd of sheep cross the busy intersection like a traffic jam of cars. Every spare parking lot and city park is turned into an animal enclosure as the locals prepare for this bloody yet joyful 'festival of sacrifice' known as Qurban.

Along with much of the Arab world, Muslims throughout western China, such as where I am in Xinjiang, look forward to this day as their biggest holiday and holiest celebration. I wake early to watch the men gather at the local mosque for prayers, and meander through neighborhoods enjoying the jovial atmosphere of a community united in the remembrance of Abraham's sacrifice of a lamb instead of his son. *Josh Summers*

Dates: It's surprisingly hard to determine the exact day of Qurban. Since the holiday is based not only on the Islamic calendar but also on the day a new moon is sighted the month prior, even my neighbors weren't sure what day we were going to celebrate until just a couple of weeks earlier.

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF ROCK:

CHINA'S UNDERGROUND MUSIC SCENE

Marco Ferrarese discovers that from the 1970s onwards, Chinese youth have embraced musical influences from overseas to create a unique sound all their own.

It's 2008, just a few months shy of Beijing's first triumphant Olympics. Wang's tiny apartment is dimly lit, slightly bigger than a car's backseat, and tastes of spent cigarettes and dirty rock and roll. "Drink," he says in Chinglish, passing a bottle of Tsing Tao beer across the floor between us.

Wang has improbable blond hair, dyed and spiked with hand soap, and sings in a Beijing Oi! band, a sub-genre of punk born from working-class, anti-racist skinheads in late 1970s England. I'm the 'foreign expert', aka a teacher of languages, who landed in a second-tier Chinese university, 186mi (300km) east of Beijing – one of the world's busiest cities. With a poor common language, Wang and I connect by referencing the shared global codes of the punk rock music we both love.

The birth of Chinese popular music

As China opened up to the world in the late 1970s, it also started forming an acquired taste for Western music and ideas people in

the country had never seen before.

From Jimi Hendrix to the Beatles, the Pet Shop Boys to punk rock: a tsunami of 50 years of foreign popular music history in the form of pirated tapes – coupled with the first influx of language teachers, foreign students, and tourists – washed over the Chinese capital all at once, creating yao gun, or 'Chinese rock'. Walking in many of Beijing's street markets, I can see these rock tapes on sale next to smiling jade buddhas, Confucius statues and tacky fake-brass dragons, looking like improbable crumbs of globalization that spilled between the cracks of China's ancient civilization.

Two artists are considered the genre's initiators: Cui Jian, a trained classical musician who fell for the smuggled sounds of the Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Talking Heads. He shot to stardom in 1986, with the song *Nothing to My Name*, which mixed elements of classical Chinese music with Western electric guitars. The

I can see these rock tapes on sale next to smiling jade buddhas, Confucius statues and tacky fake-brass dragons



The Metaphor performing at the Mao Livehouse music venue in Beijing

song became the unofficial anthem of Tiananmen Square's student protests in 1989.

The second is He Yong, whose 1994 pivotal album *Garbage Dump*, filled with nihilistic social commentary, paved the way to the birth of Chinese punk.

In the late 1980s, China also spawned its first heavy metal band with Socialist characteristics, Tang Dynasty, who released a debut album, *A Dream Return to Tang Dynasty*, in 1992. Combining progressive rock with heavy riffs, Chinese folk styles and Beijing opera techniques, it went on to sell more than two million copies in Asia and abroad. I find all these tapes on Beijing's laneways, buy them for a few yuan each, and bring them back to my room at the university. To my Western-trained ears,

they sound angry and exotic, harsh and incredibly attractive. My teenage students, of course, don't know anything about them. When I ask my block's caretaker if he has ever heard of Tang Dynasty, he answers that they ruled over China for three centuries until year 907 DC.

Beijing's burning: the rise and fall of Chinese punk rock

From 1995, the seeds of yao gun blossomed into two very antithetic punk bands: Underbaby, which used punk's stereotypical three raw chords, safety pins, and mohawks, and Catcher in the Rye with its melodic pop-punk songs. In a couple of years, Beijing's first punk underground makes a permanent base at the Screaming Club, where some of China's pioneer punk →



bands like Brain Failure, 69, Reflector, and Anarchy Boys emerged. Their music is collected in a compilation album released on Jing Wen Records in 1997, the first official Chinese punk record.

By 1998, Beijing was considered the center of cultural and musical freedom, attracting musicians, fans and students from all over China.

But soon enough the bars overflowed with too many competing bands, pushing some of Beijing's early punks to move to the musically untouched southwestern province of Yunnan, thus 'exporting' punk rock to the tourist towns of Dali and Lijiang.

Something started changing by the early 2000s, when new foreign trends like nu-metal contributed to making Beijing's music scene more commercial. On top of that, its prime spot as China's 'music city' was overshadowed by the rise of new talented musicians, clubs, and music styles in other cities including Shanghai, Wuhan, Qingdao, Nanjing and Tianjin.

Back in the capital, the years in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics saw the birth of No Beijing, a new wave of influential

and savvy Chinese bands that hint at '70s New York's No Wave art movement. This is when I arrived in China to teach Italian in the coastal town of Qinhuangdao, not far from Beijing. Even if it's busy and polluted, it becomes my weekend escape to sweat off my small-town work frustrations by checking out the No Beijing music scene. The epicenter is the small D-22 bar in the student district of Wudaokou, the main live venue for groups like Joyside, Hedgehog, Carsick Cars, Snapline and the Gar. They mix post-punk, noise and indie influences, helping widen the appeal of Chinese rock.

When I see Joyside for the first time, the D-22 is packed to the gills with a swarm of teenagers and students in tight jeans and striped t-shirts. As the band rocks into the first song, the crowd surges to the stage, melting into a human monster of twirling limbs, becoming one with the musicians. Sweat and beer condenses with breath, we all feel the punk rocking us down through our solar plexuses, and soon enough my glasses fog, my ribcage feels foreign elbows and knees, and we all become as one with that throbbing, liberating soundwave.

Chinese heavy metal music and its international recognition

Meanwhile, even Chinese metal rose to fame: from Tang Dynasty's early prog in the 1990s, which I unfortunately never had a chance to see live, the genre expanded to thrash and death metal with bands like Tomahawk and Overload. By the end of the decade, Yaksa, the first Chinese nu-metal band, and thrash death band, Suffocated, also started making noise. Their crowning achievement was participating in Germany's Wacken Open Air Festival in 2012, bringing Chinese metal to one of the world's most important heavy metal stages.

Chinese metal music continued to evolve, the first American and European metal bands started coming to play in China, and

the genre also fused with rap and even Mongolian folk — think of successful bands like Hanggai, Nine Treasures and Tengger Cavalry.

Chinese rock music today

The rebelliousness of Chinese yao gun and punk tames with the rise of the Midi Music Festival. Started in 1999 by the Beijing Midi School of Music, the first jazz and rock school in China, the Midi grows to become the biggest music festival in the Republic, changing the face of underground Chinese rock forever. This success kickstarts many other events, including the popular Strawberry Music Festival, launched by label Modern Sky, one of China's biggest, and home to 100-odd bands.

When I stop again in Beijing in April 2016, I can't help but notice the big changes in Chinese rock from that sweat-thronged, first burning D-22 performance I experienced almost a decade before. The Strawberry Music Festival will take place a week later over the May Day weekend, with events in both Beijing and Shanghai. Bands no longer play in a packed rickety student bar, but perform on the megastage of the Shanghai World Expo Park in front of thousands of people. These massive commercial operations increasingly switched focus from rock to other genres: in 2017 alone, China hosted a staggering 269 music festivals, 20% were dedicated to electronic dance music.

Rock bands still take to the stages of China's major cities, but contrary to yao gun, modern rock in China has turned from flash-in-the-pan revolution to middle-class entertainment. Often times populated and maneuvered by expat foreigners, rock music still doesn't bode well with an ever-conservative Chinese societal mindset. However, almost 40 years of Chinese yao gun have certainly left a mark on China's popular culture, but that primeval Beijing underground fire, I'm afraid, has already turned to embers.

Chinese metal music continued to evolve, the first American and European metal bands started coming to play in China



Where to See Live Rock Music Across China

Every major Chinese city has a bunch of music clubs you can visit to check the pulse of the local scene. Marco Ferrarese shares his tips on some of the most established venues:

BEIJING

Yugong Yishan

3-2 Zhangqizhong Lu, Miyun County

Beijing's fully-fledged rock club hosts many international acts and yet always keeps an eye on the beat from the local underground.

School Live Bar

53 Wudaoying Hutong, Chaoyang

The capital's spot for punk, metal and rock is this little scruffy bar packed to the gills with alternatives who always want to have a good, loud time.

SHANGHAI

Yuyintang

851 Kaixuan Lu

For the past decade, this club has brought the best of rock, folk, metal and more to this vibrant metropolis.

MAO Livehouse

308 Chongqing Nan Lu

Good sized downtown venue catering to international and local acts, from electronica to disco, metal and rock.

WUHAN

Vox Livehouse

118 Lumo Road, Guang Gu Shang Quan, Hongshan Qu Wuhan Shi

The home to Wuhan's alternative music and punk, this landmark venue sees Chinese and international bands performing here almost every night.

DALI

Bad Monkey Bar

59 Renmin Lu, Dali Old Town

Owned by two Englishmen, this Yunnanese live music bar has been rocking hard since 2003. Also check out its quirky sibling, Bad Monkey Steampunk Bar, with music every night, paired with Napoli-style pizzas and burgers.

Learn how to **Travel Responsibly** on your next trip



UNFORGETTABLE

Litang's Horse Festival, Sichuan

We are on a grassy meadow somewhere outside Litang Town, at 13,170ft-high (4,014m), one of the world's highest communities, lost in the far-flung Eastern Tibetan region of Kham. The precise location is kept secret to non-Tibetans, and passed around as a hushed insider secret only a couple of days before the event. It's in this remote corner of China that, once a year, the nomadic Khampa herders regroup to race for honor and prestige, establish their nomadic socio-economic hierarchies and search for beautiful wives.

I get closer to the people waiting on the side of an open patch of grassland. It serves as the main racing ground for the different types of challenges that Khampa horsemen will brave on horseback. Right now, each rider competes to show his acrobatic skills.

When I least expect it, the horse and rider forge ahead, gaining speed as chunks of black earth fly in their wake. And as the horse bites on its bridle, the rider lets himself fall to the side of his mount, I gulp in awe. With his legs clinging to the body of his running horse, the man floats and swings, hesitates, and then grabs a rock perched on the top of a mound that sits in the middle of the racetrack.

He then lifts himself back up amidst the screams and applause, for he's a winner. Hundreds of round leather cowboy hats swing madly in the air as the next rider takes the position at the beginning of the racetrack, getting set up for another ride. The wild Khampas all around cheer again, thrilled to continue celebrating their sacred day of acrobatic races.

Dates: After the Tibetan riots in 2008, to avoid retaliation from the Chinese authorities, no outsider knows the precise date and location of Litang's Horse Festival, which falls in the first half of August. Be in Litang at the start of August to ask around town.

How to get there: Catch a bus from Chengdu to Litang, with an overnight stop in Kangding. Or, fly directly to Kanding from Chengdu to shorten the lengthy road trip. *Marco Ferrarese*



© Marco Ferrarese

Xi'an: Beyond the Terracotta Army

Stacey McKenna discovers Xi'an's city walls, a sacred mountain and the Daming Palace Heritage Park.

Almost 700mi (1,126km) southwest of Beijing, Xi'an is one of the oldest cities in China, but is perhaps best known for its proximity to the remarkable second-century BC archaeological wonder, the Terracotta Army, which depicts the armies of Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China. But the ancient city is a gateway to more than this UNESCO World Heritage site.

Cycle the city walls

My husband Mike and I arrive in Xi'an around 7am, well-rested thanks to a private sleeper car on the overnight train from Beijing. We drop our bags at our hotel in the old city and take a short walk to the South Gate of China's most complete city walls. After paying the entry fee, we climb a staircase to the top of the 40ft (12m) walls and rent a tandem bike to cycle around the city walls.



At the North Peak, we spend a half hour taking in the panorama before descending by gondola



Stone pagoda at the holy mountain Huashan

As we pedal the 8.6mi (14km) perimeter above the city, I marvel at the juxtaposition of old and new. Traditional music blares from speakers mounted on top of the Ming-era walls. From a single corner, both the flared gold roof of Guangren Temple — the province's sole Tibetan Buddhist temple — and a slew of modern skyscrapers are visible, while teens pose for selfies in front of the towers.

A sacred peak

The next morning, we catch an 8am bus from the station outside the city's North Gate to Huà Shān, a village two hours away, to hike Mount Huashan, one of the

five sacred mountains in Taoism. We work out there are three ways to reach North Peak, the first summit which is a 3.75mi (6km) hike that climbs roughly 3,000ft (914m) to an elevation of 5,298ft (1,615m).

The most popular route up Mount Huashan follows a network of paved paths and steep stairs that weave among pines and switch back up sheer granite cliffs. After heading to the base of the mountain to purchase entry tickets, we begin our ascent.

We set a leisurely pace, and between breaking for snacks, ogling the undulating valleys, and chatting with a pair of Chinese university students, we reach the top in five or six hours. At the North Peak, we

spend a half hour taking in the panorama before descending by gondola.

Parks and gardens

On our last evening in the city, we head to Daming Palace Heritage Park, just north of the walls. We're too late to visit the museums and restored Tang Dynasty palaces within the gated area, so rent a four-wheel, surrey-style 'Lover's Bike.' As we explore the free section of the park — bouncing over cobbled paths that dart through groves of trees and arc over ponds and streams — we pass families who are also cycling, boating, strolling, and sharing our love for the outdoors in this extraordinary city.

TRIP NOTES

WHEN TO GO:

With mild days and cool nights, shoulder season — September to October and March through May — offers the most pleasant weather for outdoor activities.



Famous
Chongqing
hot pot

EATING

The Chinese food we experience in the West often bears no resemblance to the complex and fascinating flavors, tastes and sensations of authentic Chinese cooking. With great menu variations from region to region, Chinese food is a series of unexpected and pleasing surprises.

5 CHINESE FOOD EXPERIENCES

To get a sense of China's enormously varied menu, Ronan O'Connell eats his way across the country.

Forget about the westernized versions of Chinese food you might have eaten at home. Real Chinese cooking is as diverse and surprising as the rest of China.

All a skewer in Xi'an

The aroma seduces me every time I leave my hotel in downtown Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province in northcentral China. The tantalizing scent is of lamb and beef kebabs, laced with cumin powder and chili, being flame-grilled on the street.

Known as *chuan* (*Chuan*, *yang rou chuan* or *chuan'r*), these popular snacks are sold for as little as US 45c a piece throughout the city's large Muslim Quarter. Alongside Xi'an's iconic Bell Tower, this neighborhood is home to more than 50,000 Hui Muslims.

The recipe and preparation of these basic snacks has barely changed since they were introduced to Xi'an more than 400 years ago by the Hui people, who came from the far northwest of China.

The young street vendor smiles when he sees me approach. I ate his kebabs twice

the day before and he quickly heats up five lamb skewers and we do a deal. Unlike the beef, which has a chewier texture, this lamb is beautifully tender. It has slightly gamey taste that is all but overpowered by the mouth-burning chili and the nuttiness of the cumin.

Paired with an ice-cold beer – these kebabs make you thirsty – it's a recipe for deep satisfaction.

The spice of Sichuan

It's a Friday night in a packed hotpot restaurant in downtown Chongqing, a massive city in central China's Sichuan Province, and lots of my fellow diners are laughing at me. The only foreigner eating here, I've just had a coughing fit after taking my first mouthful of Sichuan hotpot.

To say it's spicy is to say China has a lot of people: redundant.

Chinese hotpot is believed to be more than 1,500 years old and Chongqing is the self-proclaimed hotpot capital of the world, with more than 10,000 hotpot restaurants.

As is typical, this broth is heavy with cardamom, MSG, Sichuan chilies and peppercorns, making it eye-wateringly spicy



Eating hotpot is a very social activity, and I'm here after being invited by two staff members at my hostel. We sit around a large, simmering, communal pot of broth, into which we have dropped a huge variety of raw ingredients, including chicken, bok choy, tofu, shrimp and cheese balls.

As is typical, this broth is heavy with cardamom, MSG, Sichuan chilies and peppercorns, making it eye-wateringly spicy. This heat soaks into every ingredient that is boiled in the broth, ensuring my taste buds swiftly go numb. "That's the best part," my new friend tells me of this unfamiliar physical reaction.

Biscuits in Guangzhou

Dumplings, soup, duck, noodles – there are many foods I associate with China. Biscuits are not one of them. That's why I do a

double take when I see a street vendor selling baked biscuits near the iconic Chen Clan Ancestral Hall temple in Guangzhou (formerly known as Canton) northwest of Hong Kong in Guangdong Province. The elderly vendor tries to sell me a bag of 10 biscuits, but first, I want to try one.

I expect a sugary taste but instead get a savory punch – this is a *ji zai* (chicken biscuit). They don't contain any white meat, but are shaped like a chicken, with their fillings typically a mixture of garlic, salt, sesame, bean curd, ground pepper, and five-spice powder. The outside is crispy, the inside is chewy, and the mixture of savory and sweet flavors is addictive.

These biscuits have been popular in Guangzhou since the mid-1800s, and there are numerous styles, some of which feature pork, cabbage, melon or egg. →



Delicious food in Chengdu



Roasted duck for sale at a market in Tibet

Guangzhou is renowned for its Cantonese snacks, including Portuguese-style egg tarts, fried shrimp dumplings and steamed pork buns. But I'll be back for the chicken biscuits.

Yakking it up in Tibet

"This does not taste like beef," I tell the young waitress. "Not beef – yak," she replies, contradicting what's written on the English language menu in her small restaurant in Songpan Ancient Town, Sichuan Province, on the Tibetan Plateau to the north. I soon learn that up here, beef normally means yak rather than cow.

The Tibetan people love yaks because of their ability to produce milk year-round in this rough, cold environment. While yaks are similar in size to a cow, their meat is much leaner and tougher than beef. Even when slow cooked, like in the *tsam-thuk* Tibetan soup I'm eating, yak is not exactly tender.

This thick, salty soup is Tibetan comfort food, with chunks of both yak meat and yak cheese complemented by radish, onion,

spinach and a hearty dose of tsampa, a barley flour that gives the soup a porridge-like consistency.

It's been a Tibetan staple for centuries, and you can find it throughout the Tibetan areas of China.

Green and natural in Hangzhou

My labor in the fields has helped me work up a thirst. What better way to quench it than with the tea I've just picked myself here in Longjing Tea Village. This cute town, in the hills near Hangzhou in Zhejiang province, has been one of China's most renowned tea plantations for more than 1,000 years. It is here that the highly prized Dragon Well tea originates.

For as little as US \$10, during the harvest season between March and April, visitors can go into Longjing's majestic, terraced tea fields and copy the actions of the local tea pickers. Then, once I fill my small bag with tea leaves, I head to a neighboring tea house to roast them in an iron pan, as is traditional, before sampling the famously delicate, green tea flavor of Dragon Well.

This thick, salty soup is Tibetan comfort food, with chunks of both yak meat and yak cheese



UNEXPECTED

Dragon Well Tea Festival, Longjing

"This is my kind of festival," I tell my tour guide as we recline in armchairs, sipping Longjing tea while looking out across a terraced tea field. There are no loud performances or colorful parades at the Dragon Well Tea Festival. It is decidedly understated, rather like the refined taste of the tea here.

Longjing village, in the eastern province of Zhejiang, has long been one of China's premier tea-growing locations. Most of its plantations are closed to visitors, but during this festival, held over four days during April's harvest season, many open their doors and offer tea-tasting sessions.

Tea lovers come to do a more sophisticated version of a pub crawl, going from one plantation to the next. I lose count of the number of different teas I taste at the three plantations I visit. But, what I can remember is the calm and quiet, unlike any other festival I've attended. **Ronan O'Connell**

Dates: Held over four days during tea harvest season each April.

Tracing the Delectable Journey of Soup Dumplings

Ubiquitous in Chinese cooking, **Christina Ng** goes on the trail of these much-loved morsels in Shanghai, Wuxi, Changzhou and Hangzhou.

Tracking down the *xiaolongbao* – little balls of ground meat, exquisitely wrapped up in semi-translucent dough skin, bobbing in savory broth – is a lip-smacking adventure. Known as soup dumplings in English, you can find every version of these all over Asia – notably at Taiwanese chain restaurant Din Tai Fung. However, their motherland is China.

Shanghai

My dumpling-tasting journey starts in coastal Shanghai, China's biggest city, where traditional *lilong* residences (townhouses connected by a lane) and modern skyscrapers compete for space. Michelin-star restaurants and shabby stalls sit side by side in the alleyways that

weave in and out of the flourishing cityscape. Do not turn your nose up at these stalls, for some harbor the dainty *xiaolongbao* that your heart will ache for as soon as you leave Shanghai. This city is, after all, where many think the *xiaolongbao* was born.

It all began with Huang Mingxian, the owner of Ri Hua Xuan restaurant in the Nanxiang district of Shanghai. He was said to have created these dumplings in the 1870s by adding aspic (double boiled chicken soup cooked with pork skin and made into a jelly) to his pork mince. This is why one bite into the dumpling fills your mouth with a rush of sweet-salty broth.

"What's so delicious about Nanxiang's *xiaolongbao* is the clear broth and gossamer skin," says Madam Fu, a Shanghaiese I spoke to. According to her, even though Shanghai now has plenty of great dumpling places, Nanxiang (the modern name for the Ri Hua Xuan restaurant) still manages to fend off its competitors. "Plus, the dumplings are so dainty," she adds.

It's their petite size that seems to have won the hearts of many. The dumplings started out bigger, and were called the *Nanxiang da rou baozi*, meaning large meat-filled buns from Nanxiang. Huang changed them into the size we know today.



Preparation of tang bao

Customers flock to this restaurant, which also has branches at the Chenghuang Temple and Guyi Garden.

"Shanghai's *xiaolongbao* are all good," says Madam Fu, but admits, "I still prefer the Wuxi ones, which are sweeter and have a hint of soy sauce in the taste."

Wuxi and Changzhou

Less than an hour west from Shanghai by bullet train, Wuxi is quieter than its bustling neighbor; here, a turn into an alley might bring the surprising view of a canal, or the lush greenery of a garden.

It's no wonder that Emperor Qianlong (1711 -1799) fell in love with *xiaolongbao* here. Legend has it that the Chinese Emperor was given the local specialty *xiaolongbao* to try when he was traveling through the region, and immediately took

a liking to them. The *xiaolongbao* of Wuxi became famous throughout China.

Tina Huang, a Changzhou native who now lives in Wuxi, disputes this story of the origins of *xiaolongbao*. She says that it is Changzhou – the city adjacent to Wuxi – where *xiaolongbao* originated, specifically in the Wanhua Teahouse, during the reign of Emperor Daoguang (1821–1850) in the Qing Dynasty. Huang says when the osmanthus flowers bloom and their scents fill the air, she knows it's the season for crabmeat *xiaolongbao*.

"Changzhou dumplings are less sweet than those from Wuxi. In fact, from Changzhou to Shanghai to Wuxi, the dumplings get sweeter and sweeter!" she laughs.

"Wu Xi, formerly called Yi Qin Yuan, is my favorite haunt for *xiaolongbao* in Wuxi," →

Improve your writing, photography, and videos with **Create**





she adds. "It's a hole in the wall but food is cheap and service is fast!" I make a mental note of that for next time.

Hangzhou

In fact, all cities in the Jiangnan region seem to have their own version of *xiaolongbao*. Just over 100mi (176km) southwest of Shanghai and an hour on the bullet train, my dumpling adventure continues in Hangzhou, a city built around the breathtaking West Lake, famed for the tragic legend of Chinese scholar Xu Xian and Madam White Snake.

Hangzhou dumplings are heavily influenced by people from Kaifeng in Henan province, 560mi (900km) northwest of Shanghai. They are not as widely known as those from Shanghai or Wuxi, yet, when savoring them in the poetic surrounds of Hangzhou I feel like I am immersing myself in *wuxia* (Chinese martial heroes) movie.

A tip from a cab driver brings me to Xin Feng Snacks, which he says is the best place to try these dumplings.

Its house special – prawn dumplings –

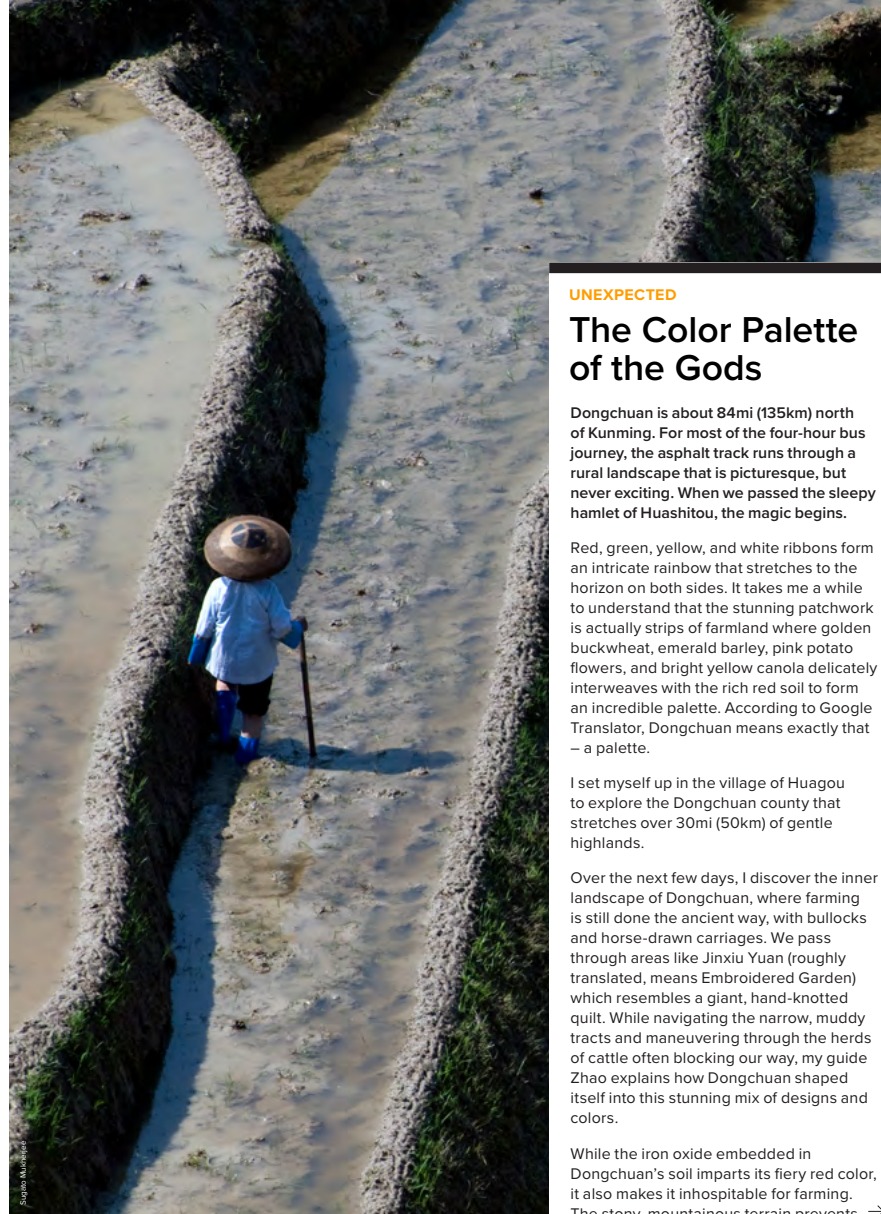
A tip from a cab driver brings me to Xin Feng Snacks, which he says is the best place to try these dumplings

are delicious. I share a communal table with an old couple, feeling a little inadequate as they pick up their dumplings expertly, take a tiny bite and sip the broth. As for me, I scorch my tongue as I take too big a bite, and the ball of meat plops defiantly into my bowl.

Hangzhou natives even have a chant to go with eating *xiaolongbao*: "pick it up gently, move it slowly, first open the 'window', then drink the soup". It loosely means that you should be careful with these dumplings, as the skin is delicate and breaks easily. It's best to nibble off the top first – open the "window" – then sip the soup inside.

I pick up my dumpling again with a few shreds of ginger, dip it into the slightly sour Chinkiang vinegar, put it on my spoon and attempt a nibble. The rich flavor of the filling – a medley of pork and prawn meat mixed in with the creamy broth – bursts forth in my mouth and lingers. The elderly couple at the table gives me a nod of approval, and so does my tummy.

May my dumpling adventure never end.



UNEXPECTED

The Color Palette of the Gods

Dongchuan is about 84mi (135km) north of Kunming. For most of the four-hour bus journey, the asphalt track runs through a rural landscape that is picturesque, but never exciting. When we passed the sleepy hamlet of Huashitou, the magic begins.

Red, green, yellow, and white ribbons form an intricate rainbow that stretches to the horizon on both sides. It takes me a while to understand that the stunning patchwork is actually strips of farmland where golden buckwheat, emerald barley, pink potato flowers, and bright yellow canola delicately interweaves with the rich red soil to form an incredible palette. According to Google Translator, Dongchuan means exactly that – a palette.

I set myself up in the village of Huagou to explore the Dongchuan county that stretches over 30mi (50km) of gentle highlands.

Over the next few days, I discover the inner landscape of Dongchuan, where farming is still done the ancient way, with bullocks and horse-drawn carriages. We pass through areas like Jinxiu Yuan (roughly translated, means Embroidered Garden) which resembles a giant, hand-knotted quilt. While navigating the narrow, muddy tracts and maneuvering through the herds of cattle often blocking our way, my guide Zhao explains how Dongchuan shaped itself into this stunning mix of designs and colors.

While the iron oxide embedded in Dongchuan's soil imparts its fiery red color, it also makes it inhospitable for farming. The stony, mountainous terrain prevents →

croplands from retaining water. For centuries, the local, agro-based community has planted drought-resistant crops. The plots allotted to each agricultural family are scattered across the land – while one plants potatoes, another cultivates wheat. This random allotment has created geometric patterns and brilliant hues in croplands that were once grazing pastures. The farmers sustain this fragile ecosystem through wind turbines that dot the undulating landscape.

We pass a couple of giant windmills and arrive at Beihecun to witness the farming community in their struggle to turn this infertile soil into a polychromatic fairyland. The terraced fields around the small village are filled with water, and farmers wade knee-deep through the mud to plant new crops. "In another three months, this village will turn into a valley of colors, much like you have seen in Jinxiu Yuan," Zhao tells me with a smile.

Later that afternoon, we veer off towards Louxiago, the fabled sunset point of Dongchuan. As the mellow rays bounce off elegant contours of the Louxiago valley (which literally means a gully of fallen, rosy clouds), I understand why it's considered the high point of the Dongchuan experience. I also remember what Zhao told me this morning. "God knocked over his palette and dropped his paint here – Dongchuan is God's own canvas."

Sugato Mukherjee





Zhangye
National Park

China is a vast country, and while many might prefer to take to the skies to traverse it, it's best explored by road. Join our Nomads as they explore very different regions of the country: the remarkable Tea Horse Route – an exciting alternative to the Silk Road, the journey to see Guizhou's giant radio telescope, the mountains and deserts of Gansu and Sichuan, and Yungang's magical grottoes.

Traveling the Ancient Tea Horse Route

Keith Lyons takes an alternative route through China, ditching the Silk Road for the Southern Silk Route.

When the abbot of a Tibetan monastery in Sichuan showed me bricks of black tea stored in a kitchen pantry, it got me thinking about how the addictive substance, first introduced to Tibet in the 7th century, had long been transported over high passes to harsh places too cold to grow tea.

The plan was to pick and process some tea from the original tea-growing region in southwest China, and take the fermented and compressed tea along the ancient Tea Horse Road – the Southern Silk Route – via the eastern Tibetan Himalayas, to one of the oldest teahouses in China.



Pu'er tea factory

Tea Horse Road

You will have heard of the historic Silk Road, the camel-train route linking the East and the West, where goods and ideas were exchanged between the 2nd and 14th centuries. Though less well-known, the Tea Horse Road – or *Cha Ma Gu Dao* – was active from the 7th century until the mid-20th century.

This Southern Silk Route was a network of trails more than 1,850mi (3,000km) in length, from tropical Yunnan in the south, through Tibet and on to India and beyond.

But the caravans of mules and yaks (and hardy porters carrying up to their own weight in loads) didn't just transport blocks of tea, but also salt, silver and silk. One of its greatest deliveries was spreading Buddhism from India to the east.

Jinghong

After an hour's drive through foggy gloom, past endless rubber and banana plantations, from the Xishuangbanna city of Jinghong towards the Myanmar and Laos borders, I still can't make out the telltale rows of contour-planted tea bushes.

I'm still baffled when the driver stops, points me towards a path in the mist, and taps out on his phone translator, 'ancient tea gardens'. There, I am surprised to find a gnarly tree with large leaves, believed to be 800 years old: the king of the tea trees. Tea from this area, Nannuo, is now worth

I'm still baffled when the driver stops, points me towards a path in the mist, and taps out on his phone translator, 'ancient tea gardens'



Chengdu tea house

more than its weight in silver. Cuttings from trees in these Chinese borderlands spread tea cultivation to more than 50 countries.

But I can't pick tea from this protected forest; instead we go to the driver's Hani-minority hamlet, where I sweatily collect basketfuls of shiny, tender leaves from wild trees.

I spread out my tea on round trays to wilt and dry, while I am plied by the driver's father with endless cups of bright orange tea, which is initially bitter, but has a honey aftertaste.

Later, the leaves are tossed into a giant wok, and the villagers set about rolling and shaping the leaves. The slightly bruised pan-roasted strands are finally left in the sun to dry. As I'm due to get on a night bus to Dali, in a 'here's-one-

I-made-earlier' moment, I'm given a bag of recently-dried loose tea which I'll get made into ripe pu'er (pronounced 'poo-erh'), as well as seven frisbee-rounds of tea (known as raw pu'er) bound in rice paper and wrapped in bamboo.

Dali

It takes 15 hours to cover the 384mi (620km) distance by bus from muggy Jinghong to the fresh air of Dali, a change of 4,500ft (1,250m) in elevation. But I'm not exactly elated.

When I arrive in the trade crossroads of Dali city, I am as bruised and as dehydrated as my bulky bag of tea thanks to the bumpy night drive over roads under construction. Dali is famous for the 9th-century Three Pagodas and the Cangshan Mountains sitting above vast Erhai Lake. →

Not far from the backpacker haven of the Old Town, I hand my loose tea over to the boss of a tea factory, to be transformed into something more portable and less bitter by the process of accelerated fermentation and aging developed in the Dali area. My tea is added to a pile of leaves, which will be kept moist and warm. When should I come back? I ask. A couple of months, he replies.

When I return, my precious tea has been reduced to what looks like compost. The dark material is carefully measured, then steamed, and finally pressed into a small convex dome. In this post-fermentation form, unlike green tea, this low-caffeine tea will get better – and more valuable – as it ages.

Shaxi

I take my domes of compressed tea from the tea growing and processing areas to the next major trade hub on the Tea Horse Road, hidden away a couple of hours north of Dali, via the main town of Jianchuan. As the minivan navigates the winding road, I catch glimpses of the patchwork fields as we descend into the so-called ‘last unspoiled valley in China’.

Later that balmy evening, I watch a

The dark material is carefully measured, then steamed, and finally pressed into a small convex dome

caravan of mules, loaded with burlap sacks strapped to wooden saddles, clip-clop by on the cobblestones of Shaxi’s market square, and I think about what I might be able to trade my tea for.

Looking out through the coin-shaped, carved lattice screen windows – symbolizing prosperity – I’m reminded how this restored staging post is too cold to grow tea, so my goods should be more valuable here. “How about some medicinal plants,” suggests my Bai-minority food guide Li Han Mei (Apple), “Or matsutake mushrooms, if they are in season?”

After being lulled by the hypnotic sounds of a village orchestra at the Old Theater Inn, a converted theater and shrine, owner Chris suggests exchanging my tea for packhorse-couriered Mapingguan honey, or a local delicacy ham. “If you have enough tea, you might be able to get a small spotted heirloom pig.”

Instead, the next day I decide to give away some of my tea fortune. At a ramshackle Ouyang merchant courtyard, where some of the last muleteers once lived, I press a round of tea upon the historical building’s caretaker; and after much insistence, he accepts, only to load me up with pears for the trip onward to Lijiang, only a couple of hours away by bus due to the new tunnel and bridge highway from Jianchuan.

Lijiang

The alleyway and bridge maze of the UNESCO World Heritage Old Town of Lijiang possibly has the highest density of tea merchants in China packed into its 3mi² (8km²) unwalled ancient city. I search the stone and wood labyrinth for two things vital for making the perfect brew: one pricey, the other priceless.

Passing oxblood wooden-paneled shopfronts, the weathered Big Stone Bridge, and the former Mufu Palace, I



Drying tea leaves of pu'er tea

finally find a locally made black clay teapot at the bustling Zhongyi Market.

I walk upstream from the town’s landmark water wheels to the picture-perfect Black Dragon Pool, where a five-arch bridge, pavilion and the distant 18,400ft (5,600m) high Jade Dragon Snow Mountain are reflected in the pond. From an artesian aquifer, I fill two bottles with the glacial meltwater, wondering if Kublai Khan’s soldiers did the same in 1253, or if horsemen stopped here on their supply missions to Tibet and India during the Second Sino-Japanese War, between 1937 to 1945.

Carrying my water, I am stopped by an old man who speaks to me first in Russian, then Mandarin. Qu Mao Hong, who was born in the 1940s, takes me up Lion Hill to see the remnants of the Tea Horse Road; the conglomerate stone worn down by shoes and hooves. In the distance,



Shangri-la Old Town

beyond the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain and Tiger Leaping Gorge, is my next destination, Shangri-la, the first Tibetan town on the way to Lhasa.

Shangri-la

In centuries past it took longer than a week to get from Lijiang to Shangri-la, via the Yangtze River crossing point at Shigu, but the road reduces the 124mi (200km) trip to fewer than four hours – and travel times will be halved when a new railway and highway is completed by 2021.

As we sit around the stove in the Tibetan Garden Inn, in Shangri-la’s old town – at 10,500 feet (3,200m) – my Tibetan host Bao, who got me hooked on the local way of drinking tea when I first stayed here more than a decade ago, asks the question he knows I can’t refuse. “Have some *suoyu cha* (yak-butter tea)?”

Fragments of my ripe *pu’er* tea have →

Travel smart with our **Safety** advice



Shaxi Market Square



Chengdu tea house

Getty Images / Paul & Bruno Wernick

been added to a simmering kettle, and then the smoky, bitter brew is poured into a wooden cylindrical tube, and churned with a dollop of yak butter (from summer grasslands near his father's village) and more than a pinch of salt.

"He likes Tibetan tea," Bao proudly tells a couple visiting from Beijing. I slurp the salty, murky liquid from a wooden bowl, feeling the grease lining my gullet, as they look on in horror, wondering how anyone could stomach tea that has been adulterated with fat and lactose. When my second bowl is partly finished, I do something else which confounds the tourists. Adding spoonfuls of roasted barley flour – called *tsampa*. I use my middle finger to combine it with the remaining yak butter tea, rotating the bowl as Bao has shown me, and squeezing the crumbly mix into a pale brown-flecked solid oval. I sample the hand-kneaded ball. The slightly rancid taste of yak butter has gone; instead, the *tsampa* is nutty and malty, similar to hot milk on breakfast cereal.

"*Hao chi ma?* (Tastes okay?)," the Beijing

man, suddenly even more pale-looking, asks hesitantly. "*Fei chang hao chi* (Unusually delicious)," I reply.

Chengdu

From Shangri-la, the 745mi (1,200km) overland route through Sichuan Tibetan areas takes in Xiangcheng, Litang, and Kangding, a journey of three days to a week to Chengdu by public bus and shared 4WDs, depending on stopovers at Yading Nature Reserve and Tagong grasslands.

"Chengdu has more tea houses than sunny days," my friend Wei tells me when we meet by Mao's statue in Sichuan's capital, known for its cloudy days, lazy pandas and mouth-numbing peppercorn.

The Chengdu native had previously introduced me to the popular People's Park Heming teahouse, where an acrobatic tea master deftly poured kung-fu tea from a long spout, while shoe-shiners and ear-cleaners roamed among card-playing patrons. Wei had taken me to Yuelai chaguan for an afternoon masked Sichuan opera, and the incense-shrouded Wenshu temple teahouse, where we nibbled bears' paws (thankfully vegetarian) in the shade of giant bamboo.

With the promise of a new place to try my tea, he shows me to one of the oldest surviving teahouses in China, in the town of Pengzhen just outside Chengdu.

Amidst shafts of light, illuminating faded Communist propaganda, and the pipe smoke of mahjong players, Guanying teahouse probably has the oldest surviving men in China (some sporting blue Mao suits, sipping jasmine tea in lidded cups).

Wei breaks off a layer of my raw *pu'er* and pours hot water from a wicker Thermos flask, watched by a couple of octogenarians sitting beside us. I am curious to know the veterans verdict on my grassy green, slightly bitter tea, so Wei pours them steaming tumblers. A wizened 81-year-old perks up, breaks into a grin and gives the thumbs up. "*Bu cuo* (Not bad)!"

TRIP NOTES

While you can fly from Jinghong to Dali, Lijiang or Chengdu, the best way to experience the Tea Horse Road is overland, using day and overnight public buses. You can also catch a train between Dali and Lijiang, or hire a car and self-drive, take a private car, see it on foot by hiking, and even exploring on horseback.



Getty Images / Frederic L. Brown

UNFORGETTABLE

Qingdao International Beer Festival

When a well-groomed woman in a red form-fitting dress, sidles up to me at the Qingdao railway station and offers me a free drink, my 'stranger-danger' alarm goes off. According to the clock tower, the sun isn't yet over the yardarm. I succumb to the charms of my mid-morning solicitor, and am offered a plastic glass filled with chilled pale lager. "*Gan Bei*," says the woman, who I discover is called Joy. "It means bottoms up." I oblige.

Freshly poured beers are thrust into my hands, as I am peppered with new tidbits about this seaside beer festival, which started in 1991. Dubbed Asia's Oktoberfest, visitors flock to enjoy gala parades and performances, drink in the tents of local and global breweries late into the night while snacking on seafood and bratwurst. If you want to see China at its messiest, visit Qingdao Beer Festival to 'Gan Bei' with the world. *Keith Lyons*

Dates: The Qingdao International Beer Festival takes place throughout August.

Getting there: It is a short taxi ride from Hongdao Station to the main festival venues; Golden Sands Beach, Laoshan Beer City, and Century Square.

ET Phone China: Guizhou's Alien-searching Radar Dish

While traveling through the Chinese province of Guizhou, **Jamie Fullerton** visits the world's biggest radio telescope.

Is there life outside the confines of Earth's atmosphere? Will aliens ever attempt to make contact with us? If the answer to both questions is yes, there's a chance that any first contact with our species will be via an enormous wok-shaped metal structure that has been dominating the landscape in China's rural Guizhou Province, which was switched on in 2017.

The 500 Meter Aperture Spherical Telescope (FAST) is the biggest radio telescope in the world, and making way for the huge pan (which, as its name suggests, is half a mile wide), meant 9,000 locals

Although its design might suggest that the mission is to cook the world's biggest stir-fry, it is in fact part of China's push to become a space-exploring superpower



FAST, Pingtang

were relocated from Guizhou's green Pingtang County valleys.

Although its design might suggest that the mission is to cook the world's biggest stir-fry, it is in fact part of China's push to become a space-exploring superpower. FAST is designed to map space and to listen for signals from aliens.

The 110mi (180km) drive to the dish from Guiyang, Guizhou's capital city, is not the most futuristic experience – but is rather lovely. The province is one of China's poorest, and, although alien tourism is emerging here, farming is the dominant industry.

After passing a petrol station quirkily designed to resemble a circular spacecraft, our driver slows to allow an elderly lady to cross the newly laid road cutting through the countryside. A large buffalo obediently follows the wicker basket bound to her back.

Things get more surreal in the theme

park-like visitors' center. Models of humanoid aliens and whoosh-bang motion sensor-based light shows teach visitors about planets. The notion that the truth is very much out there is stoked with plenty of depictions of bulbous-headed Martians.

"Aliens have probably been messaging us for decades, but we missed them," a sign confidently declares. Another reads: "Although the US has UFO monopoly, they don't have any privilege".

It is the climb to the mouth of the dish, though, that really ignites the imagination. With an electronic equipment exclusion zone around the structure strictly enforced, I hand over my phone and digital camera before being bussed through roller-coaster valley roads to FAST.

A lung-busting staircase climb, combined with the gasp-inducing first sight of the dish, exhausts me. Plonked in the base of a tranquil, tree-covered valley and shrouded in mist, FAST is a spectacularly eerie vision.

China's President Xi Jinping called the dish the country's "Eye in the sky", and the sense of national pride in it is strong here. Mr Fu, a 60-year-old military-supply worker standing next to me, is awestruck. "I've never seen such a big iron pan," he says. "The US has a similar one, but this is way bigger."

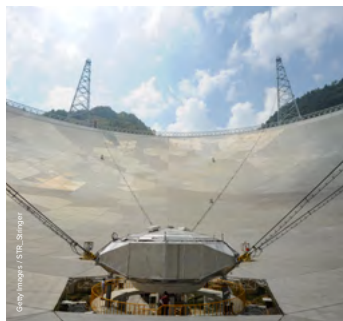
Later, back in the visitors' center, the question of the existence of aliens is being discussed among the staff. Mrs Zhu used to be a farmer but now works here as a cleaner. For many farmers, FAST has meant stressful forced relocation, for others it has created steady new jobs.

"There might be aliens out there," Mrs Zhu says, not looking particularly bothered about whether there are or not. "But that's the government's business. Even if they found one, they wouldn't tell us."

She swipes her hand over a sensor, bringing up an image of Jupiter on the wall projection in front of her.

TRIP NOTES

Various group tours visit FAST on day trips from Guiyang. You must buy tickets in person, if not as part of a tour. Contact the FAST ticket office (+86 0854 4831 788, Mandarin language only) for the latest entry ticket prices. If you can't speak Mandarin, ask your accommodation staff to help out.



The Backroads of Gansu and Sichuan

Dave Stamboulis finds phenomenal mountain and desert landscapes, and a motley collection of other unexpected experiences in China's so-called 'Wild West.'

We stand awestruck, gazing out at 19,100ft (5,820m) Zhara Lhatse – also known as Yala Snow Mountain – a towering and snowcapped triangular peak considered holy by local Tibetans. In the west of Sichuan Province, some 250mi (400km) from Chengdu and about eight to nine hours by road, the peak protrudes high above the dry grasslands below, and we feel like we're in an extraordinary, living landscape painting.

Escaping China's crowded eastern regions, my wife Raquel and I have headed to its 'Wild West,' the provinces of Sichuan and Gansu, in search of open spaces for trekking, and Tibetan culture without the permits, hassle or expense of traveling to Tibet proper.

Trekking in Tagong

Despite feeling a million miles from anywhere, it's pretty simple to get to China's mountain paradise in Tagong. A comfortable bus ride of four to five hours from Chengdu brings us to Danba, an ancient Tibetan stone tower village where we spend the night in an ethnic homestay. Then it's a four-hour minivan ride to Tagong, a small dusty town on the edge of the grasslands, busy with Tibetan pilgrims spinning prayer wheels and counting prayer beads as they make kora, a clockwise spiritual pilgrimage around the golden Lhagang Monastery.

We do our own kora around the grasslands, where an array of hiking trails all head out to the same direction, taking us to Ser Gergyo nunnery, several monasteries, and to the base of the peaks. From here, you can also climb up to high alpine lakes and do a three-day trek back out towards the road to Chengdu.

We're completely alone here, save for the occasional long-haired Khampa Tibetan cowboy or nun in a traditional monastic robe passing by, heading for Ser Gergyo Ani Gompa, a nunnery at the base of a mountain, covered in Tibetan scripture stones and with colorful prayer flags fluttering in the wind.

Yarchen Gar*

Leaving Tagong, we head north towards Langmusi. After five hours and 170mi (275km), we pass through Garze, the largest



Tagong Temple, Sichuan Province

TRIP NOTES

*WHAT TO DO IF YOU'RE TOLD YARCHEN GAR IS CLOSED:

Tour agencies in Chengdu or online may say the nunnery is a no-go for travelers, but the Chinese authorities are actually building up the complex for tourism, as opposed to tearing it down (such as the case with Larung Gar), so you just need to get yourself to Garze (also known as Ganzi), where public minibuses leave from when full each morning.

town in the region. Here, we make the best decision of our trip – to take a three-hour detour in a shared minivan, to Yarchen Gar, a nunnery on an island at 13,100ft (4,000m), home to the world's largest gathering of practicing Tibetan Buddhists.

We arrive in this magical place during a spring snowstorm, and are the only foreign visitors, drawing curious stares and polite smiles from hundreds of maroon-robed nuns, who walk through the snowflakes impervious to the freezing temperatures.

Some 10,000 nuns live here without electricity or running water in cramped quarters, but they, and the thousands of monks who reside just off the island, don't

seem to mind, as it's one of the last places left in China where Tibetan Buddhism is allowed to flourish.

They pack the main monastery complex each morning to listen to the teachings of a revered *tulku* (reincarnated lama). We sit in silence as the lama chants, mesmerized by the sea of robes around us.

Langmusi

Further north, some 400mi (650km) and 15 hours by bus, with a necessary overnight stop in the town of Aba (known in Chinese as Maerkang), and straddling the Sichuan-Gansu border, we reach Langmusi. We do massive double takes at the scenery here, →



Horse trekking



and feel like we're in the European Alps or Tyrolean Dolomites, but while it might look like a slice of Bavaria, with its verdant hills framed by jagged peaks, Langmusi is very much China.

Hui Chinese Muslims sell freshly baked flat bread and hand-pulled long noodles in the town square, and local horsemen sidle up to us to ask if we want to go horse trekking. Giddy from either the altitude or the views of mighty 13,800ft (4,200m) Mount Huagai (Mount Huagaishan) rising above town, we make plans to head to its summit the following day, but rising at dawn, our plans are thwarted by a heavy blizzard. Our spirits aren't dampened though, as it's like having a white Christmas in April, with the entire town and vertical landscape bathed in a coat of fresh snow.

Zhangye and Mati Temples

From Langmusi we take a five-hour bus trip 240mi (390km) to Langzhou, then hop aboard a train to Zhangye (four hours via high-speed train).

Zhangye is a modern city that is laid out on a grid, and wandering the backstreets, we are invited by several toothless old men into small teahouses, where we are served

the regional specialty *ba bao cha* (eight treasure tea) — a sweet and flavor-packed Muslim fruit tea that comes with dried longan, Chinese dates, rock sugar, goji berries and spices.

We take a day trip via a 1.5-hour bus ride to the temples of Mati, to see ancient caves carved high up into rock faces, requiring a bit of renouncing vertigo to climb. With the Qianlan Mountains in the background, it's a marvelous spot, but a few signs warning us of bears in the area keeps us from exploring further.

We're keen to do more hiking here, but Danxia's Rainbow Mountains, formally known as Zhangye National Geopark, are calling.

Danxia's rainbow mountains

An hour on a local bus takes us 20mi (32km) from Zhangye to the geopark from where we jump on a 10-minute eco-shuttle which brings us into this desertscape, with wind-eroded layered sandstone formations of vivid contrasting colors as far as the eye can see.

We are dazzled by the kaleidoscopic canyons surrounding us, and we smile at each other, knowing that our wild west sojourn has been completely fulfilled.

We're completely alone here, save for the occasional long-haired Khampa Tibetan cowboy or nun in a traditional monastic robe



UNMISSABLE

Feeling Small in Leshan

I'm on a road trip with my husband Charlie and our goofy Chinese rescue dog Hei-Hei. Over the course of a week, we drive from China's bustling northern capital of Beijing to the sun-soaked southern paradise of Lijiang, Yunnan Province.

About halfway through our adventure we enter Sichuan province, and head to Leshan, a city of 3.2 million (small by Chinese standards).

A figurative (and literally huge) selling point for us is the Giant Buddha of Leshan, a UNESCO World Heritage site. This 233ft-tall (71m) image of Buddha was carved into the Cretaceous red sandstones cliff at the confluence of the Min and Dadu Rivers between 713 and 803 AD. Visitors can climb to the Buddha's head and ogle his earlobes, which are taller than most adults, before descending to his gigantic toes, or see Buddha on a float-by river cruise.

Inside Leshan Giant Buddha Scenic Area we marvel at landscaped gardens, trickling fountains, and ancient stone carvings as we make our way up the steps to the Buddha's head. Visitors can surround the head from three sides.

We take a hair-raising Tuk-Tuk ride back down and board the ferry from the bottom, where we see the Buddha in all his glory from this unique vantage point. *Crystal Wilde*

Exploring the Yungang Grottoes and Hanging Monastery

Esme Fox takes a road trip from Beijing to Datong and discovers ancient and thrilling architecture.

A road trip from Beijing to Datong

Along with my husband and a couple of friends who are living and teaching in Beijing, we take a road trip from Beijing to the gravity-defying Hanging Monastery, which lies around 217mi (350km) to the west, close to the border with Inner Mongolia.

The journey to the Hanging Monastery is supposed to take four hours, but after a couple of hours on the highway, we aren't making much progress because of the traffic and the GPS, which keeps sending us the wrong way.

The GPS directs us to turn off onto a windy mountain pass, where the Hanging Monastery supposedly sits just beyond. We hit a road block when we get stuck between two trucks hauling gravel back and forth for road works. When we finally get free, I study the map closer and realize that we aren't far from the Yungang Grottoes, so we take a brief detour to get there. The four-hour trip ends up taking us eight hours.

Marveling at Yungang Grottoes

The Yungang Grottoes are a complex of caves, housing some of the best Buddhist cave art from the 5th and 6th centuries and



Yungang Grottoes



Hanging Monastery

are on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

The 252 caves are filled with 51,000 statues chiseled from the rock, and tower far above our heads. Some reach up to 55.7ft (17m) in height. We spend several hours exploring the caves, being dwarfed by the statues.

We head to the nearby city of Datong for the night, to enjoy traditional Chinese hotpot, cooking our meat and vegetables ourselves at the table in a bubbling wok.

Hiking up to Hanging Monastery

The next morning, armed with directions and maps from our hotel staff, we travel one hour and 20 minutes from Datong, 52mi (85km), to the Hanging Monastery.

Looking up at the rock face of Hengshan Mountain, the ancient Hanging Monastery appears to cling precariously to the sheer precipice.

The temple, which is shaped like a sleeping dragon, is held up by nothing more than spindly wooden poles.

Throng of visitors make their way up

the mountain by a steep path and flights of stairs, forming a long thin ribbon of color all the way to the top. As I walk, I notice that most of the faces around me are Chinese – very few foreign travelers seem to have made the trip.

The construction of the temple was believed to have been started by a monk named Liao Ran and built from 368 to 534 AD. It was added to over the next 1,400 years and restored in the 1900s. It comprises 40 halls and long narrow corridors, built on cliffs that are more than 246ft (75m) high. This almost impossible architectural feat is the only temple dedicated to three religions – Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.

With each step, the antique wooden stairs creak beneath the hundreds of pounding feet and it feels as if the dragon stirs. At the entrance to the temple, I become aware of the sheer drop to my right – just a solitary bamboo handrail is between me and the cliff edge.

Now closer, I can clearly make out the

monastery's ornate pagoda-style yellow and green roof tiles – and to my horror, feel the gentle sway of the entire structure beneath my feet, and hear the soft crunch of the wooden poles – the only things holding us up – moving against the rock.

Standing at over 98ft (30m) tall, the temple is built over three levels, joined by old rickety wooden staircases. Slowly, I am carried along with the tide of people from room to room, along passages chiseled directly into the cliff face, peering into musty spaces filled with intricate religious statues and icons. Finally, I reach the other side of the gravity-defying construction and make my way back down the mountain.

Safely back on the ground, I look up again and can just about see the temple gently swaying from side to side. With the weight of so many people inside, it's hard to believe this 1,500-year-old temple is still standing. I feel lucky to have walked inside this ancient treasure and wonder how long it will stay upright.

TRIP NOTES

HOW TO HIRE

A CAR IN CHINA:

There are a couple of ways you can do a Chinese road trip, if you don't have friends who own a car. The first is to hire a car with a driver – there are various local travel companies in Beijing that offer this service. The second option is to pre-book a car through an international company such as Avis or Hertz, then obtain a provisional Chinese driver's license once you're there. You can apply for this directly at the airport when you arrive in Beijing and it will just take a few hours.

TRIP NOTES

WHERE TO STAY IN DATONG:

There are a number of accommodation options available in Datong, but not too many around the Hanging Monastery or the Grottoes. They range from budget inns to four-star hotels.



ADVENTURE & NATURE

Wanfenglin

In Sichuan Province, a Nomad discovers what he describes as heaven on earth. We explore the Great Wall of China from under the water, and see incredible karst formations without the crowds at the Forest of Ten Thousand Peaks. And, who knew you could surf in China, or experience Yosemite-like scenery in China's far western province of Xinjiang?

JIUZHAGOU NATIONAL PARK: ALPINE WONDER

Ronan O'Connell visits an alternative to Hunan's popular Zhangjiajie, a mountain wonderland in Sichuan Province famed for its natural beauty.

A Tibetan prayer wheel spins slowly in a breeze that's drifted across a crystalline lake, down from a snowy mountain and through an alpine forest that's home to giant pandas. Is this the famed *Tian*? For more than 2,000 years, the Chinese have puzzled over *Tian* (which translates to Heaven), one of the central concepts of Confucianism, and believed to be the place from where the world is controlled.

Examine Chinese art dating back millennia and you'll see one thread running through it – the glorification of the country's natural gifts; mountains, lakes, forests and rivers. Yet, for most travelers, expectations of China are dominated by thoughts of colossal cities, nests of skyscrapers, vast highways and crowds.

Many people are shocked when, after asking for advice on visiting China, I tell them to head to its national parks. None of these protected natural areas is more beautiful than Jiuzhaigou. This is my idea of *Tian*.

The 280mi (450km) bus trip here from Chengdu, the nearest major city, takes nearly 10 hours. The seats are cramped



and the roads are bumpy. The scenery, however, grows increasingly spectacular the closer we come to Jiuzhaigou. When we finally arrive, the length and arduous nature of the trip heightens the sense that I am somewhere truly remote and untouched.

Jiuzhaigou is a paradise that has been lost and found more than once

A fiercely protected national park

Spread across 72,000ha, on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau in Sichuan Province, Jiuzhaigou National Park boasts more than 100 lakes and waterfalls across three connected valleys. It is the most beautiful place I've seen in more than a

dozen trips to China. It is one of the most visited national parks among Chinese visitors but is largely overlooked by foreign travelers who instead visit Zhangjiajie National Park, 466mi (750km) southeast in Hunan Province.

Jiuzhaigou is a paradise that has been lost and found more than once. More than 2,000 years ago, Tibetan and Qiang tribespeople discovered this breathtaking valley with its pristine lakes, dramatic waterfalls, dense coniferous forests, limestone terraces, soaring mountains and a huge diversity of rare flora and fauna.

They created an idyllic lifestyle, prospering off this fertile land.

Then, in 1975, modernity encroached. This paradise was devastated by seven years of heavy logging. In 1982, Jiuzhaigou was saved from destruction when it became one of China's first protected national parks. Strict environmental conservation was introduced, roads were built to accommodate a limited number of tour buses, and more than 31mi (50km) of wooden walkways were constructed to let visitors stroll the most scenic routes through the park.



SEEK EXPERIENCES



A unique culture

Jiuzhaigou's cultural heritage has been safeguarded, too. About 1,000 Tibetan and Qiang people still live in nine villages across the park. These settlements are wonderfully authentic, decorated by rainbow-like clusters of Tibetan prayer flags, centered around small groups of wooden buildings, almost every inch of which are covered by complex, hand-painted Tibetan motifs.

I learn just how friendly the locals are when I leave the walkway for Shuzheng Village. I've hiked about 4mi (6.5km) along the scenic path entering the park's main gate, and am intrigued to explore the closest settlement to the entrance.

I encounter a group of children bouncing a ball. Fascinated by my relatively tall height, one girl asks me in broken English if

I play basketball. I say that I do. She follows up with: "You know Yao Ming?" When I nod, she runs off, yelling excitedly, clearly having misunderstood my reply, perhaps assuming the Chinese basketball star and I are close friends when I simply know of him.

Whether this miscommunication has offered me celebrity-by-association status, or the villagers are just really amiable, I'm ushered into a Tibetan home and gifted a VIP feast of barley wine and yak stew. After the meal, my host family asks their two daughters to perform for me. Wearing bright, intricately embroidered dresses, they do a short dance which, I understand, is customary to welcome guests to a Tibetan home.

With a full belly, I wave the family goodbye and rejoin the walkway. It is

I sit on a bench next to this natural wonder for half an hour and just stare

a cold but sunny day in April. Spring is bringing Jiuzhaigou back to life after the harsh winter associated with an altitude that ranges between 6,500ft (2,000m) and 14,700ft (4,500m) across the park. The scenery I pass is majestic. The walkway weaving through lush, green forests and skirting a series of small lakes, with water so translucent it almost seems unreal. Yet, I still haven't seen the park's most famed sites.

Less than a mile after leaving the village on foot I arrive at Reed Lake. This winding, aqua-blue body of water pierces a field of tall, brown reeds, creating an enchanting contrast of color, shape and texture. I hike on and on and on. The walkway takes me along the edge of Sparkling Lake, Lying Dragon Lake and then to one of the largest lakes in the park, Shuzheng. I'm gobsmacked by the magnificence of Tiger, Rhinoceros and Mirror lakes, and Nuorilang waterfall.

Nuorilang waterfall

The latter halts me in my stride. Reputedly the world's widest limestone waterfall, it is cloaked in vegetation. Water cascades from beneath the plants and over its precipice, creating a uniquely dramatic spectacle. I sit on a bench next to this natural wonder for half an hour and simply stare. Meanwhile, birds are swooping over the waterfall – Jiuzhaigou is home to more than 200 bird species – and somewhere in the old-growth forests behind it, hide two endangered animals, the giant panda and the Sichuan takin, which looks like a cross between a goat and a moose.

A remote destination

During my two days following the scenic walkways, I hike more than 40mi (65km), while tour buses frequently whiz past me on the adjacent road. For a small fee, travelers can hop on and off these shuttles. Many Chinese visitors prefer being driven between each beauty spot to the lengthy



walks involved. But it took me a long time to get to Jiuzhaigou, so I'm in no rush.

Three days later, with aching legs, I treat myself by ditching the 10-hour bus trip and instead take a 45-minute flight back to Chengdu. I check out of my hotel – there are more than a dozen ranging from cheap to fancy in a small town next to the park's entrance – and catch a 90-minute bus ride to Jiuzhai Huanglong Airport. As my plane ascends into the sky, I peer out the window to get a final glimpse of Jiuzhaigou. I'm in the heavens looking down at Heaven.

Into the Deep: Scuba Diving the Great Wall of China

Jamie Fullerton leaves the well-worn path to explore the popular landmark from under water.

Each year in northeast China, more than 10 million visitors — many cascading from coaches before following flag-wielding tour leaders — arrive to explore various sections of the Great Wall of China.

Unfortunately, it is now possible to scoff at a Burger King Whopper or slurp a Starbucks cappuccino before climbing the most popular sections of the ancient, 13,000mi-long (21,000km) structure, the origins of which date back to the 7th century BC. Adapted by various dynasties over the centuries, largely to keep marauding forces attacking from north of China at bay, the wall is one of the most impressive architectural feats ever achieved.

It's very easy to travel to the Great Wall in a minivan from Beijing before walking along it for a few hours taking photos. However, few are aware that they are also allowed to scuba dive through some of its turrets underwater.

In 1976, the Panjiakou Reservoir, about 100mi (160km) northeast of Beijing, was built to provide a new water source for the capital following an earthquake that caused water supply infrastructure damage. Forming the new body of water meant submerging a section of the Great Wall. The result is the bizarre sight of a craggy wall section, created during China's Ming dynasty (1368 to 1644), plunging into the murky grey-green reservoir, then rising from the water 330ft (100m) away.

The site is now a mecca for scuba divers, surely representing one of the most unique travel experiences in Asia. However, with

dives here rarely going deeper than 55ft (17m) underwater, dive trips are suitable for those with PADI Open Water certificates.

"The Great Wall of China is the only Wonder of the World that you can actually dive," says Steven Schwankert, the New Jersey-born founder of SinoScuba, a dive company that takes around 50 divers a year to the site.

After a drive of about three hours from Beijing, in a van heaving under the weight of air tanks, Schwankert and I arrive at Panjiakou. It's an eerily impressive place, the vast reservoir flanked by hills dotted with ancient Great Wall watch towers. Historians believe that this section of the wall was built during the Ming dynasty and was adapted in the 1570s by Qi Jiguang, an army commander.

Historian William Lindesay, who has walked the Great Wall in its entirety, explains

Sections of the Great Wall visible above and below the surface at the Panjiakou Reservoir

that much of the wall here was damaged in the 1930s during the Second Sino-Japanese War. "The wall section occupied the high ground then, it was useful even in the age of mechanical warfare," he says. "Any ground army would have had to pass through the mountain via those passes. They were strongly fortified and in good repair since the Ming dynasty — the towers had ready-made garrison posts for machine gunners and the like."

Now, all is peaceful here. Fishermen stroll by, carrying plastic bags stuffed with flipping fish. We take a small, smoke-burping fishing boat to the submerged wall section and tool up on the wooden planks of a rustic restaurant, raised above the drink by stilt-like wooden poles.

There are few signs of marine life beyond the occasional dead fish head floating by. Schwankert says that there are a few fish around here, lucky escapees from nearby keep nets. "You can be diving next to the wall and suddenly see a flash of scales," he says.

We walk into the cold water, slowly following the uneven rubbly wall as it disappears into the murk. "Diving the wall,

getting this 360-degree view, really makes the structure feel more human," Schwankert says before we descend. "You get a sense that people built it, that people were stationed on it."

We hold onto the wall as we go under the surface, looking down through our masks at the utter blackness beneath us. The bricks are slimy, and occasionally I see small shrimp ambling on them.

Having walked on the Great Wall many times, it is surreal to now be floating next to it.

We reach an archway and I follow Schwankert as he propels himself through the shadowy gap between the bricks. Archways such as these are rare on the wall — they were considered points of weakness when defending against marauders so were rarely built. The luck of them being here creates a doubly unique experience, among the fridge-cold chill of the reservoir water.

I surface feeling exhilarated, unsure if I'll be able to enjoy a conventional day trip to the Great Wall again. I ask if we can return to repeat the dive soon. Schwankert explains that even further down there is a submerged village and train bridge that he is yet to visit.

TRIP NOTES

To book a Great Wall dive trip contact Steven Schwankert at SinoScuba via email: steven@sinoscuba.com. Trips cost from 1,999 yuan; contact SinoScuba for options.



Jamie Fullerton and dive master Steven Schwankert



Sections of the Great Wall visible above and below the surface at the Panjiakou Reservoir

TRIP NOTES

TRAVEL INSURANCE FOR SCUBA DIVING: It's important to check you've purchased the right level of travel insurance cover and have the appropriate qualifications for scuba diving before you leave home. Still not sure if you're covered? Check your policy details or contact us.

An Undiscovered Alternative to Yangshuo

Tess Humphrys discovers the Forest of Ten Thousand Peaks in Wanfenglin, an alternative to the popular karst formations in Yangshuo.

It's a warm evening in China's Guanxi Province, and the sky is slowly turning from brilliant blue to a delicate pale pink. I'm walking along a small river fringed with banana and pomegranate trees. Cicadas hum loudly, the only soundtrack to my evening stroll.

On either side of the valley, the setting sun illuminates the karst hills that rise from the horizon like humps on a sleeping dragon's back. I'm in the heart of Wanfenglin, the undiscovered alternative to Yangshuo for lovers of beautiful karst landscapes.

I awake early the next day, ready to explore. It's a glorious morning – where the peaks were a moody dark green the night before, today they are emerald. Literally translating to Forest of Ten Thousand Peaks, Wanfenglin is one of China's largest

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE:

Xingyi, the nearest city, is 6mi (10km) north of the karst hill area. Xingyi is most easily accessed via a 140mi (230km), four-hour bus ride from the tourist hub of Anshun. Xingyi is also on the Kunming to Nanning train line.

OTHER PLACES TO GO NEARBY:

Wanfenglin is 12mi (20km) from the Maling River Gorge, famous for its 300ft (91m) high waterfalls and ancient canyon geology.



areas of karst landscape, famed (in China at least), for its tower-like fenglin formations.

Together with the peaks in Yangshuo, Wanfenglin is part of a huge area of karst scenery that stretches from the western Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau to the eastern Guangxi Basin. These iconic landscapes are so unique that they have been included on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

While the karst formations in Wanfenglin might not quite match those of Yangshuo for height and sheer spectacle, this area does have what Yangshuo lost long ago – the feeling of being well off the international tourist trail.

I'm staying in a beautiful guesthouse in Upper Nahui Village, nestled amidst the hills and one of a number of small settlements dotted around Wanfenglin. The villages have been home to China's Bouyei people for 300 years. Nowadays, while people still make a living from traditional farming, many families have opened hotels and restaurants to serve visitors who come from around China.

After a breakfast of noodle soup, complete with a fried egg and spicy chili pepper on top, I walk along the river to General Bridge, a hub of restaurants and shops. I pass local people selling produce

– huge bags of dried mushrooms, peanuts and other unidentifiable products line the path, their sellers eating breakfast or playing cards between customers.

A pair of elderly ladies selling steamed buns smiles shyly at me, giggling as I grin back. They don't see many foreigners here and my presence causes excitement and confusion in equal measure.

I'd been told by the guesthouse owner that it's easy to rent a bicycle or electric motorbike, and in General Bridge I find plenty of rental options. I resist the temptation to rent a golf buggy and instead go for a sporty-looking pink e-bike (as the →





Wanfenglin stalls

electric motorbikes are called in China). It costs me less than US \$10 for the day, complete with the assurance that it is fully charged and can travel up to 37mi (60km). I set out for a day of exploration, the wind cooling me as I ride. The freedom is wonderful – it's a rarity in China to be able to travel alone. Many of the country's scenic areas have entrance fees, and visitors are obliged to ride on shuttle buses that plough pre-defined routes. Wanfenglin is a blessed anomaly.

I have no set agenda for the day, I'll go where the road and my pink ride take me. Under the baking sun, I whiz through a landscape reminiscent of ancient Chinese scroll paintings, the green-grey peaks punctuated with bright purple azalea flowers. I make abrupt turn offs down side roads and through sleepy villages.

I follow the Nahui River that meanders through the hills, nourishing a patchwork tapestry of rice paddies in various stages

of planting. I stop at the roadside to watch a group of women, shin-deep in water, planting new rice shoots. They are bent-double, plopping the shoots into the muddy water in a perfectly straight line. It's all back-breaking but important work – like many parts of China, rice is an extremely important part of both the diet and the economy.

As the sun sinks lower in the sky, it's time to return my e-bike and find dinner. Near my guesthouse, I choose a restaurant with an outdoor terrace full of families on vacation. With my basic Chinese, I spot something interesting on the menu – deep-fried grasshoppers from the surrounding fields. And so, amid the nightly cacophony of the local insect population, I enjoy a plate of hoppers served with Sichuan peppercorns and spring onions. A crunchy, nutty and oh-so-local meal among the wonderful 10,000 karst peaks of Wanfenglin.

TRIP NOTES

TRAVEL INSURANCE FOR E-BIKES AND HIRE SCOOTERS:

If you're not properly licensed and didn't purchase the right level of travel insurance cover before you leave home, your travel insurance may not cover you if something goes wrong while riding an e-bike or scooter.

Check your policy, level of cover and any conditions that apply before you hire. We suggest you check:

1. You've purchased the right level of cover – this may include selecting the right plan Standard or Explorer, or adding the activity, depending on your country of residence.
2. Are properly licensed for that class and type of bike/scooter in your country of residence.
3. Comply with the licencing requirements in the country you're hiring the e-bike or scooter in.

If you have any questions, contact us.



Waterfall in Moganshan

UNMISSABLE

Day Trip from Shanghai to Moganshan

Shanghai's sweaty summer season has begun and it's time to take a break from the concrete. My husband and I are new to this city of 26 million on China's central east coast, but we have it on good authority that Moganshan, 128mi (207km) southwest of the city, is the best bet for a rejuvenating day of nature. Although you can get there by subway and train in around three hours, we decide to drive, a journey of 2.5 hours.

On arrival, we head straight to the peak of the mountain known as Mogan ("shan" means mountain in Chinese). Amid the lush bamboo forests, which have been attracting Shanghai's overheated elites since the 1880s, are several hiking trails, waterfalls, pools, teahouses, and restaurants.

We explore the forest, ducking under and clambering over fallen bamboo trunks, and see a few cascading waterfalls on our steep 3mi (4.8 km) hike along the Temple Trail.

We stop for lunch in the village half-way up, in an eatery next door to a little stone post office. We eat *hong shao rou*, a Shanghai-style braised pork belly dish famous for being Mao Zedong's favorite, and spicy stir-fried cauliflower. It's nothing special, but it does the trick for two hungry hikers.

After several hours exploring the forest, we head down to Moganshan for a memorable dinner at Yufulou Hostel. Here we are led to the kitchen to take our pick of the freshest dishes of the day. For us, it's mushy broad beans heaped high with garlic, deep-fried chicken strips, and a spicy crayfish hotpot – this meal alone is worth making the trip from the city for. *Crystal Wilde*

Paradise in Houhai Bay: A Secret Surf Mecca on Hainan

Jamie Fullerton discovers China has a thriving surf culture and community.

Arriving at the beach shack bar of Jile Hotel on Sanya's Houhai Bay, I initially feel a little out of place, as I don't have six-pack ribs.

On any given afternoon here, Chinese surfer bros and babes spray each other with hoses after surfing in the sea a few meters from the bar, then recline in hammocks with cold beers. Surfing is still an incredibly niche sport in China, but in this small corner of Hainan Island's south coast city, it's a way of life.

Sanya's surfing community

I meet two people at the center of Sanya's surfing community: Monica Guo and Darci Liu, aka the queens of Houhai Bay. Guo is a pro surfer and is on the Chinese national surf team; Liu is a pro surfer turned environmentalist and documentary maker.

Liu and Guo were part of the first wave of Chinese surfers, catching the bug after the sport was introduced to Hainan around 15 years ago, largely by US and Japanese surfers visiting the island. "There weren't even any Chinese versions of many surfing terms, so my friend and I had to make our own Chinese surfing dictionary," says Liu.

Guo leans out of a hammock to pet her small, sandy-colored dog Honey, who likes to fearlessly hop on her human mum's board in the water. "I used to be like, 'Work, work, work' in the city before I discovered surfing," Guo says. "I loved buying high-heeled

shoes, partying every night, shopping every day. Surfing changed me."

Surf lessons in Houhai

When not training, competing in surf competitions, or giving public lectures about marine conservation, Guo and Luo give surf lessons on Houhai – and today it's my turn. As we enter the water, the pair teaches me to paddle like heck with my hands just before incoming waves break, then attempt to leap onto the board. As my teachers effortlessly soar to the sand, I giddily topple under the surface.

Still, even if you're less naturally suited to water propulsion than a waste disposal truck, Houhai Bay has much to offer. Its bohemian vibe is bolstered by a small skate park built into the front of a bar neighboring Jile Beach's terrace, and nearby artsy hangout spot Kaleidoscope hosts film screenings and DJs. It's a little bit hipster, and a lot of fun.

Indeed, with Sanya being little over 186km (300km) from the eastern Vietnamese coast, the atmosphere at Houhai is more tropical southeast Asia than modern China. Attitudes towards surfing here were not always so laid back, though.

How surfing changed Hainan

When surfing was introduced to the region, local authorities took a dim view of young, tattooed, bikini and Speedos-wearing



Sunset in Sanya, Hainan

bohemians plonking big colorful boards in their pristine oceans. Police used to tell them that they weren't allowed to surf near swimmers.

In the summer of 2016 things changed on Hainan. The government built a surf academy at Riyue Bay, a large beach with great surf north of Houhai, and recruited legions of child surfers to train there. The aim was to train a new generation of surfers to win medals for China in international competitions.

I take a taxi up to Riyue and meet Li Jing, another member of the first wave of Chinese surfers, who is based at a Riyue surf shop. She says that once local authorities realized that the central government 'approved' surfing, things became easier for her and her friends, including Liu and Guo.

"If we carried boards on our cars police would stop us, saying it's dangerous," she says between slurps of coconut milk. "But

now police are like, 'Oh, they're surfers!'. And on beaches, if surfers go, we're welcomed... they now know we're not just 'homeless' people who don't work."

I also meet Michael Weaver, a Florida-born surf coach hired to train the government-approved surfers. He says the new 'official' surf center has created two surf factions on Hainan: "The 'free surf spiritual' thing, and the competitive side."

Houhai Bay is very much the home of the former group. As the sun sets on the bay, a few miles west the tourist hordes exit coaches and cascade into the main strip of restaurants by the large, packed beaches. In contrast, on Houhai the dominant sounds are waves and lazily plucked acoustic guitars.

"This is my happy place... my happy temple," says Liu, gently pushing her hand against a tree trunk to get her hammock swinging again.

TRIP NOTES

For surfing lesson enquiries contact Darci Liu at darciliu@gmail.com or via Weibo account Darci SurferGirl, or Monica Guo at [346968562](tel:346968562) @qq.com.

On Houhai the dominant sounds are waves and lazily plucked acoustic guitars

NORTHERN XINJIANG: CHINA'S ODE TO SIBERIA

In China's far northwest, **Dave Stamboulis** navigates difficult obstacles to meet the people and see the places that make this such a fascinating destination.

Following the ancient Silk Route through orange desert oases like Turpan was exactly what my wife Raquel and I imagined when we plotted our course through Xinjiang Province, but being surrounded by verdant and dense Siberian forests, *taiga*, and Kazakh horsemen was far from what we imagined.

Yet here we are, sitting in front of our traditional yurt homestay, drinking butter tea, and realizing that the umpteen police checkpoints we had to pass through to get here are all part of the experience in this controversial region.

From picture-postcard alpine lakes to lush grasslands and ethnic Kazakh, Mongol, and Tuvan villages, the culture and scenery here is much closer to that of the Russian-Siberian north than any preconceptions you might have of China.

But, you will have to work to earn it. Passport checks, luggage scans, even being fingerprinted is the norm in security-over-conscious Xinjiang. By the

end of each day, we've learnt to vent our frustrations over a cold beer or hot tea, and realize that the incredible views and being the only foreign visitors around make it all worthwhile.

Keketuohai: China's little Yosemite

Having grown up in California, I get pretty defensive when people try to make comparisons to Yosemite National Park. But listening to the ravings of a rock climber we met in Chengdu, Raquel and I make a beeline for Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi, from where we board an overnight bus to Fuyun another 310mi (500km) away. Fuyun is the nearest town to Keketuohai village and its namesake national park, which the Chinese have dubbed 'Little Yosemite.'

A day later, standing on the park's valley floor, we can't believe our eyes, as it really is as if we are standing on familiar ground. Surrounding us are immense bell towers of granite, rising smooth and vertical straight up from the mighty Irtysh River, which



Keketuohai National Park

Even from ground level, it's pretty special, surrounded by northern white birch trees, pristine whitewater, and monstrous slabs of granite, all set under blue skies

flows out of Mongolia just a few miles up the valley.

Even from ground level, it's pretty special, surrounded by northern white birch trees, pristine whitewater, and monstrous slabs of granite, all set under blue skies. Not to mention that, while there are plenty of Chinese visitors, we are the only foreigners here.

Kanas Lake

After a day's bus ride from Keketuohai, we are soon settling in to a homestay at Kanas Lake, in a valley in the Altai Mountains. Our weather-beaten old Tuvan host speaks enough Mandarin to explain to our Chinese friend Chen that most visitors come here for a glimpse of the Kanas Monster. This supposed giant creature, dubbed the

'Chinese Nessie,' similar to the infamous beast of Scotland's Loch Ness, is said to have been spotted beneath the lake surface. Scientists are skeptical, saying that the large shadows seen in the water are most likely Siberian giant trout, which can grow up to 6ft (1.8m). Either way, we're not here for Nessie, but to witness what might be China's most beautiful spot.

Serpentine Kanas Lake cuts through the mountains, flanked by dense birch and pine forests, and we spend our days here hiking up to breathtaking viewpoints or wandering silent paths along the outlet's riverbanks, coming across both Kazakh yurt settlements and smoky log cabin villages that are home to Tuvans, the predominant ethnic group here.

Our homestay offers horseback riding, →

CONNECT LOCALLY

serves up delicious smoked fish, and is an easy walk to the lake, where we just sit and stare at the vivid turquoise water. It feels like a slice of Norway or Alaska in China. Even though there are hordes of domestic visitors that descend here, the authorities have done a good job with park management, not allowing private cars in (you have to take shuttle buses) and making all the facilities inside the park resemble the simple timber homes of the Tuvan.

Chen says he always thought that the Great Wall was China's best attraction, but he completely changed his mind after coming here. I agree, and think it can't get any more idyllic than this. I guess we are going to have to come back; we're only seeing Kanas in summer, but in autumn there is a leaf-changing extravaganza that is supposed to be second to none.

Sayram Lake

From Kanas Lake we take a three-hour bus back to Buerjin city, where we take another



Sayram Lake

Getty Images / Nativus

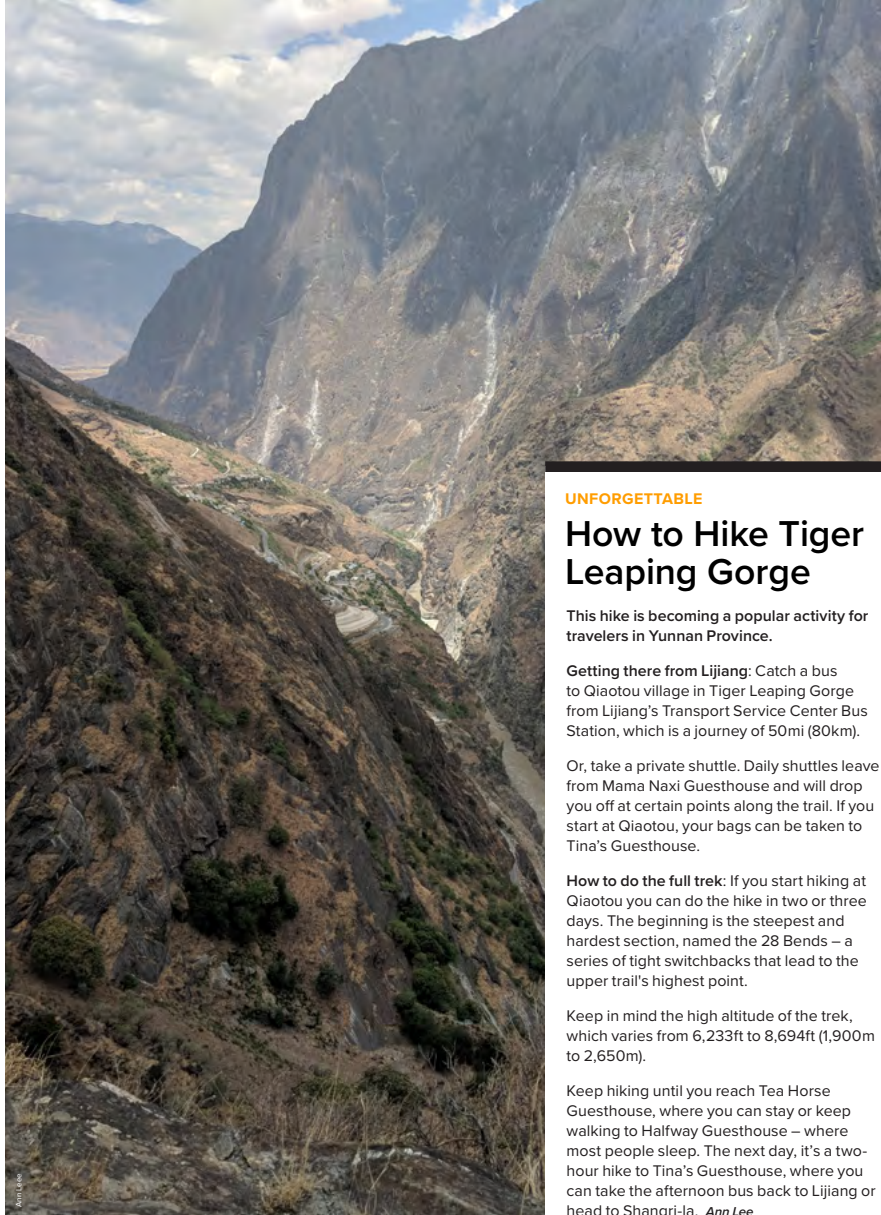
bus four hours to Karamay to spend the night. The next morning, a bus takes us 310mi (500km) and six hours to Sayram Lake.

The entry gate before reaching the lake is fronted by gaudy Chinese hotels, all neon monstrosities. We bypass them and mime to a road worker that we are looking for a yurt stay. A phone call later, he's hooked us up with a Kazakh friend who picks us up and drives us to his yurt near the lake.

An ethnic Kazakh man tells me that *sayram* means 'blessing' in Kazakh, and right now I feel particularly fortunate. The emerald lake just over the hill is one of the most gorgeous bodies of water I've ever seen, framed by the mighty Tian Shan Mountains in the background.

But even better, my wife and I feel like we are in a Genghis Khan epic, as we'll be sleeping in a traditional yurt, padded with colorful rugs and quilts, and are being served delicious skewers of freshly barbecued mutton by our Kazakh hosts.

I never expected to sleep in a yurt in China, nor that they could be so comfortable (even outfitted with a wood-burning stove for warmth), and we've got it all out here, from mountains and grasslands to the immense lake and galaxy full of stars above.



UNFORGETTABLE

How to Hike Tiger Leaping Gorge

This hike is becoming a popular activity for travelers in Yunnan Province.

Getting there from Lijiang: Catch a bus to Qiaotou village in Tiger Leaping Gorge from Lijiang's Transport Service Center Bus Station, which is a journey of 50mi (80km).

Or, take a private shuttle. Daily shuttles leave from Mama Naxi Guesthouse and will drop you off at certain points along the trail. If you start at Qiaotou, your bags can be taken to Tina's Guesthouse.

How to do the full trek: If you start hiking at Qiaotou you can do the hike in two or three days. The beginning is the steepest and hardest section, named the 28 Bends – a series of tight switchbacks that lead to the upper trail's highest point.

Keep in mind the high altitude of the trek, which varies from 6,233ft to 8,694ft (1,900m to 2,650m).

Keep hiking until you reach Tea Horse Guesthouse, where you can stay or keep walking to Halfway Guesthouse – where most people sleep. The next day, it's a two-hour hike to Tina's Guesthouse, where you can take the afternoon bus back to Lijiang or head to Shangri-la. *Ann Lee*

TRIP NOTES

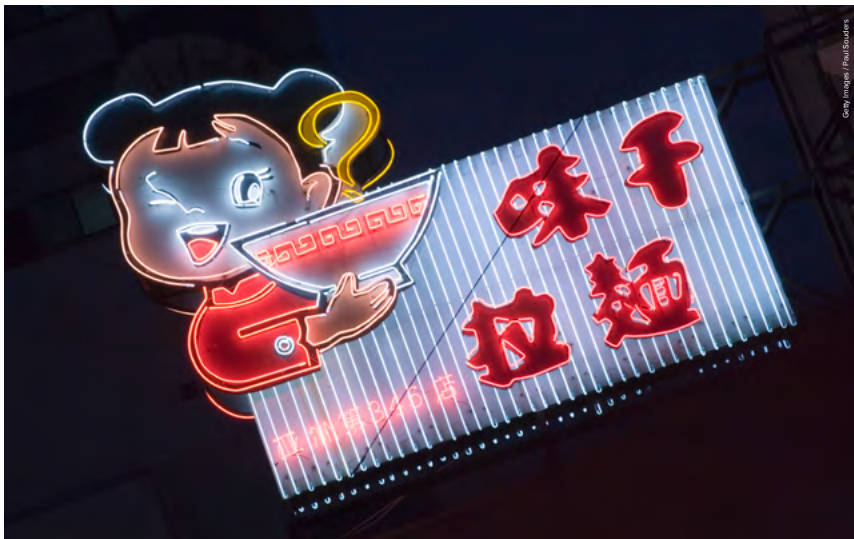
DEALING WITH SECURITY IN XINJIANG: Due to several random and isolated acts of violence that have occurred here and elsewhere in China, blamed on Uyghur separatists, the Chinese government has taken a hardline approach in putting Xinjiang under police control.

Visitors will experience ramped-up security everywhere in the province, and as a traveler you will be scanned and searched in all public places, ranging from markets to shopping centers, as well as hotels.

All public transport stations are under the heaviest scrutiny. Allow an extra 30 minutes or more in train and bus stations to go through multiple security checks, where your passport will be detailed and luggage will be searched. In smaller towns where local officials may not speak English or know what to do with foreign passports, expect delays while superiors are called to assist.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS: Completely avoid talking politics while in Xinjiang. Inter-ethnic tension between Han Chinese and the Uyghurs has been high for the past decade, and you'd be wise to read up on the situation before setting out on your trip. Whatever your opinion, once in Xinjiang they're best kept to yourself, as China currently does not tolerate any discussion about Uyghur separatism and any evidence that you might be involved in it.

If you have books on your Kindle or have recently visited websites that might portray you as sympathetic to the cause, you could get in trouble with the authorities. While the heaviest police/security presence is found in southern Xinjiang (Hotan, Turpan, Hami), with the north more home to Kazakh and Mongol minorities, you should still avoid any discussion with people about the current Uyghur/Xinjiang situation.



TRAVEL SMARTER

NEED TO KNOW

Ready to explore your boundaries and plan your own adventure in China? First, check out our expert tips to help you travel smarter and protect yourself against weather, crime, and other dangers. What's the best way to get around? How can you ensure you're traveling responsibly? Learn all that and more.

Handy Tips for First-timers	73
Getting Around	74
Learn Some of the Local Lingo	75
Climate & Weather	76
Staying Connected	77

Handy Tips for First-timers in China

The first Chinese dynasty dates back 4,000 years, so it's easy to feel a little intimidated by the depth of Chinese culture and tradition. These tips should help.

Stop stressing about chopsticks

When it comes to the ubiquitous utensils, there are a few rules: don't stand them upright in food, don't spear food with them, don't use them to eat directly from serving dishes, and don't play with or point with chopsticks. One thing you don't need to worry about is how you hold your chopsticks while eating – no one will care.

These two little sticks are just a means to an end; to get the food from the serving dish to your bowl (always use serving chopsticks for this) and then to your mouth with your personal chopsticks.

If you're worried you might drop the food, shovel it onto a spoon with your chopsticks and eat from the spoon instead.

Number punning in China

Chinese people have interesting customs related to numbers. For example, they favor the number 8 (as it sounds similar to the word for prosperity) and shun the number 4 (as it sounds too much like the word for death).



Different Dialects in China

China's official language is Putonghua, also known as standardized Chinese or Mandarin. Although it's the language that most Chinese people speak and learn in school, it's a relatively young language (codified in the 1930s), and little more than a *lingua franca*.

Each village and city has its own dialect, some more similar to Mandarin (such as Pekingese or Wuhanese) than others (such as Shanghaiese or Cantonese). To really be considered a 'local', try to learn at least a few words in the dialect of the city you're in.



The number 1111, or November 11, is known as 'singles day' as the numbers look like a line of single people. The number 520, which is a near-homophone for *wo ai ni*, or 'I love you', is celebrated as a pseudo-Valentine's Day on May 20.

The number 2 is considered a positive number, related to the saying 'Good things come in pairs.' The number 3 is considered lucky because it sounds similar to the Chinese word for 'life.'

Christmas vs Spring Festival

Christmas is enthusiastically celebrated in larger cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, where festive lights line the main streets all December. However, in China, Christmas isn't about going home and seeing your family, it's about partying with your friends.

The Spring Festival, at the start of the lunar year (which usually falls around late January or early February, depending on the moon cycle each year), is all about spending time with family. Businesses are closed for up to two weeks, and most social gatherings don't happen until a month after. *Janice Leung-Hayes*

Getting Around

With a population of around 1.42 billion, when you travel around China, you'll need to get used to crowds and queues. Luckily, there are plenty of options to get you from A to B.

Flying

If you need to cover huge distances in China, flying could save you time. Or not. Domestic flights in China are notorious for delays and last-minute cancellations, and the country's airports are ranked as the worst in the world when it comes to punctuality.

While it may seem more convenient on paper, flying may end up taking much longer than you expect, although that has not been my experience.

To increase your chances of arriving on time, take a morning flight, so if it's cancelled you can be rebooked on a later one that day. Research the available airlines to travel with, as some are more reliable than others.

Train travel

The most reliable (and comfortable) way to travel in China is by train. Modern high-speed bullet trains, which reach a



Road tripping in China

maximum speed of 217mi/h (350km/h), are a great choice for long journeys.

There are different classes ranging from standing (the cheapest) to business class and even special VIP seats on certain trains. Second class is usually the most reasonable ticket price to go for, offering comfy seats and plenty of room. There are also overnight sleepers where you get your own berth.

Buses

Buses are cheaper than trains but slower. However, they're a good option if you're on a budget. Buses aren't advised for journeys longer than eight hours as they can be cramped by passengers packing the aisle with their possessions. There are overnight sleeper buses, which feature rows of bunk beds.

Road tripping

China isn't the easiest country to drive around; traffic can be extremely chaotic and drivers often ignore traffic signs and signals.

To get behind the wheel, you need to get a Chinese driving license first. If you have a 90-day visa, you can get a provisional license at Beijing Capital Airport. You will need your driver's license and will need to have a medical exam.

For navigation, download Baidu Maps (the Chinese version of Google Maps)

To get behind the wheel, you need to get a Chinese driving license first. If you have a 90-day visa, you can get a provisional license at Beijing Capital Airport



A taxi in China

or Maps.Me, which both have an offline function so you can track your location while on the road. Download the maps prior to setting out where there is no reception or Wi-Fi available.

Metro in major cities

Most of China's major cities have a metro system which is cheap, quick and easy to navigate. Everything is clearly signposted in English as well as Chinese.

It's often hard to get a seat even at times you might consider off-peak. Just make sure you carry enough change for the ticket machines, which have an English language option.

Taxis and ride share

Taxis are cheap and plentiful in China, and are usually brightly colored cars with a LED light in the front window and a meter. You will have to pay by cash, as online payment options are not available to visitors.

Taxis are notoriously hard to catch during rush hour. So-called 'black taxis' are illegal and are essentially locals with a car. Negotiate your fare before getting in and take care.

DiDi, the Chinese version of Uber, is extremely handy and slightly cheaper than normal cabs. There is an English language version of the app and you can pay online. Set it up before arriving in China. **Ann Lee**

Just make sure you carry enough change for the ticket machines, which have an English language option

Learn Some of the Local Lingo

Many Chinese people speak English, but if you're traveling outside major cities you will need to learn a few handy phrases. Plus, learning a few basic words will help you read menus and signs, which are often not in English, and communicate with local people.

Ask your hotel staff to write down the name of your accommodation in Chinese characters. Keep this note with you so you can hand it over to a taxi driver and avoid miscommunication.

Before you begin trying to learn Chinese, here are three things to know:

Tones can change meaning dramatically: Using the wrong tone in speech can turn a nice statement into a seriously awkward conversation.

Learn how to speak pīn yīn (拼音): Pinyin is phonetic writing, it uses English letters to create new sounds, and makes learning Chinese a lot easier.

There are many Chinese sounds that are difficult for English speakers to pronounce: Pronunciation is made up of three factors: mouth shape, tongue placement and air flow. Nailing pronunciation is hard, but important to convey proper meaning in your speech.



Climate & Weather

If you're still deciding when to visit China, consider where you're going, and always, always avoid major public holidays. Even the most beautiful weather can be ruined by having to share a scenic spot with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other people. The great thing about visiting a country as large as China, is that you're sure to find the perfect place to go whatever the season.

Winter

Cold-weather lovers should head to the Dongbei in the northeast to check out the massive ice sculptures at the Harbin Ice Festival. You can ski here, too. For winter sun, head to the island province of Hainan in January and February. Just be sure to avoid China's Spring Festival (New Year) holiday period.

While the Spring Festival celebrates the arrival of spring, and technically is in spring according to the lunar farming calendar, it's actually held in January or February – so is classified as a winter festival.

Spring

Spring (March to May) is a beautiful time to visit Beijing when roses bloom in the city and the weather is pleasantly mild. It's also a good time to head to Shanghai before the humidity of summer kicks in, although it can be rainy here at times.

During spring, the snow starts to melt on the grasslands in central Tibet, while it's also peak season for tea harvesting in eastern China.

In the southern Chinese provinces of Guangxi and Guizhou, rice terraces are



Himalaya Range, central Tibet

irrigated and filled with water, providing great photo opportunities.

Summer

Summer across China is hot with most major tourist cities either crazy hot, unbelievably humid or both. Summer is a good time to head west, with the higher altitudes of Yunnan and Tibet an antidote to the heat. The dry summer heat in Xinjiang is easier to deal with than the humidity of the eastern provinces.

Fall

September and October are excellent months to visit China, although be aware that there is a week-long public holiday in early October, celebrating the founding of the People's Republic of China. Places like Xinjiang, which are sweltering in the summer, are perfect at this time. By October, the typhoons have stopped battering Hong Kong where it's officially dry season. *Tess Humphrys*

Summer across China is hot with most major tourist cities either crazy hot, unbelievably humid or both

Staying Connected

Aside from the normal functions of making calls, texting and emailing, our phones are also guide books, translators, boarding passes, entertainment hubs and a means of keeping up with our social networks while traveling.

Of course, all of this is only possible with access to the internet. Thankfully, China is covered by many Wi-Fi hotspots, and is also one of the best cellular networks in the world. However, to access this network, you need a Chinese phone number to receive a log-in code via a text message. So, the key to getting a good connection in China is to plan ahead.

How to get connected

There are two options for staying connected in China.

Option one: Use international roaming on your existing plan. However, this won't get you a Chinese phone number, and is an expensive way to travel. International roaming fees include a daily connection fee and a set cost per minute, text or data package.

Option two: Buy a local pre-paid Chinese SIM card. The only catch is that they require an unlocked mobile phone to use. Chinese SIM cards can be found at some major international airports and they can also be purchased online and activated prior to departure.

Using social media

Throughout China, the WeChat app has become the primary way to connect with friends and family. You can create your own account to interact with new friends you make on the road, but you won't be able to use the convenient mobile payment functionality without also having a Chinese bank account.

You won't find too many Chinese people using Facebook, Instagram, or other familiar



social media platforms because of, well... censorship.

Censorship

China is known for the way it heavily censors what its people can view online, earning its internet the tongue-in-cheek nickname 'The Great Firewall of China.' Almost every major social media platform is off limits to the Chinese public as well as video streaming services, including YouTube and Vimeo, international news media and messaging apps.

The solution, as most long-term expats in China know well, is a software known as a Virtual Private Network (VPN). By securely connecting to a computer server outside of China, a VPN allows anyone access to the internet free from China's censorship.

There are numerous free and premium VPN solutions available for travelers, but you must set this up before arriving in China. VPN websites are blocked in China, which can make it hard to configure from inside the country.

Are VPNs legal to use in China?

The answer is a bit tricky. China's censorship is aimed at local citizens, not travelers, so historically the government has completely ignored the use of VPN software among travelers and expats. However, past trends don't guarantee future behavior, so you must weigh the risk of being caught against your need to stay connected. *Josh Summers*

There are numerous free and premium VPN solutions available for travelers, but you must set this up before arriving in China



Shichahai Hutong old town area, Beijing

TRAVEL SMARTER

TRAVEL SAFETY IN CHINA

China is a vast country with diverse landscapes, customs, culture and people – lots of people. **Joanna Tovia** shares her tips to keep you safe and informed while traveling around the country. Our common-sense guide to travel safety is a reliable, trustworthy source of up-to-date advice so you can bravely explore the world.

Visas & Registration	79
10 Travel Safety Tips	80
Tourist Cons to Avoid	83
Health & Hygiene	84
Law & Crime	86
Banned Activities	87
Essential Insurance Tips	88
Our Other Guides	89
Our Contributors	90
Get a Quote	91

Visas & Registration

So you've planned your trip, but have you got your visa? Arguably the most important thing to do before you go, knowing when and how to apply is important. Here are a few tips to make the visa application process easy.

Before you leave – visas

Planning ahead is wise when it comes to travel, but there is such a thing as planning too far ahead if you're going to China; apply too early for your visa and it will run out before you have a chance to use it.

Apply for your visa about a month prior to departure and keep in mind that the 'valid until' date indicates the date by which you must enter the country for your visa to remain valid.

A tourist visa generally allows you to spend up to 30 days in mainland China, but if you're planning on coming and going from Hong Kong, Macau or elsewhere, you'll need a double – or multiple – entry visa. A detailed itinerary and hotel booking confirmation, or a letter of invitation from a family member or friend living in China (along with a copy of the information page in their passport) will be required as part of your application.

Plans can change once there, of course, but it isn't difficult to organize a short visa extension on a single-entry tourist visa. The Foreign Affairs Branch of the local Public Security Bureau is your friend on this one. Just make sure you apply at least a week before your visa is due to expire, and make sure you have at least six months remaining on the validity of your passport from the date you intend to leave.

Whatever you do, don't overstay your visa. If you can't avoid it, expect fines of



up to ¥500 a day and a potential ban from returning for up to 10 years. If you happen to be arrested and detained while you're there, visa overstay fines will still apply.

When you get there – registration

China takes security threats seriously, and officials like to keep an eye on where travelers go and what they're doing while they're there. Fingerprinting visitors on arrival has been standard procedure since 2017, and every visitor to China must register their place of residence with the local Public Security Bureau within 24 hours.

This is a simple process if you're staying at a hotel – it's part of check-in – but if you're staying at an Airbnb and your host doesn't take care of this for you, you'll need to pay a visit to your nearest police station to do so yourself.

Make sure you download the Google Translate app before you go (you won't be able to download it once you're in China) in case there isn't an English speaker at the police station.

If it seems a little extreme to have to register every time you travel on to a new town or city within China, avoid the temptation to skip this necessary procedure. Failing to register could mean you end up with a fine or an unpleasant stay in detention.

China takes security threats seriously, and officials like to keep an eye on where travelers go and what they're doing while they're there

10 Travel Safety Tips

From managing the sheer numbers of people in China and road rules to mobile phone payments and LGBTQ travel, here are the main concerns travelers should be aware of.

Dealing with crowds

Almost 1.4 billion people call China home, so get ready to rethink your boundaries around personal space. Elbowing, pushing and cutting in line can be confronting to visitors, but try to accept it as part of the Chinese experience.

Rest assured that 'actively encouraging' you to step aside isn't intended to do you harm. Stand your ground if someone's trying to cut in front of you in line, and have fun being a little pushy in return if you're trying to navigate a crowd.

Petty crime

There's a reason organized tours are the preferred way of seeing the highlights of this fascinating country – getting around as a group delivers safety in numbers.

Travelers are easy targets for pickpockets, bag snatchers and thieves looking to steal passports, phones, cameras and laptops. Avoid carrying anything in your back pockets, carry handbags across your body, and wear backpacks on your front.

Train and bus stations, busy shopping hubs, public toilets, and popular eating and drinking precincts in major cities are especially prone to petty crime. Trying to thwart a robbery has been known to lead to violence and injury, so it's best to do what a thief asks if you find yourself an unlucky victim. Carrying valuables such as passports inside your clothing is a smart move.

Report stolen items at the nearest



Foreign Affairs Branch of the Public Security Bureau to make a claim on your travel insurance.

Road risks

Although you are unlikely to drive yourself around in China (international drivers' licenses aren't recognized), traveling by road does not come without risk. The World Health Organization estimates there are at least 600 traffic deaths per day in China. The sheer number of vehicles is one contributing factor, but so is driver inexperience and a flagrant disregard of traffic laws.

Making matters worse, there aren't likely to be seatbelts on long-distance buses, and don't expect to find them in the rear seats of taxis either.

Pedestrian smarts

The biggest danger visitors are likely to face in China is in crossing the street. Road rules are often ignored, and pedestrians are expected to get out of the way – even if they're crossing the street on a green walk sign.

Beware too the cyclist in a hurry. A bicycle may round the corner at speed when you least expect it, piled high with precariously balanced goods. Shouted orders to get out of the way may give you the warning you need to step back – or

The biggest danger visitors are likely to face in China is in crossing the street. Road rules are often ignored, and pedestrians are expected to get out of the way

not. Rely on your eyes more than your ears to check the coast is clear. Electric cars can be almost silent when they approach.

Passport protection

Leave a photocopy of your passport and visa with a trusted friend or family member before you depart, and take an extra copy to carry around with you. If you're staying at a hotel, ask staff to also photocopy the page showing your entry stamp. The easier you can make it to replace your visa and passport, should it be lost or stolen, the more grateful you'll be that you took these precautionary steps.

Passports are valuable everywhere, but in China they are especially sought after by shady individuals looking to commit crimes using your identity. If it does go AWOL, alert your embassy and contact local police to obtain a loss report. This is essential when checking in to a new hotel or applying for a replacement passport.

Carry your passport with you rather than locking it in the hotel safe. Police are known to carry out random checks and you'll need it to enter many tourist attractions and museums.

Mobile payment apps

Traveling as part of a tour group has its benefits, and the limited payment methods available in many bars, shops and restaurants can make it challenging to venture off on your own. WeChat

and Alipay apps are now used by most Chinese people to make payments, but these require you to have a Chinese bank account.

Calling ahead to check if a restaurant accepts credit cards or cash will save you time and disappointment – an increasing number accept neither form of payment.

If you're keen to live like a local and go cashless, it is possible to use an overseas credit card to make payments via WeChat, but you can't top up your account or retrieve unspent money without a Chinese bank account or phone number.

Watch this space, though, as this may change. China may be the e-commerce capital of the world, but it remains to be seen whether foreign visitors will be allowed to join their digital revolution.

Beggars

Be alert to beggars who ask you for money then pursue you or become aggressive if you ignore them. They are common throughout China, but are especially concentrated in Beijing's Silk Alley, the Forbidden City, and other areas that attract crowds of visitors.

Child beggars can pull at your heartstrings and be as pushy as adults, but resist the urge to open your wallet or you'll soon find yourself surrounded by others hopeful for a hand-out. Also, giving to beggars encourages the practice, so don't do it.

In restaurants, staff will usually assist in encouraging beggars to leave you alone, as will police in crowded spots such as public parks. Otherwise, it will be up to you to dissuade them.

Travel for people of color

Despite a growing number of people visiting from across the world, anyone who looks a little different to the Chinese norm tends to stand out like a beacon. But that needn't be a bad thing. If you find yourself attracting attention (some people may even form a circle around you to gaze



at your intriguing features), why not use it as an opportunity to interact with the locals?

Chances are high that their interest in you isn't coming from a place of malice or prejudice. They may simply never have come across someone quite like you before. This applies as much to people of ethnically African origin as it does someone with pale blonde hair and skin. Just don't be surprised if you get asked to pose for photos. Lots of photos.

LGBTQ travel

Although homosexuality has been legal in China since 1997, same-sex marriage remains illegal and there aren't any anti-discrimination laws in place. Strident censorship laws include LGBTQ-related content, which means tour companies and other organizations can't openly promote themselves as being LGBTQ-friendly.

Although there are a range of views on homosexuality within the country – how could there not be, with a population so large – travelers are unlikely to encounter hostility. It's customary for friends of the same sex to walk along hand-in-hand, so displays of affection such as this won't attract any attention.

There's no need for concern when it comes to accommodation either. Same-sex couples booking a room in a high-end

Same-sex marriage remains illegal and there aren't any anti-discrimination laws in place

city hotel won't raise an eyebrow, and the polite and reserved nature of the Chinese people generally means surprise is unlikely to be expressed at the smaller hotels, hostels, or guesthouses either.

If you're looking for a more sociable holiday, connecting with open-minded travelers is possible but make sure you've set up a high-quality VPN on your phone before you leave home. This will protect your privacy and ensure you can still access apps and websites that allow you to connect with others.

Natural disasters

Just what you don't need on your travels. Fortunately, the chances of your plans being disrupted due to major weather-related incidents are slim in China. The following natural disasters are the only ones that could disrupt your plans, however unlikely.

Typhoons: Between May and November, typhoons (mature tropical cyclones) occur along China's south and east coasts. Keep an eye on weather reports (and your weather app) for typhoons in the region; they can change in direction and strength without much warning.

Earthquakes: China is in an active seismic zone but earthquakes typically occur in the remote and mountainous non-tourist areas of western China. A magnitude-5.9 earthquake struck Sichuan province in 2019, and this occurred in an area visited by tourists, so don't completely disregard it as a possibility.

Flooding: There are distinct rainy seasons in China that can lead to flooding. Between May and September, rural areas along the Yangtze River are particularly prone to flooding.

Landslides: The mountainous areas of southwest China can be affected by landslides in the rainy season. Between May and September, Sichuan province (home of the giant panda), Yunnan province and Tibet are more likely to face heavy rain and landslides.

Travel Cons to Avoid

Criminals with faulty moral compasses are adept at coming up with novel ways to fleece the unsuspecting visitor. Here are 10 common scams to watch out for:

Taxi scams: Your driver insists you pay a higher fee than the price you agreed on before you left. To reduce the likelihood of this happening to you, stick with licensed, metered taxis arranged through your hotel. Avoid riding in pedicabs and motorized three-wheelers. They are far more likely to overcharge you for their services. If you're traveling for longer than an hour in a taxi, it's not uncommon for a driver to arrange to meet another driver half way. If the drivers attempt to split up your party into two taxis (thus doubling the total cost), refuse.

Shopping scams: Even in large shopping malls selling high-end goods, ignore offers of special deals to be had on 'designer' items held in a back room. If you do go, don't be surprised when the door is locked behind you and you are prevented from leaving until you've made a purchase.

Left with the check: Disheartening it may be, but invitations to take part in a tea ceremony or to join someone for a meal so they can practice their English are often ploys for con-artists to get fed for free. At the end of the meal, they up and leave you with the hefty bill.

Special messages: Foreigners are lured into a building with the promise of a cut-price massage (an enticing offer if you've been on your feet seeing the sights all day), only to be assaulted by a group of thugs and robbed.

Fake products: Poor-quality designer knock-offs are pedaled to foreigners at inflated prices, complete with assurances they are the real deal. Have your wits about you and inspect goods closely before haggling for a better price. Nanjing Road in Shanghai and Beijing's Silk Alley are notorious for knock-offs.



Switched goods: Beware the last-minute switcheroo if you've made a purchase at a market or store. Keep watch as your goodies are bagged lest what you end up with is different to what you paid for.

Counterfeit currency: Pay the exact cost of an item or bill whenever you can to avoid ending up with counterfeit notes as change. Most shopkeepers use cash detectors or hold money up to the light to check yuan is real before accepting them for payment. To conduct your own check, hold a note up to the light and look for a metal ribbon that runs from top to bottom.

Stranger danger: Refuse offers of food, drink or transportation from anyone you don't know. Reports of visitors being drugged and robbed are more common than you might think.

Art exhibitions: Students are known to coerce visitors into viewing a free art exhibition at their school, only to find they've done you a drawing while you're there and push you into paying for it.

Fake ATMs: Try to only use ATMs at your hotel, a bank or shopping center. Otherwise you risk using an ATM that takes your card or issues counterfeit notes.

Ignore offers of special deals to be had on 'designer' items held in a back room



Health & Hygiene

While traveling in China, you need to be aware of potential health risks from illness, drinking water, pollution and public toilets.

Be sure to allow yourself plenty of time to complete all the recommended vaccinations before leaving for China.

Rabies is a growing problem in China, and more than 2,000 people die from it here each year. If an animal (typically a dog) with rabies licks or bites you, treatment is much more of a hassle if you haven't been vaccinated. Either way, seek medical treatment as soon as possible after contact with an animal you suspect is infected.

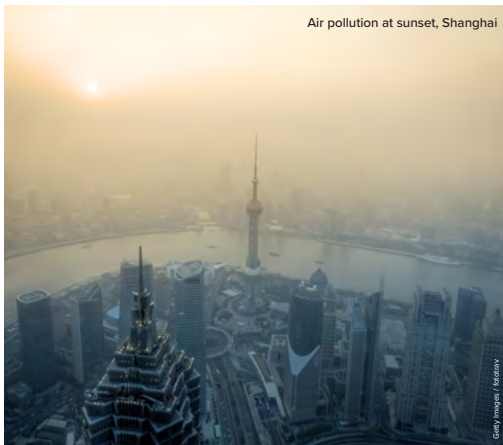
Medical facilities of an international standard are expensive (be sure to take out travel insurance) but available in major cities. In other areas, it can be a bit of a lottery and you may have to pay cash before any treatment is carried out.

Hygiene practices can be questionable, as can the level of medical training staff members have received. On a recent trip to China, one visitor on an organized tour reported having to get stitches at a local (and not terribly clean) medical center after having a fall. The doctor stitching him up was eating his lunch at the same time!

Here are some of the other health risks to watch out for:

Bird flu: Strains of the avian influenza virus continue to circulate in chickens. The only way to minimize your risk of exposure is to avoid live poultry markets in rural areas.

HIV/AIDS: Apart from taking obvious precautions during any sexual encounters, be sure to request the use of sterilized equipment if you need medical care outside major cities and insist on the



Air pollution at sunset, Shanghai

Hygiene practices can be questionable, as can the level of medical training staff members have received

use of new syringes (even if you have to pay for them).

Japanese Encephalitis (Encephalitis B): This mosquito-borne illness is endemic in rural areas of southern China between June and August. Make sure this is one of the vaccines you get before you travel.

Malaria and dengue fever: The risk of contracting malaria is highest if you're traveling to rural areas during the warmer months. Consider taking preventative medicine before and during your trip. Wearing long sleeves and using repellent and mosquito nets will reduce your risk of dengue fever.

Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease: HFMD outbreaks occur most commonly between March and October, and usually affect children younger than 10 years old. Careful and frequent hand washing is the best method of prevention.

Typhoid: This serious bacterial infection spreads via contaminated food and water. Be sure you've been vaccinated against typhoid and take extra care with food and drink to be on the safe side. Don't drink tap water, eat only freshly cooked food (avoid buffets), and always choose busy



If you do want to venture out on high-pollution days, do what the locals do and wear a mask. Be aware that flights in and out of cities can be cancelled when pollution affects visibility.

Water quality

Always boil water before drinking or brushing your teeth – tap water is not safe to drink in China. Instead of purchasing plastic water bottles, pack a water bottle with a filter. Avoid ice at restaurants, and ask for a sealed bottle of juice rather than a glass of juice – it may have been diluted with tap water.

Toilet matters

You'll need to keep your sense of humor when you visit some of the toilets in China, whether they're western-style toilets or not. Outside of your city hotel, squat toilets are standard across the country, and they are usually neither clean nor tidy.

Carry your own toilet paper or tissues around with you, tossing the used ones in the bucket next to the toilet when you're done. If you forget or run out, you can buy toilet paper from shops, restaurants and bars.

Soap may not be provided either, so carry a small bottle of hand sanitizer with you. Public toilets are free or attract a small fee. *Joanna Tovia*



restaurants over quiet ones.

Hepatitis A: This virus infects the liver and can't be treated. Pre-travel vaccination will give you effective protection.

Schistosomiasis (Bilharzia): Avoid swimming in fresh water around the central Yangzi River (Cháng Jiāng) basin. If infected, symptoms may not show up for months or years, by which time internal organ damage is irreversible.

Pollution

Efforts are being made to create vast green corridors in many cities, and China is leading the way in a quest to become the world's renewable energy superpower. In the meantime, high levels of pollution affect cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chengdu because of the sheer number of cars, and the incredible amount of manufacturing and construction activity going on.

Authorities issue red alerts if pollution levels are especially bad, and you can check Air Quality Index (<http://aqicn.org/city/beijing/>) or Air Matters (<https://air-matters.com/>) for real-time pollution readings.

Authorities issue red alerts if pollution levels are especially bad

Law & Crime

China is known for its strict laws with harsh penalties, police corruption and a high degree of surveillance. Here's everything you need to know to stay out of harm's way.

Big brother is watching

Surveillance is not new in China – it began as a method of social control under Chairman Mao's communist party in the 1920s – but, visitor or not, technology now enables your every move to be tracked and recorded.

Surveillance smarts and artificial intelligence are becoming so sophisticated that, as well as dramatically improving the odds that you'll be caught if you step out of line, your next move may be anticipated before you've even decided what that next move is.

With the government reportedly spending more on surveillance than national defense, and pilot programs in place to rate each citizen on a social credit system, China is on its way to becoming a digital dictatorship.

High-definition cameras (at least 200 million of them) with facial recognition, directional microphones, night vision and motion tracking are installed not just on lamp posts and buildings, but also cars, buses, drones, markets, schools and the jackets of police officer uniforms.

The degree to which visitor movements are being tracked is anyone's guess, but don't rule it out. Mandatory registration every time you check in to a new hotel is one way to monitor your movements, of course, but it pays to expect the unexpected when it comes to Chinese security measures.

Entering Xinjiang by land from Central Asia, for example, may mean you have to hand over your smartphone (and



passcode) before you're allowed in. An app may then be installed that collects data such as contacts and text messages, and checks whether the content on your phone triggers any of the 73,000 red flags that indicate you're a security risk. Geotracking is also likely to have been enabled by the app when it's returned to you.

Police corruption

Where there's money to be made, corruption follows and that's certainly true in China. Bribery of police is common, and foreign visitors can be targeted in elaborate set-ups designed to extract money from their families overseas.

One such incident involved an attack on a young male visitor outside a nightclub in Beijing. Police detained the foreigner, rather than his attackers, and forced his family to pay large sums of money before allowing him to leave the country.

Death penalty and laws in China

Drug offences and crimes such as murder can lead to the death penalty, no matter where in the world you're from, and even minor drug-related offences are taken very seriously. Penalties are severe for drug use, possession, distribution, or

trafficking. Even small quantities of 'soft' drugs such as marijuana don't escape police attention, and laws are strictly enforced.

Children over the age of 14 are tried as adults in China and are subject to the same conditions in detention.

Consular assistance will be of limited use if a crime has been committed in China, and you won't be allowed to leave the country until any legal matters are resolved. Less than 1 per cent of cases tried in Chinese courts result in a not-guilty verdict.

Women's safety

Women traveling alone in China don't have any reason to worry about catcalling or harassment, however you should exercise usual safety precautions: avoid walking alone down unlit alleyways at night, never accept a drink from a stranger, keep your wits about you at all times.

Culturally, Chinese people are very accepting of women traveling by themselves. You may be asked questions such as why you are alone, or where is your partner, but solo travel is not frowned upon or discouraged.

Remember: intrusive questions are not meant to offend, the Chinese are just curious people.

Drug offenses and crimes such as murder can lead to the death penalty, no matter where in the world you're from



Banned Activities

Activities you might take for granted might be viewed as national security threats in China. Taking part in any of the following will land you in serious trouble:

- **Gambling.** You won't find any poker machines or casinos in China, but illegal gambling does go on. If you find yourself invited to play cards or Mahjong – and money is involved – it's wise to walk away. Even online gambling is considered a breach of the law
- **Taking photos of military or government buildings.** Many tour operators also warn visitors against asking political questions when visiting sites such as Tiananmen Square. The site's 1989 student protests and subsequent massacre is still one of the most censored topics on the Chinese internet
- **Prostitution**
- **Organizing a demonstration without getting government approval**
- **Taking part in preaching, distributing literature or associating with unapproved religious groups**
- **Participating in Falun Gong activities.** Although devotees consider Falun Gong a spiritual practice involving meditation and compassion, the Chinese government sees the movement as an evil cult and has actively been working to stamp it out since 1999.

The Forbidden City, Beijing



Essential Travel Insurance Tips

1.4 billion people, countless adventures; make sure you're covered before you head off on your Chinese adventure. We share our tips to help keep you and your belongings safe.

Whether you're braving the crowds of Beijing or retracing the footsteps of nomads before you on the Silk Road, China is as diverse as you'd expect a country of 1.4 billion people to be. Such uniqueness brings surprises – some amazing, others not so. This is where travel insurance comes in. World Nomads policies may help in the face of the unexpected, allowing you to explore China with a support team behind you.

Conquering the language barrier in a crisis

Emergencies abroad are stressful enough, but try navigating the Chinese system when you don't speak Mandarin, Cantonese or the local dialect... lucky you have travel insurance!

In a medical emergency, contact World Nomads 24/7 Emergency Assistance team who can direct you to nearby appropriate care, talk to doctors, help out with admin and pay for expenses upfront if necessary. They can also help in other sticky situations, such as if your passport is lost or your checked-in bag ends up in Hunan instead of Hainan.

It's worth knowing that while we can help with communication on the ground, you'll need to translate paperwork into English when you lodge your claim.

Getting the right cover for your adventure

If you're the kind of nomad that likes to see a country from all angles, including upside-down, underneath and above, keep in mind that many adventure activities have travel insurance

restrictions. You may need to compare activities coverage in World Nomads' Standard and Explorer Plans before you buy, or add activities to your policy when you buy, depending on your country of residence.

Coverage for an activity may have special requirements too and if you don't comply with them, your travel insurance may be void. For example, if you plan to drive you must be licensed for that type of vehicle both at home and in China... that means getting a Chinese driver's license (International Driving Permits aren't recognized).

You may also need cover upgrades, licenses and safety gear for activities such as riding e-bikes, scuba and hiking – check out your policy wording and contact customer service if you're unsure what your cover includes.

It's important to choose your level of coverage carefully when you buy as you can't upgrade after purchasing. Please also check your policy for activities we don't cover and other exclusions, such as search and rescue.

Common sense in large crowds

While diving into the crowd is part of the experience of traveling China, it's worth brushing up on ways to protect yourself, your stuff and your insurance.

Theft

Where there are crowds there are often pickpockets. You must take reasonable care to protect your belongings or they may not be covered if stolen. This includes carrying with you valuable items

Get our smart, flexible Travel Insurance here



such as electronic devices, jewelry, cash, travel documents and credit cards and never leaving them unsupervised. You must also report any theft to the local authorities as soon as possible and retain documentation to support your claim.

Civil unrest

If a crowd suddenly becomes a riot, it may impact your cover. Contact our 24/7 Emergency Assistance team if you're affected by civil unrest so they can establish your safety and advise on what to do.

Follow the advice of local authorities, warnings and directions, and listen to local news and media for alerts.

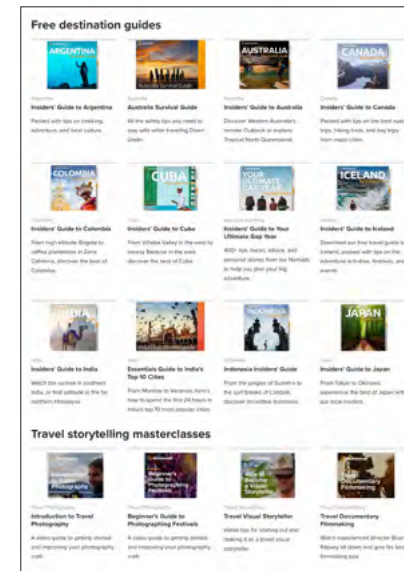
Traffic accidents

Traffic accidents are unfortunately too common in China, whether you're driving, on a bicycle or on foot. If you're involved in an accident, you'll need written confirmation from the local authority to support any claim. Please also contact 24/7 Emergency Assistance if you're injured.

Find out more at www.worldnomads.com/travel-insurance

This is only a summary of cover and does not include the full terms and conditions of the policy. You should read your policy wording in full so you understand what is and isn't covered. That way there won't be any surprises if you need to use it. If you have any questions, customer service is here to help.

Browse our guides, phrasebooks and storytelling masterclasses



Your journey starts here. Get off the beaten track and experience destinations like a local with our free travel guides. www.worldnomads.com/explore/guides

WorldNomads.com Pty Limited (ABN 62 127 485 198 AR 343027) at Governor Macquarie Tower, Level 18, 1 Farrer Place, Sydney, NSW, 2000, Australia is an Authorised Representative of nib Travel Services (Australia) Pty Ltd (ABN 81 115 932 173 AFSL 308461) (formerly known as Cerberus Special Risks), and is underwritten in Australia by XL Insurance Company SE, Australia branch (ABN 36 083 570 441) and in New Zealand by certain underwriters at Lloyd's. World Nomads Travel Lifestyle (Europe) Limited (CN 601852) markets and promotes travel insurance products of nib Travel Services Europe Limited trading as nib Travel Services (CN 601851), First Floor, City Quarter, Lapps Quay, Cork, Ireland, and underwritten by XL Insurance Company SE and XL Catlin Insurance Company UK Limited. nib Travel Services Europe Limited trading as nib Travel Services is regulated by the Central Bank of Ireland. WorldNomads.com Pty Limited markets and promotes travel insurance products of nib Travel Services Limited (License No.1446874) (formerly known as Nomadic Insurance Limited), at PO Box 1051, Grand Cayman KY1-1102, Cayman Islands. World Nomads Inc. (1585422), at 520 3rd Street, Suite 201, Oakland, CA 94607, plans are administered by Trip Mate Inc. (in CA & UT, dba, Trip Mate Insurance Agency) at 9225 Ward Parkway, Suite 200, Kansas City, MO, 64114, USA, with 24-hour and Assistance Services provided by One Call Worldwide Travel Services Network, Inc. and plans underwritten by Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company and affiliated companies. Columbus, OH: World Nomads (Canada) Ltd (BC: 0700718; Business No. 001 85379 7942 RC0001) is a licensed agent sponsored by AIG Insurance Company of Canada at 120 Bremner Boulevard, Suite 2200, Toronto, Ontario, M5J 0A8, Canada. World Experiences Seguros De Viagem Brasil Ltda (CNPJ: 21.346.969/0001-99) at Rua Padre Joao Manuel, 755, 16º andar, São Paulo – SP, Brazil is an Authorized Partner (Representante) of Zurich Minas Brasil Seguros S.A. (CNPJ: 17.197.385/0001-21) at Av. Getúlio Vargas, 1420, 5th floor, Funcionários, Belo Horizonte, State of Minas Gerais through the SUSEP Process 15.414.901/07/2015-77. All World Nomads entities listed above, including nib Travel Services Europe, nib Travel Services Limited and nib Travel Services (Australia) Pty Ltd, are subsidiaries of nib holdings limited (ABN 51 125 633 856).

Meet Our Contributors

Our writers are world travelers bound by the desire to truly understand the countries they visit.

If you'd like to contribute, keep an eye on our [Assignments page](#), where you can apply for upcoming opportunities.



Esme Fox

Esme Fox is a professional travel journalist who grew up in the UK, the Philippines and Uganda. She is now based in Spain, and has traveled to China several times.



Jamie Fullerton

Jamie is an Asia-based freelance writer who contributes to outlets including The Times, The Guardian, The Telegraph, Vice and various travel publications.



Tess Humphrys

Tess lived in China for six years, working in marketing in the cities of Ningbo, Suzhou and Shanghai.



Ann Lee

Ann is a freelance journalist who has contributed to Metro, Evening Standard, the BBC, Time Out and various other publications.



Janice Leung-Hayes

Janice is a Hong Kong-based food and travel writer. When she's not writing, you'll find her running farmers' markets, or producing videos to tell forgotten Asian stories.



Keith Lyons

Keith is an award-winning writer, specializing in soft adventure, off-the-beaten-track travel and eco-tourism, with a predilection for dark chocolate, tea and craft beer.



Sharon McDonnell

Sharon is a travel and culture writer in San Francisco who's taken cooking classes around the world, from Chile to Norway and whale-watched in the Azores.



Stacey McKenna

Stacey is a Colorado-based freelance writer covering travel, nature, adventure, and science.



Sugato Mukherjee

Sugato is a photographer and writer based in Calcutta. He enjoys writing about offbeat destinations and exotic food as much as photographing his documentary projects.



Christina Ng

Christina Ng is a freelance writer and translator originally from Singapore, but now based in Berlin. She writes for publications in the US, UK, Germany and Singapore.



Ronan O'Connell

Ronan is a journalist and photographer with 16 years' experience as a reporter. His travel writing and photography work has taken him to more than 60 countries.



Dave Stamboulis

Dave is an American travel writer and photographer based in Bangkok. He is the author of an award-winning travel memoir, and specializes in off-the-beaten-path adventure travel.



Josh Summers

Josh is an entrepreneur and writer who has lived throughout Asia, including China and Thailand, for more than 10 years.



Joanna Tovia

Joanna is a freelance travel writer and photographer based in Australia's beautiful Blue Mountains. When she's not exploring far-flung lands, Joanna is writing for print and web.



Crystal Wilde

Crystal is a British journalist who has been living in and writing about Asia for more than 10 years. She's mainly obsessed with food, culture, the great outdoors, and animals.



World Nomads

1. 4 billion people,
countless adventures;
make sure you're covered.

Get a Quote

Trusted by:

