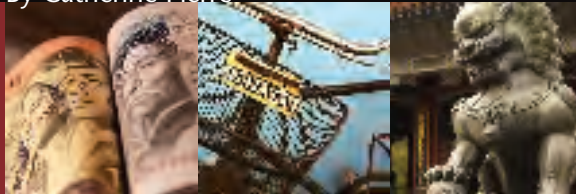


China

VAST, MYSTERIOUS AND RELATIVELY UNEXPLORED BY WESTERNERS, IT MAY BE THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME

By Catherine Pierre



China is a vast country—and vastly different from what Western travelers are used to. From the bustling capital city of Beijing to the remote mountains of Tibet, China offers an array of enchanting experiences unlike anywhere else in the world. Think of the Forbidden City, a royal palace that for centuries was off limits to all but the most elite; or the Great Wall, which spans 4,000 miles and has guarded China from invaders for thousands of years; or Shanghai—"Paris of the East"—a 19th-century port town once known for gambling and prostitution, now poised to become China's economic powerhouse.





For years, China—with all of its many treasures—was largely closed to the rest of the world. But recent capitalist-friendly reforms have opened the country to the West, making China one of the most-watched players on the world stage, and making this a great time to visit for anyone who wants to see what all the buzz is about. (According to the book *Lonely Planet*, China will likely be the world's leading travel destination by the year 2020.) With 1.3 billion people, China is the world's most populous country, and at about 3.7 million square miles, it is the world's fourth biggest. A country that size can be tough to navigate without some help, and you may want to consider going with a tour group. Charlotte Xu, executive director of China Advocates, has been planning tours of China for 20 years. She recommends visiting Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an and, for a little break from all of that city life, Guilin.



Tiananmen Square, left, at the center of Beijing. The Temple of Heaven, above, was made in the 15th century entirely of wood, without a single nail.

Beijing

Beijing is China's political capital today, and has been for almost 1,000 years, through the Jin, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Here is where you'll find some of China's most important historical locations, the Forbidden City, for example, as well as sites you'll recognize from more recent events—Tiananmen Square is located here. It is also home to one of the world's most exuberant building booms; hardly anyone touring Beijing can fail to notice the number of construction cranes that fill the skyline. The city is preparing for the 2008 Summer Olympics, which only adds to its big, bustling, crowded character.

China was closed to the Western world for much of the last few decades, and many Chinese now see the upcoming Games as a chance to show off their city and their culture to the rest of the world. Beijing holds a great many treasures,

and Xu recommends that you plan to spend a few days at least exploring this vast city.

Home to the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, the Forbidden City was so called because commoners were not allowed in; however, the 24 emperors who lived there—along with their many wives, concubines and children—rarely left the cluster of buildings that make up the Forbidden City, meeting with their ministers to conduct government business within its walls. Now referred to as the Palace Museum, the city took 14 years to build, from 1406 to 1420, and the labor of thousands of men. It is rumored to have 9,999.5 rooms (though a modern survey puts the number at around 8,600) and covers 720,000 square meters, or about 7,750,000 square feet (about 178 football fields).

Visitors to the Forbidden City can tour the Outer Court, which was used for ceremonial purposes such as coronations

and imperial addresses; and the Inner Court, where the emperors and their families lived. The Palace Museum also holds one of the most important collections of imperial art, including paintings, bronzes, textiles, timepieces, sculpture and jewelry. Listed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a World Cultural Heritage Site in 1987, the Forbidden City hosts 6 million to 8 million visitors each year and sits literally at the center of the city. “You can just imagine the biggest palace in the world sitting in the middle of Beijing,” says Xu. “The palace is the center, the pillar. Everything is built around it.”

The Temple of Heaven is another of Beijing’s most famous historical sites, and is considered one of the Ming Dynasty’s most important architectural accomplishments as it is made entirely of wood, without a single nail. Construction began in the early 15th century, and the temple was used for ceremonial purposes, when the “son of Heaven”—the emperor—would come to pray.

Beijing is also a good starting place to visit the Great Wall, a structure that extends about 4,000 miles. Originally the wall was several walls, built by individual states during the pre-dynastic period as defense. The “First Emperor”



China is the world’s oldest continuous civilization, with records dating back more than three thousand years. For much of its history, China was ruled by a succession of dynasties. Artifacts from the Shang Dynasty date from 1500 B.C., though Qinshihuangdi is considered “the First Emperor” because he unified all of China under his rule. Dynastic rule continued until the 17th century.

1644: The Manchus overthrow the Ming Dynasty and establish the Qing Dynasty, China’s last.

1840: The first Opium War begins.

1842: China cedes Hong Kong to Great Britain as part of the Treaty of Nanjing.

1911: A military revolution forces the last Qing monarch to abdicate, establishing a new republic.

1920s: Sun Yat-sen, whose ideas had inspired the uprising, founds the Kuomintang (KMT), or the Chinese Nationalist People’s Party, to unite a warring China.

1925: After Sun’s death, Chiang Kai-shek takes control of the KMT and opposes the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

1934: Defeated by the KMT, the CCP begins the “Long March” to Shaanxi, where it establishes its base. Mao Zedong takes control of the party. The two parties will struggle for years, and by 1949, the CCP will control most of China.

Qinshihuangdi—so called because he united China under one rule, in 214 B.C.—ordered that the Wall be connected to become one massive structure protecting the northern border. During the Han period (206BC - 220AD), the wall was extended westward (a section of that wall was recently discovered in the Xinjiang region), and much of the Great Wall we see today was built during the Ming period. Time has taken its toll on the Wall, and both natural and man-made forces have left much of it in ruins. But many sections have been restored to become one of the most popular sites for visitors to China. Organized tours are available, or you can visit particular sections on your own. An easy drive from Beijing, Badaling is one of the best restored sections of the wall, but it is also one of the most popular, so expect crowds, as well as many souvenir shops. Mutianyu is a little farther away—about a two-hour drive—and offers fewer crowds, beautiful scenery and a cable car to get you to the top. Finally, Jinshanling, about three hours away, offers stunning views, few crowds and a great starting point for a day-hike along the wall.

Shanghai

If Beijing is China's Washington, then Shanghai is its New York, or its Las Vegas, or its Paris—all glitz and glamour and excitement. The city's port has made it an economic center since the Opium Wars of the mid-19th century, but Shanghai has recently been undergoing a massive rebirth. As multi-national corporations set up shop in the city, the economic boom is turning Shanghai into a leading destination for shopping, eating and entertainment.

Plan to spend part of the day exploring the Bund, Shanghai's famous waterfront boulevard running along the west bank of the Huangpu River, where old colonial buildings mingle with gleaming new architecture. The Bund is particularly beautiful at night, so to get the best view, take a

The Great Wall of China, left, was originally built as several walls and is more than 4,000 miles long. The ultra-modern skyline of Shanghai, right.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Today in China, 90 percent of the population is Han Chinese, with the rest comprised of a handful of ethnic minorities. Though there are several major dialects, most Chinese speak Mandarin, which is taught in the schools and used by the government. The country is officially atheist, but the constitution recognizes religious tolerance (though the government's recent newsworthy crackdowns on followers of the Falon Gong religion suggest otherwise).

If you're traveling to China, you'll need a valid passport and a visa, and you'll want to check with the Chinese Embassy (www.china-embassy.org/eng/) for any current travel restrictions. The country is extremely cold in the winter and extremely hot in the summer (which tends to be the height of the tourist season) so consider a spring or autumn trip.



1949: Mao establishes the People's Republic of China, based on the Soviet model.

1958: Mao announces the "Great Leap Forward," an economic program aimed at increasing industrial and agricultural production that would ultimately be ruinous.

1966: Mao launches the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" to rally popular opposition against his political foes within the communist party.

1976: Mao dies.

1980: After the Third Plenum a few years earlier, the government adopts more pragmatic policies and officially declares the Cultural Revolution a catastrophe.

1989: Responding to rampant inflation and economic hardship, students and intellectuals gather in Tiananmen Square to demand political reform. Though the protest is peaceful, the government declares martial law, and hundreds of protesters are killed.

1992: Guided by Deng Xiaoping, the government officially adopts a more market-oriented economy, with the goal of raising the standard of living in China. In the years following, China has seen more economic reform and has increasingly opened to the Western world.

1997: Sovereignty of Hong Kong is transferred back to the People's Republic of China.

Source: U.S. Department of State, www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/18902.htm

MIND YOUR MANNERS IN CHINA

"Chinese culture is very old," says Charlotte Xu, executive director of China Advocates. "People treat each other with great respect and courtesy. Families and relationships are everything in our social dynamics."

To that end, if you're traveling in China, there are a few things to keep in mind. Perhaps topping the list is the idea of "face"—which basically means that you should never embarrass someone or challenge their status in front of others. It's probably a good idea not to challenge someone's authority, bring up awkward personal facts or get angry in public.

Gift giving is another major factor in Chinese culture. Xu recommends travelers bring small souvenirs from home. If you're invited to someone's house, she says, you'll be well treated, so return the favor by presenting your hosts with a gift. Similarly, if someone at your hotel (or anywhere for that matter) does you a favor, a gift is in order as a gesture of thanks.

And keep in mind that Chinese people tend to be less outwardly emotional than Westerners, especially when meeting strangers. So a nod of the head or a quick handshake is in order, as are a few personal questions—about family, marital status, etc.—to establish some common ground.

Generally speaking, if you're courteous to the Chinese, you'll be rewarded in kind.

ferry across the river to Pudong, Shanghai's new financial district on the east side of the river. Xu recommends dinner at the Grand Hyatt, where Cloud 9, a lounge located on the 87th floor, offers a 360-degree view of the city. While in Shanghai, you may also want to catch a show at the Shanghai Grand Theatre, which holds performances nightly and features a combination of Western and more traditional Chinese programming. A special highlight is Chinese acrobatics, a 2,000-year-old folk art form that includes lion dances; cycling tricks; juggling items such as chairs, plates or giant jars; and wushu, or traditional group gymnastics.

If you get the chance, take the trip from Pudong Airport to Shanghai on the Maglev train. The first-ever train built using the German technology, the Maglev transports passengers the 19 miles (30 kilometers) from the airport in just over seven minutes.

Xi'an

Any trip to China should include a stop in Xi'an, the ancient capital and burial site of the "First Emperor," Qinshihuangdi. It is also home to Qinshihuangdi's famed Army of Terracotta Warriors. In the early 1970s, a peasant stumbled across a terra-cotta relic while digging a well. His find would eventually lead to the excavation of thousands of life-sized terra-cotta soldiers and horses buried to protect Qinshihuangdi in the afterlife.

Several years ago, a handful of the soldiers toured museums in the United States to much acclaim. But nothing can compare to seeing the rows and rows of soldiers, who have stood in that exact place for thousands of years, in person. A museum has been built over the excavation site, and the peasant, now in his 80s and something of a local hero, is often available at the museum to sign autographs.

While in Xi'an, visit the Big Goose Pagoda, built in the seventh century by the Tang emperor Gaozong to hold Buddhist scriptures brought from India by Xuan Zang, one of China's most important monks; the Grand Mosque, built in the 18th century and an important site for the country's estimated 20 million Muslims; and the Forest of Steles Museum, which was once the temple of Confucius and now holds thousands of carved stone tablets, the earliest dating back to the Han Dynasty.

Outside of the Cities

If you want to get out of the city and experience some of China's more natural beauty, head to the city of Guilin, in southwest China. Guilin is located on the Li River, bordered on both sides by magnificent limestone formations. Take a tour down the Li, and at the end, enjoy some hiking or biking through the countryside. "This is one of the most idyllic, poetic places in China," says Xu. "It's like a Chinese landscape painting, with white farmhouses and green rice pad-

Thousands of life-sized terra-cotta soldiers and horses, below, were buried in Xi'an to protect China's "First Emperor" in the afterlife.





The Yangtze River, above, is the third longest in the world at 3964 miles (6380 kilometers).

dies and beautiful hills in the background—it's paradise."

Tours of the Yangtze River are another popular option. The Yangtze is the longest river in China—the third longest in the world—originating in Tibet and flowing through seven provinces on its way to the East China Sea. Tours originate in Chongqing and can take from four to as many as 12 days. The highlight of the river is unquestionably the trip through the stunning peaks and cliffs of the Three Gorges—though with the completion of the Three Gorges Dam in 2009, the rising waters may diminish the experience.

Finally, for a tour of the cities and countryside, take a trip along the Silk Road, the ancient trade route linking China to the West. Though the Silk Road got its name in the 19th century from a German geographer named Ferdinand von Richthofen, it has been traveled for more than 2,000 years, and it was used for the trade of everything from food and textiles to luxury goods to horses. Beginning in Xi'an, the route travels west to Dunhuang, where a collection of temples known as the Mogao Grottoes house an important collection of Buddhist art. Just south of Dunhuang, the Gobi Desert's dunes are interrupted by an oasis pool called Crescent Spring. A park there offers tourists the chance to try camel rides and dune surfing. After Dunhuang, the Silk Road splits into three routes. Most visitors travel the northern route and make their way along the Taklamakan Desert to Kashgar, where they can still get a feel for the old Silk Road trade at the local bazaar.



WHAT TO EAT

Chances are, you're fairly familiar with Chinese cuisine. But your dining experience in China promises to be different from the cardboard carryout boxes you're used to.

For one, rather than serving as merely a vehicle for your main dish, grains—in the form of rice, noodles or steamed buns—are an integral part of a Chinese meal, meant to balance the vegetables, fish and meat. For another, if you're having soup, it will be served last. And the fortune cookie? Forget it. Not only are the Chinese not big on desserts, but that ubiquitous, message-bearing after-dinner treat wasn't invented in China and is rarely eaten there.

Breakfast—unless you're specifically offered a "European-style" morning meal—will generally consist of many of the same foods you've eaten for dinner the night before: rice (in the form of porridge), plain or filled steamed buns, pickled cucumbers and deep-fried dough. Midday, expect to have rice or noodles served with some vegetables and meat. Dinner tends to be a larger affair, with food served family-style: Each diner has his or her own plate of rice, but will use chopsticks to share a variety of meat and vegetable dishes—often right from the serving dish.