

# Essence of China

Few countries have developed as rapidly as China has over the past two decades. Deng Xiaoping launched economic reforms in 1979,



Liuhe Ta, 'Six Harmonies Pagoda', Hangzhou

dramatically improving the lives of Chinese in both urban and rural areas. Despite these changes, the essence of the country still lies in its long history and rich heritage, in which the Chinese take immense pride. Wherever you go, history is always there in the background, from the historical dramas that play each evening on the TV, through epic films about emperors, to the cartoons and comics

based on fictional characters, such as the Monkey King, enjoyed by school children. More concrete traces can be found in every city and small village: ancient wooden pagodas, magnificent imperial palaces and tombs, serene temples, classic gardens, medieval city walls and beautiful scenery.

## THE 10 ESSENTIALS

*If you only have a short time to visit China and want to get under the skin of the country and of the Chinese, here are some essentials:*

- **Visit a park early in the morning** for a look at how Chinese start their day. You'll see people doing ballroom and disco dancing, callisthenics, martial arts, sword fighting.
- **Go fly a kite.** Kite flying is a favourite past time among youngsters and senior citizens and takes place in large open spaces, such as Tiananmen Square (▶ 43) in Beijing
- **Go to a karaoke.** While many Westerners are put off by karaoke singing, it's a national pastime for the Chinese. A good voice is not required.
- **Enjoy Peking duck** at one of Beijing's numerous duck outlets. Spread the thin pancake with some plum sauce, and fill with slices of scallion or cucumber along with crisp pieces of skin and meat.
- **Ride a bike around the city** along with tens of thousands of other Chinese, for whom this is the main form of transportation. Most cities have convenient and safe bicycle lanes.
- **Take a ride in a pedicab.** Take a leisurely tour of the back streets in a pedicab, observing Chinese at work and play, and stopping wherever something catches your interest.
- **See an opera.** Different regions boast their own opera styles, but all feature melodramatic plots, highly stylised acting and magnificent costumes.
- **Take the train.** Rub elbows during an overnight train ride to one of your tourist destinations. Soft berths accommodate four people in a closed room, while hard berths have six people to an open cubicle.
- **Visit a produce market.** Wander around during the early morning hours or just after work as Chinese housewives choose fresh ingredients for the family meal. You'll see a wide variety of fruits, spices vegetables and herbs.
- **Relax in a tea house.** Finish off a busy day with a visit to a traditional tea house, slowly brewing tea in tiny pots.



Huxingting Teahouse, Old Shanghai  
Kite flyer, Suzhou Creek, Shanghai

Kite flyer, Suzhou Creek, Shanghai



## 8 Yangshuo

-  73D2
-  83km from Guilin by boat, Guangxi Province
-  Chinese and Western restaurants on main street (£)
-  Buses from Guilin, Liuzhou and Guangzho
-  Guilin Railway Station
-  Li River Cruise: Wuzhou-Hong Kong High Speed Ferry
-  Guilin Airport
-  None
-  Guilin ▶ 73)

*With its amazing karst formations, Yangshuo is like falling into a Chinese landscape painting.*

Yangshuo has in recent years become a Mecca for foreign backpackers, lured by the beautiful scenery.

The best way to explore the nearby countryside is by bicycle, passing bamboo groves, orange orchards, cinnamon trees, and fields of sugar cane, peanuts, watermelons and tobacco. Moon Hill, a limestone peak marked by a moon-shaped hole, is a 10km bike ride southwest of Yangshuo. A 30-minute hike to the top provides excellent views of the surrounding countryside.

Boat tours out of Yangshuo travel upriver to Xingping, or downstream to Fuli. Xingping is known for its beautiful natural scenery. In addition to amazing views, Fuli, a small fishing and farming area with traditional architecture, offers charming narrow streets. You can also hire your own small boat (about Rmb200) for a leisurely trip down the Li River, getting off to explore rustic villages that still practise fishing with tamed cormorants.



Cobblestoned Xi Jie, or West Street, has a wide array of souvenir shops selling a variety of arts and crafts. Diecui Road is a good place for a look at a local produce market. For those in need of a brief break from China, dine outside at one of the local Western restaurants that serve up inexpensive Western dishes. These restaurants and coffee shops are good places to get advice on touring the area.

*Karst outcrops rise over the Li River, Yangshuo*

## 9 Yangzi Jiang (Yangtze River)

*Rising in the icy mountains of Qinghai Province, the Yangzi passes through seven provinces, ending its journey in the East China Sea.*





The Yangzi, at 6,380km in length, is the third longest river in the world, dividing China between the wheat-growing north and the rice-growing south. Every turn brings to mind stories from history and mythology, such as Kublai Khan's crossing of the river on his conquest of the Song dynasty in the 13th century.


Starting at Chongqing and heading down river the first stopping point is Fengdu, with its temples dedicated to the King of the Underworld. Further downstream, Wanxian, an old port city with a lively night market, is where many boats dock for the evening. Baidicheng provides views of the Qutang Gorge, the first of the three gorges.

The Three Gorges, located on a 200km length of the river between Baidicheng and Yichang, are crowded with towering peaks, jagged cliffs and caves. Qutang is the shortest, but most beautiful, of the three. Wu, or Sorceress Gorge, is surrounded by sloping forests and strange mountain peaks. Xiling, the last and longest, is marked by shoals and rapids. At Wushan travellers can disembark for an excursion through the Three Lesser Gorges of the Daning River, riding the crystal clear shallow waters in small boats through scenery that is almost surreal.

At Yichang you can visit the construction site of the Three Gorges Dam, the largest dam project in the world.

Wuhan, made an international Treaty Port during the mid-19th century when China's doors were forced open, is the major inland river port along the Yangzi. This is the stopping point for most river cruises.

-  72C3
-  Central China

 Cruise ships and steamers serve food

 Boats from Chongqing to Wuhan (4 days, 3 nights)

 None

 Tours can be arranged through the China International Travel Service (CITS) and international travel agencies. Note that a variety of boats can be booked, from simple steamers to expensive cruise ships.

*The Upper Yangzi or 'River of Golden Sand'*

*Socialist statuary on the Yangzi Bridge at Nanjing*



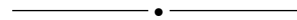
# Eastern China

Eastern China includes some of the country's most interesting cities, from bustling Shanghai, a showcase of the nation's past and future, to the ancient capitals that were once ports on the Grand Canal, and which have retained some of the oldest Chinese traditions. Here you will find examples of some of the country's most beautiful traditional architecture. The Grand Canal, segments of which date back 2,500 years, has decayed over the centuries, but remains the longest man-made waterway in the world, stretching some 1,610km. This is also the location of two of the country's most scenic mountains – Taishan and Huangshan.



*‘When you reach the top of  
Taishan, you find the world  
becomes smaller.’*

CONFUCIUS  
*after reaching the top of the  
mountain.*



## Shanghai

Shanghai is a relatively young city in terms of Chinese history. Prior to the opening of the five treaty ports in 1842, at the time of the Treaty of Nanjing between the Qing and the British, Shanghai was a walled fishing village near the mouth of the Yangzi River. This all changed, however, when British, French and American settlers teamed up with enterprising Chinese merchants to turn Shanghai into a cosmopolitan city and centre of commerce. During the city's heyday, the Park Hotel on Nanjing Road was the tallest building in China, while successful entrepreneurs and celebrities from around the world – such as the playwright Noel Coward – mixed it up in the restaurants at the Peace Hotel.

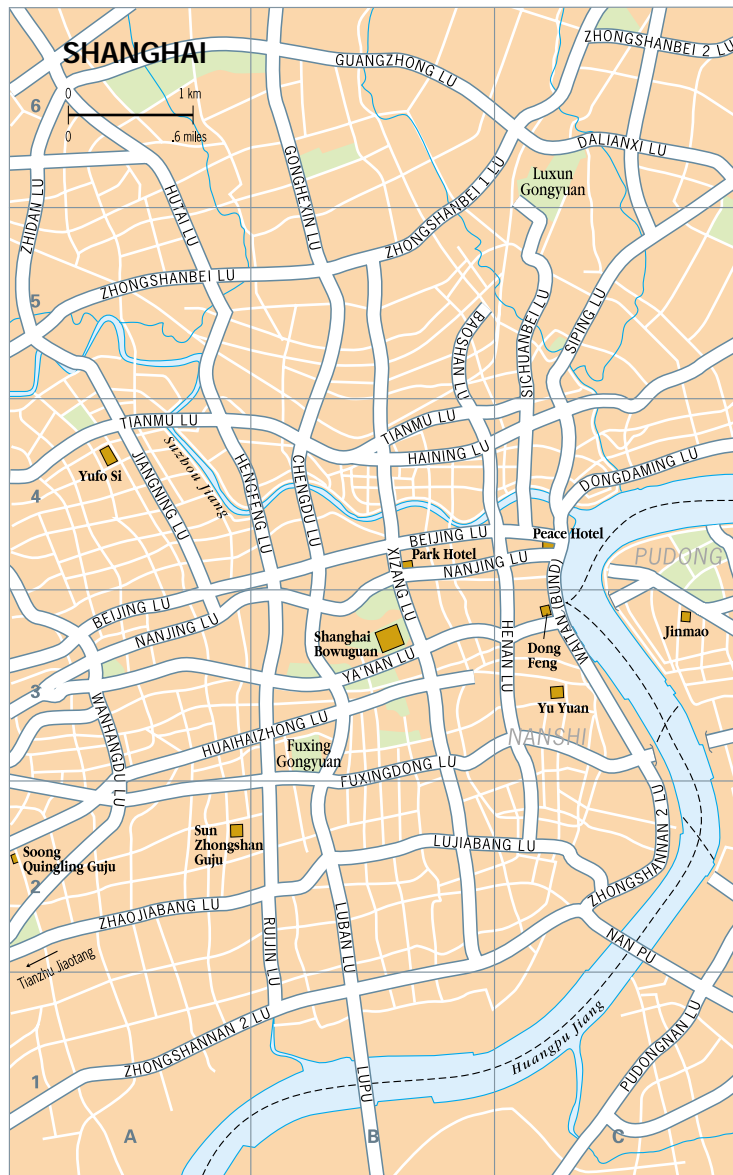
Time stood still for three decades following liberation in 1949, as the communist leadership warily viewed the city's decadent past and reputation for freewheeling capitalism. When China opened its doors to the outside world in the late 1970s, Shanghai was a pale shadow of its past self. The Shanghainese, who pride themselves in being the most savvy and enterprising people in China, lost no time in seeking to revive the city's glory. Shanghai

underwent a massive transformation, seemingly building overnight gleaming, state-of-the-art skyscrapers and expressways to speed traffic around the city. China's first stock exchange opened here in 1990, and in Pudong, across the Huangpu River from the Bund, a modern economic zone and commercial centre has risen from land that was farm fields a little over a decade ago.

One of China's largest and most densely populated cities, with 13 million people, Shanghai's bustling streets are today packed with life. Crowds rush in all directions, cars vie for space on busy streets, and department stores and shops overflow with a wide variety of goods.



The Russian Consulate by Suzhou Creek, Shanghai



# Food & Drink

China has a wide variety of regional cuisines, with each province having its own specialities. The following are the more popular cuisines that can be found around the country.

## Beijing

Mild, but hearty. Wheat, rather than rice is the staple and dumplings, breads and noodles feature prominently. The most famous dish is Peking duck. The meat and crisp skin of the duck and sliced spring onions or cucumbers are wrapped in thin crepes of slightly griddled, unleavened dough dabbed with sweet soybean paste. Soup made from the duck bones is also delicious.

## Sichuan

Spicy and richly flavoured, this cuisine makes liberal use of hot peppers. Popular specialities include *gongbao chicken* (diced boneless chicken sautéed with chillies), aubergine with garlic, *mapo tofu* (diced bean curd sautéed with ground pork, garlic, spring onions, ginger and lots of chilli peppers). Instead of rice, try *yinzi zhuàn*, a roll steamed or deep-fried.

## Hunan

Like that of Sichuan, is known for its use of chilli peppers. The home of the late Chairman Mao Zedong, many restaurants specialise in the favourites of Mao's hometown.

## Jiangzhe

The highlight of this cuisine (from Jiangsu and Zhejiang, two provinces located on the east coast), is seafood. This style is also known as Shanghai-style cooking.

## Cantonese

Cooking from Guangdong Province in southeast China is sweet and colourful, and representative of a large agricultural area. The Cantonese are known to eat just about every type of animal, and so according to one popular saying, this cuisine

includes 'everything with legs except a table, everything in the air except airplanes, and everything under the sea except submarines'. Cantonese food is perhaps most famous for the brunch time and afternoon snacks known as *dim sum*, or *dian xin* in Mandarin. Waitresses wheel carts loaded with varieties of Cantonese delicacies through the restaurant and diners select what they want from the parade of dumplings, sweet pastries and roasted and steamed treats.

## Vegetarian

Called *su cai*, vegetarian dishes have long been a part of Chinese cuisine and contrary to popular opinion, it is anything but bland. This cuisine, often prepared to look and taste like real meat and fish, is served at Buddhist temples and restaurants around the country.

## Etiquette

Chinese dishes are ordered communally, with guests helping themselves from the collection placed in the centre of the table. It is good manners to take from each dish what can be eaten immediately; do not accumulate a great pile of food on your side plate or in your rice bowl. In many restaurants there is no side plate, and so you are expected to use the rice bowl as the resting place for food taken from the communal dishes. If there is a serving spoon or chopsticks, use them; otherwise it's acceptable to use your chopsticks to take food directly from the communal plate. Watch your Chinese friends and act accordingly. It may be acceptable to sip soup directly from your soup bowl.

Dim Sum, known in Mandarin as Dian Xin

## DID YOU KNOW?

Many 'Chinese' dishes created by restaurants in other countries, such as 'Lemon Chicken', are unknown to the majority of Chinese.

Hot chestnut seller on the Bund, Shanghai



Dried flowers for infusions, Zhouzhuang  
Below: Jiaozi dumpling cook, Shanghai Old Town



# Children's China

## Acrobatics

The art of acrobatics dates back more than 4,000 years in China, and it's still a popular folk art. Special schools enrol primary school children to begin the rigorous training to become an acrobat. Acrobats are also an important part of traditional opera performances, such as Beijing Opera and the old school of opera known as Kunqu.

## Beijing

### Beijing Amusement Park

A traditional amusement park with ferris wheels, roundabouts, boat rides, roller-coaster, and a waterslide for the warmer weather.

☎ **Longtan Park, Chongwen District** ☎ (010) 6701 1155  
🕒 8:30–5:30 🎫 60  
👉 Expensive

### Beijing Aquarium

Located next to the Beijing zoo and features a fine selection of marine life. Highlights include a killer whale show and a shark tank.

☎ **137 Xizhimenwai Dajie, Xicheng District** ☎ (010) 6217 6655 🕒 9–5:30 🎫 Xizhimen  
🕒 7, 15, 102, 103, 111, 332  
👉 Expensive

### Beijing Chaoyang Theatre

The China Acrobatic Troupe offers a nightly performance of the very highest standard. Their repertoire includes tightrope walking, plate spinning, juggling, and mind-boggling gymnastic displays.

☎ **36 Dongsanhuanbei Lu, Chaoyang District** ☎ (010) 6507 2421 🕒 Daily 7:15pm  
👉 Moderate

### Beijing Zoo

Not the most inspiring zoo in the world, but it is worth a visit for the giant pandas.

☎ **137 Xizhimenwai Dajie, Xicheng District** ☎ (010) 6831 4411 🎫 Xizhimen 🕒 7, 15, 102, 103, 111, 332 👉 Cheap

### Bird Park

A reasonably large selection of colourful birds.

☎ **18 Beituchengxi Lu, Chaoyang District** ☎ (010) 6237 9927 🕒 8:30–5 🎫 Cheap

### Blue Zoo Beijing

Underwater aquarium with an electric moving walkway. Thousands of fish living in as natural environment as possible.

☎ **Worker's Stadium (South Gate), Chaoyang District** ☎ (010) 6591 3397 🕒 9–8  
👉 Moderate

### Daoxianghu Riders' Riding Club (Daoxianghu Machang)

For horse riding this park is one of the better places in Beijing. They have experienced instructors and it's also a good area to while away a few hours.

☎ **Inside Daoxianghu Park, Sujiatuo Village** ☎ (010) 6245 5879 👉 Moderate

### Fandoule (Fun Dazzle)

For children between about 3 and 10. Large play area with slides and 'jungle' style gym equipment.

☎ **Worker's Stadium, near South Gate, Chaoyang District** ☎ (010) 6593 6193 🎫 Cheap

### Lakeview Waterpark

A huge water amusement park with a beach that's possible to surf, waterslides, tubing and a vortex pool for adults.

☎ **2 Fuqian Street, near Yanqi Lake, Hualou County** ☎ (010) 6562 8838 🎫 Expensive

### Le Cool

Large ice skating rink.  
☎ **B2, China World, 1 Jianguomenwai Dajie** ☎ (010) 6505 5776 🕒 10–10 🎫 Cheap

## Hong Kong

### Ocean Park

A vast complex including an amusement park, cable-car ride, oceanarium, and the Middle Kingdom theme park.

☎ **Wong Chuk Hang Road, Hong Kong Island** ☎ (852) 2552 0291 🕒 Daily 10–6  
👉 Expensive

### Science Museum

A host of interactive displays that ought to keep the kids engaged for hours.

☎ **2 Science Museum Road, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon** ☎ (852) 2732 3232 🕒 Mon, Tue, Wed, Fri 1–9, Sat, Sun 10–9. Closed Thu 👉 Expensive

## Shanghai

### Fun Dazzle

Large indoor playground with a variety of padded slides and jungle gym equipment for children ages around 3 to 8.

☎ **780 Changning Lu, in Zhongshan Park** ☎ (021) 6210 7388 🎫 Cheap

### Science and Technology Museum

Interactive museum split into five main themes including Earth Exploration, Children's Technoland, Light of Wisdom, Spectrum of Life, and Cradle of Designers.

☎ **2000 Shijidadao, Century Park, Pudong** ☎ (021) 6862 2000 🕒 Tue–Sun 9–5:30 🎫 Yanggao NanLu 👉 Expensive

### Shanghai Acrobatics Theatre

A daily hour-and-a-half show with breathtaking feats of strength and skill.

☎ **1376 Nanjingxi Lu** ☎ (021) 6279 8663 🎫 Moderate

## Shanghai Botanical Gardens

With several children's playgrounds the gardens are a good place to enjoy a few relaxing hours. Divided into sectors specialising in ferns, bamboo, magnolias and many other plant and flower species.

☎ **1111 Longwu Lu, south of Longhua Lu, Xuhui District** ☎ (021) 6451 3369 🕒 8–4  
🎫 Cheap

## Shanghai Circus World

China has always been renowned for its circuses. Groups from all over the world come here to perform in this huge domed structure.

☎ **2266 Gonghexin Lu, near Daning Lu** ☎ (021) 6652 7750

## Shanghai Wild Animal Park

Home to more than ten thousand animals this drive-through safari is well worth the 35km trip from downtown Shanghai. Children can feed the monkeys and various other animals.

☎ **Nanhuisan Zao Zhen, Pudong** ☎ (021) 5803 6000 🕒 8–5 🎫 Moderate

## Shanghai Zoo

One of China's better zoos. Unusual and rare animals include the South China tiger, Siberian tiger, red goral, ring-tailed lemur and oriental white stork. Other facilities include a roller-skating rink, and children's playground.

☎ **2381 Hongqiao Lu (near the old airport)** ☎ (021) 6268 7775 ext, 3098 🕒 9–4:30 🎫 57  
🎫 Cheap

## Children

Chinese people love kids, and are curious about Western children, especially those with blond hair and blue eyes. If you have small children travelling with you in China, expect to have people on the street, trains and restaurants make a fuss over them. You will undoubtedly also have many requests from strangers to take a photo with your little ones. Remember that this is a good-natured interest – take a minute for a group photo and you'll see some smiling Chinese faces.