

@TRAVELRACHED · FREE GUIDE

My China route

The trip I'd do again, step by step.

8 stops

about 3 weeks

hotels for every budget

free PDF



This is the offline version of travelrached.com/guides/china. The links still work, tap them to book.

Hi, I'm Rached. I've spent more than six months in China over four trips, in big cities and in tiny mountain villages.

This is the route I'd do if I went back tomorrow, in the right order, with my mistakes taken out.



- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 Chengdu
2 nights | 2 Chongqing
4 nights |
| 3 Fenghuang & Furong
day + 1 night | 4 Zhangjiajie
4 nights |
| 5 Beijing
3 nights | 6 Hangzhou
2 nights |
| 7 Suzhou
1 night | 8 Shanghai
3 nights |

Why this order?

It goes roughly from west to east, so you never go back on yourself, and it ends in Shanghai on purpose. Most flights home leave from Shanghai, and it's where you'll do the most shopping, so better at the end than carrying it for three weeks. If you land in Shanghai, just do it the other way round.

Only 10 days or 2 weeks?

10 days Chongqing 3 → Furong 1 → Zhangjiajie 3 → ✈ Shanghai 3

2 weeks Chengdu 2 → Chongqing 3 → Furong 1 → Zhangjiajie 3 → ✈ Shanghai 4, with a day trip to Hangzhou or Suzhou

How much does it cost?

Rough numbers per person and per day, sharing a room, without the flights to China. In US dollars.

TIGHT

\$60–80

Cheap hotels, street food and noodles, second class on the trains.

COMFORTABLE

\$110–150

Mid-range hotels, a sit-down dinner most nights, the big sights.

TREAT YOURSELF

\$250+

Luxury hotels, nice restaurants, the Skywalk and the glass bridge.

- ◆ A bowl of noodles: \$2 to \$4
- ◆ A Didi across town: \$3 to \$8
- ◆ One hour of high-speed train: about \$15 to \$20
- ◆ Most big sights: \$5 to \$40

BEFORE YOU FLY



Pay with your phone

Alipay or WeChat Pay, linked to your card

How →



Internet

An eSIM, so Google and WhatsApp work when you land

Get it →



Trains & hotels

The Trip.com app, all in English

Get it →

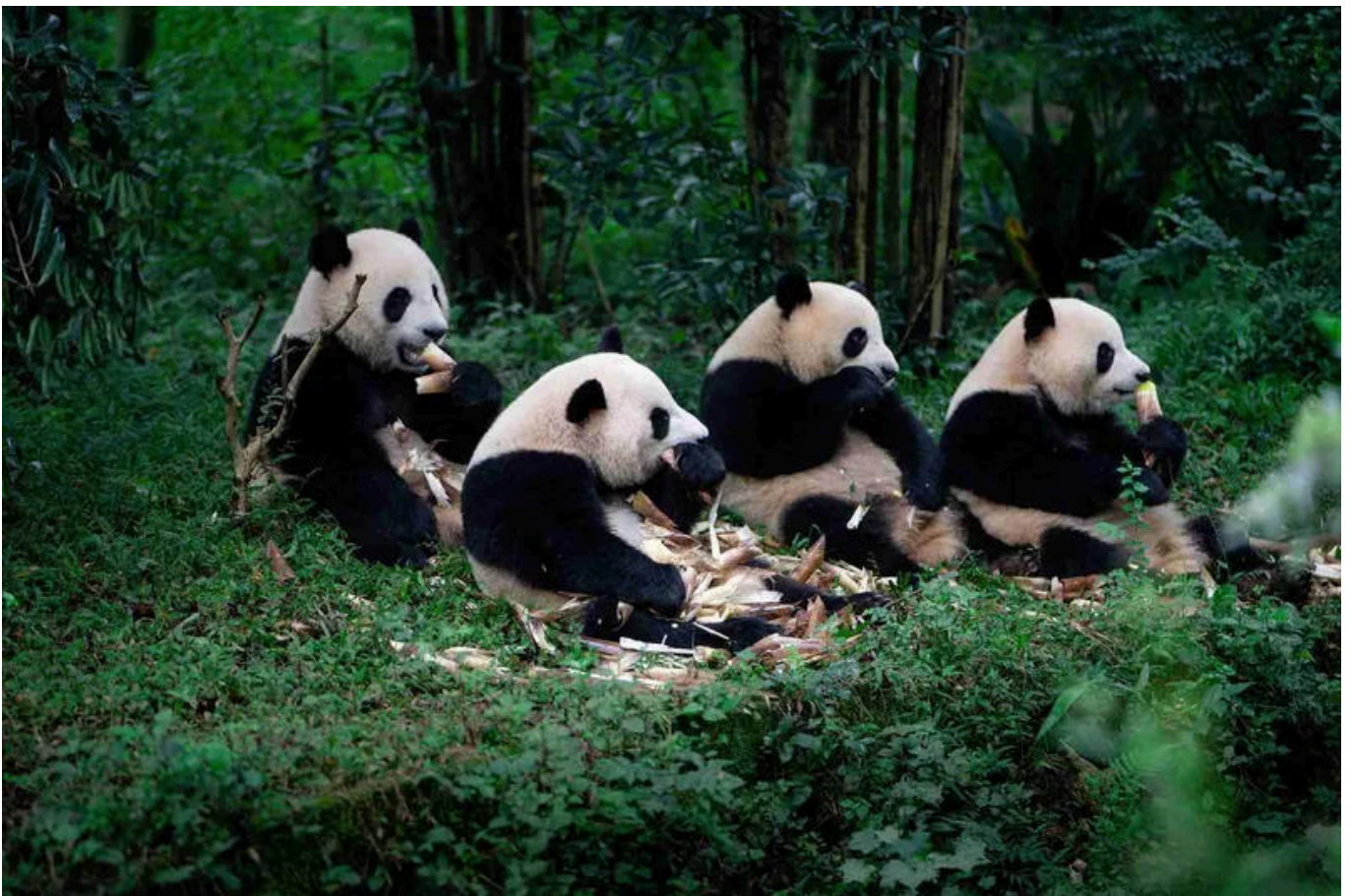
[Visa, VPN, trains and the dates to avoid →](#)

01

Chengdu

2 NIGHTS

Chengdu is known for the pandas, but there's a lot more to it. It's cute and very chill, people here really take their time. Add great, spicy Sichuan food, and it's a nice, easy start to the trip.



The Chengdu panda base.

- ◆ **The pandas.** Go to the Chengdu Research Base right when it opens, at 7:30 (8:00 in winter). Once it gets hot, the pandas go inside.

[Tickets →](#)

[at opening](#)

[2 to 3h](#)

- ◆ **People's Park** in the afternoon. People dance everywhere, there's a bonsai garden, and at the **Heming teahouse** they pour your tea from a teapot with a one-meter spout. It's a whole show.

[afternoon](#)

[2h](#)

- ◆ **Anshun Bridge** at night, all lit up over the river. The best photo is from the riverbank.

🌙 at night

- ◆ **Eat** street food, and a bowl at **Yao Guai Mian**, a noodle shop recommended by the Michelin guide where a bowl costs a few dollars.



Anshun Bridge at night

Where to sleep



CHEAP

Some rooms face Anshun Bridge

[Prices →](#)



MID-RANGE

Right in the centre

[Prices →](#)



LUXURY

An old courtyard next to Taikoo Li

[Prices →](#)

NEXT STOP

Chengdu → Chongqing

 about 1h by high-speed train

[Book](#)

Chongqing

4 NIGHTS

Chongqing is the incredible cyberpunk city. Skyscrapers are stacked on the hills, and there's neon everywhere at night. The first time you see it, it's hard to believe it's real. To be honest, it's also a bit chaotic, some spots get very crowded, and it's not the most chill stop of the trip.



Hongyadong from under Qiansimen Bridge, about 20 minutes after sunset.

AT NIGHT

- ◆ Hongyadong after dark, the yellow building stacked on the cliff. It's packed, but worth it. Then walk under the red bridge for the photo above.

🌙 after dark

🕒 1h

- ◆ **The Skywalk at Raffles City.** They put you in a harness and you walk outside with your feet in the void, about 250 m up. My favourite, it's really impressive.

Tickets →

🌙 at night

🕒 1h

- ◆ **The WFC observation deck** is the highest viewpoint in the city. On a smaller budget, it's the better pick just for the view.

Tickets →

🌆 sunset or night

🕒 1h

- ◆ **Hong'en Pavilion**, lit up on a hill. You see the whole city from there.

🌙 at night

🕒 1h

BY DAY

- ◆ **Liziba**, the train that goes through a building. Stand on the platform below and wait, one passes every few minutes. A must-see.

🕒 20 min

- ◆ **The Yangtze River Cableway**, a 5-minute cable car right over the river. Book a time slot before you go, without one the queue can take two hours.

🔪 book a slot

🕒 5 min ride

- ◆ **Luohan Temple**, almost 1,000 years old and stuck between skyscrapers.

🕒 30 min

- ◆ **Ciqikou**, the old town, in the afternoon. Then go see **Chongqing-1949** right across the creek, a show where the seats spin 360°. Book section A or B, the others don't move.

🌞 afternoon

🕒 half a day

TO EAT

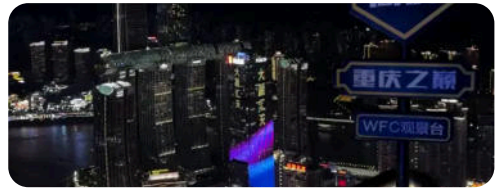
- ◆ Pea noodles (wanza mian) from a street stall for lunch, and hot pot at least once for dinner. It's spicier than in Chengdu.



Hong'en Pavilion



The Skywalk at Raffles City



The WFC deck



Liziba

Bring good shoes, it's stairs and hills everywhere. And in summer it's 35°C+, one more reason to live at night.

Where to sleep



CHEAP

River view, near Hongyadong

[Prices →](#)



MID-RANGE

Panoramic rooms way up high

[Prices →](#)



LUXURY

In the towers of the Skywalk

[Prices →](#)

NEXT STOP

Chongqing → Fenghuang

 about 3h30 by high-speed train

Sometimes with a change.

[Book](#)

Fenghuang & Furong

DAY + 1 NIGHT

Two pretty traditional villages, 40 minutes apart by train. Fenghuang is the cute old town on the river, perfect to walk around for a day. Furong is built on a waterfall, and it's the place that impressed me the most. Honestly, I've never seen anything as beautiful as the view at night. So walk Fenghuang by day, and sleep in Furong.



The covered bridge in Fenghuang.

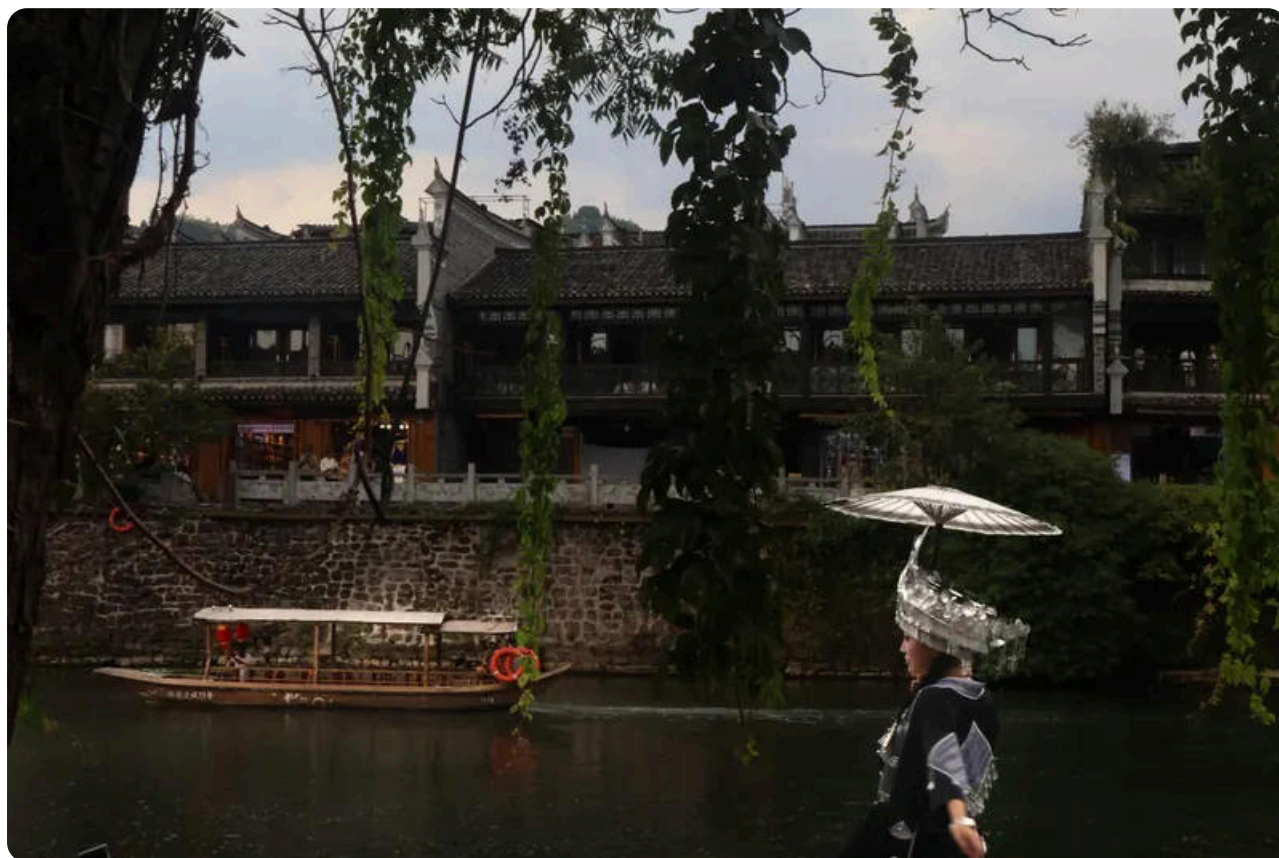
Fenghuang, by day

Expect pretty bridges, wooden houses on stilts, and lots of people in traditional outfits (you can rent one for photos). You can even walk across the water on the stepping stones.

It's pretty calm most of the time, so just wander. Avoid Chinese holidays, that's when it gets crowded. Half a day is plenty, then take the 40-minute train to Furong before dark. There aren't many of them, so book it early. [Trains](#) →

The high-speed station is about 10 km from the old town, so count 20 minutes by taxi or Didi each way.

If you'd rather sleep in Fenghuang anyway, [this inn](#) and [this one](#) both have river-view balconies.



Fenghuang, along the river.

Then Furong:

- ◆ [The waterfall](#) lights up after sunset. The 20 minutes right after are the best, and you want to be on your balcony for that.

🌙 after sunset

- ◆ You can walk **behind the waterfall**. Yes, really. It's slippery, so wear real shoes.

🕒 30 min

- ◆ Music and dance shows in the evening. They come with the village ticket, about ¥100 (\$14).

🌙 evening

- ◆ There isn't much else to do, and that's fine. It's a place you come to look at.

◆ Next morning, walk the village before 9. After that, the tour buses arrive.

 before 9



Furong by day



Furong after sunset

Pack light for these two days. It's stairs everywhere.

Where to sleep



The view from my room

Mine wasn't the fanciest hotel in town, but it has literally the best view of the whole village, right on the waterfall. It's a bit hidden, so you'll drag your bags through the alleys for a few minutes. Worth it.

MY PICK



CHEAP

Right on the waterfall, around \$50 a night

[Prices →](#)



LUXURY

Waterfall-view balconies, about 60 m from the falls

[Prices →](#)

NEXT STOP

Furong → Zhangjiajie

 23 min to Zhangjiajie West

Then about 30 min by taxi to Wulingyuan, the town at the park gate.

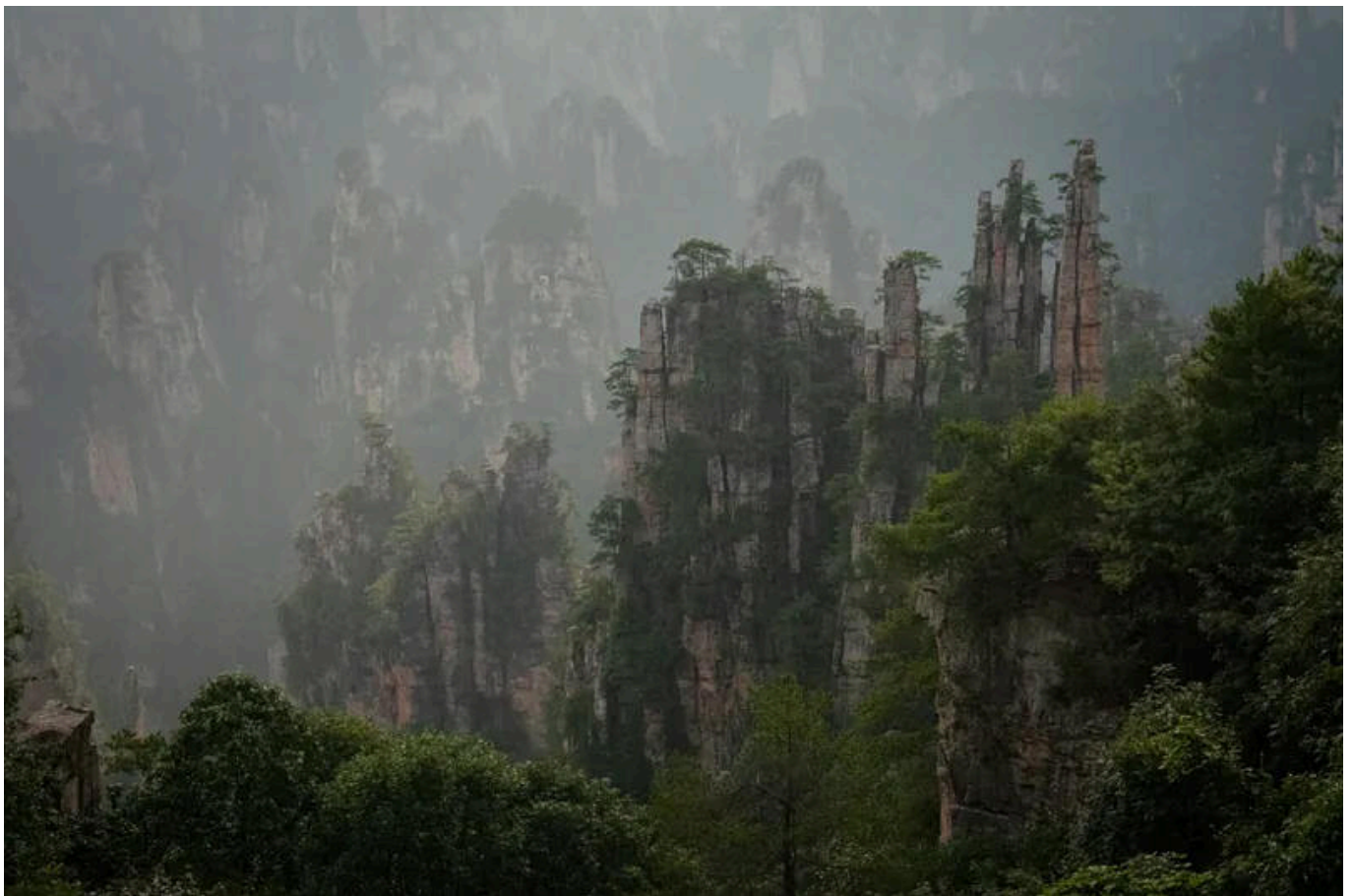
Book

|
04

Zhangjiajie

4 NIGHTS

These are the Avatar mountains, thousands of stone pillars rising out of the forest, often in the mist. In real life they're even bigger than in the photos. Give the park at least 3 days, every viewpoint is different.



The Avatar pillars, in the national park.

In the order I'd do it:

- ◆ **The glass bridge** over the Grand Canyon, first. It's a separate ticket with a time slot, and it sells out, so book a few days before.

[Tickets →](#)

[🔪 book days ahead](#)

[🕒 3 to 4h](#)

- ◆ **The national park**, over 2 or 3 days. Cable cars, the Avatar pillars, and **Golden Whip Stream**, a flat walk along the river full of monkeys. Hide your snacks.

[Tickets →](#)

🕒 2 to 3 days

- ◆ The park ticket is valid 4 days, but you reserve each visit. Bring your real passport, not a photo of it, the gates check it and scan your face.
- ◆ **Sunset in the park**. Stay for it and take the last bus down, but check what time it leaves before you go up. I almost got stuck up there.

🌅 sunset

- ◆ **Bailong Elevator**, one of the highest outdoor elevators in the world: 326 m straight up the cliff. Totally worth it.
- ◆ **72 Wonders** (七十二奇楼) at night, the colorful building that lights up. There's a show with police officers dancing, it's hilarious. Tickets cost more after 4:30 pm, or just take the photo from across the road.

🌃 at night

🕒 1h

- ◆ **Tianmen Mountain**, the "gate to heaven", about 40 min from Wulingyuan. Go at opening and book a time slot.

[Tickets →](#)

🌅 at opening

🕒 half a day

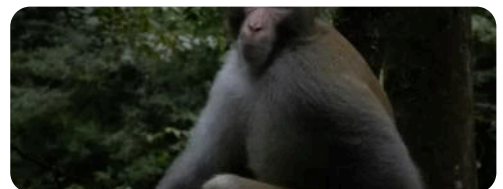
- ◆ Good to know: the long cable car from the city is closed for works, with no reopening date yet. For now you go up with the express cable car from the mountain gate to Tianmen Cave, then escalators to the top.



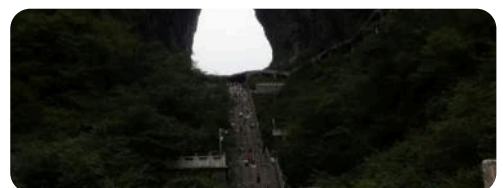
One of the Avatar pillars



72 Wonders, the dancing police



Golden Whip Stream



The gate to heaven

Go in early September, right when school starts again in China. The park is almost empty. And skip the glass bridge on a windy or rainy day, it closes.

Where to sleep



CHEAP

Mountain views, near the east gate

[Prices →](#)



MID-RANGE

Brand new, by the park gate

[Prices →](#)



LUXURY

A few minutes from the park entrance

[Prices →](#)

NEXT STOP

Zhangjiajie → Beijing

✈ about 2h15 by plane

The airport is about 45 min from Wulingyuan. On flights inside China, your power bank needs the Chinese 3C logo, or it gets taken at security.

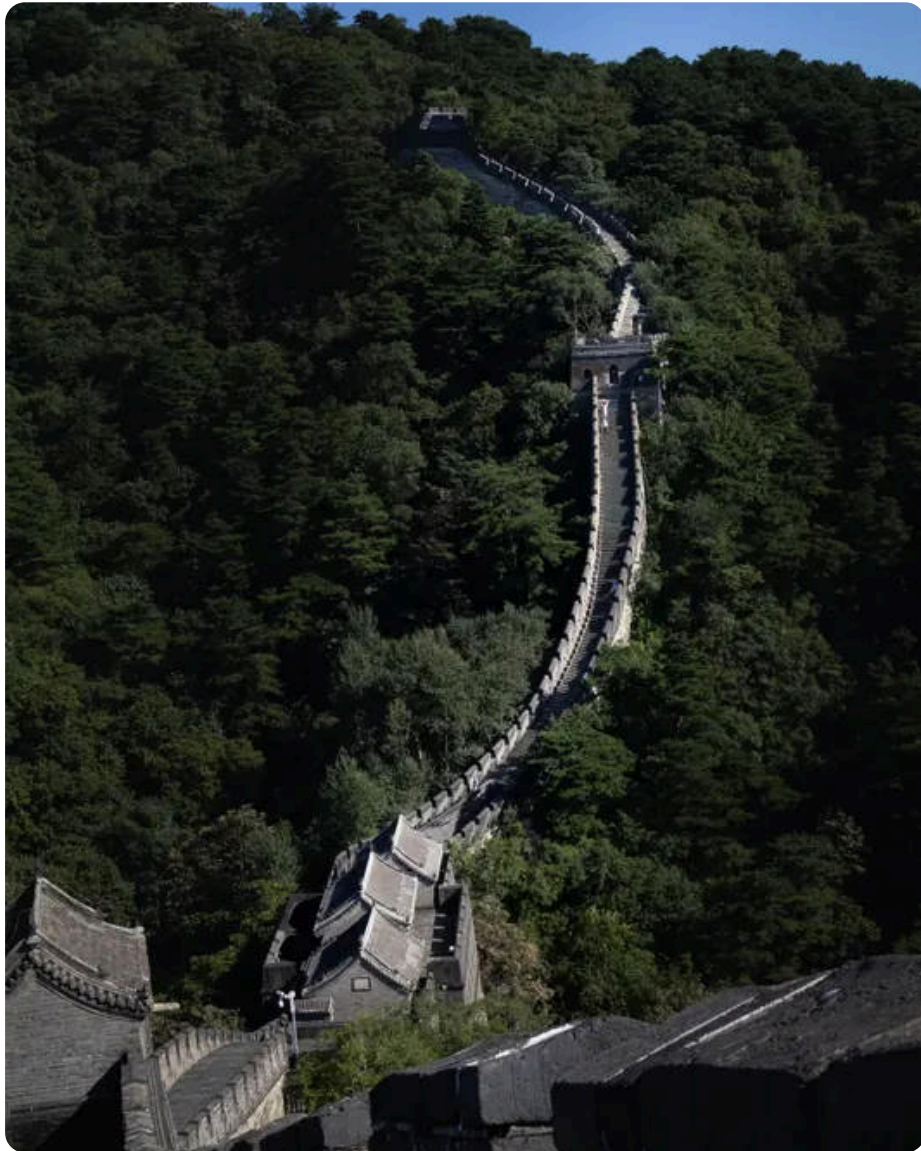
[Book](#)

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05

Beijing

3 NIGHTS

The capital, and the big history stop of the trip. The Forbidden City and the Great Wall are the two things you can't skip, and the Forbidden City sells out, so book it before you arrive. The rest of the time, get lost in the hutongs, the old lanes where people still live.

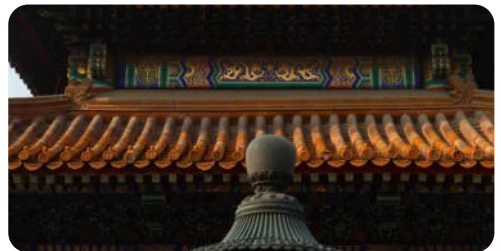


Mutianyu, the section with the toboggan.

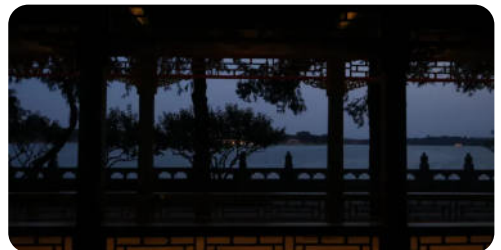
- ◆ **The Forbidden City.** Tickets open at 8 pm Beijing time, exactly 7 days before, and they go fast. It's closed on Mondays. Bring the passport you booked with.
🔑 book 7 days before 🕒 3h
- ◆ Right after, climb **Jingshan Park** across the street. It costs almost nothing, and you see all the golden roofs of the Forbidden City from above.
🕒 30 min
- ◆ **The Great Wall at Mutianyu.** Take the chairlift up and come down on the **toboggan**. Do it, seriously. It's about 1h30 from the city, so leave early.
Day trip → 🇨🇳 leave early 🕒 full day
- ◆ **The Summer Palace**, the emperors' garden on a lake. Cute, beautiful gardens, and not crowded at all.
🕒 2 to 3h
- ◆ **The Temple of Heaven.** Go early, when locals do tai chi in the park around it.
🇨🇳 early 🕒 1 to 2h
- ◆ **The hutongs**, the old lanes around Nanluoguxiang and the Drum Tower. Get lost in them on foot or by bike.
🕒 2h
- ◆ **Peking duck.** Absolutely.
🍴 dinner



The Summer Palace at dusk



Beijing



The long corridor

Where to sleep



CHEAP

A boutique hotel in the old lanes

[Prices →](#)



MID-RANGE

A courtyard house in the hutongs

[Prices →](#)



LUXURY

Very luxurious, and full of art

[Prices →](#)

NEXT STOP

Beijing → Hangzhou

 4h30 to 6h by high-speed train

[Book](#)

|
06

Hangzhou

2 NIGHTS

After Beijing, Hangzhou feels calm. The city is built around a big lake with tea fields on the hills, and it's also home to the green lake everyone's posting. Take it slow, it's made for that.



Qingshan Lake. The color is real.

- ◆ Day 1: a boat on West Lake, then the Longjing tea fields. Stop for a coffee at **Longjing 82**, a café right in the middle of the tea.

🕒 full day

- ◆ Day 2: **Qingshan Lake**, the "matcha lake". It's a forest growing out of green water, and you can kayak between the trees. Take a Didi, it's about an hour from the city and it doesn't cost much. The green comes from tiny water plants, so it's best in the warm months.



warm months



half a day



The café in the tea fields



West Lake by boat



Qingshan Lake

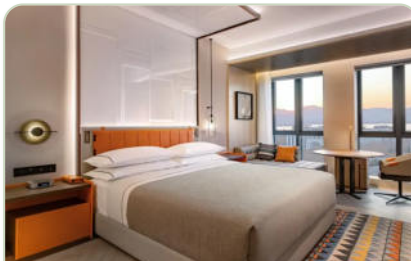
Where to sleep



CHEAP

Walking distance to the lake

[Prices →](#)



MID-RANGE

Right by West Lake

[Prices →](#)



LUXURY

A garden hotel on the lake

[Prices →](#)

NEXT STOP

Hangzhou → Suzhou

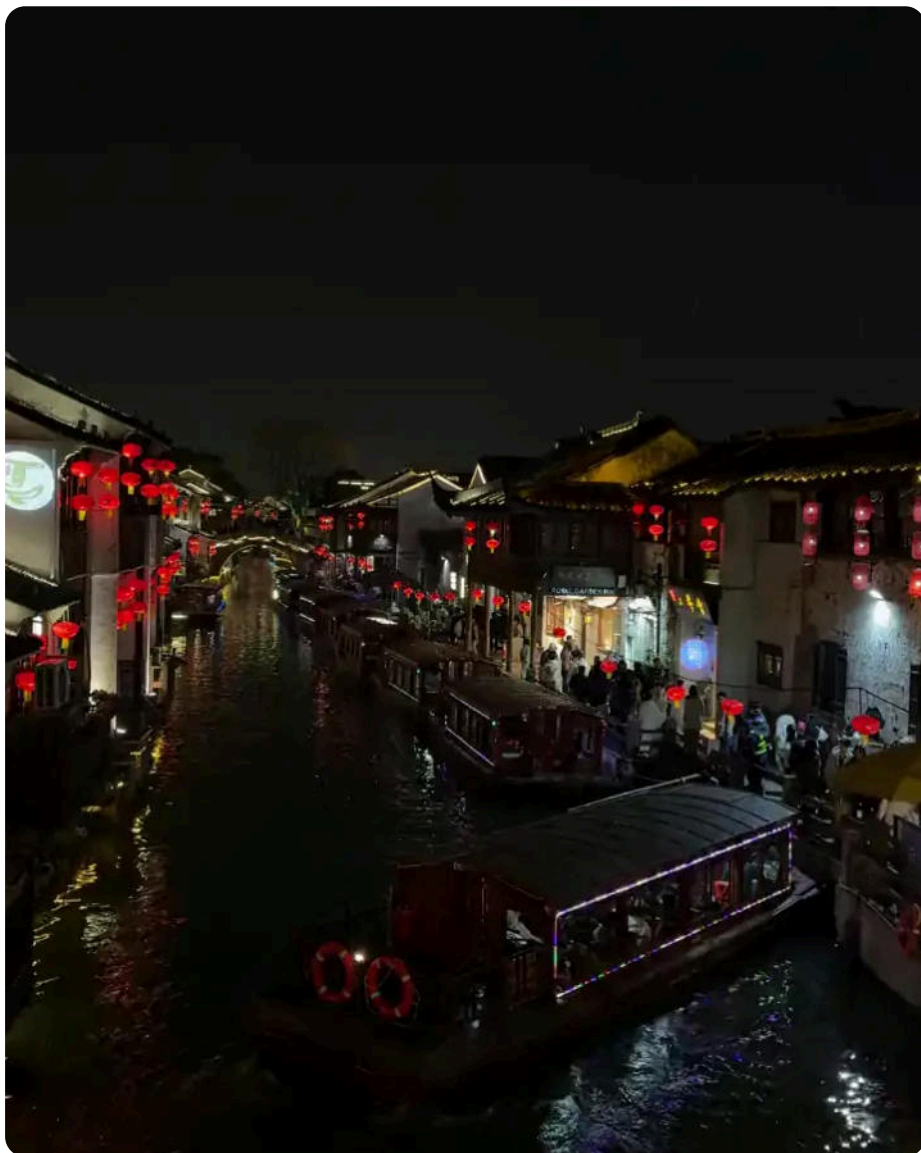
about 1h30 by train

[Book](#)

Suzhou

1 NIGHT

Suzhou is the Venice of China, with canals and old houses right on the water. It's small and easy to walk. Sleep there instead of doing a day trip, the canals are prettier after dark, once the day-trippers have left.



The canals after dark.

- ◆ **Pingjiang Road.** Walk along the canal and take the little wooden boat (about ¥40, or \$6, for 30 minutes). Go before 9, after that there's a queue.

 before 9

 1 to 2h

- ◆ **Shantang Street** at night, when the lanterns come on over the water.

🌙 at night

🕒 1h

- ◆ **The Humble Administrator's Garden**, the most famous of the classic gardens.

Beautiful. No need to plan it days ahead, booking on your phone the day before or that morning is usually enough.

🕒 2h

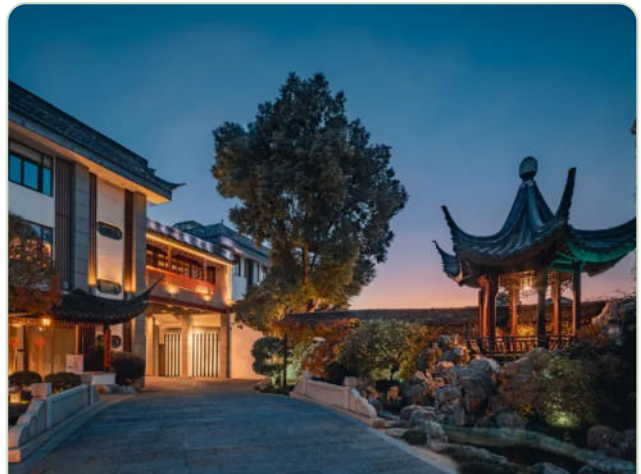
Where to sleep



CHEAP

On the canal street, around \$35 a night

[Prices →](#)



MID-RANGE

Courtyards with ponds and rock gardens

[Prices →](#)

LAST STOP

Suzhou → Shanghai

🚄 30 min by train

[Book](#)

Shanghai

3 NIGHTS

The last stop, and the most international city of the trip. It's huge and modern, and it's the best place to eat and shop. Keep your nicest hotel night and your shopping for here, you won't have to carry bags for three weeks.



Pudong from the Bund, at night.

- ◆ **The Bund at night.** Walk along the river while the towers light up on the other side. Go before 10 pm (11 on weekends), that's when they switch the lights off.



before 10 pm



1h

- ◆ **Yu Garden at night,** the old town with the curved roofs lit up in red. Packed, but cute.



at night

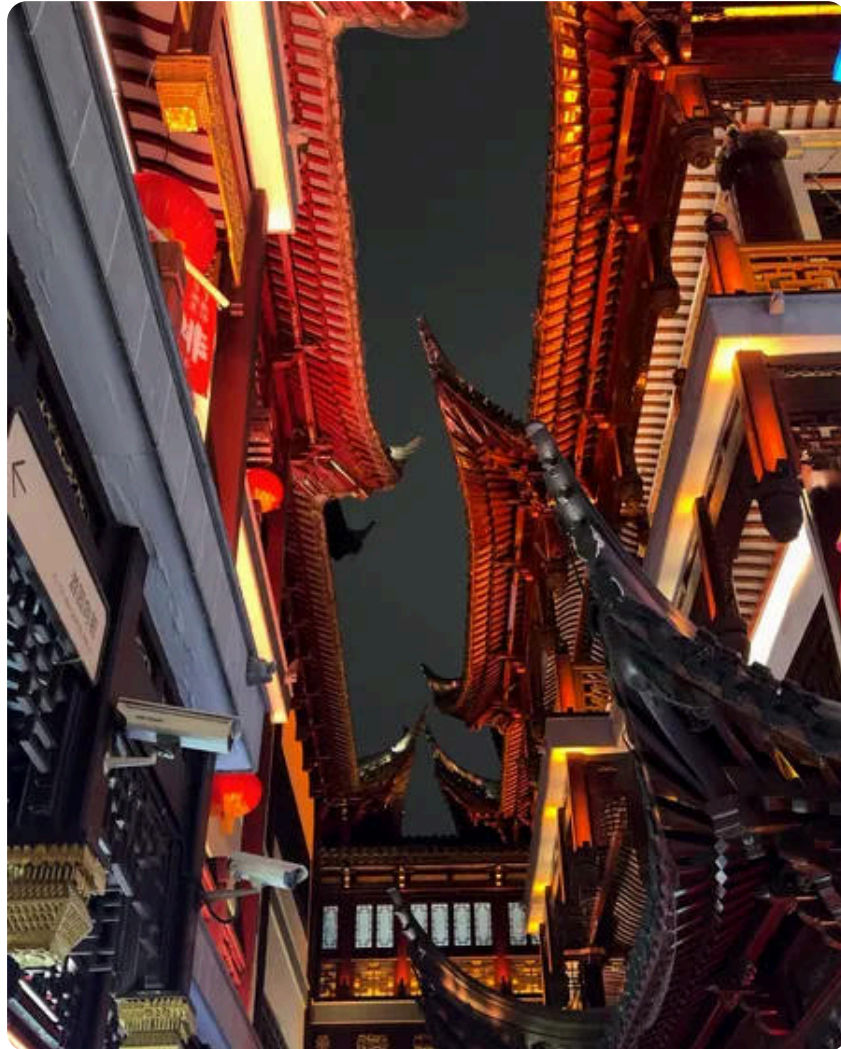


1h

- ◆ **The French Concession** for a long walk under the plane trees, some shopping, and a good dinner.

🕒 half a day

- ◆ **Tax refund.** Spend ¥200 or more in the same store and ask for it. A lot of shops in Shanghai give it back on the spot.



Yu Garden at night

You can't do everything in Shanghai, so don't try. Pick a few things, eat well, go shopping. It's a huge international city, there's a lot of choice.

Where to sleep



MID-RANGE

River views, other end of the Bund

[Prices →](#)



LUXURY

The elevator opens onto the Bund

[Prices →](#)



UNUSUAL

Built 88 m down in an old quarry

[Prices →](#)

Questions people ask me

Do I need a visa?

From most of Europe, the UK, Canada, Australia or New Zealand, no, you get up to 30 days visa-free, until 31 December 2026 for now. Americans still need a tourist visa for a trip like this one, the 10-day visa-free transit only works if you fly on to another country.

Is it expensive?

Less than you think. Count about \$60 to \$80 a day on a tight budget, \$110 to \$150 to be comfortable. The hotel makes most of the difference.

Do people speak English?

Not much, apart from hotels. A translator app with Chinese downloaded offline does the job, and trains, metros and Trip.com all work in English.

Are people friendly?

Yes. People are curious and helpful, even when you don't speak the same language.

How do I pay?

With your phone, almost everywhere: Alipay or WeChat Pay, linked to your normal card. Everything is in Before you go.

Will Google and Instagram work?

On a foreign eSIM, yes. On Chinese Wi-Fi you need a VPN, installed before you leave. More in Before you go.

Is the food very spicy?

In Chengdu and Chongqing, a lot of it is. When you order, say **bù là** (not spicy) or **wēi là** (a little spicy).

Is it safe?

Very, even late at night.

When should I go?

Spring or autumn. The weather is about the same along the whole route: hot and humid in summer (Chongqing is the hottest), mild in spring and autumn, with a rainy season from mid-June. Early September is a great plan: school has just started again in China, and places like Zhangjiajie are almost empty. Avoid Golden Week (1 to 7 October), Chinese New Year, and July and August. All the dates are in **Before you go**.

I don't have 3 weeks. What do I cut?

Take one of the short versions at the top, 10 days or 2 weeks. Both skip Beijing.

Have the best trip,
Rached

@travelrached · last updated October 2026