

CHINA BY RAIL

Beijing, Pingyao, Xi'an, Luoyang, Shanghai, Hangzhou & Guilin

19 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Beijing

Welcome to Beijing, capital of the People's Republic of China.

Beijing is not only China's political and administrative centre, it's also the country's single greatest repository of monuments and treasures from the imperial era. This is the second-largest and fastest-growing municipality in today's China, home and workplace to 20-25 million people. While many elements are common to other Chinese cities, Beijing's scope and presence in history has no equivalent in China or anywhere else in the world.

This evening we gather with fellow travellers for our first meal together.

Overnight in Beijing.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Beijing: Forbidden City & Hutong Tour

We begin today at Tian'anmen Square, the place where one million students rallied for democracy in 1989. This is the world's largest public square. Originally built in 1651, the square was quadrupled in size in 1958 to its present 40.5 hectares (100 acres) during a massive citywide reconstruction programme. Each flagstone is numbered so parade units can line up in assigned places.

From here we walk to the Forbidden City, a huge complex of palaces, pavilions, courtyards, and gardens that was off-limits to commoners for 500 years. This is where emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties carried out administration and lived, now open as a Palace Museum.

Later we tour Beijing's narrow streets, known as hutongs, on a traditional rickshaw (a type of tricycle designed to carry passengers). We visit a local home to learn about Chinese life from a family.

Today we include lunch and free up your evening for optional activities. Your Tour Leader can assist with arrangements.

Overnight in Beijing.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 3 Beijing: Great Wall & Summer Palace

This morning we travel north of Beijing to the Great Wall of China. A walk along the enormous undulating towered and turreted wall is spectacular. Rising and falling with the ridges of northern hills and extending far into the distance, the Great Wall consistently exceeds visitors' expectations and remains one of humankind's most remarkable accomplishments.

The wall's construction began during the Warring States Period (403-221 BC), when separate sections were built in scattered strategic areas. Following China's unification under the first Qin Emperor, 300,000 men - many of them political prisoners whose bodies are buried in the wall - were put to work connecting the segments into one huge rampart of stone and earth.

We have plenty of free time to explore the wall before returning to Beijing early afternoon.

After lunch we tour the Summer Palace, located in the northwest area of the city. During the late Qing Dynasty this was the summer retreat from Beijing's heat for the imperial family and court. In 1888 the notorious Empress Cixi used money intended for the Chinese Navy to build this opulent summer retreat for herself. A marvel of design, the palace - with its huge lake and hilltop views - offers a pastoral escape into the landscapes of traditional Chinese painting.

Overnight in Beijing.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Beijing - Train to Pingyao

This morning we travel by high-speed train to Pingyao (approximately 4 hours). On arrival we transfer to our hotel.

Pingyao's old town is considered the best ancient walled city in China. The old walled city is inhabited, mostly off-limits to cars, and constructed of cobbled streets and buildings almost entirely from the Ming and Qing dynasties. Perfect for atmospheric wandering, this city remains off the radar of most foreigners.

Early afternoon we begin sightseeing. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Shanxi merchants developed extensive trade routes with Pingyao at the centre. The first exchange house, Rishengchang ("Sunrise Prosperity"), established branches in different cities and used bank drafts to move money. Pingyao became the centre of China's banking industry.

Our tour includes Ming-Qing Street (also called Nanda Jie), which was Pingyao's commercial centre. Today, traditional-style shops line the street. We visit the old city wall, with a perimeter of 6.4 kilometres (4 miles) and height over 12 metres (40 feet). We also tour the Rishengchang Exchange Shop, China's earliest bank first opened in the 18th century, and the Armed Escort Company Museum, which reveals how commerce was protected and cash was moved in dangerous times.

NOTE: Porters are likely NOT available at train stations. You must be able to manage your bags on/off trains.

Overnight in Pingyao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Pingyao - Train to Xi'an

This morning we visit the Confucian temple, first built during the reign of Emperor Taizong, considered one of the greatest Chinese emperors. The original modest temple was not built as a memorial but rather was the family temple of Confucius himself.

Depending on train schedules, we may have free time for independent exploration - a nice place to stroll, especially early morning before day-trippers arrive from Beijing. In the early afternoon (usually) we travel by high-speed train to Xi'an (approximately 3 hours).

Xi'an is often called the birthplace of Chinese civilisation. Capital of Shaanxi Province and eastern end of the Silk Road, Xi'an's history and cultural significance stretch through China's ancient past into its bright future. Xi'an was capital city of 13 imperial dynasties, the most for any city, and many ancient structures are preserved. "The First Emperor" united China from his base in the Xi'an area, leaving a mighty legacy.

Overnight in Xi'an.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Xi'an: Terracotta Warriors & City Touring

Today we view the Terracotta Warriors, an impressive legion of thousands of life-size clay warriors that has been guarding the emperor's burial site for over 2,000 years. In 1974, peasants digging a well in Lintong County, about 30 kilometres (19 miles) east of Xi'an, accidentally made one of the century's greatest archaeological discoveries. What they stumbled upon were thousands of life-size terracotta warriors; an estimated 8,000 figures have thus far been identified.

We also visit the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, a Buddhist temple complex on the way back to Xi'an from the Terracotta Warrior Museum.

Afterwards we continue to the Great Mosque, a five-minute walk from the Drum Tower in Xi'an's centre. Inscriptions from stone tablets indicate the Great Mosque was established in AD 742 during the Tang Dynasty. After restorations in the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, the present complex proudly ranks among the largest mosques in China. Unlike Arabic mosques with splendid domes and minarets

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reaching into the clouds, this mosque is built in Chinese traditional style with platforms, pavilions, and halls.

Time permitting, we drive to the City Walls of Xi'an where we can climb up for more views of this remarkable city.

Overnight in Xi'an.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Xi'an - Train to Luoyang

This morning in Xi'an we visit the museum dedicated to the tomb known as Han Yangling. Built in 2005 and regarded as one of the best of its kind in the world, the museum showcases not only the resting place of the occupant, Jing Di, but also how he and others lived during his time, the second century BC. The displays are exquisitely and sensitively done; the piles of hundreds of artifacts, in situ, are like a modern work of "found" art.

Mid-afternoon we travel by high-speed train to Luoyang (approximately 1.5 hours).

Luoyang was one of China's true dynastic citadels. The city was the prosperous capital of 13 dynasties until the Northern Song dynasty shifted its capital east along the Yellow River to Kaifeng in the 10th century. The mighty Sui- and Tang-dynasty walls formed an imposing rectangle north and south of the Luo River, while worshippers flocked to 1,300 Buddhist temples through the city.

Overnight in Luoyang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Luoyang: Area Touring

Luoyang was once the very centre of the Chinese universe and the eastern capital of the resplendent Tang dynasty. Tragically, little remains of this glorious past - the heart of the magnificent Sui dynasty palace complex was centred on the point where today's Zhongzhou Zhonglu and Dingding Lu intersect in a frenzy of traffic.

Today we visit the incredible Longmen Grottoes, comprising some of the finest examples of Chinese Buddhist art. Housing tens of thousands of statues of Buddha and his disciples, they are located 12 kilometres (7.5 miles) south of Luoyang. The images, many once painted, were carved as outside rock reliefs and inside artificial caves excavated from the limestone cliffs of the Xiangshan and Longmenshan mountains. The alternative name "Dragon's Gate Grottoes" derives from the resemblance of the two hills that check the flow of the Yi River to typical Chinese gate towers that once marked Luoyang's entrance from the south.

As many as 100,000 statues exist within the 2,345 caves, ranging from 2.5 centimetres (1 inch) to 17 metres (56 feet) in height. The area also contains nearly 2,500 stelae and inscriptions, whence the name "Forest of Ancient Stelae," as well as over 60 Buddhist pagodas. The caves were dug from a one-kilometre (0.6-mile) stretch of cliff running along both banks of the river.

Overnight in Luoyang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Luoyang - Shaolin Temple - Zhengzhou

After breakfast, we enjoy a scenic 2-hour drive through gorgeous valleys to the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Shaolin Temple, a famous martial arts monastery and birthplace of both kung fu and Zen Buddhism. We take a guided tour of the temple to see its impressive design, visiting Guanyin Hall containing frescoes of fighting Shaolin monks, the Hall of Heavenly Kings, the Pagoda Forest, the Dharma Cave, and the Martial Arts Training Centre. We watch a live kung fu performance witnessing incredible displays of concentration and skill, with stunts such as breaking a metal bar with bare hands.

Nearby we take a cable car up San Huang Zhai Mountain for amazing views and the ability to visit a village at the top.

We then transfer by road to Zhengzhou, capital city of the province.

Overnight in Zhengzhou.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Zhengzhou - Train to Guilin

Mid-morning we transfer to the train station for our high-speed train to Guilin, our longest rail journey of the trip at approximately 6 hours. Though a bit long, most travellers still believe the train offers a superior experience to flying this distance when considering traffic, security, waiting to board, and luggage collection.

The city of Guilin was founded in the Qin Dynasty in 314 BC as a small settlement on the Lijiang River. It became increasingly important following construction of a canal joining the river with another further north, providing a transport link with the Yangtze. The town became the provincial capital in the Ming Dynasty and remained so until 1914 when the capital moved to Nanning. According to a popular Chinese saying, "Guilin's scenery bests all others in the world." Its shapely-rising limestone towers and crystal-clear waters are often portrayed in Chinese artworks.

This evening we visit Zhengyang Pedestrian Street.

Overnight in Guilin.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Guilin & Longsheng

This morning in the Guilin area we visit Reed Flute Cave and Fobo Hill.

We also visit Longsheng, an area famous for the excessively large number of terraced rice paddy fields on its mountain, which have created an intricate pattern on the hillsides. With the help of golf carts, we view the terraces from a vantage point and visit a Yao minority village. The Yao are one of the 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities in China and reside in the mountainous terrain of the southwest and south. The origins of the Yao can be traced back 2,000 years starting in Hunan. The Yao and Hmong were among the rebels during the Miao Rebellions against the Ming dynasty. During our time in the area, we hope to visit an informative tea plantation.

We transfer back to Guilin.

Overnight in Guilin.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Guilin - Li River Cruise to Yangshuo

Today we enjoy a spectacular cruise down the meandering Li River to Yangshuo. The scenery is breathtaking as mist-covered jagged mountains loom before you and quaint villages dot the riverbanks. We pass humped limestone peaks, fishermen astride bamboo rafts, and grazing water buffaloes. The boat passes through the Luogu Rapids where the sound of rushing water is said to resemble gongs and drums.

As the launch floats past valleys, bamboo groves, and mist-shrouded crags, one has the sensation of being carried backward in time through a traditional Chinese painting. Local river craft are still physically towed upstream in convoys; a few are still towed by men and women in harness.

There is a saying that "the landscape of Guilin is the most beautiful in the world, but the landscape of Yangshuo is the most beautiful in Guilin." Yangshuo County features some of the world's most impressive karst landscapes combining hills, rivers, and caves. Indeed the scenery around Yangshuo features on the 20 yuan bill, along with Mao Zedong himself. The town is a lively place with plenty of cafes and

shops and lots of interesting local foods to sample.

This afternoon we visit the town and its lively market.

Overnight in Yangshuo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Yangshuo Area

This morning we visit a local farmer's house and observe the lifestyle of a typical family. Rural life in this region maintains traditions that stretch back centuries, though modern conveniences have begun to appear. The karst landscape surrounding Yangshuo has shaped agricultural practices here for generations, with families working small plots nestled between the distinctive limestone peaks.

After our visit you have free time to enjoy the town and surrounds. Yangshuo offers plenty of opportunities for exploration - rent a bicycle to cycle through rice paddies and villages, browse the lively West Street with its mix of traditional and tourist-oriented shops, or simply relax at one of the many cafes watching the world go by.

Tonight we attend "Yin Xiang Liu San Jie," an exciting local minority show performed on the banks of the Li River. Directed by Zhang Yimou, a famous Chinese filmmaker, this breathtaking performance uses the beautiful mountains and river as backdrop. This spectacular light and dance show brings local culture to life against a stunning natural setting, with hundreds of performers creating an unforgettable spectacle.

Overnight in Yangshuo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Yangshuo - Guilin - Fly to Hangzhou

This morning we visit Elephant Trunk Hill and Fobo Hill (flight time permitting). Then we transfer to the airport for our flight to Hangzhou.

Famed for its natural scenery, Hangzhou and its West Lake have been immortalized by countless poets and artists. The city was capital of the Southern Song Dynasty from 1127 until the Mongol invasion of 1276. The city's population is estimated to have been as high as one million in those days, making it the world's largest city at the time. Even Marco Polo claimed to have passed through, calling it "beyond dispute the finest and the noblest in the world." Since June 2011, the West Lake Cultural Landscape has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Time permitting we may have an introductory look around Hangzhou upon arrival.

Overnight in Hangzhou.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Hangzhou Area Touring

This morning we have a scenic cruise on West Lake, the centrepiece of Hangzhou's appeal for over a thousand years. The lake's beauty has inspired poets, painters, and emperors throughout Chinese history. We visit Flower Harbour, where we can enjoy "fish viewing." The history of viewing fish at Flower Harbour dates to the Southern Song Dynasty when a private garden was built. The Red Carp Pond is the highlight, where you can enjoy the spectacular scenery of swarms of lively red carp while standing on the bridge. The tradition of observing ornamental fish in peaceful garden settings reflects classical Chinese aesthetics - harmony between human culture and nature.

We also visit Lingyin Temple, the largest of several temples in the Wulin Mountains. Founded in AD 328, this monastery has been an important centre of Chan (Zen) Buddhism for over 1,600 years. The temple complex features a large number of grottoes and religious rock carvings, including the famous Feilai Feng (Flying Peak) with its hundreds of Buddhist stone carvings dating from the 10th to 14th centuries.

Overnight in Hangzhou.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Hangzhou - Shanghai

After a leisurely morning we transfer by road to Shanghai (approximately 2 hours), giving us time to watch the landscape transform from Hangzhou's lakeside tranquility to Shanghai's urban intensity.

Shanghai, among the two or three largest cities in the world, is China's most populous as well as its most "urban" city. Despite profound changes in social and economic structure brought on since 1949, Shanghai retains the look and feel of a great Western metropolis, with a population that seems quite at home amidst the press of crowds and the throbbing energy and diversity of city life. In many ways, Shanghai's ambiance is more like that of New York or Rome than that of Beijing or Guangzhou.

Shanghai's unique character stems from its history as a treaty port, where foreign concessions created distinct neighbourhoods with their own architectural styles and cultural influences. The Art Deco buildings along the Bund, the French Concession's tree-lined avenues, and the futuristic towers of Pudong all coexist in this city of contrasts. Today Shanghai is not only China's financial capital but also its most cosmopolitan city, where East and West mingle in restaurants, galleries, and streets.

Overnight in Shanghai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Shanghai: City Touring

Our first stop today is the Shanghai World Financial Center, reaching 492 metres (1,614 feet). We go by elevator to the 94th-floor observatory deck for fantastic views. It's located in the Pudong district, an area that swiftly sprang up during the new millennium's economic growth.

Afterwards we continue to the famed Bund where we stroll along the Huangpu River, soaking in the atmosphere of one of Shanghai's most recognizable architectural symbols. The word "bund" derives from an Anglo-Indian word for an embankment along a muddy waterfront, which is what it was when the first British company opened an office there in 1846. It became the epitome of elegance during Shanghai's history as a city of trade.

This afternoon we stroll the beautiful Yu Garden, established in 1559 and considered one of the region's most lavish Chinese gardens. At nearby Yuyuan Market, we discover a bustling bazaar selling traditional arts and crafts. Food is also a great temptation with local delicacies such as xiao long bao, pigeon egg dumplings, and spicy cold noodles from street stalls or numerous restaurants.

After dinner we board our one-hour evening cruise of the Huangpu River, featuring incredible sights of the Pudong area at night, buildings brightly lit in ever-changing colours.

Overnight in Shanghai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Shanghai Touring & Leisure Time

This morning we visit the fascinating Shanghai Museum, located at People's Park. The museum is an ultra-modern repository for 5,000 years of history and tradition; its striking design by Xing Tonghe invokes the shape of a bronze ding tripod. The museum's bronze, ceramic, painting, and calligraphy collections are among the finest in the world, and the range of its collections displayed in 14 state-of-the-art galleries is unparalleled.

From here we continue to East Nanjing Road, the main shopping street of Shanghai and one of the world's busiest shopping streets. The street is cut off from cars and buses and made for pedestrians to stroll, browse, and shop. You can find hundreds of shops and brands from all over the world as well as a wide range of food and restaurants. Great for shopping or just people-watching.

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The balance of the day is yours to shop, explore, and soak it all in before our farewell dinner this evening.

Overnight in Shanghai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 Departure

Departure from Shanghai.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast