

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, the capital of the People's Republic of China. While many of its elements are common to other Chinese cities, the sum of this city -- its scope and presence in history -- has no equivalent in China or anywhere else in the world.

Beijing is not only the political and administrative centre of the People's Republic of China, it is also China'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, the home and workplace of 20-25 million people.

Overnight in Beijing.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Beijing: Forbidden City & Hutong Tour

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

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

Later we have a historical tour of Beijing's narrow streets, known as hutongs, on a traditional rickshaw (a type of tricycle designed to carry passengers in addition to the driver). We then 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 these 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 in concert with the ridges of the northern hills and undulating far off 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 will have plenty of free time to explore the wall before returning to Beijing early this afternoon.

After lunch we will have a tour of 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 the 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Beijing - Train to Pingyao

This morning we travel by high-speed train to Pingyao (+/- 4 hours).* On arrival we'll transfer to our hotel.

Pingyao's old town is typically considered the best ancient walled city in China, and is on many lists of the best walled cities in the world. 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. Picture a period film showing ancient China and you won't be far off. Perfect for atmospheric wandering, this city is still off the radar of most foreigners. As such, the tourist traffic tends to be over 99% mainland Chinese on any given day.

Early this afternoon we embark on our sightseeing program in Pingyao. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Shanxi merchants developed extensive trade routes throughout China and overseas, with Pingyao at the centre of this trade. Named Rishengchang, or "Sunrise Prosperity," this first exchange house established branches in different cities in China and abroad and used bank drafts to move money from one city to another. Subsequently, Pingyao became the center of the nation's banking industry.

Our tour begins with Ming-Qing Street, also called Nanda Jie (South Avenue), which used to be the commercial center of Pingyao. Today, many traditional-style shops line the street and sell food, snacks, specialties, paintings, furniture, calligraphy, and souvenirs. We then visit the old city wall itself, with a perimeter of 6.4 kilometers and height over 12 meters.

We continue to the Rishengchang Exchange Shop, the earliest bank in China first opened in the 18th century. While in Pingyao, we'll also visit the Armed Escort Company Museum, which offers a glimpse into how commerce was protected and how cash was moved and kept from thieving hands. In those days, traders paid for their goods with silver coins, and in those dangerous times it was unsafe for a merchant to carry large sums in silver from one city to another.

* Please note that porters are likely NOT available train stations. You must be able to manage your bags on/off trains and at train stations.

Overnight in Pingyao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Pingyao - Train to Xi'an

This morning we'll have an interesting walk-through of the Confucian temple, first built during the reign of Emperor Taizong, considered as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, Chinese emperor. The original, modest temple was not built as a memorial temple, but rather, was the family temple of Confucius himself.

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

Xi'an is often called the birthplace of Chinese civilization. Capital of Shaanxi Province and eastern end to the Silk Road, the history and cultural significance of Xi'an stretches through China's ancient past and into its bright future. Xi'an was the 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, and he has left 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, a group of peasants digging a well in Lintong County, about 30 km east of Xi'an, accidentally made one of the century's greatest archeological 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 the center of Xi'an. Inscriptions from the stone tablets indicate that the Great Mosque, located at Huajue Lane, 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 which have splendid domes, minarets reaching into the clouds, and colourful engraved sketches with dazzling patterns, the mosque is built in a Chinese traditional style with the grounds taken up by platforms, pavilions and halls.

Time permitting, we will also drive to the City Walls of Xi'an where we can climb up to get 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 (+/- 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, which comprise 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 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 of "Dragon's Gate Grottoes" derives from the resemblance of the two hills that check the flow of the Yi River to the typical "Chinese gate towers" that once marked the entrance to Luoyang from the south.

There are as many as 100,000 statues within the 2,345 caves, ranging from one inch to 57 feet (17 m) in height. The area also contains nearly 2,500 stelae and inscriptions, whence the name "Forest of Ancient Stelae", as well as over sixty Buddhist pagodas. Situated in a scenic natural environment, the caves were dug from a one kilometre 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, bringing you to the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Shaolin Temple, a famous martial arts monastery and the birthplace of both kung fu and Zen Buddhism. Take a guided tour of the temple to see its impressive design, visiting Guanyin Hall, containing frescoes of fighting Shaolin monks. Visit the Hall of Heavenly Kings, the Pagoda Forest, the Dharma Cave and the Martial Arts Training Center. We watch a live kung fu performance and witness an incredible display 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, where we have amazing views and the ability to visit a village at the top.

We then transfer by road to Transfer to Zhengzhou, the 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. This is our longest rail journey of the trip - approx 6 hours. Granted this is a bit long, but to fly this distance with traffic, security, waiting to board, waiting for luggage etc, most travellers still believe the train to be a superior experience.

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 the 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 was 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 some golf carts, we'll view the terraces from a vantage point as well as 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 the rushing water is said to resemble gongs and drums.

Legend tells us that every sailor drowned in the Li is transformed into a demon, clutching at the boats which navigate the rapids. 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 has a good portion 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 the Great Helmsman himself, Mao Zedong. The town itself is a lively place with plenty of cafes and shops and lots of interesting local foods to sample.

This afternoon we will 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. You'll then have free time to enjoy the town and surrounds.

Tonight we will attend the "Yin Xiang Liu San Jie," an exciting local minority show performed on the banks of the Li River. The Ying Xiang Liu San Jie is a spectacular light and dance performance directed by Zhang Yimou, a famous Chinese filmmaker. This is a breathtaking show, using the beautiful mountains and river as the backdrop for the performance.

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 the 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 largest city in the world 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, visiting, among other things, Flower Harbour, where we can do some "fish viewing." The history of viewing fish at Flower Harbour can be dated 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.

We also visit Lingyin Temple, the largest of several temples in the Wulin Mountains, which also features a large number of grottoes and religious rock carvings.

Overnight in Hangzhou.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Hangzhou - Shanghai

After a leisurely morning we transfer by road to Shanghai.

Shanghai, among the two or three largest cities in the world, is China's most populous as well as its most "urban" city. Despite the 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.

Overnight in Shanghai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Shanghai: City Touring

Our first stop today is the Shanghai World Financial Center, an astonishingly high building reaching 492-metres. We will go by elevator to the 94th floor observatory deck for fantastic views over the city below. It is located in the Pudong district of Shanghai, an area that swiftly sprung up in the huge economic growth enjoyed in the new millennium.

Afterwards we will continue by bus to the famed Bund where we will enjoy a stroll along the Huangpu River, soaking in the atmosphere of one of the most recognizable architectural symbols of Shanghai. The word 'bund' derives from an Anglo-Indian word for an embankment along a muddy waterfront, and that is what it was in the beginning 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 take a leisurely stroll in the beautiful Yu Garden, established in 1559 and considered one of the most lavish and finest Chinese gardens in the region. At nearby Yuyuan Market, we discover a bustling bazaar selling traditional Chinese arts and crafts, as well as a mish-mash of items including chopsticks, Chinese medicine, walking sticks, fans, silk umbrellas, bamboo and rattan furniture, goldfish, pottery, plus much more. Food is also a great temptation in Yuyuan Market with local delicacies such as xiao long bao, pigeon egg dumplings, and spicy cold noodles from the street stalls or numerous restaurants.

After dinner we will make our way to board our one-hour evening cruise of the Huangpu River. This river cruise features the incredible sights of the Pudong area at night, buildings brightly lit in a variety of 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.

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