

First Time in China? Keep This Checklist Handy

Glance through it before you fly. You won't feel lost once you land.

From Stella Guo

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01 First, who am I

I'm Stella Guo, based in Shenyang. Over the past few years I've spent most weekends and holidays on the road, and I've covered a good chunk of cities, big and small, across China.

I like slipping into the little local spots where locals actually queue up, not those tourist-packed pedestrian streets. When I land in a new city, the first thing I do is figure out how to get around, where to eat, and whether the pace is fast or slow.

To me, travel isn't ticking off a list of sights. It's understanding how the people here actually live.

02 Why you can take my word for it

A few honest points. I live in China, and every route here I've walked myself, not copied from some guidebook. I'll tell you straight about the potholes I've hit — which spot didn't live up to the hype, which app doesn't work anymore — I write it all down. I won't tell you “everything's amazing.”

I'm not a travel agency and I don't sell tours. You'll see the odd affiliate link on the site, but only for things I'd hand to a friend. Before my friends come to China, they ask me first: how do I get the visa, how do I get online, which apps do I install.

03 What this site can do for you

The scariest part of a first trip to China is “where do I even start.” I've broken it all down into clear chunks:

- **Before you leave** — visa, luggage, what to watch for at arrival.
- **Getting online & paying** — eSIM, VPN, Alipay, WeChat, how they actually work.
- **Getting around** — high-speed rail, metro, ride-hailing.
- **City guides** — Beijing, Xi'an, Chengdu, Guilin, and more.
- **Safety & health** — cultural no-nos, where to see a doctor, how to buy insurance.
- **Free tools** — this checklist is one of them.

Want a specific topic? Just head to firsttimechinaguide.com and find the section.

04 Get these sorted before you leave

Just tick them off as you go.

Documents

- ☐ Passport — **valid for 6+ months**; they check it at entry and at hotels.
- ☐ Visa, or confirm you qualify for the 240-hour (10-day) visa-free transit — double-check before you fly, don't find out at the airport.
- ☐ Flight + hotel confirmations saved to your phone, ideally accessible offline.

Money & payments

- ☐ Alipay and WeChat, both installed, with one overseas card linked — **almost everything in China is scanned-pay**.

- ☐ One bank card that works abroad — for big spends and emergencies.
- ☐ A little RMB cash — street stalls, public toilets, some old shops take cash only.

Staying online

- ☐ Translation app + Chinese offline pack downloaded — so you can point and gesture without wifi.
- ☐ Maps: use Amap (高德). Ride-hailing: DiDi (滴滴). **Google Maps barely works here.**
- ☐ A local SIM or eSIM bought ahead — you've got signal the moment you land, easier than buying at the airport.

Health & safety

- ☐ Travel insurance bought, confirmation saved — it's the thing that bails you out if something goes wrong.
- ☐ Bring the meds you're used to from home — buying medicine in China needs registration, so bring your own familiar stuff.
- ☐ Photo + photocopy of key documents — speeds up replacement if lost.

Luggage

- ☐ Travel adapter — China uses Type A, C, or I, probably not what you've got at home.
- ☐ Power bank under 20,000mAh — domestic flights cap the capacity.
- ☐ A pack of tissues in your bag — many public toilets don't provide any.

05 Where to go in China (and what to eat)

Don't try to see it all. Picking two or three cities and taking your time beats rushing through ten. These are places I go back to, or friends have loved.

Beijing. The Great Wall and the Forbidden City need no intro. Eat: roast duck and zhajiangmian (noodles with fermented bean paste). The small hutong joints beat the big hotels.

Xi'an. The Terracotta Army is two thousand years staring back at you. Eat: a roujiamo (meat burger) and a bowl of liangpi (cold noodles) or biangbiang noodles.

Chengdu. Pandas, Sichuan food, slow living. My friend Jake texted me his second day: “Why did no one tell me one QR code handles most things?” He meant scan-to-pay and scan-to-order — and yeah, once you're here you'll get it.

Guangzhou. You have to do the morning tea — cheung fun (rice rolls), har gow (shrimp dumplings), roast meats, one pot of tea and you can sit all morning. If you like clothes, the wholesale garment markets around the Thirteenth Line (十三行) are worth a walk — tons of styles, low prices.

Shenzhen · Huaqiangbei. The world's largest electronics market. If you want phone parts or gadgets, this is the most complete place on earth. You can wander half a day.

Yiwu. The International Trade City — the world's largest small-commodities market. From a single button to daily essentials, it's like stepping into another world. Bringing back souvenirs here is a steal.

Guilin & Yangshuo. Karst mountains and water, bamboo raft down the Li River, slow enough you'll want to stay longer.

Zhangjiajie. Peaks in the clouds — they filmed Avatar there. Looks almost unreal.

Hangzhou. West Lake, that soft Jiangnan mood, perfect for a wander and some daydreaming.

Yunnan (Lijiang, Dali). Cangshan and Erhai, a mix of ethnic lives, very slow pace. Don't miss the rice noodles and wild mushroom hotpot.

Changsha. Stinky tofu, spicy crayfish, lively nightlife.

Wuhan. Hot dry noodles (reganmian), a hardcore breakfast culture.

Harbin (in winter). The Ice and Snow World — yes it's freezing, but yes it's stunning.

Back home in the Northeast. guobaorou (sweet-sour pork), barbecue, dumplings — generous portions, and the people are just as straightforward.

Every place eats differently, and that's exactly why I can't leave China. Like it spicy? Go Sichuan and Chongqing. Prefer light? Head south to Guangdong and Hong Kong. Want noodles? Walk west. You'll always find the bowl that fits.

06 A few honest words

I started this site because my friend Jake sent me three pages of questions before he came to China. When he landed in Chengdu, he texted that line again — “why did no one tell me earlier.” Something clicked: there's plenty written about China online, but almost nothing that catches you in that first-time panic.

So I wrote down the real China through the eyes of a local. No roundabouts, no hard sell. This checklist is your first step. The potholes I've hit, the apps that work, what still works now — I'll keep writing it all.

07 Don't want the hassle? Let me build the whole trip

You just enjoy. I'll handle the annoying parts. Tell me your dates, how many people, where you want to go (or let me decide), and any dietary no-nos. I'll lay out your daily route, plus what to eat on the way, roughly what the weather will be, and what to pack.

Here's what's included:

- **Daily route** — which city on which day, what to see, in what order, how to connect the dots.
- **What to eat along the way**, recommended by your taste and budget, close by.
- **The historical weather** for your travel dates, so you know to pack heavy or light.
- **A packing list made for you** — by your dates and route, not more not less.
- **How to handle no-nos** — safe dishes for allergies or dislikes, with how to say it in Chinese written

out.

• **One unbroken line** from landing → high-speed rail → checkout, nothing falling through the cracks.

HOW IT WORKS

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