

# China Travel Handbook

## 2026 VUE CN Edition

— Your complete guide to entry requirements, connectivity, payments, transport, and accommodation — everything you need for a seamless journey through China.

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# 1. Entry Requirements

## Pre-travel Checklist

- **Passport & Documents**

Valid for at least **6 months** with a minimum of **two blank visa pages**. Always carry your physical passport to every attraction and hotel. Check Visa Requirements (Visa Free Transit & Regular Visa).

- **Must-Have Apps (Install before arrive)**

- **WeChat & Alipay** — digital payments, communication, daily services
- **Amap (Gaode) / Apple Maps** — navigation (Google Maps is unreliable)
- **DiDi** — ride-hailing (China's Uber)
- **Trip.com** — hotels, trains, and flight bookings
- Translation Apps: Download a reliable one and converse like a local. Like **Waygo, Microsoft Translator, DeepL**, etc

 See more details in Chinese APPs MASTER GUIDE by VUE CN

- **Insurance & Connectivity**

- Complete **real-name authentication** for Alipay and WeChat before leaving home
- Purchase and install an eSIM and VPN in advance
- Bring a **travel adapter** for suitable for Chinese power 220V, 50Hz AC outlets

- **Currency & Reservation**

- Carry some **RMB cash** for emergencies
- Credit cards notified of travel
- Book your flights in advance. Use **Trip.com** to book Chinese domestic flights for more choices and discounts.
- Hotel Reservation: First few nights accommodation booked

# Visa Requirements

## Visa-Free Entry – 30 Days

As of **February 2026**, nationals from **50+ countries** can enter China visa-free for up to 30 days for tourism, business, or family visits. Most policies are currently set to expire on **December 31, 2026**.

### Europe

UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and **35 countries total**

### Americas

Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Uruguay

### Oceania

Australia, New Zealand

### Asia

Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and more

## Transit Without Visa (TWOV)

If your country is not on the visa-free list, you may qualify for TWOV when flying to a third country (Hong Kong and Macau count as third countries).

### 24-Hour TWOV

Available to almost all nationalities at most entry ports

### 144-Hour TWOV

55 countries (including the US) in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou regions

### 240-Hour TWOV

Select regions; allows broader travel and domestic flights within the permitted area

### Main Problem: Airline Staff Don't Understand TWOV

Arrive 2-3 hours early. Print TWOV eligibility proof from official China immigration website. Be prepared to explain calmly.

### Book Flights: Country A → China → Country B

Make sure Country B is different from Country A. Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan count as separate.

# Traditional Visa

A traditional visa is required for citizens of the **US, India**, and 100+ other countries if staying longer than the visa-free or transit limits allow.

## Application Process

### 1 Apply Online via COVA

Complete the official COVA application form online before your appointment.

### 2 Submit Passport in Person

Visit your nearest Chinese consulate to submit your passport and supporting documents.

### 3 Collect Your Visa


Pick up your passport with the visa affixed, typically within 4–7 business days.

## Key Details

**US Citizens:** Typically eligible for a 10-year multiple-entry L (tourism) visa.

**Cost:** Approximately \$140–\$300 USD depending on whether you apply directly or use an agency.

**Timeline:** Apply at least **4 weeks** before your travel date.

 Do not leave your visa application to the last minute — consulate processing times can vary significantly.

## Useful Chinese Visa & Policy Links

Check Visa Requirements on Chinese Government Official Website for **Policy Interpretation Updates**

CHINA ONLINE VISA APPLICATION

[cova.mfa.gov.cn](https://cova.mfa.gov.cn)

NATIONAL IMMIGRATION ADMINISTRATION

[en.nia.gov.cn](https://en.nia.gov.cn)

## 2. Wi-Fi & SIM Cards

### Internet Access Options

To stay connected in China, choose the option that best fits your device and travel style.

#### eSIM Cards (Highly Recommended)

The most convenient and budget-friendly choice. Purchase through **Trip.com app, Alipay, Airalo, or Holafly**.

- **Pre-Trip Setup:** Purchase and download the eSIM provider's app **1-2 days before** your trip
- **Compatibility:** iPhone XS, Pixel 3, Samsung S20, or newer — must be unlocked

#### International Roaming

Convenient as you keep your home number, but often the most expensive option. Check with your provider for "China roaming" packages.

#### Local SIM Card

Best for long-term stays. Purchase at major airports (China Mobile/Unicom) with your **original passport**. A local number helps with registering in some domestic apps.

#### Portable Wi-Fi Device

Great for groups sharing data. Rent online and pick up at major international airports in China.

#### Public Wi-Fi

Widely available in malls and hotels. Note: Most require a Chinese phone number to receive a verification SMS to log in.

# The "Great Firewall" & VPNs

China blocks access to many Western services including Google, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. A VPN is essential for accessing these platforms.



**The Golden Rule: You MUST download, install, and test your VPN BEFORE you leave your home country. You cannot access VPN websites or download these apps once you arrive in China.**



## ExpressVPN

Most reliable overall — the top recommendation for most travelers



## Astrill VPN

Fast and powerful — ideal for tech-savvy users who need speed



## Holafly

Offers eSIMs with built-in VPN — an all-in-one connectivity solution



**Backup Plan: Consider having two different VPNs installed in case one experiences downtime. Without a VPN, you will not be able to use Google Maps, Gmail, or WhatsApp to communicate with people outside of China.**

# Messaging Apps

Communication in China happens almost entirely through local platforms, but you can still use your preferred apps with the right setup.



## WeChat (微信)

The "everything app." Primary tool for paying, messaging, video calls, and social sharing. Complete real-name authentication **before you arrive** for full functionality.



## Alipay (支付宝)

Primarily for payments, but also has messaging features and mini-programs for translations and travel services.



## Western Apps (WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram)

These will **only work if your VPN is connected**. Without a VPN, these apps will not send or receive messages.



## Translation Apps

**Pleco** (best dictionary), **Waygo**, **Microsoft**, **Google Translate** (download offline Chinese pack), or **DeepL** for more natural translations. Also, **WeChat** has build-in translation function for image & chats, it will be very useful for menus and street signs.



## 3. Payment Methods

### Digital Wallet – The Primary Choice

China is a nearly cashless society. For **90% of your daily transactions** — from street food and taxis to convenience stores — you will need a mobile payment app.



#### Alipay (支付宝)

The best option for international travelers. Clear English interface and accepted almost everywhere.



#### WeChat Pay (微信支付)

An essential backup built into the WeChat messaging app. Equally widely accepted across China.

#### How to Set Up

1. Download and register the app before arriving in China
2. Link your international Visa or Mastercard directly — no Chinese bank account needed
3. Test with a small transaction if possible

#### How to Pay

Scan a merchant's QR code with the app, or show your own "Payment Code" to be scanned.

**i** Apple Pay, Google Pay, and PayPal do NOT work for daily purchases in China.

# Cash and Cards – The Essential Backup

While digital wallets are the norm, traditional payment methods remain necessary as a safety net throughout your trip.

## International Credit Cards

Visa and Mastercard are primarily accepted at **international hotels, high-end restaurants, and large shopping malls**. Rarely accepted by small vendors or taxis.

## Emergency Cash (¥RMB)

Always carry a small amount for emergencies. We recommend keeping **¥300–¥500** (\$40–\$70 USD) for your entire trip.

## Where to Get Cash

Withdraw RMB from ATMs at airports, major banks, or shopping malls using your international debit card. Look for the **UnionPay, Plus, or Cirrus** logos.

## Currency Exchange

Exchange at airport counters or major banks. ATM withdrawals often offer better exchange rates than currency counters.

# Tax Refund for International Travelers

International travelers can claim a refund on the Value Added Tax (VAT) for goods purchased in mainland China.



The standard refund is 11%, but after service fees you will typically receive about **9%** back in cash or via your digital wallet. Only shops displaying the "**Tax Free**" sign are eligible — always present your original passport at the store to obtain the official tax refund application form.

## 4. Tours and Experiences

### Attraction Tips

Visiting popular sites in China requires specific digital steps. Use these guidelines to ensure you don't miss out.

- **Better Book in Advance**

Popular attractions like the Forbidden City or Chengdu Panda Base have strict daily limits and often sell out in peak tourist seasons. Book via the **Trip.com app** (Attractions & Tours) or through the attraction's **WeChat Official Account** (look for the green verification checkmark). However, you can always buy at attractions and may need to go early.

- **Always Carry Your Passport**

Your physical passport serves as your official ID for entry and is often scanned at the gate in place of a paper ticket.

- **Check Monday Closures**

Most museums and galleries across China are **closed on Mondays**. Always verify the schedule before planning your day.

- **Navigate with Precision**

Google Maps is not reliable in China. Use **Amap (Gaode Maps)** or the "Map" function within **WeChat** for accurate directions.

#### **VUE CN Advantage**

VUE CN travel guides provide the exact **Chinese names** for every attraction. Copy and paste these characters into **Amap** or **WeChat** to find the correct entrance every time.



# Interacting with Locals

While English is common among younger people in major cities, these tools and phrases will make your daily interactions much smoother.

## Real-time Translation Tools

### Microsoft Translator / DeepL

**Bilingual Mode:** Use the voice function to record a conversation — the app translates and speaks back in Chinese/English in real-time.

### Visual Translation

Use the camera feature to photograph menus, street signs, or labels for an instant English overlay.

- ☐ Most major cities and tourist sites have English street signs and detailed English descriptions in museums.

## Essential Phrases

Hello	Nǐ hǎo (你好)
Thank you	Xiè xiè (谢谢)
How much?	Duō shǎo qián? (多少钱? )
I want this	Wǒ xiǎng yào zhè ge (我想要这个)
Where is [Location]?	Qǐng wèn, [Location] zài nǎ lǐ? (请问, XXX在哪里? )

# 5. Transport

## Flights

### Booking Platforms

Use **Trip.com** for domestic flights within China. Chinese-language alternatives include 携程旅游 (Ctrip), 去哪儿网 (Qunar), and 飞猪 (Fliggy).

### Arrival Process

Follow signs for "Immigration" where officers will check your passport and visa. After clearing immigration, collect your luggage and pass through customs.

### Money-Saving Tip

Consider flying into **Hong Kong** and taking a high-speed train to your final destination in mainland China. This can often save you over **50%** compared to a direct flight.

### Important Note

Foreigners visiting both the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong need to check if they require a **separate visa** for each, as they have different entry policies.


# Trains – High-Speed Rail

China's high-speed rail network is world-class and often faster than flying for short-to-medium distances.

## How to Book

Use the **Trip.com app** or the official **Railway 12306 app** (both available in English).

1. Select your stations and travel date
2. Enter your **passport details** exactly as they appear
3. Complete payment — your e-ticket is linked to your passport, no paper ticket needed

 Tickets go on sale **15 days** before departure and sell out quickly during holidays. Book early!

## Onboarding at the Station

- Arrive **30–60 minutes** before departure
- Go to the **Manual Lane (人工通道)** at the gate — an agent will scan your physical passport
- All luggage must pass through a **security X-ray machine**

# Map & Navigation

Accurate navigation is critical in China. Google Maps is unreliable — use these alternatives for the best experience.

## Amap (Gaode Map)

The most accurate option for real-time traffic and public transport routing across all of China.

## Apple Maps

A reliable choice for iOS users — works directly in China with English labels and accurate local data.

## VUE CN Advantage

VUE CN guides provide **Chinese characters** for every station and destination. Copy the text and paste it into Amap or Apple Maps for **more accuracy**.

- ❑ Navigation is significantly harder if you only have English names. Chinese characters ensure you find the exact entrance, not just the general area.



# Metro (Subway)

Over **54 cities** in China have modern, clean, and safe subway systems — one of the best ways to get around efficiently.

## How to Pay

### 1 Mobile App (Recommended)

Open **Alipay** → Tap "Transport"  
→ Select "Metro" or "Bus" →  
Scan the QR code at the  
turnstile. (You need to activate  
when first time use)

### 2 On-site Tickets

Use vending machines (English  
available) or the Staffed Service  
Center. They accept Alipay,  
WeChat, and sometimes cash.

## Operational Tips

- All stations have security checks for bags
- Announcements and signs are provided in both **Chinese and English**
- Most stations have restrooms, but they rarely provide toilet paper — **always carry your own tissues**

# Taxis & Ride-Hailing



## Ride-Hailing via DiDi (Recommended)

Use the **Didi mini-program** inside the **Alipay app**. Features a full English interface and allows you to type destinations in English. Payment is handled automatically via your linked card — no cash or language skills needed.



## Traditional Taxis

Find taxis at designated queues at airports and stations, or hail them on the street. Most drivers do not speak English — show your destination address in **Chinese characters** to avoid confusion. Pay via Alipay/WeChat QR code or small cash bills (¥50 or less).

- ☐ Tipping is NOT required or expected in China — for taxis, restaurants, or any other service.

## 6. Accommodation

### International Traveler-Friendly Hotels

Choosing the right hotel is the key to a stress-free trip. Here's how to find the best options for international travelers.

1

#### Use Trip.com

The international arm of Ctrip — China's largest travel company. Offers a much larger selection of hotels, guesthouses, and homestays within China than any foreign booking website.

2

#### Hotel Choices

International or major Chinese hotel chains are better equipped with English-speaking staff and are familiar with international travel customs. However, if you are not afraid of the language barrier, you can actually find many hotels with a high cost performance.

3

#### Verify Payment Methods

Confirm in advance if the hotel accepts international credit cards (Visa/Mastercard). Some budget hotels may only accept Alipay, WeChat Pay, or cash.

# Key Differences to Expect

Chinese hotels are often more flexible with their policies than those in many Western countries. Here's what to expect during your stay.

- **Flexible Check-in**

Official check-in is usually after **2:00 PM**. However, if you arrive early and your room is ready, most hotels will allow you to check in immediately at no extra cost.

- **Negotiable Check-out**

Standard check-out is typically at **12:00 PM**, but many hotels allow late check-out up to 2:00 PM if you ask in advance. Always confirm with the front desk.

- **Room Amenities**

Most Chinese hotels provide a complete set of **free bathroom amenities** — toothbrushes, toothpaste, and slippers are standard.

- **Drinking Water**

**Tap water in China is NOT safe to drink.** Only drink bottled water (usually provided for free) or water boiled using the in-room electric kettle.

- **Power Outlets**

Most modern hotels use "universal" sockets, but it is still recommended to bring a **travel adapter** to ensure all your devices can charge.



# Mandatory Police (PSB) Registration

It is a **legal requirement** for all foreigners to register their address with the Public Security Bureau (PSB) within **24 hours** of arrival in China.

## Staying at Hotels

The process is effortless. The hotel scans your passport at check-in and **automatically handles the registration** for you — no action required on your part.

## Staying at Private Residences

If staying at an Airbnb or with friends, you must register either in-person at the local police station (派出所) or via the **online registration pilot** available in certain provinces (Chongqing, Sichuan, Zhejiang) through Alipay/WeChat mini-programs.

## Don't Panic About Penalties

While the 24-hour rule exists, do not panic if you forget or are slightly delayed. For the vast majority of tourists, simply explaining the situation to the authorities or your hotel will resolve the issue without any serious problems.

**i** Re-entry Note: If you leave mainland China — even for a day trip to Hong Kong — and return, you must be re-registered at your accommodation upon your return.

# 24h

**Registration Window**

Time allowed to register with PSB after arrival

# 50+

**Visa-Free Countries**

Nations eligible for 30-day visa-free entry as of 2026

# 54+

**Metro Cities**

Chinese major cities with modern subway systems

# 9%

**VAT Refund**

Effective refund rate after service fees for eligible purchases