

Soggy Paws' Travel Notes for China

Rev 3, July 25, 2026

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A lot of the info in our notes came from from Reddit's ChinaTravel bulletin board. All recent info.

<https://www.reddit.com/r/travelchina/>

"Don't stress too much. Grab a local SIM/ESIM at the airport to fix SMS verification and use WeChat/Alipay. Use Trip.com for bookings, and bring a reliable VPN. That's basically your survival kit."

Our own personal notes after finishing our trip are below in italicized blue type.

1.1 Overview of Our Trip

We were interested in seeing China while we were so close in Malaysia. Though we normally do all our travel arrangements on our own, friends in the marina highly recommended a guy in the UK who had done a bunch of travel arrangements for them (Chris at TravelNation). We also contacted an online "tours available" company, and used their day-by-day itinerary to base our initial plans on.

Our contact at Travel Nation was Chris

Chris West

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chris@travelnation.co.uk

We made our coming and going airplane reservations ourselves, and Chris handled all the rest of the arrangements from when we were actually in China... hotels, transportation, guides. We flew into Shanghai and visited Zhangjiajie, Xi'an, and Beijing, flying out within the 240 "visa free transit" window. There was another place we wanted to visit, and was initially in the plan, but the schedule was just too tight for our 10-day visit, so we skipped it. (Guilin, for panda bears).

Americans CAN get Chinese visas for a longer stay, but in the short time we had to plan this trip, it just wasn't feasible. (We would have had to take documents and passports to Kuala Lumpur—a 5 hour drive from where we were, and there is some turnaround time before a visa is approved, so a second trip would have been necessary).

1.2 The 240 Hour Non-visa Visa (TWOV)

Transit Without a Visa (TWOV) – For US (and other) citizens, doesn't require an actual visa, but has some strict rules. Details below.

Our recap. This worked.... as mentioned below, the hardest part of this non-visa visa was checking in at our airline check-in counter (Air Asia in Kuala Lumpur). We THOUGHT we had prepared for this, but it still took us nearly 2 hours to finally get our boarding pass. [Check in WAY EARLY!! More details here.](#)

1.2.1 Sources of information

Info from: <https://www.chinatravel.com/guide/visa/240-hour-visa-free-in-china> June 2026

https://www.visaforchina.cn/MES3_EN/tongzhigonggao/393037975220523008.html

(This one is in Indonesia, but appears to be an official visa processing center sanctioned by the Chinese consulate/embassy to help with processing visa applications)

The equivalent website for Malaysia is here, but isn't as helpful:

https://www.visaforchina.cn/KUL3_EN/qianzhengyewu

1.2.2 Required Documents

1. A passport that is valid for more than 3 months from the date of your arrival.
2. A confirmed onward ticket to a third country or region, such as an airplane, train, or ship ticket, with a seat and departure date already set.
3. Arrival card for your arrival in China.

1.2.3 Exit to a Country Other than Where You Entered From

The 240-hour visa-free transit requires that the country you go to from China be a third country or a third region. A third country refers to any country other than your departure country and China. In other words, the country you were in before entering China and the country you go to from China cannot be the same, nor can they be two cities within the same country.

Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan are considered third regions, and can be used as your "exit country".

Restrictions: Passengers are not allowed to use the 240-hour Visa-free Transit Program when they arrive on a direct flight from the USA, Guam or Northern Mariana Isl. AND depart on a direct flight to USA, Guam or Northern Mariana Isl. (e.g. JFK - PVG - GUM).

1.2.4 How to Calculate 240 Hours

Your maximum stay is limited to 240 hours (10 days) from midnight the day after you arrive in China. In fact, including the day you arrive, you can stay for a total of 11 days. (this info from chinatravel.com)

For instance, if you arrive in Beijing at 4:00 PM on June 1, then your 240-hour (10-day) visa-free transit will begin counting from 0:00 on June 2. You just need to leave before midnight on June 11.

Also, corroborated here:

https://www.visaforchina.cn/MES3_EN/tongzhigonggao/393037975220523008.html

We were scared to push the limits, so did not take advantage of the possible extra day. The stamp in our passport we received at entry said "Arrival July 10, Departure July 20", when we actually departed on July 19. 10 days including our arrival day of July 10 would have us leaving on July 19.

1.2.5 Setting up to Use the 240-Hour Visa-Free Transit

1. Choose one of the eligible entry ports. (Beijing and Shanghai both are on the list)
2. Inform your carrier agent that you wish to use a 240-hour visa-free transit at check-in.
3. After landing, follow the signs to find the border inspection area.
4. Fill in and submit the Arrival Card. (online?)

An Arrival Card must be presented upon arrival. The form can be completed before departure or upon arrival

5. Pass through the 240-hour visa-free transit inspection channel.
6. Present your passport, ticket, and arrival card to the staff, and answer their questions truthfully.
7. Claim luggage and go through customs.

1.2.6 Dealing with the Airline on Check-in

Airline staff uses the [Timatic data base](#), which is THE source that all airlines use for up to date visa information.

So it helps when you check your routing/travel plans with the [Timatic database](#), and screen shot or PDF the whole page.

[>>Try it here<<](#) (or any other link to the live data base)

Here is a link for US citizens, scroll down to the 240 hour visa free section.

<https://www.emirates.com/uk/english/before-you-fly/visa-passport-information/visa-passport-information-results/?widgetheader=visa&nationality=us&destination=cn&transit=my%2Csg>

Note: AirAsia had a HUGE problem validating this scheme on check-in. We got there early, fortunately, but took almost 2 hours before they would issue boarding passes.

They didn't WANT to look at the pages I printed from the IATA travel site. They didn't care. They had a form they were trying to fill out on their terminals. Our travel info had too much other included information (hotels, tours, etc). Make a SEPARATE document...

*Having a CLEAR printed list of your flights, with dates and **airline confirmation numbers** would be very helpful. We had most of it, but it was confusing to them. The primary points of confusion were:*

1. *We had 2 couples trying to check in at the same time, booked on different flight confirmations. If you are doing this, EACH person/couple should have their own summary sheet. And do your check-in one couple/person at a time, depending on how the tickets were booked.*
2. *We did not have a CLEAR itinerary of just the movements. Ie, I would put ONLY this info on the sheet:*

KUL – PUD (Shanghai), date time, Flight Confirmation number

PUD – XXX (Shanghai Zhangjiajie), date time, Flight Confirmation number

XXX – YYY (Xi'an), date time, Flight Confirmation number

YYY – Beijing, date time, by Train (Train No)

Beijing – HK, date time, Flight Confirmation Number

They didn't care that our flight was actually booked from Beijing to Singapore with a short stop in HK. (I don't believe we will actually check in in HK, just be in transit). So

1.2.7 Can you use this twice?

There's no specific time limit between two uses of the 240-hour visa-free policy as long as you meet the relevant requirements of the policy.

1.2.8 Info from Official China Immigration Website

<https://en.nia.gov.cn/n147418/n147463/c183412/content.html>

240-Hour Visa-Free Transit Policy: Currently, China is implementing this policy for nationals of 55 countries including Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Nationals of these countries, who need to transit through China to third countries or regions, may enter visa-free through any of the designated 65 open exit-entry ports in 24 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government and stay in the permitted areas for no more than 10 days, provided that they hold valid international travel documents and onward tickets with confirmed seats and departure dates. Foreign nationals covered by this policy may, within the designated areas, engage in activities like travel activities, business activities, visits, family reunions, etc., during their stay periods. Activities such as work, study, or news reporting still require prior approvals and appropriate visas.

(I) List of 55 Countries

Europe (40 countries): Albania, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom

North America (2 countries): Canada, United States

South America (4 countries): Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico

Oceania (2 countries): Australia, New Zealand

Asia (7 countries): Brunei, Indonesia, Japan, Qatar, Singapore, South Korea, United Arab Emirates

I don't see any information here about "your arrival day is not counted", but did find it in several other places.

1.2.9 Random comments from Reddit:

US Citizens: Long story short, we had no problems TWOV for 11 days as long as we were below the 240 hours in mainland China.

Common misconception is 10 days max but we did 11 days with total hours in mainland China under 240 hours.

USA to Japan then Beijing/mainland China for 11 days/225 hours then to Hong Kong. Immigration was a separate line but very easy. Immigration stamp had 11 calendar days confirming the 240 hours was fine regardless of 10 vs 11 days.

The only thing they cared about was we that I was leaving China within the full 240 hours.

- I stressed so much about 240 hours vs 10 days but it was fine.

- Flew into PEK using TWOV. Had my departing flight and my hotel stays printed out. Immigration officer just asked to see the departing flight and then he saw I had other papers he asked to see them. He

looked at the hotels for about 30 seconds and I was good to go. From what I have read printing out the departing flight and the hotels makes things very easy.

In the airport there were signs for Chinese nationals, foreigners, and 240/24 hour TWOV. It was very straightforward.

When I flew into Shenzhen, the process was much more complicated

(<https://www.reddit.com/r/Chinavisa/s/7csaGYzk1d>)

- I just planned a short China trip using the 144/240-hour Transit Without Visa, and honestly, I went in way more nervous than I needed to. My idea was simple: I didn't want to deal with consulates or paperwork, I just wanted to spend a few days in China on the way to another country.

On paper TWOV looked perfect. In practice, I realized the real "boss fight" isn't Chinese immigration, it's the airline check-in desk at your departure airport.

My route looked like this: Country A (US) > China > Country B (Japan). That "third country" part is everything. You can't do A > China > A and expect TWOV to magically cover you.

I had my onward ticket out of China booked and paid, and I made sure my total time on the ground was safely under the allowed hours. I also printed the official transit rules from the Chinese immigration website, because I'd read too many stories of airline staff not knowing their own responsibilities.

At the airport, that homework paid off. The agent checked my passport, stared at the screen for a long time, and then said something like, "I don't see a visa for China here." That was the moment. I calmly explained that I was entering on the 144/240-hour transit without visa, showed the printed page with my passport's eligibility and the exact route, and pointed to my onward ticket. They called a supervisor, disappeared for 3 minutes, and eventually came back with, "Okay, you're good." It was not fun, but it was manageable because I knew the rules better than they did.

Once I actually landed in China, everything felt almost anticlimactic. I followed the signs for transit / visa-free entry, showed my onward ticket again, answered a couple of basic questions about where I was staying and how long, and they stuck the TWOV label in my passport.

Immigration itself was way smoother than the previous argument at the check-in counter. Inside the country, hotels and domestic flights just looked at my passport and the sticker and never made a fuss. After doing it this way, my conclusion is pretty simple.

If you just want a fast/first/express taste of China on the way somewhere else, and your route is a clean A > China > B, TWOV is amazing. You skip the whole visa process, you save money, and if you're mentally ready to educate airline staff with printouts from official sites, it works. But if you want flexibility, maybe stay longer, or know you'll be coming back to China again, I'd seriously consider getting a normal L visa once and being done with the stress. A lot of travelers who took that route now have a ten year multiple entry visa and don't have to think about "third countries" or hour counts at all

If you're not sure whether your route really fits the TWOV rules, I'd start by checking whatever the official Chinese immigration site says right now, and then read a couple of fresh posts on r/Chinavisa or r/travelchina to see what people are actually dealing with at check-in.

On top of that, I used a few longer resources: things like

https://www.visaforchina.cn/MES3_EN/tongzhigonggao/393037975220523008.html for the technical side, and the guide on realchinaguide.com that I ended up using for pretty much the whole trip, not just visas.

After checking those, booking flights and planning the route felt a lot less like guessing

- Outside of China no one really seems to know this visa-free transfer thing exists, even though it's more than a decade old. My record so far was being the 1st one to go to the check-in desk of a low-cost airline

at Osaka and being the 210th in sequence to be actually checked in. At other airports it only added maybe 3-5 minutes extra during the check-in process.

1.3 Carry Your Passport Always

Several people said that museums and every place you visit want to check your passport on entry. Always carry it.

Basically in China, your identity card is your entry to everything. For us, that meant passports. The guide had to have our passports to make ticket purchases, and then at the gate, you scan your passport at (usually) an automated gate. A few places just scanned our faces!

1.4 eSims

In China it's less about which eSIM and more about how it's set up behind the scenes.

There are basically two types:

- ones that route traffic outside China → Google/WhatsApp just work, no VPN
- ones that act like a local SIM → you're behind the firewall, VPN needed

So when you're choosing, don't look at marketing - check if they mention stuff like "no VPN needed" or routing via HK/EU/US. If it's vague, assume it's the second type.

Couple of practical things:

 "unlimited" = almost always throttled after a few GB

 latency can be a bit weird (normal if traffic is routed abroad)

 some apps act slightly off even if they technically work

 hotspot isn't always allowed

 For ~10 days I'd just get a normal fixed plan (10–20GB) and not overthink it.

Also install everything before you land, just in case.

- this <https://www.trip.com/t/E7hkp0ai6U2> allows you to use youtube, google apps, WhatsApp, etc... whilst allowing you to make payment with Alipay, WeChat and all that..

- Another one recommended airalo

- I'm using holafly eSIM and I can access everything that I would use in America like TikTok, instagram, YouTube, google. Unlimited data but it's pricey. No need for vpn

- The most popular (and cheapest) eSIM for China is the one sold at Trip.com, however, they are limited to 10mb/s, so if you want to enjoy a fastest connection, better use a more expensive but better eSIM like the one from Nomad.

- Forget about using Chinese internet. WiFi is available everywhere but most western sites are blocked. The same would happen if you buy a local SIM card. The best solution is to buy a eSIM on sites like Trip.com (cheapest) or Nomad (best quality). They work with roaming so everything is unlocked and you can share your connection to your laptop for example if you need it.

- I went with an eSIM from trip.com. WhatsApp, Google Maps, Instagram, Gmail all worked without a VPN for me. Might depend on the plan or the city though, I don't know, just telling you what happened in my case.

If you go with a regular Chinese SIM (saw some at the airport for around ¥100/30 days), install your VPN before you land. You probably can't download one once you're on a Chinese network.

Our notes: I bought a 3 GB per day / 14 days eSim on trip.com using the link above. Cost about \$15 USD. It worked fabulously, and only one day did I somehow go over the 3GB limit (using hotspot / laptop / Windows updates, I think, for 2 computers, plus mega updates on Google Play apps at the same time).

I also bought an eSim for Dave, but never used it, because I had already bought a 15 day "all asia" roaming plan on Hotlink. This worked OK, but wasn't tested much, because I did all the heavy lifting on my phone.

Joyce had TMobile and it worked for somethings and not others. They had a 5GB limit and blew thru that in the first 2 days. (Two of them + computers).

1.5 VPNs

I used Nordvpn, it was working intermittently until I looked online. You need to set the protocol to udp and set it to connect to obfuscated servers and it worked really well.

I'm in China right now and tested Mullvad; Kiree and LetsVPN. All three work. When I was out here in Dec 2025 only Lets VPN worked, Astrill and Mullvad didn't. I've tried Express VPN on a few trips before and it has never worked.

Currently in China using an eSIM from Trip.com. Paid \$25 for 15 days /w 100gb a day. No vpn needed working flawlessly. I even use it to watch YouTube on my iPad as I sleep.

<https://us.trip.com/things-to-do/detail/57042119?locale=en-US&curr=USD>

Kiree, I used your VPN in China and it worked flawlessly. Thank you so much!

On my recent trip (April and May 2026, 60 days total) LetsVPN was almost unusable. It kept switching servers which broke a lot of websites. The speed was also very slow. Nord was stable, but it was also very slow and didn't always connect. I found myself switching between the two.

I used NordVPN, sometimes had to turn it off to do somethings (I forget exact scenario, but if something didn't work, I'd turn VPN on or off to see if that fixed it).

1.6 Paying for Stuff

I've never used cash in China. You either use Alipay or WeChat. **SET IT UP AHEAD OF TIME!**

You can sign up before coming, verify your account and link your credit/debit card and then every time you pay with them, your card is charged. I've had more problems in other countries than in China with payments. Not really an issue.

<https://www.alipayplus.com/pay-in-the-chinese-mainland/>

<https://lsl-school.com/alipay-for-foreigners/>

Note: My friend Colleen said that you can't actually get verified until you have a Chinese sim card. It only wants a Chinese sim card. And then, when they went to Hong Kong, it wouldn't work. Need a HK sim card.

But others indicated that you could set it up and verify before you arrive.

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Bank of China ATMs worked fine with my Visa. Didn't try others.

From us, after our trip: We were able to link our Capital One Mastercard (for me) and our USAA Visa card (for Dave) to (separate) Alipay accounts, and get verified before we started our trip. I didn't record the details on how I did it, sorry.

It's important you get verified, which means scanning your passport, and I think scanning/taking a picture of your credit card. You assign a 6-digit pin code, which pops up when you pay, to verify the payment. Don't forget it! You may get a \$1 charge on your card which is Alipay verifying that the card is not blocked.

Pay attention the first time or two that you use it... our friends had their card set up, but the first time they used it, the bank emailed a "was this you?". They didn't notice that, and checking their email a day or so later, they got scared. Ended up that their card was canceled! (but it was them, they just didn't realize the two situations were linked).

I eventually set up a WeChat payment, but never used it. I only once encountered a situation where I wanted a WeChat (only), and hadn't set it up.

1.7 Translating

People don't speak English. Very few!! You need to download a translation app (I use the native Apple Translate app on my iPhone). And you simply write what you want to say and show them the translation. They are used to do this. They even will do it with you.

Our inputs: In 10 days in China, we learned only 2 words/phrases.

Ice: Bing

Thank you: Xia Xia (Shia Shia)

Both Alipay and Wechat (and everything else) come up in Chinese. Alipay has a "translate" button that works most of the time (when it didn't work, I think it was because I had no, or slow, internet).

But... and this is a big but... We had an English speaking guide with us all day every day, who handled most of the day-to-day struggle with Chinese.

1.8 Arrival Card

You need to apply for an arrival card before arrival. Can do it on arrival, but easier to do at home. We did ours MORE than 3 days in advance, and had a printed copy with the QR code.

<https://s.nia.gov.cn/ArrivalCardFillingPC/entry-registration-home>

How to (video) <https://en.nia.gov.cn/n147418/n147463/c195170/content.html>

1.9 Getting Around

Metros were honestly great. Enough English signs in Beijing and Shanghai that I never really got lost. Chengdu was a little trickier but still manageable.

Didi is basically Chinese Uber. Linked it through Alipay, typed in where I wanted to go, car showed up. Didn't need to speak Chinese. Probably used it 20+ times with zero issues.

For airport taxis, just use the official queue outside. Ignore anyone who approaches you inside the terminal. I made that mistake in Beijing, didn't get scammed but definitely overpaid.

One thing that saved me multiple times: screenshot your hotel address in Chinese characters. Not the English name. I showed a taxi driver "Grand Hyatt Beijing" and he just stared at me. Showed him 北京东方君悦大酒店 and we were moving in 5 seconds.

High-speed trains are incredible. Beijing to Shanghai in about 4.5 hours, smoother than most flights honestly. I booked everything on [Trip.com](https://www.trip.com) because I wanted English and didn't feel like creating yet another Chinese app account.

From Us: The train we used was booked by the travel agency, and they dropped us off at the train station, and picked us up on the platform when we arrived.

We did take a Metro in Shanghai, accompanied by a guide.

We did take a few "Didi" (ie Grab) rides on our own, with some coaching from the guide. Calling up Didi from within Alipay meant paying was easy and it was translated. Pretty much like taking a grab.

Otherwise, all our transportation was by private transport (a van for 4 of us + guide).

1.9.1 Navigation / Maps

Transportation is easy and affordable. Here Google Maps doesn't work but you can download Amap. You can use Amap to look for public transportation routes. You can pay either by card (for example in Beijing you can pay by tapping the card before entering the platform), or by purchasing a ticket with Alipay or WeChat. Super easy. And everything is translated into English.

It's tough to navigate Didi in large crowded airports and train stations. I would not try to do it right after landing from an Intl flight. We didn't have good reception in the rideshare area of PVG, our driver said he couldn't find us, and the police weren't interested in helping us. It was a mess. We eventually got the hang of it as the trip went on but I would prebook a pickup for your initial arrival if budget allows

(our experience: Google Maps worked, and sometimes was useful, but also sometimes didn't have something we were searching for (a restaurant or something), GPS navigation was off a bit sometimes. Amap, which I eventually downloaded, wasn't very helpful in my opinion. Someone else suggested downloading Baidu, but I never got around to using it. We were on a pre-booked tour with guides picking us up and taking us where we needed to go, so really didn't do our own navigation. We did use Didi (from inside Alipay) to get to and from a restaurant. It worked.)

1.10 Ordering Food

OK so this was actually the most stressful part of the trip, which I did not expect.

A lot of restaurants, not just fancy ones, like random neighborhood places, have switched to QR code menus. You scan, you get a menu in Chinese, you order from your phone.

Google Translate camera mode kind of works but it kept translating things into nonsense. I spent like 10 minutes in a Chengdu restaurant trying to figure out if something had peanuts in it (I'm mildly allergic) and eventually just gave up and pointed at what the table next to me was eating. Not my proudest moment.

The places right next to major tourist spots were almost always meh. The restaurants within eyeshot of the Forbidden City entrance were overpriced and bland. Walk 10 minutes in any direction and the food got way better and cheaper.

Oh and the tea house scam, yeah it's still a thing. Two very friendly college-age girls came up to me near the Temple of Heaven, great English, wanted to "practice conversation" and then "show me a traditional tea ceremony." I'd read about it beforehand so I just said no thanks. But they were convincing, I get how people fall for it.

Scan the QR code with Ali Pay or We Chat. Menu mini app pops up. You can use the built in translation tools in Ali Pay or We Chat. You don't need to screenshot things and use Google Translate. The menu usually starts by asking you how many people in your group, sometimes it will ask if you are dining in, ordering take away, or delivery. Sometimes it asks you if you want to be a member and get discounts.

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China has this habit of giving dishes poetic/dramatic names instead of just... describing the food normally.

Chinese Name	Literal Meaning	What it actually is	What to Watch Out For
夫妻肺片	Husband and wife lung slices	A spicy Sichuan cold dish, usually made with beef offal such as tripe, tongue, or tendon	No husband, no wife, and usually no lung. But it does contain offal, so it may not be for everyone.
蚂蚁上树	Ants climbing a tree	Glass noodles stir-fried with minced pork	No ants. The “ants” are the tiny bits of minced meat sticking to the noodles. Usually contains pork.
老婆饼	Wife cake	A flaky sweet pastry, often filled with winter melon paste	No wife involved. It is a dessert.
佛跳墙	Buddha jumps over the wall	A rich luxury soup or stew with premium seafood and meat ingredients	Usually expensive. It may contain abalone, sea cucumber, fish maw, ham, and other ingredients.
口水鸡	Saliva chicken	Cold chicken served with chili oil and Sichuan-style sauce	“Saliva” means mouth-watering, not actual saliva. It is often spicy and may contain peanuts.
麻婆豆腐	Pockmarked grandma’s tofu	Spicy tofu with minced meat, chili oil, and Sichuan peppercorns	Not always vegetarian. It often contains minced pork or beef.
虎皮青椒	Tiger-skin green peppers	Pan-seared green peppers with blistered, wrinkled skin	Usually vegetarian, but some restaurants may add minced pork for extra flavor
狗不理包子	Dog ignores buns	A famous steamed bun name from Tianjin	It does not mean dog meat. Traditional versions are usually filled with pork.
驴打滚	Rolling donkey	Sticky rice rolls with red bean paste and soybean flour	No donkey. It is a traditional dessert.
阳春面	Spring noodles	A simple plain noodle soup with scallions	It looks vegetarian, but it is often flavored with lard.
狮子头	Lion’s Head	Not lion. Just oversized pork meatballs.	
	Duck Shit Lemon Tea	There’s no duck shit, just a very fragrant oolong tea with hand smashed lemons to bring out the aroma and citrus from the fruit paired with cold “duck shit” tea and some pebbles of ice to top it off	
	Snoozing Dragon	sliced and lightly fried eggplant “snoozing” across the plate with a nice oily meat sauce on it, btw	
松鼠鱼	Squirrel Fish	Fish carved/fried to look fluffy like a squirrel.	

Someone suggested using AI to interpret Chinese meal options.

We were almost always accompanied by a guide, who helped us order. When with the guide, they took us to restaurants that were used to tourists, so menus had some English.

1.11 Chinese Language

Everyone talks about the Great Firewall and payment apps, which fair enough, those are important. But nobody warned me how mentally tiring it is to do everything through your phone in a language you can't read. By day 3 I had like 15 screenshots of different things I might need, I was switching between 4 apps constantly, and I was spending real energy on stuff that should be simple, like ordering lunch or figuring out how to say "no spice" to a waiter.

Learn some Chinese: <https://en.nia.gov.cn/n147428/n147503/n147805/index.html>

Here's another site I found: <https://lil-school.com/learn-chinese-in-shanghai/> They have Chinese intensive classes in cities around china, if you have the time and are planning on spending some time in China.

1.11.1 Words we used

Again, we were on a trip in which we had pre-arranged guides and hotels. A guide would meet us at the airport/train station with a sign with our name on it, at the exit of the arrivals area, and they would have transportation arranged, and drop us at the hotel. In 10 days, we only did a few things "unescorted". When the guide was with us, they would help us in the restaurant. And took us mainly to restaurants that catered to tourists, so the menus were usually in Chinese and English (one in Beijing was Chinese, English, Russian, and Italian!)

That said the only words we learned were:

Ice – Bing (for our drinks)

Thank you – xia xia (Shia Shia).

Most of our guides introduced themselves with a western name. They'd give us their Chinese name if we asked, but we were pretty hopeless in remembering.

1.12 Notes from our friend Colleen

Our friend Colleen – June 2026

Your VPN must be turned on before arriving, because you can't turn it on after you get here. *(our experience: we turned our VPN on and off as needed, because some things did not work with VPN and some things would not work without VPN. BUT... we were using an eSim purchased through Trip.com that specifically was supposed to allow it... it was a HK-based eSim).*

Get Alipay - digital wallet. It has Didi (like Uber) on it. I also downloaded Didi & have used it a couple times when Alipay wasn't working right. In Alipay, is transport for subway, buses, etc. You put in a credit card. I'd suggest Alipay for both of you.

Amap instead of Google Maps. Nothing Google will work here. *(our experience: Google Maps worked, and sometimes was useful, but also sometimes didn't have something we were searching for (a restaurant or something), GPS navigation was off a bit sometimes. Amap, which I eventually downloaded, wasn't very helpful in my opinion. Someone else suggested Baidu, but I never got around to using it. We were on a pre-booked tour with guides picking us up and taking us where we needed to go, so really didn't do our own navigation. We did use Didi (from inside Alipay) to get to and from a restaurant. It worked.)*

Download all before you get here but you probably can't activate it unless you get an ESIM card. I got WeChat but I never got verified. Most tour companies want to use WeChat for communication. *(Our experience: Our tour company did. But a couple of the guides also had Whatsapp. I highly suggest that you ALSO get Whatsapp. Whatsapp is much more intuitive. I found We Chat weird—partially because, like Alipay, it is a super-app, which can invoke other apps.)*

We were told WhatsApp doesn't work but it does. In fact we had a couple guides who use it.

Ctrip is a Chinese company & owns Trip.com so it's the best for tours & tickets. Also, even in Beijing, very few people speak English. A good translator app or Google app will work with your VPN.

Oh & China is virtually a cashless society. We had a hard time finding an ATM! *(Our experience: We exchanged \$100 at the Shanghai Airport (and saw exchange desks at the other airports we went thru), but ONLY used it to pay tips to our guides. Later when we ran out of cash, it was not easy to find an ATM, and we paid tips using Alipay. A bit more awkward, but it worked).*