

The China Planning Edit

ELEGANT ESCAPES TRAVEL

Where to go, what fits, and what to arrange before you arrive.



A practical companion to your interactive guide. Planning guidance reviewed October 19, 2026. Entry rules, availability and operating details can change.

Start with the shape of your trip

Fewer bases. More of China.

A first visit is more satisfying when the route leaves room to experience places rather than constantly leave them. Count nights, transfers and usable days separately. A three-hour train journey does not mean only three hours of your day are committed.

7 nights: a focused introduction

Beijing 4 + Shanghai 3. Two bases with one moving day. Choose this when you want history and a contrasting city finish.

10 nights: the classic history route

Beijing 4 + Xi'an 3 + Shanghai 3. Two moving days. Best treated as a multi-city trip with arrival into Beijing and departure from Shanghai if flights support it.

14 nights: food + history

Beijing 4 + Xi'an 3 + Chengdu 4 + Shanghai 3. Three moving days; compare flight and rail schedules before assuming each leg is simple.

14 nights: scenery + cities

Beijing 4 + Zhangjiajie 4 + Shanghai 6. Two moving days, subject to practical transport connections. Shanghai time can include quieter days rather than another hotel move.

These are editorial starting points, not timed or bookable itineraries. Add international travel days outside the nights shown. Availability, mobility and connections may change the best route.

Choose places with purpose

Beijing · 4–5 nights

Imperial history + a memorable first chapter

The Forbidden City, neighborhood lanes and a separate Great Wall day.

Choose your base: Stay centrally around Wangfujing or a well-connected historic neighborhood. A distant hotel can erase the benefit of a lower room rate.

The planning detail: Keep your arrival day light. Put the Great Wall on its own day, and check Palace Museum closing days before fixing your sequence.

Season lens: Spring and autumn often suit outdoor sightseeing. Summer can be hot and wet; winter is cold and exposed at the Wall.

Xi'an · 2–3 nights

Ancient China + lively evenings

Terracotta Warriors, the city wall and a food-focused evening.

Choose your base: The central walled city works well for evening exploring; check vehicle access and the walk from the drop-off to your hotel.

The planning detail: The Terracotta Warriors are outside the center. Give that excursion a generous half day rather than squeezing it between trains.

Season lens: Spring and autumn are useful starting points. Summer heat changes the comfort of wall walks; winter requires warm layers.

Choose places with purpose

Chengdu · 3–4 nights

Food + a slower rhythm

Sichuan cooking, teahouses and an optional panda visit.

Choose your base: Choose a neighborhood that supports the evenings you want, not simply a famous hotel name. Check journey times to your actual sights.

The planning detail: Choose the panda facility before choosing transport. An early visit can help with heat and crowds, but wildlife activity is never guaranteed.

Season lens: Summer can be hot and humid. Build in indoor food or tea experiences and check conditions for any mountain side trips.

Zhangjiajie · 3–4 nights

Landscape-led travel

Forest pillars, viewpoints and a trip shaped by weather.

Choose your base: Wulingyuan suits the forest park; the city area serves Tianmen Mountain. One base is not automatically convenient for everything.

The planning detail: The forest park, Tianmen Mountain and the Grand Canyon glass bridge are separate outings. Pick priorities and allow a weather buffer.

Season lens: Cloud and rain can obscure views in any season. Wet surfaces, stairs and queues matter as much as temperature.

Choose places with purpose

Shanghai · 3–4 nights

Design, dining + a polished finish

The Bund, neighborhood walks and time for a final dinner.

Choose your base: The Bund offers riverfront atmosphere; the former French Concession area favors leafy neighborhood exploring. Match the base to your evenings.

The planning detail: A Bund hotel does not automatically mean a river-view room. Reserve the room category you actually want and check the departure airport.

Season lens: Spring and autumn are often comfortable starting points. Summer is hot and humid; severe weather can disrupt coastal travel.

Before you arrive

Passport + entry

Confirm the requirements for your own passport and exact routing before nonrefundable bookings. Ordinary U.S. passport holders should not assume a blanket tourist visa exemption. The online application process includes review and passport submission; an online status is not the visa itself.

Transit is a routing rule

The 240-hour transit exemption is conditional. Eligibility depends on nationality, approved ports, permitted areas and confirmed onward travel to a different country or region. A simple U.S.–China–U.S. return does not satisfy that third-country routing condition. Ask for an itinerary-specific check; never build a trip around a guess.

Payments that have a backup

Set up supported mobile payments, check passport verification and test your linked card before departure. Carry a second payment card and some RMB cash. Acceptance varies; do not rely on one app, one phone or one card.

Details that protect your trip

Connectivity + account access

Check lawful connectivity options with your provider. Some familiar services are restricted, and U.S. guidance warns that VPN use is illegal in most cases. Save hotel names and addresses in Chinese, tickets and essential contacts offline. Keep a workable plan for bank verification texts.

Rail booking + moving days

12306 uses real-name tickets: names and passport details must match, and you should carry the original document used to book. The published advance-sales window is 15 days including today; an agency request before that window is not an issued ticket. Verify the current rule and exact station.

Reservations + breathing room

Check timed-entry requirements and weekly closing days before assigning sightseeing dates. The Palace Museum generally closes Mondays except statutory holidays. Avoid a major prepaid visit immediately after an international arrival or a tight intercity connection.

Choose the stay, not just the name

The Peninsula Beijing

An all-suite option in Wangfujing. Compare suite layout, bedding and your preferred neighborhood before choosing.

The PuXuan, Beijing

A design-led option. Forbidden City views are tied to specific categories, including Grand Deluxe rooms; do not assume every room has that view.

Capella Shanghai, Jian Ye Li

A villa-based stay in restored shikumen buildings. Confirm the exact villa layout, stairs and access if mobility or young children affect your choice.

Make experiences fit the day

Reserve a food-focused evening on a day with a light afternoon. Ask about dietary requirements before a tasting menu. Keep a Great Wall outing separate from a full museum day. In Zhangjiajie, plan around the actual park or mountain rather than one broad destination label.

What professional planning adds

A coherent route, hotel and room-category comparisons, realistic transfers, reservation sequencing and the small details that make the itinerary usable. Elegant Escapes Travel can discuss the right planning scope for your trip. Services and fees are confirmed before you commit.

[Start a China planning inquiry](#)

Your departure checklist

- Confirm passport-specific visa or entry permission
- Check the holiday calendar for my exact travel year
- Choose bases and count usable sightseeing days
- Confirm passport names on every rail booking
- Save Chinese hotel addresses and offline documents
- Set up payment options plus a backup card and RMB
- Confirm connectivity, bank texts and device access
- Check attraction reservations and closing days
- Share transfer details, arrival times and luggage needs
- Confirm medical, mobility and dietary requirements

A note on timing

Check official holiday dates for your exact year, especially Spring Festival, May holidays and National Day travel periods. Published holiday schedules and shifted working days affect crowds and transport. Do not assume a date range is identical every year.

This guide offers planning guidance, not individual entry clearance, live schedules or a quotation. Confirm current rules with the relevant official authority.

Official references

Checked October 19, 2026. Recheck before booking and again before departure. Hotel references explain published property features, not availability, benefits or a booking recommendation for every traveler.

China Embassy: visa application

China Embassy: current visa notices

Shanghai government: transit exemption

U.S. State Department: China advisory

China government: payment guidance

China Railway: passenger FAQ

China Railway: advance ticket sales

Beijing government: attraction reservations

Hunan tourism: regional touring

The Peninsula Beijing: suites

The PuXuan: Grand Deluxe room

Capella Shanghai: accommodation