

CITY GUIDE #3: SICHUAN AND THE WEST



People going to China for the first time usually visit Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong, all good choices. However, you might be less interested in seeing big, industrial cities, or maybe have time to see somewhere else too. Sichuan province in the west of China is famous for its stunning scenery, spicy food and pandas. If you're looking for somewhere offering something other than the big-name tourist attractions, then this might be a better choice for you.

Sichuan province is less easily accessible from Haining and Huzhou than Shanghai, or even Beijing, but if you have enough time after the camps end then you can definitely do all 3 areas. I can't stress enough how important it is to have some kind of plan in mind before you book your return flights to China. If you want to do Shanghai, Beijing and Sichuan I suggest flying into Shanghai from the UK and back to the UK from Chengdu, visiting Beijing in between.

Getting there

Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan, and the best base to explore the province from. Like other large Chinese cities it has a [metro](#), but it's still under construction and doesn't cover much of the city. Finding your way around Chengdu will be an exciting challenge. You should get familiar with the bus system, and be willing to take taxis if all else fails.



Chengdu East railway station is on Line 2. Chengdu railway station (that's the North station on the map) is on Line 1. Chengdu South railway station is on Line 1. From Chengdu airport (full name is Chengdu Shuangliu International airport) there are 4 airport buses, No. 1 will take you to the city centre. There's also a high speed train from the airport to Chengdu South station.

From Shanghai

here are 3 options for travelling from Shanghai to Chengdu:

1. Overnight sleeper train- There are 4 long-distance sleeper trains from Shanghai to Chengdu each day. They take up to 40 hours to arrive in Chengdu and is not an advisable way to travel for physical or mental comfort. Tickets around £30.
2. Bullet train- The bullet train line from Shanghai to Chengdu is relatively new and makes what was a very difficult journey much more accessible. There are 3 bullet trains per day from Shanghai Hongqiao, station taking about 15 hours, and 1 from Shanghai station taking 13 hours. Some trains go to Chengdu East station and others to Chengdu station, both are on the metro so have good accessibility. Standard tickets around £70.

3. Aeroplane- Flying is the easiest way to get to Chengdu, and there are lots of flights from Shanghai Pudong and Shanghai Hongqiao airports to Chengdu every day. The journey takes about 3 hours, one-way tickets start from around £100. See the **Getting There** introduction for information on getting from Chengdu airport to the city centre.

From Beijing

There are 4 travel options from Beijing to Chengdu:

1. Overnight sleeper train- There are 4 sleeper trains each day, taking around 30 hours. All of these trains leave from Beijing West station (Lines 7 & 9) and arrive at Chengdu station (North, Line 1). Tickets around £30.
2. Fast train- There's one fast train per day from Beijing West station to Chengdu station. This is not a bullet train, but it stops at fewer places than the trains above. The journey takes 21 hours and tickets cost £30.
3. Bullet train- There's currently one bullet train per day from Beijing West station to Chengdu East station (Line 2). The train leaves at 8:23 am, arriving 14 hours later to Chengdu East at 22:36 pm. Standard tickets cost £98.
4. Aeroplane- There are lots of flights daily from Beijing Capital airport, and a few from [Beijing Nanyuan airport](#) (this is a very small military airport in Beijing with poor transport links, I suggest you get a taxi if flying from here). The flight takes 3 hours and tickets are available from about £100 one-way, flights from Beijing Nanyuan should be slightly cheaper and less likely to sell-out.

From Xi'an

Travelling from Beijing to Xi'an and then onto Chengdu is a good way of breaking up the long journey whilst keeping travel cheap. There are about 10 normal trains from Xi'an to Chengdu each day. They leave from either Xi'an station or Xi'an South station to Chengdu or Chengdu East stations. The journey takes between 10-16 hours, with tickets from as little as £13.

Tips:

- Tickets for all journeys can be booked from any train station in China. Once you've decided where to travel you can book all of your tickets at once to ensure it's doable.
- Bullet trains often sell out a few days in advance.
- There are always public transport transfers from airports to downtown areas. Do a bit of research to prevent getting into an expensive or unmarked taxi from the airport. If your accommodation is hard to get to, take public transport as close as possible before getting a taxi.

Accommodation

When I went to Sichuan I didn't stay in hostels, so I can't give any recommendations of places to stay. As with other large cities in China there are plenty of youth hostels, check out [Hostel World](#) for reviews and availability for your dates. As mentioned in the Shanghai guide, there is a growing youth hostel culture in China as young people start to travel more extensively. Most of the scenic

areas discussed below will also have youth hostels, but there might not be a lot so make sure you book early!

Things to see in Sichuan province

Most people make the journey to Sichuan in search of stunning natural scenery, or pandas. As I said earlier, Chengdu is a good base but in reality it's little different from the eastern cities (apart from the amazing spicy food, Chengdu hot pot is incredible and you've got to try it!). Before you arrive in Chengdu, have a good idea of where else you want to go in the province and plan carefully to make sure you've got accommodation and understand how to get around.

Pandas

A combination of its geographical location and investment into conservation has made Chengdu home of pandas in China. There are a few tourist traps that claim to "have" pandas (in fact, Shanghai and Beijing zoos have a few pandas each), but the best place to see and learn about them in their natural environment is the [Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding](#).



This is a responsible and educational tourist site which breeds, cares for and studies pandas. I've been and can definitely recommend it. Although it's not teeming with pandas like some promotional pictures claim, you'll definitely see a few and there's a thrill to seeing them through the trees after searching for a while that you don't get from viewing an enclosure in a zoo.

Unfortunately, the base isn't on a metro line at the moment. If you want to try public transport, get the No. 9 bus to the Zoo bus stop and then change to the No. 87 or No. 198 bus to the Panda Base bus stop. Alternatively, a taxi from Chengdu railway station should cost £3.50 or £5.30 from downtown. I suspect most taxi drivers won't want to charge this on the meter because it's outside the city limits, if you want to haggle then that's fine but you shouldn't pay more than about £12 (about 100 CNY).

Jiuzhaigou National Park

[Jiuzhaigou](#) is a stunning national park that covers 720km. It's been used in several famous Chinese films, most well-known to Westerners for some of the [fight scenes from Jet Li's Hero](#) and some other kung fu films. The national park contains an unbelievable number of natural lakes, waterfalls, mountains and wooded areas. I really can't stress how amazing this national park is, so here are some pictures:



The beauty of Jiuzhaigou comes from it being so isolated from human civilization, fantastic for nature but not so great for tourists. There are two ways to get to Jiuzhaigou from Chengdu:

1. Coach- There are 6 buses a day from Xinnanmen bus station (a short taxi journey from Chengdu city centre) to Jiuzhaigou. The journey takes about 8 hours and costs around £15.
2. Aeroplane- Jiuzhaigou has a very small airport on the top of a mountain. There are a few flights each day from Chengdu to Jiuzhaigou, however it is consistently one of the latest running routes globally as the remoteness of the Jiuzhaigou airport makes it unsafe to land at in any amount of fog or rain. If you are at all nervous about flying, take the bus instead! Flight time is about 1 hour and tickets start from £100.

You need at least one full day in Jiuzhaigou to make the most of it, two days is advisable to really enjoy the area. Student tickets for Jiuzhaigou are £22, and you can currently enter on two consecutive days with one ticket! The Jiuzhaigou area is also home to the amazing natural pools of [Huanglong](#) on the other side of the mountain, so there's definitely more than enough to keep you entertained for a few days. There is accommodation in a small village next to Jiuzhaigou national park, including a couple of youth hostels on [Hostel World](#).



Tibet

Sichuan province is right next to Tibet, so it's a good place to visit if you want to experience Tibetan culture without having to organize a separate visa to get into Tibet itself. It would also make a good starting point to go into Tibet. Youth hostels in Chengdu and Sichuan will have information on how to get a tour into Tibet, including help with getting a visa.

Yunnan province

To the south of Sichuan province is Yunnan province, another area with stunning natural beauty. There are some trains between Chengdu and Yunnan's capital Kunming, unfortunately there's still not bullet train line so the journey takes about 20 hours.

Yunnan province is home to the beautiful lakeside city of [Dali](#). The most unique large city I've seen in China, there's hardly any pollution or industry. The culture verges on Western hippy ideals, and there's lots of attention on natural and cultural preservation. If you have the chance, I definitely suggest a visit to Dali to dilute any stereotypes about China.



Not far from Dali is [Lijiang](#), another incredibly beautiful and isolated city with lots of traditional culture and craft. Lijiang is a great base to travel to [Tiger Leaping Gorge](#) where you'll find the best hiking in China. There are daily buses from Lijiang to Tiger Leaping Gorge, ask at your accommodation because this information isn't currently online. Climbing Tiger Leaping Gorge is a 2-day event, and there are some amazing traditional villages and houses on top of the mountain where tourists can stay very cheaply. If you want to do the hike then check out the [Tiger Leaping Gorge properties in the Shangri-La section of Hostel World](#).

