

CITY GUIDE: BEIJING AND THE NORTH



Everywhere you go in China has a different feel, different cuisine and even different languages. Shanghai is more modern and Westernised, Beijing is more traditionally Chinese. Most people have some reason for preferring one or the other, I'm a Beijing fan myself. Of course, the only way to make up your mind is by visiting both.

Travellers sometimes make the mistake of booking a return flight from the UK to Shanghai, thinking that they can hop over to Beijing for a few days and get back for their plane. Before travelling to China it's good to have a travel plan, and choose airports to fit the plan. My first time in China I wasted £80 changing tickets a week before flying.

Getting there

I'm sure you won't be surprised that there are good long-distance transport links in and out of China's capital. It's not quite as good as Shanghai's, but Beijing also has a [metro](#) system covering the city. It's an easy city to navigate, as long as you check which stop you need before getting on!



Beijing South railway station, where the bullet train arrives from Shanghai, is on Lines 4 & 14. Beijing railway station is on Line 2. Beijing Capital airport runs an Airport Express train to take you to the city centre. Tickets can be bought from self-service machines in English for about £3.

From Shanghai

There are 3 options for getting from Shanghai to Beijing (*Běijīng*):

1. Overnight sleeper train- There are 2 overnight trains every night from Shanghai station to Beijing South station. The train takes 12 hours and you can choose either a seat (£35), a bed (£70) or a luxury bed (£163). I don't recommend this train unless you're on a very tight budget or want the experience. Beijing South is on [metro](#) Lines 4 & 14.
2. Bullet train- There are 36 bullet trains per day between Shanghai Hongqiao station and Beijing South station. The train takes between 5 and 6 hours. Second class tickets are £63 and very comfortable in comparison to standard Chinese trains. This is the best value way to get to Beijing quickly.
3. Aeroplane- Flying from Shanghai Hongqiao airport to Beijing Capital airport takes about 2 hours. Tickets prices vary but can sometimes be picked up for about £130 return if booked early. To be honest, once you've checked in at one end and got your luggage at the other it takes almost as long as the bullet trains. There is an Airport Express train from Beijing Capital to the city centre.

Tips:

- If you're getting the bullet train, make sure you have the Chinese word for 'bullet train' written on a piece of paper or your phone. In Chinese, this is gāo tiě.
- Remember to double-check dates, times and number of tickets on the computer at the ticket window!
- You can book train journeys to and from anywhere in China at all railway ticket offices if it's within 30 days of travelling (10 days for certain local journeys).
- You can book tickets from Shanghai to Beijing at the same time as a ticket from your starting city to Shanghai, even if you're not travelling until later in the week.
- Long-distance bullet trains often sell out a few days in advance.

From Hangzhou

Hangzhou is another city that people sometimes visit after the summer camp. It's close to both Haining (40 mins by train) and Huzhou (30 mins by train). I'm won't be dedicating a guide to it, but here is the travel information to Beijing:

1. Overnight sleeper train- There are 3 overnight trains each day from Hangzhou railway station to Beijing railway station. They start from around 5pm and take 15-20 hours to reach Beijing. Tickets start from about £20 for just a seat or £40 for a simple bed. Beijing railway station is on [metro](#) Line 2. Again, I wouldn't recommend this unless you're on a very tight budget.
2. Bullet train- The bullet train runs from Hangzhou East railway station to Beijing South railway station, there are about 15 trains per day. The bullet train takes 5-6 hours to reach Beijing and tickets start from £62. Be aware that Hangzhou East is quite a way from the tourist centre, but is on [Hangzhou metro](#) Lines 1 & 4 and has good bus links.

Tips:

- If you're getting the bullet train, make sure you have the Chinese word for 'bullet train' written on a piece of paper or your phone. If you speak Chinese this is gāo tiě.
- Remember to double check dates, times and number of tickets on the computer at the ticket window!
- You can book train journeys to and from anywhere in China at all railway ticket offices as long as it's within 30 days of travelling (10 days for certain local journeys).
- You can book tickets from Hangzhou to Beijing at the same time as you book a ticket from your starting city to Hangzhou, even if you're not travelling until later in the week.
- Long-distance bullet trains often sell out a few days in advance.

Accommodation

As with Shanghai, there's a large variety of youth hostels and hotels for you to stay at in Beijing. The traditional history of the city and its sprawling nature have created space for really interesting places to stay.

You can stay on [hutongs](#) (historic backstreets), in [siheyuans](#) (traditional courtyard rooms) and even converted temples. Below is a list of a few places you might want to stay in:

- [Leo Hostel](#)- On a hutong in the heart of Beijing, this hostel has an excellent location. The facilities are also very good and there's a bar and games room where you can meet other travellers, or relax. The hostel is within walking or short metro distance of Beijing's famous spots, including the Temple of Heaven and Zhongshan Park. The only downside to this hostel is that the rooms aren't the best. Hutongs can be quite difficult places to navigate when you arrive, please make sure that you read the instructions provided by the hostel for finding them!

Closest metro station: Qianmen (Line 2)

- [Happy Dragon youth hostel](#)- Another fantastically located hutong hostel. As with Leo's, Happy Dragon is close to most of Beijing's central tourist spots, such as Tian'anmen Square and the parks. The rooms at Happy Dragon are excellent, the private rooms are as good as some hotels, so it's more expensive than Leo's. Again, hutongs are difficult to navigate so please make sure you know roughly where you're going and take down the hostel's phone number in case you get stuck!

Closest metro station: Dengshikou (Line 5)

- [Heyuan International youth hostel](#)- A converted siheyuan (you might've seen these in kung fu films!), this hostel gives a traditional "Beijingnese" experience. There's a huge amount of outside space in the courtyards, making it perfect for summer. In terms of the actual building, rooms and atmosphere this is the best hostel, but the location isn't as good as Leo's or Happy Dragon.

Closest metro station: Jishuitan (Line 2)

Tips:

- These highly rated hostels will be booked up really quickly. In fact, my favourite Beijing hostel isn't on the list because it's fully booked for summer 2017. Make sure you book early to get a decent place to stay.

Things to see

There's loads of interesting things to see in Beijing. If you want to feel like you've really seen the city I suggest planning no less than 5 days in Beijing. Top places to go in the city centre are [Tian'anmen Square](#), [Forbidden City](#), [Temple of Heaven](#), [Zhongshan Park](#), and [Mao's Mausoleum](#). Here's more detail on a couple of more complicated trips:

- [The Great Wall](#)- If you get to Beijing, you must go and visit the Great Wall. However, trips there are often more complicated to arrange than you imagine. There are 5 sections of the Great Wall accessible for tourists, with the closest an hour and a half drive from Beijing. There are no trains or busses to the Great Wall, so you will have to join a tour, hire a minibus or get a taxi. Taxis and tours are exceptionally expensive, so I suggest you talk to the staff where you are staying and try to organize a minibus from your hostel to the wall. Hostels usually organize daily trips on demand, which will always be cheaper than booking through tour companies. The easiest walking and best restoration on at the Mutianyu and Badaling sections, but they're also the busiest. For more of a challenge, and a quieter trip, check out Jiankou. There are hotels near the wall but they are usually terrible and expensive. Sleeping

on the Great Wall is discouraged because of the wall's condition and difficulties getting back to Beijing, however I've heard it's a fantastic experience if you can arrange something!

- [The Summer Palace](#)- This is my favourite place to visit in Beijing. A beautiful area with green spaces, lakes, temples and a huge palace. Some people don't visit The Summer Palace because it takes about an hour to get there on the metro, but it's well worth the visit and you can easily spend the whole afternoon here. Entrance tickets are only £6. If you go in the morning then make sure you have somewhere to take cover in the middle of the day, it can get really hot! Believe me, you won't regret making the trip.



Closest metro station: Beigongmen (Line 4). Journey takes about an hour from central Beijing.

Nightlife

In terms of nightlife, Beijing has nothing on Shanghai and some prefer to take it easy in Beijing and make sure they see everything. In April 2017, the government closed the most popular nightlife area, Sanlitun, so beware of out-of-date websites taking you there. However, there are still places that you can go for a drink and/or a dance after a day walking on the wall.

1. [Hou Hai](#)- A collection of bars clustered round a lake, Hou Hai is the most picturesque place to grab a drink in Beijing. There's a huge selection of themed bars around here from Irish pubs to shisha bars. Drinks are not cheap, so make sure you check a menu and whether you're expected to order multiple drinks to secure a table. Also, double check the kind of bar it is before entering. I've had an embarrassing experience here involving an accidental adult bar, an unreturnable round of drinks and my family!



Closest metro station: Jishuitan (Line 2), Gulou Dajie (Lines 2 & 8), Beihai North (Line 6), Xijiekou (Line 4) will all get you close to Hou Hai, it's a short walk from each station.

2. [Propaganda](#)- Apparently a controversial choice these days. When I went to this club a few years ago it was a fun, cheap, student bar with a club in the basement. However, the crowd wasn't always great. Recent online reviews say this has got worse. A good spot for a few drinks earlier on, but might get steadily worse as more people turn up!

Closest metro station: Wudaokou (Line 13)

Where else to go in the north

There are lots of other cities you can visit once you've got to the north of China. [Tianjin](#) is a half hour train ride from Beijing. The coastal [Qingdao](#) is about 6 hours on the bullet train and home to China's beer industry. [Harbin](#) is a little bit further, 7 hours on the bullet train, but is a diverse place with heavy Russian influence.

My personal choice from Beijing would be [Xi'an](#). It's easily accessible with about 10 bullet trains each day, the journey takes about 5 hours. Xi'an is home to the Terracotta Army, this another trip that it's best to ask hostels about. The city itself is fascinating and has lots of historic urban remains, with almost untouched city walls.