

LIVING IN A SMALL CITY



Faye Shaw is teaching at a state school in Lianyuan, a small city in Hunan province. She offers 10 tips about getting used to life in smaller cities in China.

1. When you first arrive in China, it's likely to be a busy time. On our first day in our city we were taken out to breakfast, had a trip round the supermarket, then lunch, with a brief respite at the apartment before we were whisked away to go swimming in a nearby lake, and were then fed again. It's tiring, but it's good to be kept busy at first, getting to know your new colleagues, and when you finally get time to yourself you'll appreciate it so much. Do put your foot down though and say no to an invite if you have planned to Skype family. And this is actually a good go to excuse should you ever have to get out of something.

2. Try to make your apartment as comfortable as possible; typically the working hours are low so you may end up spending a significant amount of time there. Take a day to get it as clean as you can and blast it with bug spray, then put up photos from home, or any other bits you've collected to make it a little bit more homely.

3. Make friends with the Chinese English teachers at your school. Invite them out to your cheap local restaurants or to play badminton. If you're struggling to find other English speakers in the area then other teachers can be an important part of your social life. They may also be able to help with some things that your go-to person might not be as quite adept at- for us it's anything to do with the internet, so one of our friends helps us to book train tickets and buy things online.

4. Learn Mandarin! Those living in a major city may find more people willing to speak to them in English, but after a while you may find you have no choice. It's easier than you might imagine not being able to speak the language at first. Pointing gets you through the basics, and locals may tolerate it for a while seeing as you are a novelty, but living in a small town is the perfect opportunity to learn. If your school doesn't offer lessons, then do an online course, (Michel Thomas is quite a good one: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Mandarin-Chinese-Beginners-Michel-Program/dp/0071547363>). The spoken language of Mandarin isn't actually too complicated and you can soon learn enough basics to use in shops, restaurants, and to explain to curious locals where you're from and why you're here. If the city you live in speaks with a strong dialect then use travelling as an opportunity to practice. Your students will always be happy to teach you new words so utilise them as well!

5. Be nice to the locals! You'll probably end up frequenting the same shops and restaurants so always be polite.

6. Travel. While you're in China try to see as much of it as possible. You don't know when you'll come back again. The big trips break up your time in China, and have smaller trips planned for the weekends to other nearby cities where you have friends from orientation, or know there are lots of other westerners. These trips are something to look forward to and make the weekdays go quicker because it gives you more to think about and organise lesson planning wise.

7. But do explore your city. Its size means you can't wander too far and get horrendously lost. You might find some interesting places, and best of all might find some new joints to eat in.

8. If you have a lot of free time, use this as an opportunity to get a hobby or develop a skill. Learning Mandarin is an obvious one. I had never set foot in a gym until I moved to China and now I go almost every day. I'm also really, really good at naming countries capital cities... It's also a good time to

binge watch a TV series and read the books you've been meaning to, (books or a Kindle are a good idea because there is a tendency for the electricity to cut out more often than we're used to at home).

9. Ignore the stares. I'm still not used to this eight months later. It's hard to comprehend coming from such a multi-racial society in the UK, but in China you may be the first foreigner somebody has ever seen. It can be annoying, imagine struggling with chopsticks or shovelling noodles in your mouth to then see a table full of people staring, and maybe even taking pictures. There's nothing you can do about it so it's best to embrace it and smile. It's a situation you're unlikely to find yourself in again. Failing that, on the days when you're feeling, basically pretty ugly and don't want to be noticed, try to ignore it.

10. Anytime it starts to get tough, remember that what you're doing is unique, and there won't be many people with the same stories or experiences you have at the end of it. A lot of people wouldn't be able to do what you're doing at all- at least that's what people keep telling me.