

VEGAN DIETS IN CHINA



Hi, I'm Eleanor and I've been living vegan in Shanghai for the past 6 months. Before I came to China I had very little knowledge about how easy or difficult it would be to adjust to the language barrier, and I really didn't know if I was going to be able to continue my vegan lifestyle when I came out here. I wanted to write this article because I was so worried about it before I came here, and it was something that almost made me decide not to come. Since being here, I've found it is a lot easier than I'd anticipated, although a little bit difficult to adjust and learn for myself the little things that make it easier. This article will (hopefully) answer some of the questions that I feel would have helped me before I came here, if I had known the answers to them.

What can I eat other than rice?

I often cook for myself at home. I make spaghetti bolognese with homemade tomato sauce and tofu, I make stew, where I just put a mushroom stock cube and loads of veggies in a pan with some tofu and it's beautiful. Most supermarkets have a huge tofu section and tofu is really easy to cook. I also eat peanuts as a snack. The vegetables here are SO cheap if you go to local markets.

If you're not a big one for cooking though, it's still easy to get food out. There are places all over the city that will make vegan food for you if you ask them. I will write more later about how to ask them to make you something. A lot of places do shredded potatoes that have been cooked in oil with vegetables and they are now one of my favourite foods, because they are just so tasty.

Don't they put meat in everything?

Short answer, no they don't. However, if you are at a restaurant and you ask them not to put meat in, you might end up with a meal with chicken or fish in. One time I asked for no meat, no fish, and no chicken, and they came out with a dish that had frog in (big sigh, don't know whether to laugh or cry). The trick is not to assume that they know what you mean when you say you're a vegan and don't eat meat. You have to be very specific about what you do and don't eat, and if they tell you they don't have anything for you to eat, you can always go to a restaurant that will. There are so many restaurants everywhere that you'll have plenty to choose from.

So, how do you ask them, if the restaurant staff speak no English and you have very limited to no Chinese, to not put any animal products in your food? You can save this photo (*main image, above*) on your phone and show it to people in the restaurant. It might be a bit of a laborious process getting them to read it all, but this is honestly the most helpful thing I've come across when trying to have a peaceful vegan life in China.

A word of warning though, restaurant staff, in Shanghai at least, are not as polite as staff at home. If they think something is funny, they will laugh in your face, and I've even experienced staff going to tell other staff and gather round and laugh at the fact that I don't eat a lot of things. It's nothing to worry about, it's just because they have not come across veganism before. They are not trying to be rude, but they just don't understand why.

Where will I get my protein from?

Soy milk is readily available in most big supermarkets, and there are a lot of big supermarkets. I found it hard to find them on Google maps, but I find that if you just wander around the area that you're living in you'll come across a huge Walmart, or Carrefour, or E-mart eventually.

One brand of soy milk you should NOT drink is VITASOY. Although this brand says it is soy milk, it has actual milk in it too, which I unpleasantly found out when it turned in my fridge after only a few days.

As I mentioned earlier, tofu is available readily in supermarkets as well, you can get soft tofu, hard tofu, even little tofu puffs that you can put in stew or stir fry.

I also try to eat peanuts every day, just to make sure I am getting enough protein in, as you can never be too careful.

For any British people like me, baked beans are available in some supermarkets, you just have to keep an eye out for them, so beans on toast is still on the menu! However, a lot of the bread in China is not vegan, as it is often sweet bread which has had milk added to it. Just shop around and see if you can find a brand that hasn't been sweetened or had milk added to it. You might have to ask a Chinese friend or teacher to help you with the ingredients.

What can I eat for breakfast?

I usually eat toast with cooked tomatoes and mushrooms which is pretty tasty, but they sell oats everywhere here, so you can have that with either water, almond milk or soy milk if you fancy it. I also found Wheatabix in an imported goods supermarket, so there are plenty of options when it comes to breakfast.

Will my school provide food for me?

If you ask them, they will. Sometimes I find that they forget about me, and on those days I just have to have rice and vegetables. In the six months, I've been here there has only been one occasion when they had nothing at all for me to eat, because they had put meat in with the tofu, the rice, and the vegetables. On this occasion, I just explained the situation to the headteacher and, although they don't usually allow teachers off campus at my school, they let me and another teacher go off campus to get food from a place nearby.



You won't go without food if you explain yourself. The chefs just tend to forget about you, which sounds harsh but when they're cooking for that

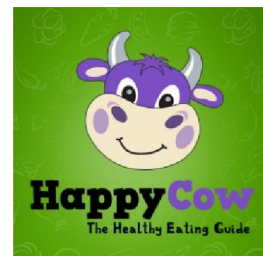
many kids, I can see why one foreigner with (to them) strange eating habits might slip their mind.

I advise taking a little snack of fruit, crisps or nuts with you if you get hungry and in case they don't have anything for you that day. I don't personally because I'm too lazy, but I think it's definitely advisable to have a bit of backup food just in case.

They also have Walkers (Lays) here, but the plain flavour is in the yellow packaging, instead of red so bear that in mind or you might just end up with a lovely meat flavoured snack.

How will I go out to eat?

There is an APP called 'Happy Cow' that is quite useful when it comes to locating vegan restaurants in the area near to you. It has a rating system, and a map to show you how to get there. It's useful too because you can also use it when you go back home. Make sure you check on-line before you go to the places though, as one time I went to a place that was listed on there, but it wasn't open any more (which was a little bit sad).



The best place to go out to eat for me personally, is Hot Pot. Hot Pot is amazing. You have a broth in the middle of the table, (which is sometimes made with meat in so you have to check first) and then you order little plates of whatever you want to put in, and you just cook it yourself. I only get vegetables but I always leave feeling so full and happy. The best hotpot place I've found is called Xiabu Xiabu, and it's a chain of restaurants, so there are branches everywhere. At this one, you have a personal hotpot so you don't have to worry about going out with non-vegan friends.

There are also lots of We Chat groups you can join that are filled with vegans from Shanghai, who often post about meeting up and going for food at various places, which is really nice because the vegan community is so friendly. They also post about events, one of which was a vegan festival in the day time where they had loads of food and drinks to try and live music.

Are there any vegan restaurants?

Surprisingly, there are quite a few vegan restaurants in Shanghai, and again, a lot of them can be found on the Happy Cow APP.

There is a restaurant called Happy Buddha on South Shaanxi Road, that sells vegan burgers and hot dogs, they even have vegan mac and cheese which is lovely. They also sell cake, so if you've a bit of a sweet tooth then never fear. You can buy whole cakes if you want to get a birthday cake or something, or just really like cake.

There's also a restaurant called Organic Kitchen, which does a vegan buffet every Wednesday and it's really good.

I went to another vegan restaurant which, is in my opinion, the best. It's called Humane Vegetarian, and it's in the River Mall at Yaohua Road station. It does the most amazing mock meat. The staff there are good at speaking English and reassured me many times that none of their products have dairy in unless the menu says otherwise. It's at B1 in the mall (the mall is huge so it might take a while to find, but it's definitely worth it!)



How will I get my B12?

My best advice on this front is to bring Vitamin tablets out with you, as you might not be able to get your hands on it in China. I brought enough with me to last the year, so I'm sorted on that front.

What about health and beauty products?

Unfortunately this is one that is a lot harder to be strict with. There are no cheap alternatives for cruelty free products in Shanghai that I have come across (like they have in Superdrug in the UK). By all means, look for yourself, but I've not had much luck so far. I did find cruelty free products in the shop underneath Happy Buddha, and at the Vegan festival I went to, but these products were out of my price range at around 200RMB for a small bottle.

I would suggest trying to bring as much out with you as you can, so that it can last as long as possible. It's heavy though, so you might have to buy extra baggage allowance on your flight out here.

Another thing you can do is get your family or friends at home to buy products for you at home and then ship them over to you. This might take a while though, and as I've not tried it myself, I don't know whether it's worth it financially.

I have not found any make up products that are vegan, but I haven't run out of make up yet, so I haven't been looking hard. From what I can tell, again, just try to bring enough out with you to last the year. A lot of cosmetic products in China have whitening products in anyway, so it's even advisable for non-vegans to stock up on moisturiser and foundation before they come out here, unless you want bleached skin.

Unfortunately, I don't have information specific to cities outside of Shanghai, but I am sure that a lot of the advice in this article can be applied to other cities. Make sure you are very specific and don't be afraid to send things back, as the chances are you're going to have to a few times.

I really hope this article has calmed some of your worries, and you feel more confident about continuing your vegan diet in China! You can do it!