China Golden Triangle & Pandas

Beijing - Xi'an - Chengdu - Shanghai - 12 days / 11 nights

Sample itinerary - Subject to availability

Travel style: scheduled

Overview

The framework we usually start from for first-time visitors: the Great Wall, the Terracotta Army, the pandas, then Shanghai - with the pace left short enough to add a stop.

The journey

The classic triangle stretched to twelve days and turned towards Sichuan, so the pace breathes and the trip ends with two days around the giant pandas of Chengdu. Built for travellers who want the icons without rushing them.

Highlights

- Great Wall at Mutianyu, cable car up and toboggan down
- Terracotta Army with a specialist guide, ahead of the coach groups
- Panda base in Chengdu before the crowds
- High-speed rail Beijing-Xi'an-Chengdu, then a short internal flight to Shanghai
- Shanghai skyline at dusk from a private rooftop

Day by day



Day 1 - Arrive Beijing

Met in the arrivals hall by your guide and driven into town, usually at the hotel by late afternoon. The first evening is left open on purpose: recover from the flight, take a slow walk, and let the guide point out the nearest food street - the queues of locals outside a stall are the most honest review it will ever get.

Meals: - - Hotel: Beijing, city centre

Day 2 - The Great Wall at Mutianyu

Early start ahead of the coaches. Cable car up, then the morning on the eastern ramparts - watchtower to watchtower, often to yourselves in the first hour. Toboggan down and a farmhouse lunch under the wall. Back in the city by mid-afternoon with time to rest; the walking route, closures and timings are confirmed shortly before the day, as noted. (walking route, closures and timings subject to confirmation)

Meals: B, L - Hotel: Beijing



Day 3 - Forbidden City, hutongs and Temple of Heaven

Into the Forbidden City as the gates open, Treasure Gallery included, before the queues build. Midday in the hutongs for a courtyard-house lunch with a local family - host and menu subject to confirmation, as noted. The afternoon turns to the Temple of Heaven: the painted hall first, then the long covered walkways where retired

locals hold court over chess, cards and open-air choirs. (host family and menu subject to confirmation)

Meals: B, L - Hotel: Beijing

Day 4 - Beijing to Xi'an by high-speed rail

Around 4h30 by bullet train southwest, the plains giving way to loess gullies outside the window. Settle in near the Bell Tower, then keep the afternoon easy inside the city wall - the drum and bell towers, and the Muslim Quarter as the bread ovens and skewer grills get going. Xi'an eats late, and its street breakfasts deserve a fresh start tomorrow.

Meals: B - Hotel: Xi'an



Day 5 - The Terracotta Army

Full morning at the pits with a specialist guide, in ahead of the coach wave: Pit One's ranks first, then the smaller excavation pits and the bronze chariots. Lunch near the site; afterwards the Ming city wall by bicycle or on foot as the heat eases and the kite flyers come out. The evening is free - the Muslim Quarter's night stalls sit steps from the hotel.

Meals: B, L - Hotel: Xi'an

Day 6 - Xi'an to Chengdu

Roughly 3h30 by rail southwest into the Sichuan basin, the landscape turning humid and green at the tunnel mouths. The afternoon is unscheduled on purpose: Chengdu does its best eating after dark, and the first evening belongs to the snack streets near the hotel - sweet-water noodles, skewers, and mild options everywhere. The guide books nothing; the city performs.

Meals: B - Hotel: Chengdu



Day 7 - Pandas at first light

Into the panda base at opening, when the animals are awake and feeding and the light is still soft - unhurried hours with the enclosures and the nursery windows. Keeper sessions are age-limited and quota-controlled, subject to confirmation as noted. The afternoon is deliberately slow: a park teahouse, covered-bowl tea, bamboo chairs, and an afternoon spent the way Chengdu actually spends its own. (keeper sessions are age-limited and quota-controlled - subject to confirmation)

Meals: B, L - Hotel: Chengdu

Day 8 - Leshan and back

Day trip to the Leshan Giant Buddha, carved into the cliff where three rivers meet: descend the stairways beside the statue when the queues allow, or take the statue in from the embankment - both are the sight. Lunch in Leshan and back to Chengdu by early evening. It remains a full day; keep dinner loose and the Sichuan gentle.

Meals: B, L - Hotel: Chengdu



Day 9 - Chengdu to Shanghai

A short internal flight east to Shanghai, at the hotel by mid-afternoon. The evening is at leisure around the Bund: the riverfront at dusk, the cross-river ferry, the skyline switched on across the water and wedding photographs in progress every few metres. Dinner can be as simple or as dressed-up as the group feels - the hotel's position makes both easy.

Meals: B - Hotel: Shanghai

Day 10 - Shanghai

Yu Garden and the old-town bazaar in the morning, steam and queues included. The afternoon goes to the French Concession on foot - plane-tree streets, shikumen lane houses, small galleries and smaller noodle shops. At dusk the day finishes above the rooftops: the private-venue skyline evening from the highlights is subject to confirmation, and once fixed it makes the trip's best photograph.

Meals: B, L - Hotel: Shanghai

Day 11 - Free day in Shanghai

Left open on purpose. Museums and the old town's silk shops for some; Suzhou's gardens and canals, an hour away by rail, for others; most simply walk, shop and graze. The guide stays reachable rather than scheduled, and the group reconvenes naturally in the evening - swap notes over dinner and pack for the flight home. A built-in rest day before the long haul.

Meals: B - Hotel: Shanghai

Day 12 - Depart

Transfer to the airport in good time for the international flight - three hours before departure keeps check-in, security and the last souvenirs unhurried. If the flight allows a final morning, the riverside promenade and one last basket of soup dumplings are within reach of the hotel. The China coordination team stays contactable until boarding.

Meals: B - Hotel: -

What makes this journey different

- Panda base early entry, before the day visitors peak.
- A full Xi'an stay - Terracotta Army, city wall and Muslim Quarter street breakfasts.
- Guilin and Yangshuo karst scenery between the icons, by road and river.
- Frequent scheduled departures run with our China delivery partners - strong value at an accessible price point.

Where you stay

Comfortable four-star hotels in each city; scenic-area accommodation near Guilin chosen for river access rather than star rating.

Food & local life

Imperial-era dishes in Beijing, Xi'an noodle and bread traditions, Sichuan tables in Chengdu (mild options standard), and Guangxi river-fish specialities in Yangshuo.

Included

+ Accommodation in the agreed grade, with breakfast
+ Private guide and private vehicle on touring days
+ All internal transport between cities as stated - high-speed rail, internal flights and transfers
+ Entrance fees for the sites named in the itinerary
+ Meals as stated (B = breakfast, L = lunch, D = dinner)
+ Drinking water in the vehicle, and a 24-hour emergency contact while the group is in China
+ One internal flight (Chengdu-Shanghai)

Not included

- International flights to and from China
- Chinese visa or visa-application costs
- Travel insurance, including medical and cancellation cover
- Meals not marked in the itinerary, drinks and personal spending
- Anything listed under subject to confirmation until it is confirmed

To be confirmed with suppliers

- panda keeper experience: age limits, daily quota and base rules
- host family and menu for the hutong lunch
- eastern rampart walking route and restoration closures
- private rooftop venue in Shanghai
- internal flight times and baggage allowance

Customisation

Every framework can be re-built around your client's dates, party size, hotel grade, pace and interests - or combined with scheduled small group departures where budget matters. Send us the brief and we will quote in writing.