

China Arrival Guide

Payments, phone, maps and safety for your first trip. Save it to your phone before you fly. It works with no signal.

Free from YourHelperInChina (hua11.com) · Written by Nick, a Guangzhou local · Updated October 2026

Stuck in China? Message Nick, in English

WhatsApp or phone: +86 13602887907

Alipay or WeChat: search +8613602887907 (with the +86) and add me as a friend.

Hours: daily 08:30 – 21:30 China Time (GMT+8). Outside those hours, leave a message and I'll reply when I'm back online.

More ways to reach me: hua11.com/contact.html

Emergency numbers in China

Ambulance 120 · Police 110 · Fire 119. I'm a local guide, not a doctor or a lawyer. In an emergency, call these numbers or your embassy or consulate first.

BEFORE YOU FLY

Your pre-trip checklist

- ☐ **Entry paperwork.** Whether you need a visa depends on your passport, and the rules change often. Check with the Chinese embassy or consulate, or the National Immigration Administration (NIA). Foreign visitors also fill in an arrival card. You can file it online before you fly, for free, through the NIA website or its 12367 app. Don't pay a third-party site for it. (I can't give visa advice.)
- ☐ **Alipay set up at home.** Verify with your passport and link your Visa or Mastercard before you fly. Your bank may text you a code, so keep your home number able to receive texts.
- ☐ **Phone data ready.** Buy and install a travel eSIM that routes your data outside China. Check that data roaming is on for that line.
- ☐ **Hotel names in Chinese.** Save each hotel's Chinese name and address as a screenshot, so you can paste it into maps or show a driver.
- ☐ **Offline basics.** Save this PDF, download the Chinese language pack in your translation app, and screenshot your bookings.
- ☐ **Pack.** Passport (needed for hotels, tickets and SIM cards), a few 50 or 100 RMB notes, and a charger that works on 220V. Sockets in China take Type A, C and I plugs.

INSTALL BEFORE YOU FLY

Apps worth having

- **Alipay** (payments, metro codes, Didi) and **WeChat** (backup payments, messaging with hotels and drivers).
- **WhatsApp** to reach Nick. It works on cellular data with a roaming eSIM, but not on hotel Wi-Fi.
- **Apple Maps**, or **AMap** (高德地图) with Chinese place names. Google Maps is often inaccurate in China.
- **Trip.com** for hotels, trains and attraction tickets in English.
- A **translation app** with the Chinese language pack downloaded for offline use.

Read on for the details: Step 1 Payments, Step 2 Internet, Step 3 Guangzhou notes, Step 4 Safety. The last page has Chinese cards you can show to a driver, a waiter or a hotel.

How to pay in China

Most everyday payments happen by scanning a QR code on your phone. Cash is still legal tender, but many small shops, food courts and self-order screens are built around QR payments. You don't need a Chinese bank account. You can link a foreign card to both Alipay and WeChat Pay. **Start with Alipay, then add WeChat Pay as a backup.**

Why Alipay first

- **English interface** (international mode).
- **Metro codes and Didi ride-hailing** open right inside the app, in English.
- **Foreign cards:** Visa and Mastercard work for most travelers. Other networks may work too. Check which cards the app accepts when you add yours.

Why add WeChat Pay too

- Some places, including many mini-programs for tickets and ordering, **only take WeChat Pay**.
- With a foreign card you can **pay businesses only** (shops, restaurants, taxis). You can't send money to a person or send red packets without a mainland bank account.
- Hotels, drivers and local contacts often prefer WeChat for messaging.

The 200 RMB rule, fees and limits

- **200 RMB or less (about \$28):** no platform fee.
- **Over 200 RMB:** a 3% platform fee on the *whole* payment, not just the part over 200. Your card issuer's foreign transaction fee may come on top. The app shows the fee before you confirm.
- **Limits:** foreign cards have per-payment and yearly limits (up to about US\$5,000 per payment and US\$50,000 per year, but your in-app limit may be lower). Check yours in the app.
- **Set up at home:** tell your bank you're traveling to China, and make sure you can receive its one-time code by text.

Paying for the metro in Guangzhou

- **Tap your card:** Guangzhou Metro accepts contactless Visa, Mastercard, American Express and JCB at all stations. Tap on gates that show your card's logo, both when you enter and when you exit, with the same card. Your bank may charge a foreign transaction fee on each tap.
- **Or use the Alipay code:** open **Transport** (出行), choose **Guangzhou**, accept the terms, and show the QR code to the gate's scanner.
- **Other cities:** metro passes are set up city by city. Switch cities in Alipay when you travel.
- **Scan vs. show:** at gates and many convenience stores, you *show* your QR code to their scanner. At food stalls and on table-ordering signs, you *scan* their printed QR code with your camera.
- **Cash backup:** carry a 50 or 100 RMB note. If a gate rejects your code or card, buy a single-ride ticket at the machine or the station window.

Never show your Alipay or WeChat payment code to a stranger, let anyone scan it "to check" it, or share your passwords or text-message codes. Your payment code is only for a real checkout. Nick never asks for your card number, passwords or codes either.

Staying connected

On a Chinese network, such as hotel Wi-Fi or a Chinese SIM card, Google, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Gmail and many international news sites are blocked. Here is how visitors get around that.

Travel eSIMs (best for most trips)

If your phone is unlocked and supports eSIM, a travel data plan bought before you fly is usually the easiest option. Many travel eSIMs use international roaming, so your data goes through servers outside mainland China (often Hong Kong or Singapore). That's why Google, WhatsApp and your usual apps work on cellular data without a VPN.

Not every "China eSIM" works this way. Some connect straight to Chinese networks, and those are blocked like a local SIM. Before you buy, check that the plan routes data outside China, or ask the seller whether Google and WhatsApp work in China.

Things to keep in mind

- **Hotel Wi-Fi is on the Chinese network.** The roaming route only applies on cellular data. Turn Wi-Fi off and use your eSIM. If you want a VPN for Wi-Fi, install it before you arrive, because VPN apps and websites are hard to reach once you're in China. I don't sell, install or recommend VPNs.
- **No Chinese (+86) number.** Most travel eSIMs are data-only. Alipay, WeChat and Didi work with a foreign number, but some local apps, such as food delivery, need a +86 number to send you a code.
- **Keep your home number reachable.** Your bank may text a one-time code to your home number. Keep that line active with SMS roaming on, or set up your bank's app for codes before you leave.
- **Maps.** Google Maps may load on a roaming eSIM, but it's often inaccurate or incomplete in China. Use Apple Maps, or the map and Didi inside Alipay.

No data? Check these first

- Is **data roaming switched on** for the eSIM line? Is the eSIM selected as your **cellular data** line?
- Is **Wi-Fi switched off**? Hotel Wi-Fi keeps blocked sites blocked.
- Restart the phone. Then check that the plan routes data outside China, as above.
- Still stuck? Message Nick with a screenshot of what you see.

Do you need a local physical SIM?

You can buy a Chinese SIM at Guangzhou Baiyun Airport or at a carrier store in the city. Bring your passport. It makes sense if you're staying more than a few weeks, make a lot of domestic calls, or need a +86 number. Data on a local SIM is on the Chinese network, so blocked sites stay blocked. A common setup for longer stays is a local SIM for the +86 number plus a roaming eSIM for everything else.

Quick rule: short trip, roaming eSIM. Long stay, or you need a +86 number, add a local SIM.

Guangzhou field notes

Language. Staff at major international hotels and airport international counters usually speak English. On the street, in taxis, in the metro, in convenience stores and neighborhood restaurants, people mostly speak Cantonese and Mandarin. People are polite and glad to help, but a translation app and a working map will make life much easier.

The hotel name trap in maps

Typing an English hotel name into AMap (高德地图) or Didi inside Alipay often returns nothing. Booking sites show an English marketing name, but Chinese map apps index the officially registered **Chinese business name**. Open your booking and look for the hotel's name and address in Chinese. If you can't find it, message the hotel. Copy the Chinese characters and paste them into the map or Didi. Save a screenshot, so you have it offline.

Six Chinese words worth recognizing

买单 <i>mǎidān</i> The bill / check, please	扫码 <i>sǎomǎ</i> Scan QR code (to order or pay)	洗手间 <i>xǐshǒujiān</i> Restroom
不要辣 <i>bú yào là</i> Not spicy / no chili	过敏 <i>guòmǐn</i> Allergy	出口 / 入口 <i>chū kǒu / rù kǒu</i> Exit / entrance

In Guangzhou you'll also hear 埋单 (maai daan in Cantonese) for "the bill." It means the same as 买单.

Getting from the airport or station

At Baiyun Airport (CAN) and Guangzhou South Railway Station, follow the official overhead signs to the **official taxi queue**, or call a Didi through Alipay. Ignore anyone who approaches you with "Taxi, taxi?" (see Step 4).

Eating well

- **Old Yuexiu and Liwan (Xiguan):** walk Wenming Road (文明路) and Enning Road (恩宁路) for double-skin milk pudding, slow-simmered herbal soups and steamed rice noodle rolls (肠粉).
- **Roast goose and BBQ pork (烧腊):** look for neighborhood shops with roast goose and char siu in the window. A set meal with rice and soup is usually around 25–40 RMB (roughly \$3.50–\$5.50), though prices change.
- **Claypot rice (煲仔饭):** cooked over a flame with a crispy crust, often served in the evening.
- **Dim sum customs:** rinsing your tableware in the hot tea is a local habit you can skip. Tapping two fingers on the table says thank you when someone pours your tea. Leave the teapot lid slightly open when you want a refill.

Shopping: wholesale markets

Guangzhou is one of China's biggest garment hubs. Locals and traders buy at much lower prices in the wholesale markets than on Beijing Road or in Tianhe malls. Booths are built for wholesale, so many have a minimum of a few pieces per style. Some will sell single pieces if you ask politely, usually at a higher price each. Prices are negotiable, opening hours vary by building, and mornings through mid-afternoon are the safest time to go.

- **Baima Garment Market (白马服装市场),** near Guangzhou Railway Station: mid-range to higher-end clothing. A good first market for visitors.
- **Shisanhang / New China Building (十三行),** Liwan: trendy, low-priced fashion. Very busy and much easier with someone who speaks Chinese.
- **Fangcun Tea Market (芳村茶叶市场):** tasting is normal and you never have to buy. Compare a few shops and never agree to an expensive "package" on the spot.

Tourist traps and mistakes to avoid

China is generally very safe in terms of personal security, and you can walk through city centers at night without safety concerns. The problems visitors run into are common tourist traps and small administrative oversights.

1. The "tea ceremony / English practice" trap

On busy pedestrian streets (Beijing Road in Guangzhou, Nanjing Road in Shanghai, Wangfujing in Beijing), friendly young people ask to practice English or to have a photo taken. After a chat, they invite you to a nearby tea tasting or art show, and you're handed an inflated bill, often well over 1,000 RMB. **Never follow strangers from tourist streets into private tea rooms or galleries.**

2. Unlicensed airport taxis ("black cabs")

Unofficial drivers at baggage claim and train stations often charge several times the meter fare. Use the official taxi queue or a Didi through Alipay.

3. Hotel foreign-guest registration

Every accommodation in China must register foreign guests with the local police within 24 hours. Some small budget inns and informal apartments can't register a foreign passport. Before you book, check the property page for a note about foreign guests, or message the hotel to confirm. Keep a backup hotel in mind for your first night.

4. Fake or unofficial ticket sellers

Tickets for big sights like the Forbidden City are real-name tickets linked to your passport, so they can't be resold on the street. Anyone selling tickets or "skip-the-line passes" near an entrance is a risk. Buy from the official site or app. Third-party platforms usually charge a markup. Also note that the Forbidden City is closed on Mondays and doesn't sell same-day tickets.

5. Strangers who want your payment code

See Step 1. Your payment code is only for a real checkout.

6. Paid "help" with your entry paperwork

Some third-party websites charge fees to fill in China's arrival card for you. The official online arrival card is free and is filed through the National Immigration Administration. If a site asks you to pay for it, it isn't the official one.

If something goes wrong, message Nick

WhatsApp or phone **+86 13602887907** · Alipay or WeChat: search **+8613602887907** · daily 08:30 – 21:30 China Time. Tell me what you see, in English. I tell you whether I can help, and what it costs, before you pay for anything. I never ask for your card number, passwords or verification codes.

Cards to show a driver, a waiter or a hotel

Hold your phone out and let people read the Chinese. Pinyin is there so you can try saying it too.

1. Take me to this address

请带我去这个地址。

Qǐng dài wǒ qù zhège dìzhǐ.

Please take me to this address. (Write or paste the Chinese name and address of your hotel or destination below.)

2. Please call this number for me

您好，请问您能帮我打这个电话吗？电话那头会说中文和英文，可以帮我们沟通。谢谢！

Nín hǎo, qǐngwèn nín néng bāng wǒ dǎ zhège diànhuà ma? Diànhuà nà tóu huì shuō Zhōngwén hé Yīngwén, kěyǐ bāng wǒmen gōutōng. Xièxie!

Hello, could you please call this number for me? The person on the phone speaks Chinese and English and can help us communicate. Thank you!

电话 Phone: +86 13602887907

3. Food allergy

我对_____过敏。请不要加，也不要含有它的油或调料。

Wǒ duì _____ guòmǐn. Qǐng bú yào jiā, yě bú yào yòng hányóu tā de yóu huò tiáoliào.

I'm allergic to _____. Please don't add it, and don't use oil or sauces that contain it.

花生 坚果 虾/蟹/海鲜 鸡蛋 牛奶 小麦/麸质 黄豆 芝麻

huāshēng · jiāngguǒ · xiā/xiè/hǎixiān · jīdàn · niúǎi · xiǎomài/fūzhì · huángdòu · zhīma

Peanut · tree nuts · shrimp/crab/seafood · egg · milk · wheat/gluten · soy · sesame. Many kitchens cook with peanut oil (花生油), so ask about it.

4. At the hotel and at the counter

请问你们可以登记外国人护照吗？

Qǐngwèn nǐmen kěyǐ dēngjì wàiguórén hùzhào ma?

Can you register a foreign passport?

可以扫码支付吗？ / 可以用现金吗？

Kěyǐ sǎomǎ zhīfù ma? / Kěyǐ yòng xiànjīn ma?

Can I pay by QR code? / Can I pay with cash?

请问洗手间在哪里？

Qǐngwèn xǐshǒujiān zài nǎlǐ?

Where is the restroom?