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The Best of China

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It's unfortunate for visitors to China that however impressive the country's sights, they are often dwarfed by the hype surrounding them. The Chinese travel industry is determined to shuttle tour groups around a limited shortlist of both truly magnificent sights and merely wannabe jaw-droppers, selling a highly imaginary picture-book China so over-promoted that it can hardly fail to disappoint. And yet beyond the world of the carefully cropped photograph, the overcharging, and the tourist trap, there is a China where life goes on regardless of your presence, not staged for your pleasure—where you, rather than just your wallet, are welcome.

While the first section below features the best and truly worthwhile of the experiences that figure prominently in the itineraries of both independent and organized trips, many of the remaining recommendations will lead you off regular routes and onto do-it-yourself itineraries to small-town alternatives, regional foods, and small guesthouses in traditional Chinese buildings—to a real China beyond both the brochure hype and the reach of other guidebooks.

1 The Best China Experiences

- **Strolling Past the Old Russian Architecture in Harbin:** At the heart of the Russian-built city, Zhōngyáng Dàjiē's unexpected cupola-topped Art Nouveau mansions are reminders of the 1920s and 1930s, when Harbin was the liveliest stop on the eastern leg of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. See chapter 4.
- **Exploring the Forbidden City's Forgotten Corners** (Běijīng): No one fails to be impressed by the grandeur of the Forbidden City's central axis, which is all most visitors see. But the quieter maze of pavilions, gardens, courtyards, and theaters to either side have the greater charm. See p. 97.
- **Cycling the City Wall in Xī'ān:** The largest city walls in China have been much pierced for modern purposes and can be tackled in

a modern way, too, with a breezy, traffic-light-free ride above the rooftops on rented bicycles and tandems. Behold views of remnants of vernacular architecture, clustered around small temples. See chapter 6.

- **Exploring Lǐjiāng's Old Town:** Built over 800 years ago and partly rebuilt after a massive 1996 earthquake, Lǐjiāng's old town, with its maze of cobblestone streets, gurgling streams, and original and reconstructed traditional Nàxī houses, is one of the most atmospheric places in China, hordes of tourists notwithstanding. Rise before the sun, then watch its golden rays filter through the gray winding streets, lighting up the dark wooden houses. See chapter 11.

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- **Walking on the Great Wall from Jinshanling to Simatai** (Běijīng): The Great Wall, winding snake-like through the mountains, was meant to be walked. This magnificent 3-hour hike follows China's greatest monument through various states of repair, from freshly restored to thoroughly crumbling, over steep peaks and gentle flats, and through patches of wilderness and rugged farmland, with over two dozen watchtowers along the way. See chapter 3.
- **Riding the Star Ferry** (Hong Kong): There's no better way to acquaint yourself with Hong Kong than to ride the cheapest cruise in China. The century-old green-and-white Star ferries weave between tugs, junks, and ocean-going vessels in a 5-minute harbor crossing. See chapter 10.
- **Cruising the Lí River** (Guilín): One of the most popular attractions in China, the cruise along the Lí River between Guilín and Yángshuò is overexposed and overpriced, but the scenery along the way, taking in gently rolling karst mountains, gigantic bamboo sprays, and quaint fishing villages, is still some of the most memorable in the world. See chapter 11.
- **Unwinding in a Sìchuān Teahouse:** One of the great pleasures of being in Sìchuān is drinking tea at a neighborhood teahouse. On any given afternoon at Qīngyáng Gōng in Chéngdū, for instance, seniors can be found playing mahjong with friends while their caged songbirds sit in nearby trees providing ambient music. As patrons eat watermelon seeds, nuts, dried squid, or beef jerky, attendants appear at regular intervals to refill their cups from copper kettles. For an afternoon of perfect relaxation, bring a friend and a deck of cards, or postcards to write, and forget about sightseeing for a few hours. See chapter 12.
- **Strolling in Shànghǎi's French Concession:** The domain of the French community up until 1949 was colonial Shànghǎi's trendiest area, and it remains full of tree-lined boulevards, colonial mansions, and numerous Art Deco masterpieces, now bundled up with phone lines and pole-hung washing. Some of the city's best shopping is also here. Just beyond the former concession is modern Shànghǎi's trendiest area, the megadevelopment of restaurants and shops known as **Xintiandi**. See chapter 8.
- **Getting Lost in the Lanes Around Běijīng's Back Lakes:** No other city in the world has anything quite like the *hútòng*, narrow lanes once "as numberless as the hairs on an ox." Now rapidly vanishing, the best-preserved *hútòng* are found around a pair of man-made lakes in the city center. This section of the city is almost the last repository of Old Běijīng's gritty, low-rise charm, dotted with tiny temples, hole-in-the-wall noodle shops, and quiet courtyard houses whose older residents can still be seen walking around in Máo suits. See the walking tour, "The Back Lakes," on p. 110.
- **Dining Táng-style at the Shǎnxī Grand Opera House** (Xī'ān): There are several dinner-theater shows in Xī'ān, but this one combines a more authentic performance by an opera company holding revolutionary credentials, with an imperial banquet of more than 20 kinds of dumplings, all excellent. For booking details, see p. 253.
- **Taking a "Peapod" Boat on Shénnóng Stream** (Yángzǐ River): Best of the Three Gorges cruise excursions, this 2-hour journey

through a long, narrow canyon takes passengers to one of the famous suspended coffins of the Bā people, then returns them downstream in a fraction of the time. Along the way, howler monkeys can sometimes be spotted swinging through the trees, small

waterfalls appear from the rocks, and swallows and other small birds flit about. The water in this small tributary is surprisingly clear, and the scenery and silence are thoroughly calming. See chapter 12.

2 The Best Small Towns

- **Xiàhé** (Gānsù): This delightful monastery town nestles in a mountain valley at an elevation of 2,900m (9,500 ft.). It's divided into two sections, primarily Huí (Muslim) and Hàn Chinese at its eastern end, changing abruptly to a Tibetan town as you climb westward to the gorgeous gilded roofs of the vast Labrang Monastery. Bent and walnut-visaged Tibetan pilgrims make you welcome on the 3km (2-mile) circuit around the monastery's perimeter. See p. 266.
- **Mǎnzhōulǐ** (Inner Mongolia): A tiny town of 50,000 on the Russian border, lost in a sea of grass, Mǎnzhōulǐ is the East-meets-Wild West frontier outpost David Caradine should have used as the backdrop to the TV series *Kung Fu*. It stands on the edge of the Hulun Buir, an emerald expanse of grassland shot through with radiant patches of wildflowers. See p. 191.
- **Dàlǐ** (Yúnnán): This home of the Bái people, a backpacker's mecca for over a decade and recently gentrified for large numbers of tourists, remains a retreat from the world. You can hike part of the impressive 19-peak Green Mountains (Cāng Shān) to the west, sail
- on the cerulean Ěr Hǎi Lake to the east, take a bike ride into any of the nearby Bái villages. See p. 628.
- **Gyantse** (Tibet): Towered over by the spectacular 13th-century fortress of **Gyantse Dzong**, this is the only substantial settlement in Tibet to retain its vernacular architecture of sturdy two- and three-story farmhouses, offering a rare and beautiful glimpse of Tibetan rural life no visitor to Tibet should miss. See p. 770.
- **Yángshuò** (Guǎngxī): Some decry it for being over-commercialized, but this small town on the Lí River, nestled in a cluster of spiny pinnacles, has retained enough of its laid-back charm to be a delightful alternative to Guilín. See p. 588.
- **Shàoxīng** (Zhèjiāng): The gondolas of this relaxed "Venice" are narrow craft with arched, black-painted woven bamboo awnings, propelled by wiry boatmen acrobatically using both hands and feet to work the oars. The inevitable rebuilding of the city center has at least showed some sense of scale and left intact a few areas of ancient housing, through which the boatmen cruise, passing under Míng-era bridges. See p. 443.

3 The Best Countryside Trips

- **Jiǔzhài Gōu** (Sìchuān): This national park has dense forest, green meadows, rivers, rapids,

ribbon lakes in various shades of blue and green, chalky shoals, and waterfalls of every kind—long and

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narrow, short and wide, terraced, rushing, and cascading. Of cultural interest are six Tibetan villages of the original nine from which this valley gets its name. See p. 697.

- **Bayan Bulak** (Xīnjiāng): This tiny Mongolian hamlet surrounded by breathtaking grasslands is reached by a spectacular journey through pine forests, waterfalls, and wildflowers. It's also close to vast **Swan Lake**, a breeding ground for elegant black swans. See p. 311.
- **Chángbái Shān** (Jílín): This long-dormant 2,600m (8,500-ft.) high volcano is home to Tiān Chí, a deep, pure, mist-enshrouded crater lake that straddles the China–North Korea border and is sacred to both Koreans and Manchurians. The northern approach to the lake, with its trail that climbs alongside the thundering Chángbái Waterfall, is best in the fall. The western approach is ideal in early summer, when its vast fields of vibrant wildflowers are in full bloom. See p. 178.
- **The Bridges of Tàishùn County** (Zhèjiāng): Within living memory, this mountainous area above Wēnzhōu had no highways other than the winding paths and steep, stone-flagged staircases slithering down slopes to cross fast-moving rivers at extraordinary “centipede bridges”—gorgeous hump-backed and often two-story constructions, with midstream shrines and topped with writhing ceramic dragons. Tàishùn still has many unmetalled roads, and as you follow the original paths through the lush countryside to find some hidden bridge, you pass water buffalo pulling ploughs. See chapter 9.
- **Lángmù Sì** (Gānsù): This Tibetan monastic center is largely unknown to Chinese tourists, and the tranquil mountain village is reminiscent of Lǐjiāng before it was “discovered.” The town is home to two major Tibetan monasteries, housing around 1,000 monks whose chanting of the scriptures may be heard throughout the day. Ramble through narrow ravines and moraine valleys crowded with wildflowers, or take a horse trek up Flower Cap Mountain to obtain stunning views as far as the holy mountain of Amnye Machen. See p. 269.
- **Amnye Machen** (Qīnghǎi): The route around this holy mountain, for a while believed to be the world's highest, must be clockwise—turning back is sacrilegious. So once you start on the 3-day horse trek, or the 7- to 10-day walk with the aid of a baggage-carrying yak, there's no turning back. But the scenery around the 6,282m (20,605-ft.) peak, and the company of sometimes entire villages of Tibetans, make the trek well worthwhile. See p. 752.
- **Around Lǐjiāng** (Yúnnán): This area offers a wide variety of countryside experiences, from riding a chairlift up to the glacier park of the magnificent, snowcapped **Jade Dragon Snow Mountain**, to hiking the sheer-sided **Tiger Leaping Gorge** while the Yángzǐ River rages below, to being rowed in a “pig-trough” boat across the pristine **Lúgū Lake**—China's answer to Lake Tahoe. See p. 636.
- **Wǔlíngyuán & Zhāngjiā Jiè** (Húnán): This scenic area is made up of three adjoining subtropical parklands, with quartzite sandstone peaks and pillars to rival Guílín's scenery. There are plentiful rare plants and insects, swarms of butterflies, a large cave with calcite deposits, and stunning views

through bamboo, pine, and oak forest. See chapter 12.

- **Everest Base Camp** (Tibet): Whether by 3-hour drive from the village of Pelbar, or by a 3- to 4-day trek from Tingri, the trip to the tented base camp (at 5,150m/16,890 ft.) or to rooms in Rongbuk Monastery (at 4,980m/16,330 ft.) offers unbeatable vistas of the world's toothiest snowcaps set against a startling cobalt sky. See chapter 13.
- **Hulun Buir Grasslands** (Inner Mongolia): Located just outside the remote border town of Mǎnzhōulǐ, the Hulun Buir's grasslands are the most pristine in China. This expanse of gentle emerald hills, perfectly punctuated with small streams and rocky outcrops, is all the more attractive for how difficult it is to reach. See chapter 4.
- **Great Wall Hike from Jīnshānlǐng to Sīmǎtái** (Héběi): This is the easiest and most complete way to experience the breadth of the Great Wall. See "Best China Experiences," above, and chapter 3.
- **The Leaning Towers of Kǎipíng** (Guǎngdōng): This county is littered with extraordinary towers called *diāolóu*—some of them

squat brick fortresses dating back to the 17th-century; others bizarre, alien watchtowers mostly built by Chinese who traveled out through the treaty ports and returned wealthy enough to build fortified residences. Up to nine stories high, the towers sprout turrets and loopholes, balconies and cupolas, borrowed from half-understood European styles encountered anywhere from Macau to Manila. *Diāolóu* tower over almost every village and rice paddy in the county. See chapter 9.

- **Rice Terraces** (Yúnnán, Guǎngxī): Some of southwest China's most spectacular vistas are of its terraced rice fields—golden yellow in the fall and sparkling silver in the spring—painstakingly hewn over hundreds of years by various minority groups. See chapter 11.
- **Huáng Shān** (Ānhuī): The most famous mountain in China for scenic beauty, actually a group of 72 peaks, is known for its sea of clouds, strangely shaped rocks, unusual pine trees, and bubbling hot springs—four features that have inspired countless painters and poets for over 1,500 years. See p. 388.

4 The Best Mansions & Palaces

- **Wáng Jiā Dàyuàn** (Píngyáo): It took a century for this vast mansion to grow to 123 courtyards and 1,118 houses; the decorative lattice screens and windows, shaped openings between rooms and courtyards, and undulating walls are exquisite examples of Míng and Qīng vernacular architecture. See p. 223.
- **Potala Palace** (Lhasa): A monastery, a palace, and a prison, the Potala symbolizes the fusion of secular and religious power in Tibet in a vast, slab-sided, red and white agglomeration on a hilltop dominating central Lhasa. Despite the ruination of its surroundings, there's no more haunting sight within China's modern political boundaries, and nothing else which speaks so clearly of the otherness of Tibet. See p. 761.
- **The Forbidden City** (Běijīng): Preeminent among the surviving complexes of ancient buildings in China, the former residence of the emperors needs far more time

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than most tours give it. See “The Best China Experiences,” earlier in this chapter, and p. 97.

- **Wěi Huáng Gōng** (Chángchūn): Also known as the Puppet Emperor’s Palace and best known in the west as the setting for part of Bernardo Bertolucci’s film, *The Last Emperor*, this impressive palace complex, opened to visitors after an admirable full-scale restoration in 2002, was the residence of Henry Pūyí, China’s last emperor and subsequently puppet ruler of Japanese-controlled Manchukuo. See p. 170.
- **Prince Gōng’s Mansion** (Běijīng): With a garden of elaborate rockeries and peaceful covered pathways framed by the sloping tile roofs and brightly painted beams of its surrounding buildings, this stunning complex is the most impressive imperial residence in Běijīng, outside of the Forbidden City. See p. 109.
- **Qíáo Jiǎ Dàyuàn** (Píngyáo): One of the loveliest of the several merchant family mansions of this area, this was the set for the film *Raise the Red Lantern*. With six large courtyards, 313 houses, and fine craftsmanship of lattices, lintels, carvings, wooden balustrades, and chimneys throughout, the 18th-century manse takes hours to explore. See p. 222.
- **Bìshǔ Shānzhuāng** (Chéngdé): The imperial summer resort and its surrounding Eight Outer Temples form another of the greatest ancient architectural complexes of China, arranged around a green valley. The temples have bizarre borrowings from a number of minority architectural traditions, and both temples and palace have 18th-century replicas of buildings of which the country is most proud. See p. 130.

5 The Best Museums

- **Hong Kong Museum of History** (Hong Kong): A life-size diorama of a Neolithic settlement, replicas of fishing boats and traditional houses, ethnic clothing, displays of colorful festivals, and whole streets of old shop frontages with their interiors removed piece by piece and rebuilt here, make this the most entertaining museum in China. See p. 551.
- **Shānxī Lìshǐ Bówùguǎn** (Xī’ān): If you can visit only one museum in China, this should be it. An unrivalled collection of treasures, many demonstrating Xī’ān’s international contacts via the Silk Routes, is more professionally displayed here than almost anywhere else in the mainland. See p. 244.
- **Unit 731 Museum** (Harbin): During World War II, Japan set up a secret facility where it tested biological weapons on thousands of live human subjects. This museum, built on what remains of the Unit 731 testing grounds, presents a gloomy but vivid account of one of the war’s most obscure and shocking atrocities. See p. 186.
- **Sānxīng Duī Bówùguǎn** (Chéngdū): An attractive and well-laid-out museum housing items from a group of sacrificial pits, this is one of the most significant finds in 20th-century China. See p. 682.
- **Shànghǎi Bówùguǎn** (Shànghǎi): In terms of display and English labeling, this ultra-modern museum (lights fade as you approach cabinets), loaded with stunning antiquities, is China’s most modern and inviting. See p. 427.

- **Nánjīng Dàtúshā Jìniànguǎn** (Nánjīng): The deaths of over 300,000 Chinese, killed over the course of 6 weeks during the 1937 Japanese invasion of Nánjīng, are commemorated here. Photographs and artifacts documenting the Japanese onslaught, the atrocities suffered, and the aftermath, are sobering, grisly, and shockingly effective. See p. 368.
- **Wáng Āntíng Xiǎoxiǎo Zhǎnlǎnguǎn** (Chéngdū): Located in a narrow lane west of the main town square, this small, one-of-a-kind museum contains tens of thousands of Máo pins, Cultural Revolution memorabilia, and vintage photographs. The museum occupies the living room of its devoted proprietor. See p. 681.

6 The Best Temples

- **Kǒng Miào** (Qūfǔ): One of China's greatest classical architectural complexes, this spectacular temple in Confucius's home town is the largest and most magnificent of the hundreds of temples around the country honoring the sage. Greatly enlarged since it was originally built in 478 B.C., it has a series of gates and buildings aligned on a north-south axis and decorated with imperial flourishes like yellow-tiled roofs and dragon-entwined pillars. See p. 346.
- **Màijī Shān Shíkū** (Tiānshuǐ): This haystack-shaped mountain of soft red rock, covered in brilliant green foliage, is China's prettiest cave-temple site, and the only one where statuary has been added to the cave walls rather than carved out of them. Views from the stairs and walkways lacing the cliffs are spectacular (including those straight down). See p. 258.
- **Zhèngdìng** (Héběi): Neither the most spectacular nor the best known of temple groups, but within a short walking distance of each other, are some of China's oldest surviving unimproved temple buildings (one of which houses a 30m/90-ft.) high multi-armed bronze of Guānyīn), and a collection of ancient pagodas so varied it's almost as if they've been set out specifically to surprise you. See p. 139.
- **Jokhang Temple** (Lhasa): The spiritual heart of Tibetan Buddhism, this temple should be visited twice: once to see the intense devotion of pilgrims circumnavigating it by prostrating themselves repeatedly across cobblestones made slippery by centuries of burning yak butter lamps, and rubbing their foreheads against the statuary in the dim, smoky interior; and a second time in the afternoon for a closer look at the ancient images they venerate. See p. 760.
- **Temple of Heaven** (Běijīng): The circular Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, one of the finest achievements of Míng architecture, is almost as well-known as a symbol of Běijīng as the Tiān'ān Mén, but the three-tiered sacrificial altar of plain stone is thought by many to be the most sublime object of beauty in China. See p. 105.
- **Mògāo Shíkū** (Dūnhuáng): The biggest, best-preserved, and most significant site of Buddhist statuary and frescoes in all China, with the broadest historical range, the Mògāo Caves, in their tranquil desert setting, should be your choice if you can see only one cave site. See p. 279.
- **Yōnghé Gōng** (Běijīng): After the Qīng Yōngzhèng emperor moved into the Forbidden City, his personal residence was converted into

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this temple. Several impressive incense burners are scattered throughout the golden-roofed complex, also known as the Lama Temple. A 20m (60-ft.) tall sandalwood statue of Maitreya, the future Buddha, fills the last building. See p. 107.

- **Bǎodǐng Shān** (Dàzú): Artistically among the subtlest and most sophisticated of China's Buddhist grottoes, these Sòng dynasty caves are situated around a horseshoe-shaped cove, at the center of which is lush forest. See p. 709.
- **Lóngmén Shíkū** (Luòyáng): About 2,300 caves and niches

with more than 2,800 inscriptions and over 100,000 Buddhist statues are spread across two hills and 400 years in time. See p. 325.

- **Yúngǎng Shíkū** (Shānxī): These are the earliest Buddhist caves carved in China. Most were hollowed out over a 65-year period between 460 and 524. Viewed as a whole, they show a movement from Indian and Central Asian artistic models to greater reliance on Chinese traditions. See p. 198.

See also Chéngdē's Bishǔ Shānzhuāng and its Eight Outer Temples, in "The Best Mansions & Palaces," above.

7 The Best Markets

- **Kashgar Sunday Bazaar:** The bazaar is now split in two and not quite what it was, but the livestock part of the market, southeast of town, is still well worth visiting. Bearded Uighur men in traditional blue and white garb sharpen their knives and trim their sheep, small boys wearing Inter Milan strip gorge themselves on Hami melons, Kyrgyz in dark fur hats pick up and drop dozens of lambs to test their weight and meatiness before settling deals with vigorous and protracted handshakes. See p. 302.

- **Pānjiāyuán Jiùhuò Shìchǎng** (Běijīng): A vast outdoor market held on weekends, Pānjiāyuán teems with what is very likely the world's best selection of things Chinese: row upon row of everything from reproduction Míng furniture to minority clothing to Máo memorabilia. Most of the antiques are fakes, although experts have made some surprising finds in the bedlam. See p. 122.

- **Kāifēng Night Market** (Kāifēng): Visitors overnight in Kāifēng just so they can attend this famous and

festive night market whose mainstay is the wide variety of delicious local snacks on offer, such as five-spice roasted bread, sesame soup, and spicy lamb kabob. See p. 334.

- **Khotan Sunday Bazaar:** This is everything the Kashgar Market once was. Jewelers pore over gemstones, blacksmiths busy themselves shoeing horses and repairing farm tools, blanket makers beat cotton balls, rat-poison sellers proudly demonstrate the efficacy of their products—the sights and smells are overwhelming. Don't miss the horse-riding enclosure towards the north side of the melée, where buyers test the road-worthiness of both beast and attached cart, with frequent spectacular tumbles. See p. 308.

- **Temple Street Night Market** (Hong Kong): Prices here are outrageous compared to those at China's other markets, but the scene at this night market is very entertaining, especially the fortune-tellers and street-side performers singing Chinese opera. See p. 560.

8 The Best Festivals

For dates and contact information, see also the “China Calendar of Events” on p. 27.

- **Saka Dawa**, held throughout the Tibetan world, celebrates the Buddha passing away and thus attaining nirvana. It's held on the 8th to 15th days of the fourth lunar month, with religious dancing, mass chanting and “sunning the Buddha”—the public display of giant sanctified silk portraits. See chapter 13.
- **Ice & Snow Festival** (Harbin): Not so much a festival as an extended citywide exhibition, Harbin's Ice and Snow Festival runs from December to March every year and is without doubt the northeast's top winter attraction. The festival centers around hundreds of elaborate ice and snow sculptures, frosty reproductions of everything from *Tiān'ān Mén* to Elvis. See chapter 4.
- **Sānyuè Jié** (Dǎlǐ): This once-religious festival celebrated by the Bǎi people in mid-April/early May now features 5 days and nights of considerably more secular singing, dancing, wrestling, horse-racing, and large-scale trading. This is a rare opportunity to see not only the Bǎi, but a number of Yúnnán's other minorities, gathering together in one of the most beautiful and serene settings in the foothills of the Green Mountains (Cāng Shān). See chapter 11.
- **Kurban Bairam** (Kashgar): Celebrations are held in Muslim communities across China, but in Kashgar they involve feats of tightrope-walking in the main square and wild dancing outside the Idkah Mosque. The 4-day festival is held 70 days after the breaking of the fast of Ramadan, on the 10th day of the 12th month (Dhul-Hijjah) in the Islamic calendar. It falls on February 1, 2004, and annually shifts backwards by 11 days. See chapter 2.
- **Miáo New Year Festival** (Xijiang, Lángdē): The Miáo celebrate many festivals, but one of the biggest blowouts is the occasion of the Miáo New Year, usually around December. The celebration features songs, dances, bullfights, and *lúshēng* competitions, not to mention Miáo women gorgeously bedecked in silver headdresses engaging in various courtship rituals. See chapter 11.
- **Wéifāng International Kite Festival**: Thousands of kites take to the skies for 2 days in April in one of the world's largest kite-flying galas. You can simply watch, of course, but the Chinese claim the kite as their invention, so there's no better time and place to pick up the end of the string yourself. See chapter 7.

9 The Best Up-and-Coming Destinations

- **Yǒngdìng** (Fújiàn): The magnificent multistory circular **fortresses** of the Hakka minority, known as “earth buildings” and home to hundreds (usually all with the same family name), are the largest and most striking examples of surviving domestic architecture in China. See chapter 9.
- **Yùshù** (Qīnghǎi): Khampa areas within the Tibet “Autonomous Regions” are closed to the individual traveler, but here these fiercely proud Tibetan warriors trade in a traditional market town beneath a stern gray and red monastery. See chapter 13.

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- **Jiànshuǐ** (Yúnnán): This small Hàn-dynasty town boasts the third largest Confucian temple in the country, some exquisitely restored traditional Míng and Qīng dynasty residences, and an unusual collection of old-fashioned wells. Jiànshuǐ is also the gateway to some of the most beautiful terrace fields in the country. See chapter 11.
- **Yánbiān** (Jílín): A lush, achingly pretty hilly region perched on China's border with North Korea, parts of which have only recently been opened to tourism, Yánbiān is home to the largest population of ethnic Koreans outside the peninsula itself. Independent-minded travelers have the opportunity to explore one of the few truly bicultural societies in China. See chapter 4.
- **Téngchōng** (Yúnnán): This charming overlooked town on the ancient southern Silk Route is poised to become an important tourist destination in the coming years as tourist authorities gear up to promote travel along the ancient trade route. For now, Téngchōng is still a laid-back, friendly town with a surprisingly large number of attractions that include hot springs, volcanoes, waterfalls, temples, and some absolutely delightful traditional Chinese villages just outside it. See chapter 11.
- **Píngyáo** (Shānxī): Chinese tourists have discovered Píngyáo, but the numbers of Western tourists are still relatively few at what is one of the best-preserved Míng and Qīng towns in China. An intact Míng city wall surrounds clusters of elegant high-walled courtyard residences, some of which are also guesthouses. See chapter 5.
- **Quánzhōu** (Fújiàn): An overnight ferry from Hong Kong, a few days in Xiàmén, and a short bus trip to Quánzhōu combine to make the perfect less-traveled start to a China trip. Quánzhōu's rebuilt city center is more to scale than most, with hints of traditional style. The laid-back town has plenty of interest to see, at a human scale and pace. See chapter 9.

10 The Best Local Accommodations

- **Dūnhuáng Shānzhuāng** (Dūnhuáng): The finest hotel on the Silk Routes, with views of the Míngshā Shān Dunes, this imposing fortress is surrounded by stylishly renovated courtyard houses. See p. 280.
- **Lǚsōng Yuán Bīnguǎn**: Of all Běijīng's traditional courtyard-style hotels, this former imperial residence has the most character, recalling the opulence of China's "feudal" era, but with a more lived-in feel than you'll find elsewhere. See p. 86.
- **Lóngmén Guībīn Lóu** (Harbin): Built by the Russian-controlled Chinese Eastern Railroad in 1901, the Lóngmén has served as a hospital, the Russian Embassy, and a cheap hostel for migrant workers. In the 1930s and 1940s, it was part of the illustrious Japanese-owned Yamato Hotel chain. The Chinese Railway Bureau renovated the building in 1996, preserving the original Russian woodwork and restoring much of its turn-of-the-20th-century atmosphere. Rooms are palatial and decorated with period furniture. See p. 188.
- **Zhūjiā Huāyuán Kèzhàn** (Jiànshuǐ): A stay at this charming

guesthouse, which occupies several wings of the exquisitely restored, 214-room, 42-courtyard Qīng dynasty mansion, is a delightful step back in time. See p. 667.

- **Sèmǎn Bīnguǎn** (Kashgar): Set on the grounds of the former Russian Consulate, this has merely two government-issued stars and poor service, but standard rooms and suites in the original and beautifully decorated consulate buildings, with their high ceilings and dramatic oil paintings, can be bargained down to low prices. This is the nearest you'll get to experiencing some "Great Game" ambience. See p. 303.

- **Déjū Yuán & Tiān Yuán Kuí** (Píngyáo): These are the top two courtyard guesthouses in a town full of ancient architecture. The Déjū Yuán has rooms decorated with calligraphy and furnished with dark wooden Míng style tables and chairs and traditional heated brick beds. The Tiān Yuán Kuí also offers occasional opera performances on hot summer nights when the guesthouse is full

and the performers available. See p. 224.

- **Former Consulates** (Wēnzhōu and Xiàmén): Wēnzhōu's **Jiāngxīn Liáoyǎngyuàn** is a former British Consulate from 1894, set peacefully on an offshore island. There are only six very oddly shaped rooms, the best of which is vast and high-ceilinged with a balcony with a view across the water. Xiàmén's **Jīnquán Bīnguǎn** is more upmarket, a recently converted former U.S. Consulate from 1928 on the island of Gǔlàng Yǔ, with views towards Xiàmén proper. Both former consulates allow modern visitors a whiff of the treaty port past. See p. 466 and 495.

The **Peace Hotel**, the best of Shànghǎi's historic hotels—built in 1929 as the Cathay Hotel—features a lobby that is an Art Deco masterpiece, and splendid public areas. Rooms have been modernized, but the service has lapsed. Go for lunch or a drink. See also **Yǒngdīng** in "The Best Up-and-Coming Destinations," above. A night in a several-hundred-year-old earthen fortress is as authentic as it gets, but don't expect luxuries (or even necessities).

11 The Best Buys

- **Chén Lú** (Shǎnxī): Seventeen small factories turn out different styles of pottery, and their show-rooms have starting prices so low you'll volunteer to pay more. You can also buy original works in the houses of individual artisans. See chapter 6.
- **Hù Xiàn** (Shǎnxī): There's no better place than the source to buy these farmers' paintings with their brilliant colors and scenes of village fairs and peasants harvesting crops or herding geese. See chapter 6.
- **Zhōng Běi Jiùhuò Shìchǎng** (Xī'ān): There are fakes aplenty, as everywhere else, but this bustling antiques market, fed by continuous new discoveries in the surrounding plain, is geared to locals, so asking prices are not as absurd as elsewhere. See chapter 6.
- **Jatson School** (Lhasa): High-quality Tibetan handicrafts, including traditional Tibetan clothing, paper, incense, mandala *thangkas*, yak-hide boots, ceramic dolls, door hangings, bags, and cowboy hats, are all made on-site,

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and sold at very fair prices. Your money goes to support poor, orphaned, and children with disabilities. See chapter 13.

- **Name-Brand Clothing & Accessories:** Adequate to near-perfect imitations of items by North Face, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Gucci, Polo, and just about any other expensive label you can think of can be had for a song at several markets in China, especially at Běijīng's Silk Street and Hóngqiáo markets, Shànghǎi's Xiāngyáng Lù market, and Shēnzhèn's Luó Hú Commercial City (not quite as cheaply). See chapters 3, 8, and 9.
- **Khawachen Carpet and Wool Handicraft Co. Ltd** (Lhasa): This U.S.–Tibetan factory's carpets have rich but tasteful shades woven into delightful traditional patterns. Carpets can also be made to order. You'll pay much less here

than in New York or even Běijīng. See chapter 13.

- **Qípáo:** Tailors in Běijīng and Shànghǎi will cut a custom-fit *qípáo*, the tight-fitting traditional dress better known by its Cantonese name *cheongsam*, sometimes for hundreds of dollars less than in Hong Kong and the West. A quality tailored dress, lined with silk and finished with handmade buttons, typically costs between \$100 and \$200. Slightly less fancy versions go for as little as \$50. Custom-embroidered fabrics are also available very cheaply. See chapters 3 and 8.

Note: Pearls, antiques, jade, jewelry in general, and objets d'art are fakes or are not worth the asking price (usually both). Unless you are an expert or are happy to have a fake, do not buy these things.

12 The Best Chinese Restaurants

Turn to each chapter's full restaurant reviews for contact information and details of dishes, and use the characters given in "Appendix B: The Chinese Menu" to place your orders. It's easy.

- **Hàn Kèjiā** (Běijīng): This restaurant's stylized mix of stone floors and rough-hewn wood tables, set against the backdrop of one of Běijīng's lakes, is enough to make it noteworthy. But it is the food—a delicate interpretation of little-known Hakka cuisine—that places it among the best restaurants in the country. The sweet "secret recipe" paper-wrapped fish ranks among the most divine seafood entrees anywhere. See p. 95.
- **Shìjì Xīng** (Turpan): Set in grape fields north of town, with a melt-water stream flowing by, this Uighur restaurant is a favorite

among locals for carousing late into the night, and features dancers from all over Xīnjiāng. See p. 287.

- **Bāguó Bùyī** (Chéngdū): The artfully rustic surroundings are a pleasure in themselves, but this restaurant is a particular favorite with locals for its delicious local fare made with fresh, natural ingredients. See p. 684.
- **Wúmǎ'ěrhóng Měishí Chéng** (Kuşa): This is the most illustrious restaurant in this charming oasis town. Cheerful Uighur staff serve the tastiest, most filling kabobs in the Xīnjiāng region. See p. 297.
- **Mayke Ame** (Lhasa): Set in the former pleasure palace of Dalai Lama VI, who preferred skirts to sutras, this is the Tibetan capital's most charming restaurant. See p. 764.

- **Dōngfāng Jiǎozi Wǎng** (Harbin): This always-busy restaurant on Harbin's celebrated Zhōngyáng Dàjiě produces some of the best *jiǎozi* anywhere, served the way they should be: generously filled and unadorned, with a mouth-watering, make-it-yourself vinegar-and-garlic dipping sauce. See p. 189.
- **Běijīng Dàdǒng Kǎoyā Diàn** (Běijīng): When done properly, roast duck, cooked in a wood-fired oven then sliced and rolled in pancakes with plum sauce and green onion, is one of the finest dining experiences in China. This place does it best. See p. 91.
- **Lǎo Sūn Jiā** (Xī'ān): This is the best place to sample Xī'ān's most celebrated dish, *yángróu pàomó*, a self-assembled lamb stew with coriander, chili, and garlic, thickened with bread you crumble yourself. See p. 252.
- **Míng Yuán** (Nánjīng): Few people have heard of Dīngshān dishes, but locals will tell you that this unusual cuisine, created in Nánjīng over 20 years ago, is guaranteed to refresh and delight even the most jaded of palates with crab steeped for a week in wine, honey, and spices; sautéed Yúnnán mushroom with crab paste; and the restaurant's signature hand-made fish noodles. See p. 371.
- **Cūchá Dànfan** (Wúhàn): Among the specialties, which rely on local produce, are dishes served in bamboo stalks and hollowed-out melons and squashes. This is a chance to try Húnán dishes with a slight bite, as well as dishes rarely seen in restaurants in the West. See p. 722.
- **Kǒng Yǐjǐ Jiǔlóu** (Běijīng): Decorated to look like a traditional study and named for the drunken scholar-hero of a short story by father of modern Chinese literature Lǚ Xùn, the atmospheric Kǒng Yǐjǐ serves wonderfully executed dishes from the Yangtze River delta where Lǚ was born. See p. 96.
- **Cháng Mǔ Dì Yóumiàn Dà Wáng** (Hohhot): This bustling restaurant, a mix of Mongolian *ger* and prettified farmhouse, specializes in Mongolian pastas and pancakes that you're not likely to find anywhere at home. Try husked-wheat pancakes filled with carrots, potato, and cabbage, rolled up and sliced like Mediterranean levant sandwiches. See p. 209.
- **Luk Yu Tea House** (Hong Kong): First opened in 1933, this is the city's most famous remaining tea-house, a wonderful Art Deco-era Cantonese restaurant with ceiling fans, spittoons, individual wooden booths for couples, marble tabletops, and stained-glass windows. It's one of the best places to try Chinese teas, but it's most famous for its dim sum, served from 7am to 5:30pm. See p. 547.
- **Shāng Palace** (Hángzhōu): This restaurant is expensive, but it deserves its place here as the purveyor of simply the best of the region's delicate Huáiyáng cuisine, using modern techniques to turn "beggar's chicken" into a feast fit for an emperor, and in equally imperial surroundings. See p. 524.