

The Best of China

With a landmass of almost 10 million sq. km (4 million sq. miles), plus a further 5 million sq. km (2 million sq. miles) of water, no other single country can even come close to offering such a vast choice of destinations as the unimaginable vastness that is currently known as China.

The world's foremost authority on China, Harvard professor John King Fairbank, declared that "our libraries are filled with writers who know all about China, but could not see how much they did not know." We concede that we have barely scratched the surface, especially when we consider that human history in this area stretches back almost two million years, much further than the much-vaunted "5,000 years of Chinese civilization," yet even this is hardly a smudge on the far longer geologic record. In many parts, the People's Republic has only recently been opened to visitors, and so we have only had a few decades to unlock some of this enormous realm's secrets. While we certainly do not claim to have uncovered everything, we have been truly inspired by this huge treasure house, and have included here what we have been able to find out so far, starting with what we think is some of China's very best.

1 The Best China Experiences

- **Strolling Past the Old Russian Architecture in Harbin:** At the heart of the Russian-built city, Zhōngyāng 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 5.
- **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 chapter 4.
- **Dining on Shànghǎi's Bund:** China's most famous waterfront street of colonial architecture, the Bund, has recently become the toniest address in town, with the redevelopment of a few formerly stodgy old buildings into some of the city's finest shopping and dining establishments. These rooftop restaurants serve up unsurpassed views of Shànghǎi, old and new. See chapter 9.
- **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 7.
- **Exploring Lì Jiāng's Old Town:** Built over 800 years ago and partly rebuilt after a massive 1996 earthquake, Lì Jiāng'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 12.

- **Walking on the Great Wall from Jīnshānlǐng to Sīmǎtái** (Běijīng): The Great Wall, winding snakelike 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 4.
- **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 11.
- **Cruising the Lí River** (Guǐlín): One of the most popular attractions in China, the cruise along the Lí River between Guǐlín and Yángshuò is overexposed and overpriced, but the scenery along the way is still some of the most memorable in the world. The tongue of the Lí River flicks lazily past islands as it courses through serried hills like dragon's teeth. See chapter 12.
- **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 13.

- **Gazing at the Sea of Terra-Cotta Warriors at the Tomb of Qín Shǐ Huáng** (Xī'ān): The first sight of the tomb, situated in a hangarlike building, leaves many visitors stunned and awed. This destination is at the top of almost every visitor's list, and it does not disappoint. See p. 257.
- **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 one of modern Shànghǎi's trendiest areas, the mega-development of restaurants and shops known as **Xīn Tiāndì**. See chapter 9.
- **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. 121.

- **Strolling the Old Neighborhoods of Kashgar:** The dusty alleys, colorful residential doorways, and mud-brick walls remain as they have been for decades. Kids with henna-dyed feet and fingernails will approach you speaking a few words of Chinese and English; men with donkey carts trudge down narrow passages; bakers arrange round large slabs of nan in coal ovens built into the ground. Spending hours watching how citizens of Kashgar live is one of the most rewarding experiences along the Silk Road. See p. 307.

- **Taking a “Peapod” Boat on Shén-nóng 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 13.

2 The Best Small Towns

- **Xià Hé (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 chapter 7.
- **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 Carradine 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. 204.
- **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 Ēr Hǎi Lake to the east, and take a bike ride into any of the nearby Bái villages. See p. 630.

- **Dūnhuáng (Gānsù):** Surrounded by barren deserts, this oasis town beckons with sand dunes, camel treks, and the Buddhist cave art of Mògāo. Its tree-lined streets and backpacker cafes give it a laid-back feeling that is hard to find elsewhere in China. See p. 284.
- **Yángshuò (Guǎngxī):** Some decry it for being overcommercialized, 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 Guílín. Fortunately, rather than being over-developed, Yángshuò is at the cutting edge of Chinese tourism and features some of its best innovations as well as some of its worst. See p. 594.
- **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. 461.

3 The Best Countryside Trips

- **Jiǔzhài Gōu** (Sichuān): 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 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. 692.
- **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. 305.
- **Cháng Bái Shān** (Jílín): This long-dormant 2,600m-high (8,500-ft.) 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. 189.
- **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”—photogenic hump-backed and often two-story constructions, with mid-stream shrines and topped with writhing ceramic dragons. Tàishùn still has many unpaved roads, and as you follow the original paths through the lush countryside to find some hidden bridge, you pass water buffalo pulling plows. See p. 480.
- **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. 277.
- **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. 748.
- **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. 649.
- **Karakul Lake** (Xīnjiāng): On the highway between Kashgar and Tashkurgan lie stark, jagged mountains surrounded by a pristine lake at an altitude over 4,000m (13,120 ft.). Come here for some peace and quiet and a change of scenery from the dusty Uighur towns along the Silk Road. See p. 315.
 - **Wǔ Líng Yuán & Zhāng Jiā 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 p. 726.
 - **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 14.
 - **Hulun Buir Grasslands** (Inner Mongolia): Located just outside the remote border town of Mǎnzhōuli, 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 5.
 - **Eastern Qīng Tombs** (Héběi): This rural tomb complex offers more to the visitor than the better-known Míng Tombs, but sees a fraction of the visitors. Undeniably difficult to reach, the effort is rewarded many times over by the Qiánlóng emperor’s breathtakingly beautiful tomb chamber, **Yù Líng**, and an (unintentionally) drop-dead funny photo exhibit of the much-maligned dowager empress Cǐxī. See chapter 4.
 - **The Leaning Towers of Kǎipíng** (Guǎngdōng): This county is littered with extraordinary towers called *diāolóu*—some of them squat brick fortresses dating from 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 10.
 - **Rice Terraces** (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 12.
 - **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. 643.

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. 236.
- **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 that speaks so clearly of the otherness of Tibet. See p. 757.
- **The Forbidden City** (Běijīng): Preeminent among the surviving complexes of ancient buildings in China, the former residence of the emperors needs far more time than most tours give it. See "The Best China Experiences," earlier in this chapter, and p. 107.
- **Wěi Huángōng** (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 Pǔyí, China's last emperor and subsequently puppet ruler of Japanese-controlled Manchukuo. See p. 180.
- **Wáng Jiā Dàyuàn** (Héběi): With investment from a Běijīng entrepreneur, part of a traditional courtyard mansion which once housed Shānhǎiguān's wealthiest burgher has been magnificently restored and is expected to expand farther south. Set in the heart of the old walled town, it also boasts a folk museum crammed with curiosities. Four of the rooms are available for overnight stays, although you'll have to be out before the next day's visitors arrive. See p. 146.
- **Qiáo Jiā 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. 235.
- **Bìshǔ Shānzhūāng** (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. 140.

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. 562.
- **Shǎnxī Lìshǐ Bówùguǎn** (Xī'ān): If you can visit only one museum in

China, this should be it. An unrivaled collection of treasures, many demonstrating Xi'an's international contacts via the Silk Routes, is more professionally displayed here than almost anywhere else in the mainland. See p. 256.

- **Sānxíng 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. 674.
- **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. 439.
- **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. 381.

- **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 Mao pins, Cultural Revolution memorabilia, and vintage photographs. The museum occupies the living room of its devoted proprietor. See p. 675.
- **Maritime Museum (Hǎiwài Jiāotōng Shǐ Bówùguǎn)** (Quánzhōu): Hidden away on the second floor, visitors will find a unique collection of painstakingly hand-crafted, scale models that trace the entire history of Chinese seafaring from its very beginnings. See p. 497.

6 The Best Temples

- **Kǒng Miào** (Qūfú): One of China's greatest classical architectural complexes, this spectacular temple in Confucius's hometown 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. 358.
- **Màiji 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. 266.

- **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-high/90-ft. 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. 147.
- **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. 757.

- **Mògāo Caves** (Dūnhuáng): Here is the biggest, best-preserved, and most significant site of Buddhist statuary and frescoes in all of China—and one of the best-curated attractions, too. The guides, who all have bachelor's degrees, are excellent, sometimes going well beyond the script. See p. 287.
- **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. 115.
- **Dragon Gate Grottoes** (Luòyáng): The grottoes go well beyond just the identity of a temple, as these caves are considered one of the best sculptural treasure troves in China. The site comprises a mind-boggling 2,300 caves and niches with more than 2,800 inscriptions and over 100,000 Buddhist statues. See p. 335.
- **Sakya Monastery (Sàjiā Sì)** (Sakya): The massive 35m (115-ft.) windowless gray walls of Lhakhang Chenmo tower above the village and fields on the southern bank of the Trum Chu. Completed in 1274, this monastery fort was largely funded by Kublai Khan, and unlike the older temples of north Sakya, it survived the Cultural Revolution. See p. 772.
- **Yōnghé Gōng** (Běijīng): After the Qīng Yōngzhèng emperor moved into the Forbidden City, his personal residence was converted into this temple. Several impressive incense burners are scattered throughout the golden-roofed complex, also known as the Lama Temple. A 20m-tall (60-ft.) sandalwood statue of Maitreya, the future Buddha, fills the last building. See p. 118.
- **Bǎodīng 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. 703.
- **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. 210.

See also Chéngdé'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. 312.

- **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. 132.
- **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. 345.
- **Khotan Sunday Market:** 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 toward the north side of the melee, where buyers test the road-worthiness of both beast and attached cart, with frequent spectacular tumbles. See p. 318.

- **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. 571.
- **Dōngjiādù Fabric Market** (Shànghǎi): Bales and bales of fabric (silk, cotton, linen, wool, and cashmere) are sold here at ridiculously low prices. Many stalls have their own in-house tailors who can stitch you a suit, or anything else you want, at rates that are less than half what you'd pay at retail outlets. See p. 449.
- **Hǎizhū Square Wholesale Market** (Guǎngzhōu): With so many markets to choose from in a city whose very *raison d'être* is commerce, it is difficult to know which one to choose first. This is one of the most colorful. If it was made in China then there is a very good chance that you will find it around here somewhere. See p. 524.

8 The Best Festivals

For dates and contact information, see also the "China Calendar of Events" on p. 30.

- **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 14.
- **Ice and 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 5.

- **Sānyuè Jié** (Dàlǐ): 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 Bái, but a number of Yún-nán'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 12.

- **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 Iddah 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 January 13, 2006, and annually shifts backward by 12 days. See chapter 2.

- **Miáo New Year Festival** (Xijiang, Lángdè): 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 12.

9 The Best Up-and-Coming Destinations

- **Yǒngdīng** (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 10.
- **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 14.
- **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 5.
- **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 12.

- **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 6.
- **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. The laid-back town has plenty of interest to see, at a human scale and pace. See chapter 10.

- **Níngbō** (Zhèjiāng): With a new tourist office and lots of colorful brochures, the authorities here are determined to make Níngbō more than a container port. Here is an

opportunity to discover new beaches, forests, temples, and mountain ranges that many Chinese have never even heard of. See chapter 10.

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. 289.
- **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. 95.
- **Lóngmén Guǐbīn 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. 200.
- **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. 313.
- **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. 236.
- **Yè Bǎihé Bīnguǎn (Night Lily Guest House)** (Gǔlǎng Yù): One of the latest, and certainly one of the most successful conversions of early colonial architecture. A fascinating combination of Qīng dynasty furniture and modern interior-design styles, although the antique beds have been causing a few problems for very tall foreign visitors whom they were definitely not designed for in the first place. See p. 512.
- **The Peninsula** (Hong Kong): Built in 1928 and retaining the atmosphere of its colonial past, The Peninsula has long been the grand old hotel of Hong Kong. It boasts an ornate lobby popular for people-watching, some of Hong Kong's best restaurants, and gorgeous rooms with sweeping views of Victoria Harbour. See p. 548.
- **Yángshuò Shèngdì (Mountain Retreat)** (Yángshuò): Situated in one of the area's most picturesque settings, this small hotel is a world away from the usual trials and tribulations of traveling in China. This is the kind of place where you will want to

extend your holiday indefinitely. See p. 602.

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 **Yǒngdìng** 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 showrooms have starting prices so low you'll volunteer to pay more. You can also buy original works in the houses of individual artisans. See p. 263.
 - **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 p. 258.
 - **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, and sold at very fair prices. Your money goes to support poor, orphaned, and children with disabilities. See p. 760.
 - **Name-Brand Clothing & Accessories:** Adequate to near-perfect imitations of items by North Face, Louis Vuitton, Prada, 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 4, 9, and 10.
 - **Factory 798** (Běijīng): We left 798 out of the first edition, reasoning that an ad hoc gathering of designers, painters, and sculptors selling avant-garde art in a former military complex wasn't something the regime would tolerate for long. We were wrong. Market rents are now charged, so don't expect to pick up a bargain, but the Dàshānzǐ art district makes for a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon of gallery- and cafe-hopping. See p. 119.
 - **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 p. 760.
 - **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. See chapters 4 and 9.
- 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.