

The Best of Beijing

The best of Beijing is a study in contrasts—from the ritzy elegance of restaurants located in the snazziest of hotels to the humble yet lively fare available in local dining rooms. We give you a healthy dose of traditional Beijing life, which is rapidly disappearing as the city is bulldozed away to make room for tall skyscrapers. We recommend that you take in a local punk band to get a glimpse of the capital's vibrant youth culture, but also visit an antiquated Peking opera hall, and fraternize with seniors at the city's numerous gardens and parks. For all its big-city development, Beijing's lakes and parks provide solace—a place where you can go to ponder the contradictions that make up this fascinating capital.

1 The Most Unforgettable Beijing Experiences

- **Strolling around the Back Lakes:** You'll find everything around these man-made lakes, from historic courtyard homes, to tranquil spots, to amusing entertainment. Speedo-clad elders dive into the lake year-round—including the chilly winter months—and ducks congregate on a small man-made island on the western end of the lake. Visit around sunset for a particularly romantic experience, and stroll to the nearby restaurants and bars for dinner and drinks. See p. 158.
- **Sinking Your Teeth into Crisp, Juicy Peking Duck at Made in China:** A hotel restaurant it is, but this is the best place to enjoy the capital's most famous dish, and the dining room—set in the middle of an open kitchen—is the best place to see chefs perform their magic. See p. 87.
- **Investigating the Northeast Corner of the Forbidden City:** Away from the main north-south axis on which the former palace's grander halls stand, there's a more human scale similar to that of the rapidly disappearing *hutong* beyond the palace's walls, although with much greater luxury. Venturing far from the main arteries is well worth the effort—you'll find treasures like the ornate theater building where the Empress Dowager Cixi watched her favorite operas on demand and the well in which she ended the life of her nephew's favorite concubine. See p. 126.
- **Praying for a Smog-Free Day with the Monks at Beijing Temples:** Many of the capital's temples have once again become genuine places of worship, as well as tourist attractions. The **Yonghe Gong** (p. 137) has an active and approachable community of Tibetan monks (although under careful scrutiny by the authorities), while the leafy **Fayuan Si** (p. 134) houses amicable Chinese Buddhist monks in Beijing's most venerable

temple. **Baiyun Guan** (p. 133) is the Daoist alternative, where blue-frocked monks wear their hair in the rarely seen traditional manner—long and tied in a bun at the top of the head.

- **Bargaining for Fakes: At Panjiayuan Jiuhuo Shichang**, the first asking prices for foreigners are at least 10 to 15 times those asked of Chinese, but don't let that deter you from visiting. This weekend market has the city's best selection of bric-a-brac, including row upon crowded row of calligraphy, jewelry, ceramics, teapots, ethnic clothing, Buddha statues, paper lanterns, Cultural Revolution memorabilia, army belts, little wooden boxes, Ming- and Qing-style furniture, old pipes, opium scales, painted human skulls, and more conventional souvenirs. A whole other genre of fakes can be found at the Ritan Office Building, where samples of Marc Jacobs jackets and Diane von Furstenberg dresses cram the racks. See p. 171 and p. 177 for both markets.
- **Haggling for Tea at Malian Dao:** If you're serious about tea, this is the only place to go. Malian Dao may not have all the tea in China, but it does have over a mile of shops hawking tea leaves and their paraphernalia. Most shops are run by the extended families of tea growers from Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, and you might rate this friendly street as the highlight of your visit. See p. 183.
- **Attending Beijing Opera at the Zhengyici Xilou:** The Zhengyici, last of a handful of theaters that supported Beijing Opera from its beginnings, only occasionally hosts performances and is under constant threat of permanent closure. But the scarcity of performances only makes the experience of watching the colorful operas in this intimate, traditionally decorated space

all the more precious. **Tip:** Ask your hotel staff to call and ask about performance schedules and tickets. See p. 187.

- **Unwinding at a Traditional Teahouse:** Several quiet teahouses offer you the chance to remove yourself temporarily from the tourist rush. The teahouse in the **Sanwei Bookstore** (p. 190) offers live traditional music with its bottomless cups of jasmine. For a little extra, **The Teahouse of Family Fu** (p. 196) in the Back Lakes area brews your oolong (*wulong*) in the Chinese version of the tea ceremony. Both teahouses are furnished with replica Ming dynasty tables and chairs and make ideal spots for reading, writing, or doing absolutely nothing.
- **Seeing a Band at Yugong Yishan:** The owners of the now defunct Loup Chante have created what Beijing lacked for years: an atmospheric venue showcasing an eclectic range of musical styles, from Mongolian mouth music to acid jazz. It's stuffy, smoky, difficult to find, and run by serious and talented musicians. See appendix A for more about Beijing music.
- **Hiking along the Great Wall at Jiankou:** Our favorite part of the wall is so untouristed that there isn't even a ticket booth—or a tacky postcard tout—in sight. The 5-hour hike meanders along a vertigo-inducing stretch of wall that isn't for the faint of heart—but it's an unforgettable experience. See p. 205.
- **Bicycling through the Hutong Neighborhoods:** We can't get enough of the *hutong*. After taking a stroll, hop on a bike for a completely different experience in the capital's old neighborhoods. See p. 147.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **The Peninsula Beijing** (Jinyu Hutong 8; ☎ **866/382-8388** or 010/8516-2888): Despite the huge boom in five-star hotels in the capital, The Peninsula still manages to stay on top with its constant upgrades and its impeccable English-speaking staff. There's an understated elegance to the entire complex, complete with a luxury shopping arcade and afternoon tea in the lobby. Wireless Internet and marble bathtubs with television screens anchored in front of them are standout amenities in nearly all rooms. See p. 65.
- **Raffles Beijing** (Dong Chang'an Jie 1; ☎ **800/768-9009** [toll-free from U.S.] or 010/6526-3388):

Located in a historic European building just steps away from Forbidden City, the distinguished Raffles has an old-world charm that few hotels in the capital can match. See p. 65.

- **Hotel Côté Cour S.L.** (Yanyue Hutong 70; ☎ **010/6512-8020**): A glut of new courtyard hotels has opened in the capital's old neighborhoods, but none matches the elegance and style of Hotel Côté Cour S.L., with rooms decorated in Chinese antiques and green and wood tones. The public spaces, like an elegant lounge and a spacious center patio, are perfect for unwinding after a hectic day touring the city. See p. 68.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Gu Xiang 20** (Nanluogu Xiang 20; ☎ **010/6400-5566**): This lovely three-star hotel is smack in the middle of one of old Beijing's gentrifying neighborhoods. The stylish rooms are decorated with Chinese antiques and flat-screen TVs, and third-floor rooms have picturesque views of the *hutong*. See p. 69.
- **Far East Youth Hostel** (Tieshu Xie Jie 113; ☎ **010/5195-8561**, ext. 3118): The best budget option in Beijing is located at the center of one of the city's most interesting *hutong*

neighborhoods, only a 10-minute walk from both the Heping Men and Qian Men metro stops. It has clean, nicely renovated three-star rooms at unbeatable rates—you can get down to ¥200 (\$27/£13) with a little bargaining). See p. 76.

- **Feiyang Bilingual** (Xuanwu Men Xi Dajie 10; ☎ **010/6317-1116**): This is the most “hotel-like” branch of Youth Hostelling International in Beijing. Dorms have in-room bathroom and brand-new floors, and beds are only ¥60 (\$8/£4). See p. 76.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **Made in China** (Dong Chang'an Jie 1 [inside Grand Hyatt]; ☎ **010/8518-1234**): It's not just the Peking duck that's fantastic—it's nearly everything on the menu, from spicy Sichuan-style string beans to the passion fruit and pear champagne sorbet. We visit this lively restaurant regularly, sharing the experience with

out-of-town guests or simply enjoying it selfishly on our own. See p. 87.

- **Chuan Jing Ban Canting** (Gongyuan Tou Tiao 5; ☎ **010/6512-2277**): Sichuan food has conquered the capital, and this ubiquitous cuisine, loved by Beijingers and Sichuanese alike, is best enjoyed in this chaotic, crowded restaurant

owned by the Sichuan Provincial Government. It will also be one of the cheapest meals you can have in Beijing, with the price of an entire meal averaging no more than ¥40 (\$5.35/£2.65) per person. See p. 90.

- **Cepe** (Jincheengfang Dong Jie 1 [inside Ritz Carlton, Financial Street] ☎ 010/6601-6666): Unexpectedly, there is flawless northern Italian cuisine in the Middle Kingdom. This lovely restaurant, in the Ritz Carlton, Financial Street, has its own

mushroom humidor for its imported Italian fungi and makes its pasta fresh daily. See p. 103.

- **Whampoa Club Beijing** (Jin Rong Jie Jia 23; ☎010/8808-8828): Ambitious Hong Kong-born chef Jereme Leung brings his inventive cuisine to the capital after opening a successful first branch of the restaurant in Shanghai. Leung has tamed Northern cuisine to a level of refinement never tasted before.

5 The Best Things to Do for Free (or Almost)

- **Go Bohemian at Factory 798:** We left Factory 798 out of the previous edition, reasoning that an ad hoc gathering of performance artists, painters, and sculptors in a former military complex wasn't something the regime would tolerate. We were wrong. Market rents are now charged, so don't expect to pick up a bargain, but there's no need to make a purchase: The Dashanzi art district makes for a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon of gallery and cafe hopping. See p. 144.
- **Pay Your Respects to the Chairman:** While Jung Chang's *Mao: The Untold Story* subjects the Great Helmsman to a Cultural Revolution-style

denunciation, you'll find no trace of such disrespect inside **Chairman Mao's Mausoleum**, set to the south side of Tian'an Men Square. While there are souvenir vendors, this is far from the kitsch experience you may expect. See p. 121.

- **Exercise with Elders:** At the break of dawn each day, retired Beijingers flock to numerous local parks. Aside from *taijiquan* and ballroom dancing, you may spy master calligraphers practicing their art with oversize sponge-tipped brushes, or amateur troupes performing Beijing Opera or revolutionary airs from the 1950s. See section 6 of chapter 7, "Parks & Gardens."