

The 2 Idiots Travel Blog

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Preparing for a Visit to China with Your Family

As one of our top three places in the world, we find China to be one most unique cultural experiences we've had as well as an incredible food experience. The Chinese love children and are extremely family-friendly, and at every turn, you will be surrounded by ancient history. We just cannot stress enough that your family should visit China.

But before you visit, you will need to prepare. While China is technologically advanced, it can feel as if you are in a time warp — very few people speak English, you cannot just call a taxi, and all the social media tools, apps and email you typically use, including Uber, are not available to you in China.

From the basics you'll need to enter the country, which has stricter visa requirements, to some things may be unusual for your family to encounter, here's how you can prepare for your trip to China.

Get a Visa

The very first thing you must do is apply for a visa to China. Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan are not the same as Mainland China. There are 50 or more nationalities that can enter Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan without a visa, staying as long as 180 days. However, to visit Mainland China, you will need a visa. (Unless you are from Japan, Singapore or Brunei.)

To obtain a visa is a complicated process with very detailed application forms. Passports must be valid for six months from your trip and you need two blank pages within it. You should apply 30 to 60 days before your departure date, completing a Visa Application Form and providing a photo. It will take a couple of weeks to receive your visa. Different countries have different requirements, including length of time they are allowed to visit China. Check with your Chinese consulate or embassy for more detailed information.

Install a VPN

The Chinese have many restrictions on the Internet. All of the social networks you are used to, such as Facebook and Instagram, are banned in China. Google is banned so Gmail will not work. Google Maps doesn't work well in China. (They are often incorrect, especially the traffic updates.)

So before you go to China, install a VPN (virtual private network). A VPN enables you connect into a different network. Install this on your phone and when you connect through Wi-Fi in China, it will connect you through a different country and bypass China and its restrictions.

We used [Better Net](#) and [Super VPN](#); we recommend installing two VPNs just in case one doesn't work. Be sure to test them before you go.

Although we prepared by having a VPN, we were surprised to discover our T-Mobile plan worked very well in China. We actually had access to Facebook, Instagram and Gmail when we connected through regular 3G/4G data and lost access as soon as we connected to Chinese Wi-Fi (without VPN). While our data plan worked wonders, this doesn't mean the same will happen with your data plan.

Create an Email Account

We often use email to connect to various tour companies and stay abreast of our travel details. With Google banned in China, our Gmail accounts were not accessible on wifi. If you don't already have an email through an approved provider, sign up for one before your trip. Yahoo, for example, works in China and is a free email account.

Download Google Translate

Download the Google Translate app and then download the offline Mandarin dictionary – you will need it! Most people in China do not speak English. The menus will be in Chinese, signage will be in Chinese... you will need some help figuring things out and the app will be a lifesaver.

Google Translate will allow you to hold your phone over a menu or sign and it will translate what it is saying. You can also speak English into the phone and it will translate the language to Mandarin for the people you are interacting with, and when they reply in Mandarin, it will translate it to English for you. You can now actually have a conversation with people, including taxi drivers.

Download Apps and Videos

Aside of Google Translate, you may want to have access to tools you currently use that may be blocked by China's Great Firewall. YouTube is not available in China, for example, so have download videos you can use offline to keep your children busy while dining or on a walking tour.

Uber also does not work in China; they use something called Didi. It required we use a Chinese credit card to set up an account at the time we tried it, but we have since learned there are some American credit cards that will go through. Download the app and test it before you go.

Bring Masks

Pollution is a serious problem in China. We were extremely lucky in that it was windy during our visit and blew away much of the pollution, but this is not always the case. Smog from exhaust emissions cause the air pollution in Beijing and other cities, where people need to wear masks to help them breathe when outdoors. You won't see a lot of kids outside because of the pollution.

A box of surgical masks will work just fine for adults, and is very cheap. Buy a box before you go. For children, however, masks could gap if they are too large. Search for child-sized masks, such as the [Comfysail cotton face masks](#) that comes in multiple colors and have cute cartoons.

Prepare Financially

The Chinese are incredibly advanced when it comes to technology, especially payments. Many people use chat apps like WeChat and Alipay to pay for things. Download these apps and be sure they work on your phone and with your credit cards before you travel. WeChat is only available in Chinese, but does have a translate option to assist you as you use it.

Credit cards, while accepted in some places, aren't always accepted in places China and you may be required to pay by mobile phone. If you are not able to use the payment technology, you will need a lot of cash for China. We were trying to exchange dollars into yuan and it was a nightmare. You literally have to go into a bank and fill out a ton of paperwork on why you are exchanging money and they ask you all kinds of questions before they will do the exchange.

You can also use your ATM, although the machines will not offer you an English option and you will need your Google Translate app to help you. There are exchange companies within the airports, who may have tellers who speak some English and can assist you, as well.

While In China

The two biggest concerns people have about China is worrying about data security and eating. Knowing ahead of time what we encountered can help you be prepared for your own journey.

1. It is recommended that travelers do not access important or secure documents and apps while in China, as the Chinese government routinely monitors the Internet. Do not access sensitive documents, or use your VPN if you must access them.
2. As for eating in China, yes, it can be daunting, as you do not always know what things are on a menu. There are chains like McDonald's in Beijing, but they are different. There isn't coffee, for example. (They have tea.) Milk is harder to find. It was difficult to find things for Aarav because the basic foods you may offer, like chicken nuggets, are likely not going to be available. Have enough snacks for your child, if you do not think your child is brave enough to try new foods.
3. A third concern that most don't have until they encounter it is for the first time is how much the Chinese love children. They love them so much they may reach out and touch

your child, or take photos of your children. It can be confusing or seem weird when you initially encounter it, but it's friendly and people are often polite about it. Our son was a little celebrity in China!

Despite all of the preparation we list, the Chinese are amazing. They absolutely go out of their way to make you comfortable, even if you cannot speak the same language. Don't let our preparations deter you; they are meant to prepare you for what will be a fantastic experience. China is a beautiful country filled with warm, welcoming people, and your family will remember the visit forever.