First · 24

Hours in China

The practical playbook for your first day in China — payments set up before you fly, a script for landing, the train system decoded, and pocket pages for Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an. Written by Chinese locals who read the travel complaints and answered every one.

Part 1 — Before you fly: the 48-hour checklist

Part 2 — Landing: immigration, cash, taxis, first night

Part 3 — 12306: China's high-speed rail, decoded

Part 4 — City pocket pages: Beijing · Shanghai · Xi'an

Part 5 — When things go wrong: payments, emergencies, phrases

Policies here are verified as of November 2026 — and updated free when they change.

START HERE

What this guide is — and is not

China's travel infrastructure changed more in five years than most countries change in twenty. Cash is nearly gone, taxis are summoned by app, and the biggest friction you will face is not the language — it is the **first 24 hours**, before your apps work and your instincts have recalibrated. This guide covers exactly that window, and nothing else.

What you get

- **A payment system that works before you land.** Set up in 30 minutes at home, tested, with the fee rules explained.
- **A landing script.** Immigration, SIM, cash, taxi to the hotel, the check-in desk — in order, with what to say.
- **The train system decoded.** 12306 booking with a foreign passport, security, and which platform channel to use.
- **Pocket pages for Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an.** Airport transfers, metro fares, what to order, what to book ahead.

What you will not find

- **No sightseeing essays.** Other guides do that better. We give you one line on what to book ahead, not five pages of history.
- **No filler screenshots that expire.** App layouts change every few months; every step here works even if buttons move, because we describe the logic, not the pixels.

> **The version promise.** Entry rules, payment fees and booking windows change. This edition is verified as of **November 2026**. When a policy changes, we publish an updated edition — buyers of any version get the new files free, for life. The version is printed on the cover and on the changelog page at the back.

Contents

01 Before you fly — the 48-hour checklist p. 4

02 Landing — the first 24 hours, in script p. 10

03 12306 — high-speed rail without the panic p. 15

04 City pocket pages — Beijing · Shanghai · Xi'an p. 18

05 When things go wrong p. 25

Alipay, step by step

Alipay is China's default wallet: it pays street vendors, metro gates, trains, convenience stores and restaurant QR codes. This is the one app that must work the moment you land.

01 **Download "Alipay" from your app store.**
This is the international version — it accepts foreign phone numbers and runs in English. Do not confuse it with the China-mainland-only build.

02 **Sign up with your home phone number.**
+44, +1, +61 all fine. Verify by SMS while you still have signal at home.

03 **Add your card: Profile → Bank cards → Add.**
Visa, Mastercard, Amex, JCB, Discover and Diners all work. UnionPay-issued foreign cards work too. Enter the card exactly as your bank shows it.

04 **Verify the card.**
Alipay makes a tiny refundable verification charge. Your bank may text you a fraud warning — approve it, it is you.

05 **Set your 6-digit payment PIN.**
You will type this dozens of times a day. Pick one you can find by feel.

06 **Test it from home.**
Buy anything tiny through Alipay's own mini-programs (or send a RMB 0.10 red packet to a friend) to confirm the pipeline works. A failed binding discovered in China is a bad hour; discovered at home it is a bad minute.

The fee rules (the part other guides get wrong)

All prices in this guide are in **renminbi (RMB)** — Chinese yuan (元), marked CNY on tickets and receipts. Rough anchor: **RMB 7 ≈ US$1**, so RMB 200 ≈ $29. Note that the ¥ symbol is shared with the Japanese yen — prices in Japan are a different currency entirely.

TRANSACTION	FEE ON FOREIGN CARDS	WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU
RMB 200 or under	**None — free**	Meals, metro, coffee, entry tickets. The overwhelming majority of daily transactions.
Over RMB 200	3% of the amount	Hotels, big train fares, big shopping days. Either absorb it or pay those by cash/card at the desk.

> **Strategy that costs you nothing:** let Alipay handle the many small payments (all free), and keep a little cash for the few large ones. See page 6 for the cash plan.