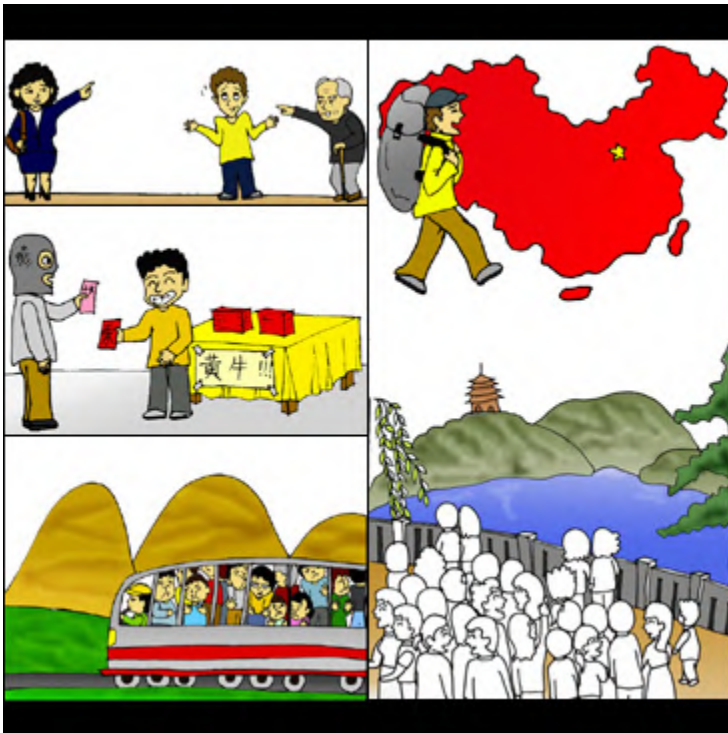


# CHINA TRAVEL SECRETS



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# INTRODUCTION



Are you looking for a way to get through China safer, faster, and with less hassle? Maybe you are trying to avoid many of the mistakes that have been made before you? If so, you've come to the right place. This mini-series will show you how to travel China better.

While none of this advice is really secret, it will stand you in good stead if you don't already know it, and it might still be a secret to you.

If you have anything to add (and your advice and experiences are extremely welcome), just go to the front page of this series at [China Travel Secrets](#).



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# 3 WAYS TO TRAVEL CHINA FASTER



If you've ever been frustrated by the amount of time it takes to get from one place to another in China, read this. Although the methods below won't make time go by more quickly, they may help shave off a couple of hours here and there.

## 1. TAKE FAST TRAINS & BUSES

In the old days in China, there were two types of travel options by bus or train: slow and deadly slow. Nowadays, it's more like this:

- Deadly Slow
- Slow
- Fast
- Super Sonic

While not all options are available everywhere, it's good to be aware that the first two are available everywhere, and hence to try to avoid them if at all possible.

One easy way to tell if you are getting on a fast bus or train is the letter before the bus or train number. A **“K” almost always means you will be on a fast train or bus**, and a **“D” usually means the train is almost super sonic**.

As an added bonus, the quick train or bus is usually much less crowded, has more comfortable seating, and costs just a little more.

One last bit of advice: You are going to be in for a long, long ride if you don't get on a direct bus. Like twice as long. Always confirm that the bus you are getting on is a direct one (值班-zhíbān-direct route), or at the very least one with stops limited to once every several hours.

## 2. THINK ABOUT BUYING “YELLOW COW” TICKETS

Scams abound in China - and you always have to be careful not to buy into one. If you've ever seen someone selling tickets outside of or right at the entrance to a train station in China, you might think this is one such scam.

From personal experience, though, these guys or girls are virtually always selling real tickets that have been bought up in advance to scalp at a small profit. In Chinese, such tickets are often given the nickname 黄牛 (*huánɡniú*-Yellow Cow). I've never bought a fake scalped ticket.

What's the benefit in buying these types of tickets? Many times the earliest train you can get a ticket through “proper channels” doesn't leave for 3-4 hours, or even the next day. Part of this is because many of the tickets have already been bought up - the train station might even hand these tickets under the table to scalpers as the time to departure draws near.



“Yellow Cow” tickets often have decent seats on fast trains at a minimal markup (as an example, the “Yellow Cow” ticket counter / war zone at the Suzhou train station sells tickets to Shanghai departing in 30-45 minutes with a 5 RMB mark-up - even with the [scary Chinese police](#) all standing around I still go for this kind of ticket) - just check to make sure that the ticket **looks and feels** real. That way you’ll get on the train even if your ticket is fake - you just won’t have a seat.

### 3. BUY DEPARTURE TICKETS WHEN YOU ARRIVE

This is pretty obvious advice, but it is often helpful to buy your departure tickets from a particular place the moment you arrive there. This forces a bit of extra planning and perhaps sacrifice (*after all, who wouldn’t want to spend an extra three days in Lijiang in Yunnan province after learning how relaxing it is?*), but means you don’t end up having to stick around an extra unexpected day or three if you can’t get 黄牛 tickets because of particularly strict train station management.



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# HOW TO ASK FOR DIRECTIONS IN CHINA



Have you ever asked for directions in China and ended up confused, in the wrong place, or frustrated by 'the point'?

It can be a challenge getting the right directions in China - and this is true whether you are asking in English or Mandarin. Luckily, it's not impossible, and this post will show you ways to seek out the right directions in the shortest amount of time.

## WHERE TO ASK FOR DIRECTIONS IN CHINA

The best place to ask for directions in China is a guide book or Google - the next best place is a hotel. After this, the options diminish rapidly - a policeman makes a decent guide, but a guard often does not. The typical taxi driver knows more than the next guy or girl on the street. Beyond this, there are clear rules.

The bottom line: Try not to leave home or your hotel without directions. Finding them on the street, even if you speak Chinese fluently, can be a challenge. Why? Let's look at some of the reasons below:

## SOME PEOPLE DON'T KNOW, DON'T CARE, OR AREN'T CLEAR (THE POINT)

Why is it so hard to get directions on the street? There are several reasons:

- **Some people don't care** - Although as a foreigner you will likely get more help than the typical Chinese person, it's still a fact that strangers are often ignored or given unclear directions:
- **Some people don't know how to give clear directions** - Some people in China either don't know how to give detailed directions, or don't care to do so. In this case, you will get **the point** - a finger pointed in the general direction of where you want to go.
- **Some people don't know the directions, but tell you anyway** - They give you 'the point', but usually in the wrong direction

## HOW CAN YOU TELL IF YOU ARE GETTING REAL DIRECTIONS IN CHINA?

It's actually surprisingly simple to tell when people are unsure of the directions but give them to you anyway. They hesitate before 'the point'.

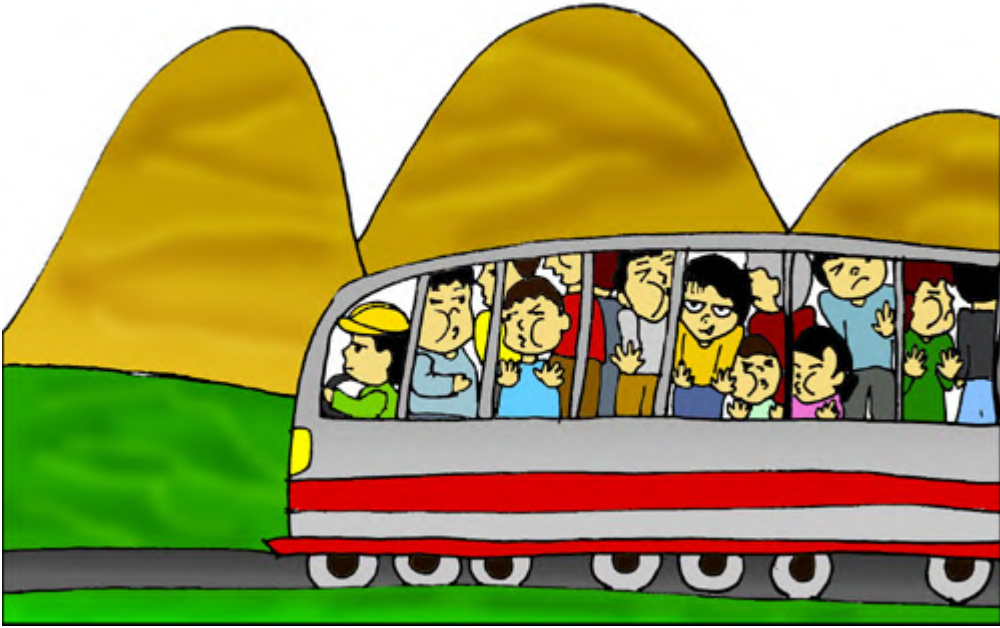
Since many people in China give sparsely simple directions ('the point'), most don't even have to think about them before telling you. Those that do have to think about them are usually giving you fake directions.

Basically, if you get 'the point' after a long moment of hesitation, the person giving directions probably doesn't know the way. If, however, you get detailed directions after such a moment of hesitation, they usually know what they are talking about.



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# 6 MISTAKES TO AVOID WHEN TRAVELING IN CHINA



Learning from other people's mistakes is great - you can avoid doing some really stupid things.

***"All men make mistakes, but only wise men learn from their mistakes."*** - Winston Churchill

If you follow the advice below, you might have a better travel experience in China. Just remember that none of it is written in stone.

## ON CHINA TOURS AND TOUR GUIDES



**1. Avoid the 'tour guides' at bus and train stops** offering to take you on a tour or to a hotel - you may get ripped off and end up with an entirely unsatisfactory experience.

**2. Don't go on packaged tours** - they usually aren't much fun (but there are exceptions). If you buy a 'packaged' tour, go for a 自由行 (*zìyóuxíng* - *Free Travel*) - it may be a little harder to find your way, but it will be much more fun, you will have much more time to do what you want, and you won't be herded through 'factories' and friendship stores with sky high prices.

## ON DIRECTIONS AND TAXI DRIVERS IN CHINA

**3. Don't follow directions from someone who hesitates** before giving you directions. They probably don't know the way.

**4. Don't go with a cabbie who doesn't know the way** - you may well end up in the wrong place with a lighter wallet.

## ON WHEN TO TRAVEL IN CHINA

**5. Avoid traveling during China's long holidays.**

**6. Do not get on a long distance train during the two days leading up to Chinese New Year's** (unless you have a sleeper ticket) - You may have an unforgettable experience.



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# CHINA'S WORST TRAVEL DAYS



What is the worst day for visiting a popular tourist destination in China? How about the worst day for traveling within China?

Take a moment to guess where these two dates fall before reading on.

## HANGZHOU & LOTS OF PEOPLE

Hangzhou is a beautiful city - really - and has a handful of sites surrounding the most famous West Lake in China (there are quite a few West Lakes in China).

With not much money to spare, and a travel decision done at the very last possible moment, it was Hangzhou that my girlfriend and I ended up in on October 1st.



## CHINA'S BUSIEST SITE-SEEING DAY

If you guessed that the 'worst' day to go site-seeing in China is October 1st, congratulations because you know what you're talking about.

With a seven day holiday and no pressing reason to visit the rest of your family, Golden Week (National Week, or 国庆节 - *guóqìngjié*) is the most convenient time to see China for hundreds of millions of Chinese people.

The first couple of days are usually the most crowded since three days of travel are usually followed by three days of rest - and so October 1st ends up as hands down the busiest day to see China's most famous sites.

人山人海 (*rénshānrénhǎi*) is a very common four character saying in Chinese - and one that struck a chord the past couple of days. It means "people mountain people sea" - basically a lot of people - and these past two days it took on a special meaning. When people in front of you and behind you block out much of the mountains or water from your line of site, people literally become 'people mountain, people sea'.

Yet even walking slowly in lockstep around Hangzhou's West Lake was still a great time and break from Shanghai - the holiday feeling was all around. I even turned off my cell phone for a day and a half.

If you want relative peace and quiet during your future travels, stay home during Golden Week (if you're working full time in China, however, this may be one of the only chances you get to see China - just remember to brace yourself for enormous crowds of people).

## CHINA'S WORST TRAVELING DAY



So what's the worst day to get from one place to another in China? The night before the lunar new year is arguably the most important part of Chinese New Year (ringing in the new year with the family, so to speak) - so everyone must get home - which means one to two days before the lunar new year is by far the hardest time to travel in China.

It is these two days that are the craziest time to try and squeeze on a train or even a bus - if you can avoid it, don't travel on a train during these two days - it is a claustrophobic experience you may never forget.

Just because it's hard to get around doesn't mean that the Chinese New Year is a bad time to see tourist destinations. On the contrary, since most people in China are at home celebrating the new year, you can enjoy many of China's finest sites in relative peace and quiet. Try to schedule your travel such that you are not on a train (and are instead enjoying some of China's finer sites) during these crazy two days, and you'll be just dandy.

## THANKS FOR READING

Check out [The China Expat](#) for more posts and articles about living in China. I'd love to hear back from you about whether this short guide was useful, and what else you would like to see from the site.

Thanks again for reading, and I hope that you have a chance to travel around much of China and see all of its magic and beauty on your own terms.

- *Jeremy*

