Getting around China: your checklist

The video's ten questions, in order. Tick them off as you plan.



Before you book flights in

- [ ] **1 Choose the city you fly into**
  For most first trips, Shanghai or Beijing. Guangzhou, Chengdu or Hong Kong also work. Why: the airport you land at can change your entry rules, so check our visa video (F1) first.

- [ ] **2 Decide: direct flight or a connection**
  Direct is simpler; a connection can be cheaper. Why: a stop in China is still an entry if you leave the airport. Long layover at Shanghai Pudong? There are free transit city tours (entry rules apply).

- [ ] **3 Plan your ride from the airport to the city**
  Shanghai: Metro Line 2, the Maglev or a taxi. Beijing: the airport express. Guangzhou: check the terminal on your ticket. Chengdu Tianfu: Metro Line 18. Why: you'll want data on your phone the moment you land, for the metro map and the taxi app.

Booking trains between cities

- [ ] **4 Compare train and plane door to door**
  Look at the train first. Why: stations are in the cities, and you arrive about 30 min early for a train, versus checking bags at least 60 min before a flight.

- [ ] **5 Make a 12306 account and verify your passport at home**
  12306.cn or the 12306 app, China Railway's only official one. Sign up with email; type your name exactly as in your passport, no spaces. Book up to 15 days ahead CHECK BEFORE YOU GO, pay by card, Alipay or WeChat Pay. Why: every ticket is tied to your passport, and station machines don't take passports.

- [ ] **6 Not sure of a date? Book it later**
  You can refund, or change a ticket once. Why: a refund is free 8+ days before departure, and a fee comes off closer to the day (page 2).

On the day stations and airports

- [ ] **7 Station: half an hour early, staffed lane, same passport**
  No paper ticket: your passport is your ticket. Why: everyone goes through security, the automatic gates generally don't read foreign passports, and gates close 3–5 min before the train leaves.

- [ ] **8 Train from Hong Kong: allow extra time at West Kowloon**
  Book it on 12306 too. Why: you leave Hong Kong and enter the mainland in the station, before the train, and checks close well before departure.

- [ ] **9 Domestic flight: check in early, keep your passport handy**
  Book on the airline's own site or app, or a ticket platform. Why: check-in and the boarding gate close earlier than many people expect.

In each city the metro

- [ ] **10 Tap your own contactless card at the metro gates**
  Works in Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Chengdu. Why: no ticket, no app. Elsewhere, use the metro QR code in your payment app (our money and apps video, F3).

The key facts

Airport → city

Shanghai Pudong	Metro Line 2 about CNY 7, about 1 h to People's Square · Maglev CNY 50 (CNY 40 with a same-day air ticket) to Longyang Rd, then Line 2 · Taxi about CNY 180, about 50 min
Beijing	Capital Airport Express, flat CNY 25 · Daxing Airport Express up to CNY 35, about 19 min to Caoqiao
Guangzhou	Domestic flights moved from T1 to T3 (7 May 2026). To T3: Metro Line 3 or 9 to Gaozeng, then the shuttle bus (about 15 min, CNY 2)
Chengdu Tianfu	About 50 km from downtown, Metro Line 18

CHECK BEFORE YOU GO fares and terminals change

At a mainland station

- Arrive at least **30 min** early; security check for everyone.
- No paper ticket: show the passport you booked with, at the **staffed lane**, in and out.
- Gates usually close **3–5 min** before departure.
- Luggage on high-speed trains: 20 kg per adult, items up to 130 cm (length + width + height).
- No smoking on high-speed trains.

Train vs plane

- Over 50,000 km of high-speed line (end of 2025).
- Beijing–Shanghai from 4 h 18 min; Beijing–Guangzhou from 7 h 16 min. CHECK BEFORE YOU GO

Hong Kong West Kowloon

- Start checks from **90 min** before; they usually take 30–45 min. Allow more as a passport holder and at weekends.
- Ticket checks stop 30 min before; gates close 5 min before.
- Hong Kong and Mainland immigration are both on level B3.
- On 12306, search West Kowloon with **香**, **hkw** or **xg**.

Refunds and changes on 12306

8+ days before	free
More than 48 h	5%
24–48 h before	10%
Under 24 h	20%
Changes	one per ticket

Domestic flights

China Eastern: online check-in closes 45 min before; gates close 15 min before take-off (20 at some airports). Guangzhou T3 domestic check-in closes 40 min before.

CHECK BEFORE YOU GO

Sources (checked 13 Nov 2026)

1. **Shanghai Pudong → city:** english.shanghai.gov.cn/en-Transportation/20231214/649e06ea38f74aaeb573fa2debbe97d3.html · Maglev: smtdc.com/en/jszl.html · transit tours: english.shanghai.gov.cn/en-Latest-WhatsNew/20260807/8797f93e18e24e86ad35f46e1202dbea.html
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Mobile data in China

Our First Time Asia eSIM store: **shops.yonosim.com/firsttimeasia**

Shop eSIMs →

Watch the video: F2 Transportation, **youtu.be/M8x1PB80HGM** · **@firsttimeasia**

Fares, timetables and rules change. Checked 13 Nov 2026; confirm items marked "check before you go". Free to share, not for resale.



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