

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

The holiday haven of Hainan is an island off southern China and popular with those seeking carefree days of sunshine and sea.

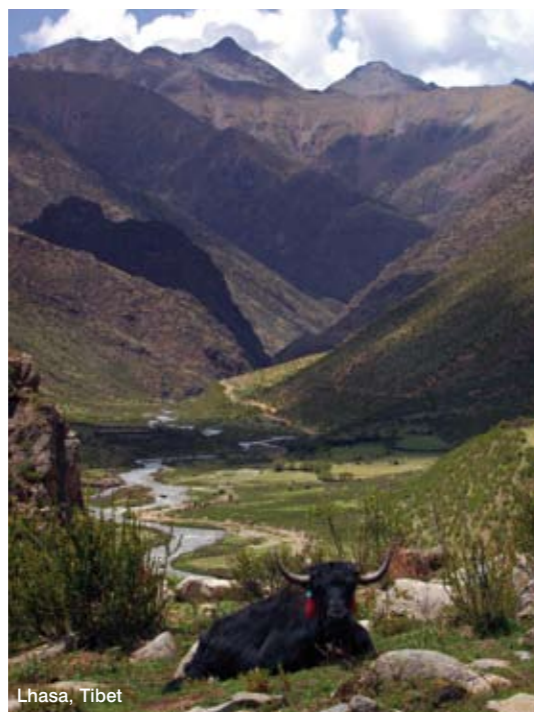
Haikou, in the island's north, is the provincial capital. The other main tourist centre is Sanya in the south, the location of Yalong Bay, site of several premium resorts. There are Li and Miao ethnic villages to visit as well as the Jianfengling Primeval Tropical Forest. The best time to visit Hainan is between November and March.

Jiangsu province has 1,000 kilometres of Yellow Sea coastline, spliced in the south by the Yangtze River. Nanjing is one of China's ancient capitals. It has an impressive art gallery and more than 70 museums. Its ancient temples, shrines and tombs include that of Sun Yat Sen, sometimes called 'the father of modern China', and the Nanjing Confucious Temple, which dates from 1034.

Yunnan borders Burma, Vietnam and Laos and is China's most culturally diverse province. Close to the provincial capital of Kunming is a stone forest consisting of gigantic pillars of rock. Yunnan's other famous attraction is Lijiang Old Town in the northwest of the province, a preserved ancient city of ethnic minorities. It's a photographer's paradise with narrow winding lanes, decorated timber and tile buildings and people clad in traditional dress.

The Yangtze is China's largest river and third longest in the world. Cruise itineraries depart from Yichang for the Three Gorges of Qutang, Wu and Xiling, considered one of the country's top scenic attractions. Together these gorges provide nearly 200 kilometres of amazing scenery that include vertiginous cliffs, mist-shrouded mountains and turbulent rapids.

Northwest China's most important city, Xi'an, is best known to foreigners as the site of the Museum of Qin Terracotta Warriors and Horses, 35 kilometres east of town. The life-size figures, in battle formation, date from the Qin Dynasty (211-206BC). More than 7,000 have so far been unearthed.



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Another grand attraction is the Temple of Heaven complex set within a 270-hectare park in the Chongwen district, a few kilometres south east of the Forbidden City. Also known as Tiantan Park it's the largest temple and altar complex in China, five times larger than the Forbidden City. Tiantan dates from the early 17th century and contains prime examples of Ming and Qing architecture. The park is a popular leisure spot and a great place to sample, first hand, Beijing residents at play. If you go very early in the morning you'll see hundreds of people practising Tai Chi or other disciplines. Tiantan is also used for exhibitions and outdoor concerts.

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behind the *hutong* walls. Any good guide book will have a section on *hutongs*. For shopping try the Pearl Market, Xiushui Silk Market, the Panjiayuan Sunday market near the Temple of Heaven or the neon glitz of Wanfujing arcade.

The Summer Palace (Yihe Yuan) is about 12 kilometres north west of the city centre on the shores of Kunming Lake. It has grand halls, pavilions, courtyards and temples and bridges and a restaurant serving expensive Imperial Court-style cuisine.

Beihai Park is another popular former royal garden with a lake that becomes an ice rink in winter. Notable sights include the White Dagoba on Jade Isle and the famous Nine Dragon Screen built of coloured

tiles. And you'll find another restaurant specialising in Imperial dishes at a high price. Daily excursions from Beijing are made to the Great Wall of China, which extends from the coast to the Gobi Desert. Most tour buses visit Badaling, 70 kilometres north west of the city, where there's a cable car, museum and cinema as well as rows of hawkers selling cheap souvenirs.

The Lonely Planet guide suggests the Huangha Chang Chen (Yellow Flower Fortress) section, about 60 kilometres north of the capital, if you want to 'walk the wall' away from the tourist hordes. Another location is Mutianyu, 90 kilometres north east of the capital. There are three major tomb sites around Beijing of which the most frequented are the Ming Tombs, about 50 kilometres out of town and often visited in tandem with the Great Wall.

The tombs are approached along a seven-kilometre Spirit Way lined with mythical stone animals. There are 13 mausoleums but only the Chang Ling, Ding Ling and Zhao Ling tombs are open to the public. Chang Ling is the largest and best preserved. A signature feature is a palace built of camphor wood.



FESTIVALS & HOLIDAYS



The most significant annual events are National Day, May Day and the Spring Festival.

National Day, October 1, honours the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. International Labor Day is celebrated on May 1.

The Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, lasts two weeks, usually at the end of January into February. It culminates in the Lantern Festival, or Yuanxiao Jie, held on the 15th day of the first lunar month in the Chinese New Year, the night of the first full moon. This is also the Chinese equivalent of Valentine's Day.

Since 1999, China's three official holidays, focused on the above events, have become known as 'Golden Weeks', each of them a seven-day holiday. This is achieved by workers putting in extra working days both before and after each holiday. During these public holidays, particularly Chinese New Year, it's can be difficult to get around and accommodation can also be scarce.

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