

INTRODUCING BĚIJĪNG



Beijingers drink and stroll on a balmy Saturday night, Houhai Lake (p138)

Capital of the country set to dominate the 21st century, Běijīng has transformed itself into one of the world's great cities at a speed few other metropolises could ever hope to match.

Ten years ago, Běijīng was a dowdy backwater of a capital. Now, the world looks on enviously at the futuristic buildings that loom over a buzzing, buoyant city that has embraced consumerism as eagerly as it once championed communism. Yet for all its fancy new trimmings, Běijīng is in many ways the same city that was once ruled by emperors and has been invaded by everyone from Genghis Khan to the former colonial powers.

It's that contrast between the distant past and super-charged present that makes Běijīng such a captivating destination. Tower blocks dot the skyline, but the *hútòng* (ancient alleyways that criss-cross the heart of the city) still teem with life, as they did hundreds of years ago. Temples and shopping malls coexist, as do five-star restaurants and hole-in-the-wall dumpling joints, or you can sip a cocktail in a trendy rooftop bar while gazing over the Forbidden City. And just a couple hours away, the majestic Great Wall snakes its way across the hills north of Běijīng.

But as well as some of the most essential sights in all of China, it's Běijīng's fizzing energy that makes it such a unique place. Summer is hot and humid, and winter is freezing, making autumn and spring the best times to visit, but whenever you come you'll get to experience a city intoxicated by the spirit of change. It's never boring in Běijīng.

BĚIJĪNG LIFE

Beijingers are a stoical people. But even the most reserved of the city's 17 million-odd inhabitants have been left gasping, as well as proud, at the way Běijīng has reinvented itself in recent years. If the staging of the hugely successful 2008 Olympics was the catalyst for this remarkable overhaul, then the pace has hardly let up since. New buildings, shopping malls and subway lines spring up almost weekly.

That feeling of being in permanent flux can be disorientating and the changes have resulted in millions of people decamping to the ever-expanding suburbs of this huge, sprawling city. The centre of the capital is now lined with the office blocks and shopping malls that stand as temples to the twin gods of money and status that many Beijingers worship. Moving up the social ladder is an obsession for everyone.

Constant change also means that most people look forward rather than back. The capital's former reputation as a conservative city is a fast-fading memory as rising incomes and the rapidly increasing numbers of restaurants, bars and clubs fuel vibrant nightlife. And with the latest fashions in the shops and new cars on the streets, Beijingers are quickly shrugging off any feelings of inferiority to the West.

Nevertheless, the widening gap between the rich and the poor is evidence that not everyone has benefited from Běijīng's boom. The city's 20-somethings might party till late with the latest mobile phones clamped to their ears, but the elderly, the unemployed and the huge army of migrant workers in the capital exist in a parallel universe where life is far less sweet.

Politics, though, is hardly mentioned, at least not in public. For most people, especially the young, the knowledge that they can enjoy lives radically different and more prosperous than ever before is enough to satisfy them. But almost all Beijingers possess an overwhelming confidence that life can only get better. They know that this is their city's time.

'A buzzing, buoyant city that has embraced consumerism as eagerly as it once championed communism.'



Tai chi is practised in the Temple of Heaven Park (p80)

THE AUTHORS

Damian Harper



Damian first arrived in Běijīng in 1992 via a degree in Chinese from London's School of Oriental African Studies. Since then he has shackled up in a *sihéyuàn* (courtyard house), worked as a Beijing Radio presenter, lived in

Shànghǎi, wrestled with the Cantonese dialect in Hong Kong, chewed the fat with Shaolin monks and knocked back bags of beer in Qīngdǎo. Married to an outstanding Shāndōng lass, Damian has been authoring for Lonely Planet for over 12 years, exploring China with a constant swarm of deadlines (*Beijing, China, China's Southwest, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Lonely Planet's Best in Travel*) in pursuit.

DAMIAN'S TOP BĚIJĪNG DAY

I like to rise early to join the shuffling queue for *yóutiáo* (deep-fried dough stick) to chew en route to practising several forms of *tàijíquán* (taichi) in the park. The pulse-quickening Yang-style long form (108 moves) takes around 20 minutes to perform. For fresh coffee afterwards, I'll make my way to Nanluogu Xiang after picking up a copy of 参考消息 (*Reference News*), one of the few Chinese-language newspapers worth reading. Fortified by caffeine I'll disappear into the city's *hútòng* (alleyways), which is the best way to rummage through Běijīng's past. I'll always find something extraordinary buried away here whether I'm deliberately exploring or just idly meandering. I'll certainly go temple hunting in the *hútòng*, as some temples – such as Huguo Temple in Xíchéng district – are well disguised, their disparate halls divided up among live-in residents or converted for other functions. Others, such as Zhìhua Temple (p77), are authentic and almost neglected. To catch up with currents in Chinese art, I'll bookmark the 798 Art District (p133) but for hiking I'll opt for Bādàchù (p134) or Fragrant Hills Park (p133). In fact in spring or autumn, I may devote the entire day to visiting Jiankou Great Wall (p103) for absolute tranquillity and premier views of the brick bastion. Tiananmen Square (p66) at twilight is a magical spot to stop if I've time, and I'll always visit the Forbidden City beforehand –

you can never explore the palace enough. I'll have dinner with friends in the Hòuhǎi area before sinking late-night drinks in Nanluogu Xiang again and chatting till the witching hour and beyond.

Contributing Author

DAVID EIMER



David made his first trip to China in 1988, when both Westerners and cars were in short supply. After graduating with a law degree from University College London, he abandoned the idea of becoming a barrister for a career as a freelance journalist. That

took him from London to LA for five years, where he wrote for a variety of newspapers and magazines. Back in London, David began to be intrigued by the world's increasing focus on China. Returning there for the first time in 14 years, he found a country that had changed beyond almost all recognition. He moved to Běijīng in early 2005, where he contributes to the *Sunday Telegraph* and the *South China Morning Post*. He co-wrote the previous editions of *Beijing* and *Shanghai* for Lonely Planet, as well as working on the last edition of the *China* guide.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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GETTING STARTED

From backpacking expeditions to luxury stopovers and every point in between, Běijīng caters to each and every budget. First you'll need a visa (p253), and you'll also need to know when to go (below) and what weather to expect. Běijīng doesn't do the English language at all well (this is no Thailand or Malaysia), so you'll need to prepare for excruciating lingo problems – consult the Language chapter (p256) at the back of the book and the language section in the Background chapter (p45). We have put a considerable amount of written Chinese in this book. When in doubt, showing the Chinese characters to local passers-by is far more immediate than trying to pronounce Chinese (unless you can speak the language). Try to allow time to explore China outside Běijīng; engineering an itinerary is an excellent idea. If you plan on visiting Tibet, check on any travel restrictions. For essentials, you should be able to find most of what you need in Běijīng, but it's advisable to take along any prescription medicines and cannot-live-without reading material. Last but not least, Běijīng is often surprising and endlessly fascinating – so don't forget to pack a sense of adventure!

WHEN TO GO

'Climate is what you expect; weather is what you get.'

Robert A Heinlein

Climate-wise, autumn (September and October) is Běijīng's finest, but shortest, season. Skies are blue, the weather is cooling down and the mad summer rush has exhausted itself, so fewer visitors are in town. Locals muse that this is the season of *'tiāngāo qìshuǎng'*, literally 'high skies and the air is fresh', with trademark blue skies and crisp air. Arid spring (March to April/May) can be pleasant, apart from the scouring sandstorms (see the Dust Devil boxed text, p42) gusting in from Inner Mongolia, and the ubiquitous static electricity discharging everywhere. Spring also sees the snow-like *liǔxù* (willow catkins) wafting through the Běijīng air. Summer (May to August) is a blistering, drawn-out event, but it's also the peak tourist season. From May onwards the mercury can surge above 30°C, reaching over 40°C in midsummer; heavy rainstorms appear late in the season. Face-numbing winter (November to February/March) sees far fewer tourists in town, and some hotels may offer substantial discounts – but it's glacial outside (dipping as low as -20°C) and the northern winds cut like a knife through bean curd. Heating in public buildings is officially turned on only in mid-November, no matter how cold it gets. Air pollution can be very harsh in both summer and winter (see p120).

Avoid visiting the capital during the first week of October and the first three days of

May (p245), as the entire nation is on holiday – rooms are in short (and expensive) supply and attractions are swamped. Be warned that the Spring Festival (below) is China's biggest holiday and transport outside Běijīng can be hellish; many people take a week off work. But it can also be a great time to see the Chinese celebrating with all stops out – be sure to book your room in advance.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

China follows both the *yánglì* (Gregorian) and the *yīnlì* (lunar) calendars. Traditional Chinese festivals are calculated according to the lunar calendar and fall on different days each year according to the Gregorian calendar. The three huge holiday periods begin with the Spring Festival, on 1 May and 1 October, respectively.

January & February

WESTERN NEW YEAR

1 Jan

元旦 Yuándàn

The Spring Festival is China's big New Year's bash, but the Western New Year is also wildly celebrated throughout town.

SPRING FESTIVAL

14 Feb 2010 & 3 Feb 2011

春节 Chūn Jié

As big in China as Christmas in the West, the family-oriented Spring Festival celebrates the arrival of the new lunar New Year. The festival commences on the first day of the first month in the lunar calendar, which usually falls sometime between late January and mid-February, ushering in one of the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. The

long build-up to the festival is an explosion of colour, with *chūnlǐán* (spring couplets) pasted on door posts, door gods brightening up *hútòng* (alleyways) and shops glistening with red and gold decorations. Work colleagues and relatives present each other with red envelopes of *hóngbāo* (money), the streets ring with cries of '*gōngxǐ fācái*' ('congratulations – make money'). At midnight of the New Year a long cavalcade of fireworks illuminates the sky. The **White Cloud Temple** (p93), the **Lama Temple** (p70) and other temples in Běijīng stage entertaining *miàohuì* (temple fairs). Celebrations are also held in parks, such as **Ditan Park** (p79).

VALENTINE'S DAY

14 Feb

情人节 Qīngrén Jié

China's traditional festival for lovers (the seventh day of the seventh lunar month) simply doesn't attract the same kind of dewy-eyed fascination. Jewellery stores are busy with white-collar suits blowing a month's salary on rings, while flower shops do a roaring trade in roses (in bunches of eleven, symbolising loyalty). If eating out, book early or make do with a takeaway. With fortuitous synchronicity, Valentine's Day in 2010 exactly coincides with the first day of the Spring Festival (so book that table *months* ahead).

LANTERN FESTIVAL

28 Feb 2010 & 17 Feb 2011

元宵节 Yuánxiāo Jié

Celebrated two weeks after the first day of the Spring Festival, this family-oriented festival is not a public holiday, but can be a very colourful time to visit Běijīng. The Chinese devour gorgeous *yuánxiāo* (glutinous rice dumplings with soft, sweet fillings) while evening firework shows explode over town.

March & April

INTERNATIONAL LITERARY FESTIVAL

Mar

国际文学节 Guójí Wénxué Jié

This excellent festival sees writers, readers and bibliophiles convening at the fabulous **Bookworm** (p148) – where else? – for a two-week bonanza of readings and discussions. Hosting a gaggle of prize-winning international authors and local writers, the event has been going strong since 2006. The festival sells out quickly so bookmark it early for tickets: see www.chinabookworm.com for details.

GUANYIN'S BIRTHDAY

3 Apr 2010 & 23 Mar 2011

观世音生日 Guānshīyīn Shēngrì

Held on the 19th day of the second moon, the birthday of Guanyin, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, is a fine time to visit Buddhist temples. Dedicated to the goddess, Puning Temple (p222) in Chéngdé province holds suitably big celebrations.

TOMB SWEEPING DAY

5 Apr (4 Apr in leap years)

清明节 Qīngmíng Jié

A day for worshipping ancestors, the festival falls near the date of Easter. People visit and clean the graves (*sǎomù*) of their departed relatives, placing flowers on tombs and burning ghost money for the departed. There may be increased vigilance in Tiananmen Square during the festival, as public displays of mourning for the dead of 4 June 1989 remain sensitive. The festival has now become an official public holiday.

May

MAY DAY

1 May

五一 Wūyī

May Day kicks off a much-needed three-day national holiday for Chinese, who swamp tourist sights the length and breadth of the nation.

GREAT WALL MARATHON

May

长城马拉松 Chángchéng Mǎlāsōng

The hike up Sīmǎtái is like a walk to the local shops compared to the thigh-juddering,

ADVANCE PLANNING

Scroll through some of Běijīng's top websites (p15) and scope government travel-health websites (p243). Check whether your trip coincides with popular festivals or clashes with the big Chinese holiday periods (opposite). Make sure your passport and visa are in order (p253). Check that your vaccinations are up-to-date and make a start at learning some Mandarin. If you're going to Běijīng on business, make sure you've got some business cards.

Give some thought to possible excursions (p218) outside of town. Scout around for good hotel deals and make a room reservation. On the day before you leave, reconfirm your flight (and cancel the milk).

knee-wrecking agony of this main and half marathon. See www.great-wall-marathon.com.

September

MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL

22 Sep 2010 & 12 Sep 2011

中秋节 Zhōngqiū Jié

Also known as the Moon Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival is marked by eating tasty *yuèbǐng* (moon cakes), gazing at the full moon and gathering together with relatives for family reunions. It is also a traditional holiday for lovers. It takes place on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month.

October & November

NATIONAL DAY

1 Oct

国庆节 Guóqīng Jié

Crowds flock to Tiananmen Square for a huge party, followed by a massive week-long national holiday where the Chinese blow their hard-earned savings on travelling and enjoying themselves in what is known as Golden Week.

BEIJING MUSIC FESTIVAL

Oct & Nov

北京国际音乐节 Běijīng Guójì Yīnyuè Jié

Usually staged around October and November, this classical-music festival (www.bmf.org.cn) sees foreign orchestras and musicians coming to town for a five-week range of musical events.

December

CHRISTMAS DAY

25 Dec

圣诞节 Shèngdàn Jié

Not an official Chinese festival perhaps, but the birthday of baby Jesus is a major milestone on the commercial calendar, when Běijīng's big shopping zones sparkle with decorations and glisten with snow. Yuletide is celebrated more by expats and young Chinese than by more elderly locals.

COSTS & MONEY

Běijīng is no longer cheap. In the good-old, bad-old communist days (up to around 15 years ago), you could have survived in town on a pittance and lived like a lord; nowadays you can wince when forking out Y45 for a latte or Y50 for a bowl of noodles at Capital Airport.

BEIJING'S ECONOMIC STATS

GDP US\$151 billion (2008)

Per capita GDP US\$9000 (2008)

Per capita income US\$1573 (2008)

Expenditure on real estate US\$25.77 billion (2008)

Hotels are the biggest expense, but food and transport can quickly add up, too. Dorm beds start at around Y35 a night, but you will probably pay at least around Y200 for a double room. The underground system is very good value indeed (Y2 flat fee) and taxis are reasonable; hiring a bike is also cheap. Eating at street stalls and small hole-in-the-wall restaurants is cost-effective, and you can eat this way for around Y40 per day or less.

Bank on spending from around Y500 a day for midrange comfort (accommodation, dining and sightseeing). This figure can rapidly expand depending on where you choose to eat and sleep. Further up the spectrum, five-star hotel rooms can cost over Y1500 a night and stylish restaurant meals can cost from Y150.

Entertainment is no longer cheap. Beer bought from corner shops is cheaper than the equivalent size of bottled water, however, costing around Y2.5 for a bottle of Beijing or Yanjing Beer. Bars are far pricier, with small bottles of Tsingtao retailing for around Y15 to Y25 (although we have listed some budget-bracket watering holes); imported beers cost much more. Unlike in countries such as the UK, where prices for cigarettes are by and large the same, there is great variation in Chinese cigarette prices (Y3 to Y70 per pack).

HOW MUCH?

Bāozǐ (steamed meat buns) from street stall Y3

Bus ticket Y1

Metro ticket Y2

Hour in internet cafe Y2-4

Large bottle of Yanjing Beer from a shop Y2.50

Local SIM card Y100

Lamb kebab from Y1

Chinese-language newspaper Y0.50

0.5L bottle of mineral water Y2

Taxi rate (for first 3km) Y10

Great Wall cotton T-shirt from Y15

BEST BLOGS

Beijing Boyce (www.beijingboyce.com) Ins-and-outs of Běijīng's bar and club scene with an avalanche of detail.

Bezdomny ex patria (<http://wangbo.blogtown.co.nz>) 'Ramblings of an expat Kiwi living in one small corner of Beijing'; on learning Chinese and all things Běijīng.

China Blog List (www.chinabloglist.org) A list of China-related blogs.

Danwei (www.danwei.org) Resourceful reflections on Chinese media, advertising and urban life; translations into English from Chinese media.

Pomfret's China (<http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/pomfretschina>) 'A Foreign Devil's take on the Middle Kingdom' by the former *Washington Post* Běijīng bureau chief.

Quirky Beijing (www.quirkybeijing.com) Does what it says on the packet.

The China Blog (<http://china.blogs.time.com>) Articles and observations from *Time* magazine's China correspondents.

Zhongnanhai Blog (www.zhongnanhaiblog.com) News, opinion, analysis and articles on China from contributors living in China.

Cinema ticket prices are similar to those in the West, so most locals buy pirate DVDs instead, which cost between ¥5 and ¥10.

Be extra vigilant against being lured to tea houses or art galleries in tourist areas (p251). We have read endless tales of travellers being duped of their entire holiday budgets in extortionate tea houses. Remember, as a foreigner you can be preyed upon and targeted for your hard-earned cash. There's little point in pinching your pennies while shopping only to be conned big time elsewhere.

Běijīng is one of those wonderful cities where tipping is not the norm. This applies throughout China. Midrange restaurants and above have closed the gap with a service charge (*fúwùfèi*), however, so there is no need to indulge them with a tip. Porters at upmarket hotels will, of course, expect a tip. Taxi drivers certainly do not expect a tip and will often refuse.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Beijinger (www.thebeijinger.com) The low-down on Běijīng entertainment.

Beijingpage (www.beijingpage.com) Informative online directory with reams of practical info on the city.

CTrip (www.english.ctrip.com) Discounted hotels and ticketing; recommended.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Useful summaries on travelling through China, plus tips from travellers on the Thorn Tree travel forum.

Wild Wall (www.wildwall.com) Great Wall expert William Lindesay's informative website on the crumbling fortification.

Zhongwen (www.zhongwen.com) Handy primer for students of written Chinese.

SUSTAINABLE BĚIJĪNG

From the city's growing water woes and encroaching desertification to caustic atmospheric pollution and a long history of environmental neglect, Běijīng is hardly a paragon of environmental sustainability. However, recent initiatives (such as the banning of free plastic grocery bags) are having an effect, and China is a world leader in harnessing solar energy. You can help to lessen the human impact on the environment by buying your own reusable chopsticks, avoiding shark's fin soup (if it's genuine) and getting around town as much as you can by bicycle.