

*Pretty Far From Home*

# Beijing in 3 Days, *made easy.*

A first-timer's plan for gals who travel in the middle: the famous sights done properly, then the side street around the corner where the locals actually eat.

By Nicola · written from Beijing · updated October 2026

The Big One + the Side Street | Where to stay at 3 budgets | Hour-by-hour days | What it costs | Before-you-go checklist

START HERE

# Kia ora, and welcome to Beijing

I live here, and I've walked these routes many times with visitors, kids and grandparents. This is the plan I'd hand a friend: a comfy bed, the big sights done properly, then the little local places tour groups drive straight past. Real prices included, so nothing catches you off guard.

1

### Imperial Beijing

The Forbidden City and the best rooftop view in the city, then Peking duck where locals go for it.

2

### The Great Wall

Mutianyu by toboggan, a hidden hotel lunch, roadside "wild coffee" and a spa to finish.

3

### Local Beijing

Tai chi with the retirees, hutong dumplings, a lakeside drink and late-night crayfish.

## How this guide works: the Big One + the Side Street

You didn't fly all this way to skip the famous stuff, and you don't want to eat at the tourist food court either. So every day pairs the two:

THE BIG ONE

The famous sight you came for, with the timing and booking tricks that make it easy.

SIDE STREET

The local spot nearby to eat, sip or wander, away from the crowds. The bit you'll actually talk about at home.

## Before you read on

- Book your hotel first (page 3). Location decides how easy everything else feels.
- Prices are in Chinese yuan (¥). Roughly ¥7 ≈ US$1, checked October 2026.
- **Squat toilets?** Hotels, malls, cafés and big sights have Western ones. Carry tissues for the rest.

## The 3 things to sort before you fly

- **Alipay** set up with your own bank card. Almost everything is paid by QR code.
- **A roaming eSIM**, so Google, Instagram and WhatsApp just work. Much easier than a VPN.
- **Forbidden City tickets**, released 7 days ahead at 8pm Beijing time. They go fast.

The full checklist is on the last page.

## Which day for what (read this before you book)

The Forbidden City and Beijing's big museums are **closed on Mondays**, so everyone heads to the Great Wall instead and it gets busy. Weekends and public holidays are busy too.

- **Great Wall:** Tuesday to Thursday if you can.
- **Forbidden City (Day 1):** any day except Monday.
- **Local Beijing (Day 3):** works any day, so it's your Monday plan.
- **Easy example:** arrive Sunday or Monday, then Day 1 on Tuesday, the Wall on Wednesday and Local Beijing on Thursday.

WHERE TO STAY

# Pick your base

Three areas, three budgets each. Prices are typical "from" nightly rates for a double room in October 2026. Weekends and holidays (especially Golden Week, 1–7 October) cost more. I book on Trip.com, which usually has the best rates for China.

## Wangfujing & Dongcheng

Best for first-timers

Walk to the Forbidden City and Tiananmen, with metro Line 1 on your doorstep. Lots of easy dinner options.

| BUDGET | HOTEL | APPROX / NIGHT |
|---|---|---|
| BUDGET | **Happy Dragon City Culture Hotel** · small, well-reviewed, near the National Art Museum | ¥300–400 |
| MIDDLE | **Park Plaza Beijing Wangfujing** · reliable, big breakfast, walk to the shopping street | ¥700–950 |
| SPLURGE | **Regent Beijing** We stayed here · calm and polished, near Dengshikou metro | ¥1,250–1,600 |

## The hutongs (Lama Temple & Gulou)

Best for charm & food

Sleep in old courtyard lanes, near street food, cafés and Ghost Street (Guijie) for late dinners. The trade-off is that some rooms are compact.

| BUDGET | HOTEL | APPROX / NIGHT |
|---|---|---|
| BUDGET | **Nostalgia Hotel Beijing Yonghe Lama Temple** · simple, clean, great location | ¥350–450 |
| MIDDLE | **Beijing 161 Lama Temple Courtyard Hotel** · a proper courtyard stay without the luxury price | ¥550–700 |
| SPLURGE | **The Orchid** · 9-room boutique hutong hotel with private porches | from ¥1,000 |

## Sanlitun & Chaoyang

Best for cafés & nightlife

Modern Beijing: shopping, brunch, cocktail bars and the 798 Art District. It's 20–40 minutes by DiDi to the big sights, but closer to the Capital Airport and on the way to the Great Wall.

| BUDGET | HOTEL | APPROX / NIGHT |
|---|---|---|
| BUDGET | **Stey Sanlitun Boutique Hotel** · stylish, small, right in the action | ¥380–450 |
| MIDDLE | **EAST Beijing** We stayed here · stylish, great breakfast, pool, next to 798 | ¥700–1,100 |
| MIDDLE | **LiveFortuna Hotel** We stayed here · by Ritan Park, rooftop pool, in-room washer/dryer, great breakfast | from ¥600 |
| SPLURGE | **CHAO Sanlitun** · design hotel, great rooftop, walk to Taikoo Li | ¥1,700–2,000 |

Tip: use Trip.com's map view and check the distance to the nearest metro station before you book. Under 10 minutes' walk makes a real difference.

# 01 DAY ONE
# Imperial Beijing

7:30

## A proper breakfast, then a jianbing

Eat a good Western breakfast at your hotel. Once you start walking, it's hard to find one. Then grab a jianbing (crispy egg crêpe, about ¥10) from a street cart on your way out, just for the experience.

Jianbing ¥10

8:30

## Snack stop, then Tiananmen Square

**Stock up at a 7-Eleven or convenience store** before you go in: lunch, snacks and water. The big attractions are a food desert. Then take Line 1 to Tiananmen East, with your passport ready for airport-style security. The square needs a **free reservation** (official mini-program).

Snacks ¥20–40 | Square free, but booking required

9:30

## The Forbidden City THE BIG ONE

Enter through the Meridian Gate (south) and walk north. Pick one route rather than every courtyard: up the central axis, then veer east for the Treasure Gallery, which is quieter and prettier. Allow 3 hours. Bring the same physical passport you booked with.

¥60 (Apr–Oct) | ¥40 (Nov–Mar) | Treasure Gallery +¥10

12:30

## Jingshan Park, for *the* photo

Straight across from the north gate. A short, steep climb gives you the view over the golden rooftops, and the best photo of you in Beijing. Go back at sunset if you have the energy.

¥2

1:30

## Late lunch near your hotel, then feet up

Honest warning: the restaurants near the Forbidden City are packed with Chinese diners, but they're domestic tourists, not locals. Local food is further out, so head back towards your hotel, stop at a clean noodle chain like **Hefu Noodle** (picture menu), then rest. Day 1 is 20,000+ steps.

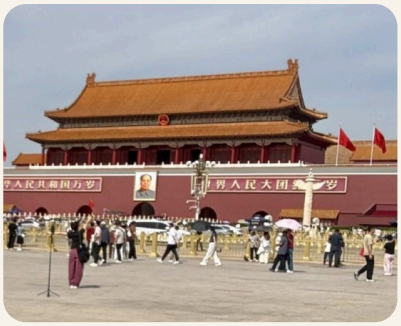
¥40–60

6:30

## Peking duck at Dayali SIDE STREET

Skip the famous tourist duck houses. **Dayali Roast Duck** is where Beijing locals go for duck and northern Chinese dishes. Great for families and groups, with private rooms. Our last visit: two families (4 adults, 3 kids), 2 whole ducks, sides and drinks for about ¥550 all up. Afterwards, stroll Wangfujing's lit-up shopping street.

≈ ¥140 per adult | ¥550 for 2 families



### Make it easy

- Tickets release **7 days ahead at 8pm** on the official mini-program. Klook or Trip.com are easier if you're happy to pay a little more.
- Wear proper walking shoes. The stones are uneven.
- Carry your own lunch and water: there's little food inside or around the palace.
- Closed Mondays (except public holidays).
- Book your free Tiananmen Square reservation at the same time.

Day 1, per person

**≈ ¥290–340**

Tickets, food and metro, not including your hotel

# 02 DAY TWO
# The Great Wall at Mutianyu

**Go Tuesday to Thursday.** Mondays are packed because the Forbidden City and museums are closed. Mutianyu is quieter than Badaling and easy for any fitness level. Make it a slow, whole-day treat.

7:30

## Get picked up

A private driver is the easiest option by far: door to door in about 1.5 hours, on your own schedule, with no tea ceremonies, jade factories or pricey shopping stops. **Book mine in a few minutes on the blog** (link on the right).

¥1,200 return (up to 6 adults)

9:00

## The toboggan trick

Do this first: take the **chairlift up and toboggan straight back down**, before the crowds arrive. Later on, the slide jams up with slow sledders. Buy the chairlift-up + toboggan-down combo.

10:00

## Up the Wall THE BIG ONE

Now walk along to the cable car and ride it up. Walk the restored section between the towers for 1.5–2 hours. It gets quieter (and the photos get better) the further you go.

Entry ¥40–45 | Shuttle ¥15 return

Cable car ¥100 one way / ¥140 return

12:30

## The hidden hotel lunch SIDE STREET

Skip the tourist restaurants. A quiet hotel near the Wall serves great food, with a playground if the kids need to burn off energy. It can be pre-booked, and if you book the driver through me, she knows exactly where to go.

2:00

## Wild coffee SIDE STREET

**"Wild coffee":** your driver takes you to a coffee caravan on the side of the road where locals hang out.

**Or keep it simple:** coffee or an ice cream in a nearby town.

5:00

## Spa or foot massage, then dinner

**Go all in: No. 9 Spa.** A well-known spa popular with foreigners, with indoor and outdoor pools. Stay for the buffet dinner and eat in your robe.

**Keep it local:** search 足疗 (zú liáo, "foot spa") on Amap to find one near your hotel, then a bowl of noodles nearby.

No. 9 Spa ≈ ¥350 | Foot massage ¥150–250 | Noodles ¥25–50



### Make it easy

- Bring your **passport**: tickets are bought with it.
- Pack water, a hat and layers. It's windier and cooler up top.
- Kids under 1.2 m often ride and enter free or discounted.
- There are clean Western toilets up on the Wall. Just bring tissues and hand sanitiser.

Day 2, per person (2 sharing a driver)

**≈ ¥1,050–1,450**

Driver share, Wall, toboggan, food, coffee and a spa or massage, not including your hotel

**Book the driver I use**

¥1,200 return for up to 6 adults. She knows the hidden lunch spot and the wild coffee caravan, with no shopping detours.

Book your driver →

prettyfarfromhome.com/mutianyu-great-wall-private-driver

# 03 DAY THREE
# Local Beijing

8:00

## Temple of Heaven, with the locals THE BIG ONE

Go in the morning, when the park is full of retirees doing tai chi, dancing, singing and playing jianzi (a feathered kick-shuttlecock). Buy one for a few yuan and join in. The famous halls open at 8am.

Combo ticket ¥34 (¥28 in winter)

10:30

## The Lama Temple, then coffee SIDE STREET

Metro north to Yonghegong, Beijing's most beautiful working temple, full of incense and a giant carved Buddha. Then cross the road to Wudaoying Hutong for a coffee in one of its little cafés.

¥25

12:30

## Dumplings, away from the crowds SIDE STREET

Skip the tourist strip and duck into any busy little dumpling shop in the side lanes. Point at the menu photos, and you'll get a plate of 10–15 for the price of a coffee back home.

¥30–60

2:00

## Hutong wander

Walk or rickshaw through Gulou (the Drum and Bell Towers) and down to Houhai lake. Nanluoguxiang is the famous lane but gets crowded, so dip into the quieter lanes either side. Hire a bike or a little boat if the weather's nice.

Rickshaw tour ¥100–200

5:30

## Sunset at Houhai

The lakeside bars come alive. A drink by the water is the perfect last-night moment, and golden hour on the lake makes for a lovely photo.

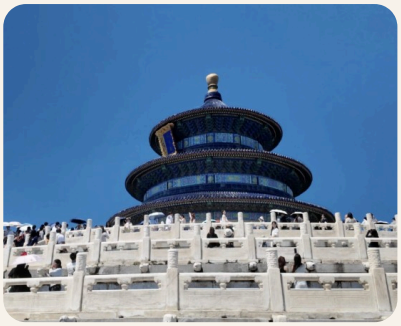
¥50–80

7:30

## Ghost Street (Guijie) until late SIDE STREET

A long strip of red lanterns and restaurants open late. Try spicy crayfish or hotpot, then wander. It's lively, safe and very Beijing.

¥120–200



### Make it easy

- Works on a **Monday**: the temples and hutongs are open.
- Book the Temple of Heaven a day ahead on weekends.
- Use DiDi (inside Alipay) between areas. Most rides cost ¥20–40.
- Have Chinese addresses saved in your phone to show drivers.

Day 3, per person

**≈ ¥420–700**

Tickets, food, rickshaw and transport, not including your hotel

THE NUMBERS

# What 3 days costs

Per person, two people sharing a room, travelling the middle way: comfy hotel, a mix of local and sit-down meals, and the extras that make it feel like a holiday. Flights aren't included.

| WHAT | BUDGET-ISH | MIDDLE (THIS PLAN) | SPLURGE |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Hotel**, 3 nights, your half | ¥450–680 | ¥830–1,650 | ¥1,500–3,000 |
| **Tickets** (Forbidden City, Wall, temples) | ¥180 (walk up) | ¥290–330 | ¥330 + guides |
| **Great Wall transport** | ¥80 (public bus) | ¥600 (driver, 2 sharing) | ¥1,200 (own driver) |
| **Food & drinks** | ¥300 | ¥550–900 | ¥1,200+ |
| **Getting around** (metro + DiDi) | ¥60 | ¥80–150 | ¥300 |
| **Treats** (massage or spa, rickshaw, Houhai drinks) | ¥0 | ¥300–630 | ¥600+ |
| **Total, per person** | **≈ ¥1,100** | **≈ ¥2,650–4,250** | **≈ ¥5,100+** |
| In US dollars (¥7 ≈ $1) | ≈ US$155 | ≈ US$380–605 | ≈ US$730+ |

## Where to spend, where to save

Middle travel means paying for what matters and saving where it doesn't. Spend on your hotel (you'll walk 20,000+ steps a day), the Great Wall driver and the spa. Save on lunches, which are best at the busy little local spots anyway.

## Easy ways to save

- Eat breakfast and lunch where locals do. Save sit-down meals for dinner.
- Use the metro between 10am and 4pm. Use DiDi when your feet give up.
- Travel outside Golden Week and Chinese New Year. Hotels can double.
- Split the Great Wall driver: it takes up to 6 adults.

BEFORE YOU GO

# Your Beijing checklist

## Paperwork & money

- [ ] Check whether your passport is visa-free for China (many now are), or apply for your visa
- [ ] Passport valid for 6+ months, carried with you every day
- [ ] Alipay set up and linked to your own bank card
- [ ] A little cash (¥200–300) as a backup
- [ ] Travel insurance

## Phone

- [ ] Roaming eSIM bought and installed **before** you fly (way easier than a VPN)
- [ ] DiDi (inside Alipay), Trip.com and a translation app
- [ ] Amap or Apple Maps. Google Maps isn't reliable here
- [ ] Hotel address saved in Chinese characters

## Bookings

- [ ] Hotel booked (page 3)
- [ ] Forbidden City: 7 days ahead, 8pm Beijing time
- [ ] Tiananmen Square: free reservation (required)
- [ ] Great Wall driver confirmed (ask about the hidden lunch and wild coffee)
- [ ] Want a local SIM card too? Book our private driver and she can help you get one, so you can shop on Taobao
- [ ] Temple of Heaven booked if you're visiting on a weekend
- [ ] Dayali duck dinner reserved, or plan to arrive early
- [ ] Spa or massage booked for the evening of Day 2

## In your day bag

- [ ] Comfy walking shoes (seriously)
- [ ] Tissues, hand sanitiser and a power bank
- [ ] A reusable water bottle and snacks
- [ ] Layers: Beijing swings hot and cold

## Want more? It's all on the blog.

Read the full guides to the Forbidden City, Mutianyu by private driver, Universal Studios Beijing and getting online in China at **prettyfarfromhome.com**. Have a question, or want my Great Wall driver? Message me through the blog and I'll help where I can. For China made easy in real time, find me on Instagram and YouTube at **@nickybeebo**.

*Enjoy every step. Nicola x*

Prices and opening rules were checked in October 2026 and can change without notice. Always confirm on official channels before you go. Some links on the blog are affiliate links, which help keep the guides free.