

MAGAZINE

China Connectivity Guide 2026

*eSIM, SIM cards, pocket WiFi and roaming — how to actually stay
connected*



Abstract: eSIM vs local SIM vs pocket WiFi vs international roaming — how to get online in China as a foreign visitor. Covers setup steps, VPN requirements, provider recommendations, and the questions every first-timer asks.

Ready? China!

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Getting Online in China

This is the #1 thing first-time visitors worry about — and the #1 thing they get wrong. China's internet works differently from anywhere else you've traveled. This guide covers the four ways to get online (eSIM, local SIM card, pocket WiFi, and international roaming), how to set up an eSIM step by step, and straight answers to the questions everyone asks — including the big one: "Do I still need a VPN?"

The Golden Rule: For most solo travelers on a trip under a month, a travel eSIM is the best choice — buy it before you fly, scan one QR code, and you're online the moment you land. No airport queues, no passport registration, no extra device to charge. Roughly \$5-20 for a typical 7-day trip.

Part 1 — Your Four Options, Compared

Every traveler to China has four realistic ways to get mobile data. Here's the honest comparison:

Option	Typical Cost (7 days)	Setup	Best For
Travel eSIM	\$5-20	Scan QR code at home	Most travelers, trips up to a month
Local SIM card	\$15-30 one-off	Airport counter + passport registration	Stays over 1 month, need a local number
Pocket WiFi	\$30-100 rental	Pick up & return at airport	Families & groups (connects 5-10 devices)
International roaming	\$35-84 (\$5-12/day)	None — just enable it	Trips under 2 days, or as a backup

The four ways to get online in China, 2026.

- **Travel eSIM:** A digital SIM you download before departure. Instant activation when you land, keeps your home number active for calls and texts, and no extra device. Catch:



most plans are data-only (no local phone number), and you'll need a VPN for blocked apps (more on this below).

- **Local SIM card (China Mobile / Unicom / Telecom):** Sold at airport counters in Beijing, Shanghai, and other major airports. Requires passport registration and a 20-40 minute wait during peak arrivals. You get a local phone number and the cheapest per-GB rates — worth it only for longer stays.
- **Pocket WiFi:** A little router that connects up to 10 devices. Great for families — one rental covers everyone. Downsides: it needs daily charging, it's another thing to carry and return, and when its battery dies, the whole family is offline.
- **International roaming:** The zero-effort option — your home SIM just works. But at \$5-12 per day with daily data caps, a 7-day trip costs \$35-84. Only worth it for very short trips or as an emergency backup line.

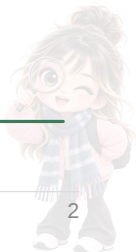
So Which One Should YOU Buy?

Your Situation	Get This
Solo / couple, trip under 1 month	Travel eSIM
Family or group of 3+	Pocket WiFi, or one eSIM + hotspot
Studying / working / 1 month+	Local SIM card
Trip of 1-2 days only	Roaming is fine
Phone doesn't support eSIM	Local SIM or pocket WiFi
Anyone, as backup	Keep roaming enabled on your home SIM

Decision table: which connectivity option fits your trip.

Pro combo: The setup frequent travelers use: a travel eSIM for data + your home SIM left inserted with roaming ON (but mobile data OFF). Your home number still receives calls and SMS verification codes for free, and all data flows through the cheap eSIM. Best of both worlds.

Part 2 — How to Set Up a Travel eSIM



The single biggest eSIM mistake is waiting until you land. Airport WiFi is slow and congested, and installation requires an internet connection. **Always install your eSIM at home, the night before you fly.** It only activates when you arrive in China — installing early costs you nothing.

- **Step 1 — Check compatibility.** iPhone XR/XS and newer, Google Pixel 4 and newer, Samsung Galaxy S20 and newer all support eSIM. Quick test: dial *#06# — if an EID number appears, your phone supports eSIM. Your phone must also be carrier-unlocked.
- **Step 2 — Buy your plan before departure** from a provider like Airalo, Saily, Nomad, or Holafly (all cover China, roughly \$5-20 for 1-10GB). You'll receive a QR code by email instantly.
- **Step 3 — Install on WiFi at home.** iPhone: Settings → Cellular → Add eSIM → scan the QR code. Android: Settings → Network & Internet (or Connections) → SIM Manager → Add eSIM → scan. Name it "China eSIM" so you don't confuse it with your home line.
- **Step 4 — After you land, turn it on.** Toggle the China eSIM ON, set it as your Mobile Data line, and enable **Data Roaming** on it (yes, really — that's how travel eSIMs connect; it doesn't cost extra). Turn mobile data OFF on your home SIM.
- **Step 5 — Test before leaving the airport.** Open a map, load a webpage, send a message. If nothing works: toggle Airplane Mode on/off, check Data Roaming is on, and confirm the eSIM is selected for data.

Warning — the QR code is single-use: An eSIM QR code can usually only be scanned once, and a deleted eSIM generally cannot be reinstalled. Don't delete it mid-trip to 'free up space' — save that for when you're home.

Part 3 — "Do I Still Need a VPN?"

Yes — probably. This is the part most guides gloss over. China's Great Firewall blocks Google, Gmail, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, TikTok, and many Western news sites. **These blocks apply to the network you're on, not to your SIM type.** So here's the honest breakdown:

Connection	Google / WhatsApp / Instagram?
Travel eSIM (most providers)	BLOCKED — VPN needed
Local Chinese SIM card	BLOCKED — VPN needed

Pocket WiFi (standard rental)	BLOCKED — VPN needed (some rentals bundle one — ask!)
Home carrier roaming	Often WORKS — traffic routes through your home country

What the Great Firewall does to each connection type.

Why does roaming sometimes bypass the block? When you roam, your traffic tunnels back through your home carrier's network abroad — effectively exiting the internet in your own country, outside the Firewall. Some Hong Kong-based eSIMs work the same way. The trade-off: roaming is expensive per day, and Hong Kong-routed eSIMs tend to cost more per GB than standard travel eSIMs.

The practical play: Buy a standard travel eSIM for cheap data + install a VPN app BEFORE your trip (VPNs are much harder to download once you're inside the Firewall). With that combo, everything works: local apps run on fast local data, and your VPN handles Google and WhatsApp when you need them. Alternatively, some providers (like 3HK-based plans) route through Hong Kong and skip the VPN entirely — for a price premium.

What works WITHOUT any VPN: WeChat, Alipay, DiDi, Apple Maps, Baidu Maps, Amap, Trip.com, Agoda, Booking.com, your email if it's not Gmail, iMessage, and WhatsApp texts if your VPN is on. Download Amap or Apple Maps before you fly — Google Maps barely works in China even with a VPN, because local mapping data is restricted.

Part 4 — The Questions Everyone Asks

- **"Does my phone support eSIM?"** iPhone XR/XS (2018) and newer, Pixel 4+, Samsung S20+ — basically any flagship from the last few years. Dial *#06# to check for an EID. Important exception: phones bought in mainland China (■■) do NOT support travel eSIMs — get a local SIM or pocket WiFi instead.
- **"Will eSIM mess up my home number?"** No. The eSIM runs alongside your physical SIM. Keep your home line on for calls and SMS (2FA codes still arrive), just move mobile data to the eSIM.
- **"Can I get a Chinese phone number with an eSIM?"** Rarely. Most travel eSIMs are data-only. If you need a local number (some hotel bookings ask for one), get a local SIM card instead — or use your hotel's front desk number.



- **"What if I run out of data?"** Top up instantly in your provider's app — no store visit needed. This is a big advantage over local SIMs, which require a carrier store visit to recharge.
- **"How much data do I need?"** Maps + messaging + light social: 1-3GB per week is plenty. Heavy use (hotspot for laptop, video calls, streaming): 10GB+, or an unlimited plan. Public WiFi is everywhere in China — cafes, hotels, malls — which stretches your data further.
- **"Is eSIM legal in China?"** Yes, visitors using travel eSIMs is completely normal and not prohibited. What is restricted is selling local eSIM service domestically without regulation — not your problem as a tourist.
- **"4G or 5G?"** If your connection feels unstable on 5G, switch your phone to 4G/LTE mode — travel eSIMs sometimes behave more reliably there. Coverage in cities is excellent either way; only remote mountains (Tibet, rural Guangxi) get patchy.
- **"My phone is carrier-locked — now what?"** Locked phones reject travel eSIMs. Either unlock it with your carrier before the trip (usually free, takes a few days), or rent a pocket WiFi instead.

Quick Reference Card

Task	When	How
Buy eSIM	Before departure	Airalo / Saily / Nomad / Holafly
Install eSIM	Night before flight, on WiFi	Settings → Add eSIM → scan QR
Install VPN app	BEFORE entering China	Download & test at home
Download offline maps	Before departure	Amap or Apple Maps
Activate eSIM	After landing	Toggle ON + Data Roaming ON
Keep home SIM for	Calls & SMS only	Mobile data OFF on home line
Don't delete the eSIM	Until you're home	QR codes are single-use

Your connectivity checklist, in order.



Kat's Final Tip: Set up everything before you fly — eSIM installed, VPN downloaded and tested, offline maps saved. The most stressful moment of any China trip is the first 30 minutes after landing, standing in an airport where your usual apps don't work. Spend 20 minutes at home and you walk out of the terminal already online.

For step-by-step VPN setup, Alipay and WeChat Pay guides, DiDi instructions, and honest local advice on every part of your trip, head to www.readychinatravel.com.

Ready? China! — Real tips. Real voice. Real China.

