

MAGAZINE

China Flight Booking Guide 2026

When to book, where to book, and how to save money on flights to and within China



Abstract: When to book, where to book, and how to save money on flights to and within China — based on 2026 data from Expedia, Google, and Skyscanner. For first-time foreign visitors.

Ready? China!

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So You Need to Fly to China

Good news: booking flights to and within China is easier than you think — if you know the rules. Bad news: most Western travel blogs give advice that doesn't apply here. This guide gives you what actually works in 2026: when to book, where to book, and how to avoid the mistakes that cost first-timers hundreds of dollars.

The Golden Rule: Book through Trip.com for all China flights. It's the international version of Ctrip (China's biggest travel platform), works in English, accepts foreign Visa/Mastercard, and shows flights other platforms don't. If you only remember one thing from this guide, remember this.

Part 1 — International Flights to China

Flying to China from abroad? The rules are different from booking domestic flights in your home country. Here's what actually matters.

- **Book 2-5 months ahead** for long-haul flights to China. This is the sweet spot — early enough for early-bird pricing, late enough to catch promotions. Data from Expedia, Google, and Skyscanner all converge here.
- **Book on Sundays.** Expedia's 2025 report shows Sunday bookings save up to 17% on international flights compared to Friday (the most expensive day to book).
- **Fly on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday.** Google's 2025 data shows these are up to 13% cheaper than weekend departures. Friday and Sunday are the priciest days to fly.
- **August is surprisingly cheap** for international flights (up to 7% cheaper than March, per Expedia). Most people assume summer is expensive — not always true for China routes.
- **Shoulder seasons** (March-May and September-October) give you the best combination of price + pleasant weather. Win-win.



Avoid these periods (prices triple): Chinese New Year (late Jan/Feb, dates change yearly), Golden Week (Oct 1-7), and May Day holiday (May 1-5). During these, 1.4 billion people are all traveling at once. Book months ahead if you absolutely must go, or just pick different dates.

Which Platform to Use

- **Google Flights** — Best for researching and comparing prices across airlines. Use the 'Explore' map to find cheapest dates. Set price alerts and wait for a drop.
- **Trip.com** — Best for actually booking. Accepts foreign cards, English interface, includes Chinese domestic flights that Google Flights doesn't always show. 24/7 English customer service.
- **Airline websites** — Air China, China Eastern, China Southern all have English sites. Good if you want to earn frequent flyer miles or need special services.
- **Skyscanner** — Good for finding budget carriers and one-stop routes you might not think of.

Money-saving strategy: Flying into Chengdu, Kunming, or Xi'an can be 30-50% cheaper than Beijing or Shanghai. These cities are just as incredible and make great starting points for exploring China.

Direct vs. connecting: Direct flights to Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou are convenient but premium-priced. One-stop flights via Seoul, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Taipei, or Singapore can save substantially. Common transit time: 2-6 hours. Korean Air, Cathay Pacific, Japan Airlines, and Emirates frequently offer competitive connecting fares.

Critical: If your country needs a visa to enter China, wait for visa approval before booking non-refundable tickets. Even 'guaranteed' processing can take longer than expected. Book refundable flights, or wait. This is the #1 mistake first-timers make.

Part 2 — Domestic Flights Within China



China is massive. Flying is often the best way to cover long distances — Beijing to Shanghai is 2 hours by plane vs. 4.5 hours by high-speed train. But booking domestic flights as a foreigner has its own rules.

- **Book 14-21 days before departure** for the best prices. This is the sweet spot for domestic routes.
- **Peak season** (Chinese New Year, Golden Week, summer): book 45-60 days ahead. Prices only go up.
- **Off-peak** (March-April, November): last-minute deals are sometimes possible as airlines adjust capacity.
- **Early morning** (6-8am) and **late night** (after 11pm) flights are typically 20-40% cheaper than daytime.

The Only Platform You Need: Trip.com

For 90% of foreign travelers, Trip.com is the only platform worth using for domestic Chinese flights. Here's why the local apps are NOT recommended for first-timers:

Platform	Language	Foreign Cards	Verdict
Trip.com	English	Visa/MC/Amex	USE THIS
Ctrip (Chinese)	Chinese only	Often needs CN bank	Avoid
Fliggy (Alibaba)	Chinese only	CN ID needed	Avoid
Qunar	Chinese only	CN phone needed	Avoid
Airline websites	English	Varies	Good backup

Flight booking platforms for foreigners in China.

Major Chinese Airlines

Airline	Best For	Notes
Air China	National carrier	Safety record, intl connections



China Eastern	Shanghai departures	Competitive fares
China Southern	Southern China	Largest by volume
Hainan Airlines	Service & comfort	Best rated for quality
Spring Airlines	Budget fares	NO free checked bag on cheapest fares!

Major Chinese airlines at a glance.

Spring Airlines baggage trap: Fares look incredibly cheap, but the lowest fare class includes ZERO checked baggage. Adding a bag at check-in costs far more than adding it during booking. Always check the baggage allowance before you click 'book'.

Typical Domestic Fares (2026)

Route	Flight Time	Typical Fare (CNY)
Beijing to Shanghai	~2 hours	350-700 (~\$50-100)
Beijing to Guangzhou	~3 hours	450-900 (~\$65-130)
Shanghai to Chengdu	~3 hours	400-800 (~\$55-115)
Shanghai to Xi'an	~2.5 hours	350-650 (~\$50-90)
Beijing to Chengdu	~3 hours	400-800 (~\$55-115)

Typical domestic flight fares in China, 2026.

Part 3 — Airport Survival Guide

- Arrive **2 hours** before domestic flights, **3 hours** for international. Major airports (Beijing, Shanghai) are huge — navigation takes time.
- Security: no liquids over 100ml. Put your bag through X-ray every time.



- Your **passport** is your ID for domestic flights. No Chinese ID card needed — just show your passport at check-in and security.
- English signage available at all major airports: Beijing (PEK/PKX), Shanghai (PVG/SHA), Guangzhou (CAN), Chengdu (TFU/CTU).
- Airport shops often don't accept foreign credit cards — use Alipay or WeChat Pay.
- If your flight is delayed 2+ hours, airlines may provide free food. Ask at the service desk.

Train vs. Plane — the 800km rule: For distances under 800km (like Shanghai to Nanjing, or Chengdu to Chongqing), take the high-speed train instead. It's often faster door-to-door, more comfortable, and rarely delayed. Save flights for distances over 800km.

Multi-Airport Cities — Don't Mix Them Up

- **Beijing:** Capital (PEK) and Daxing (PKX) — check which one your flight uses!
- **Shanghai:** Pudong (PVG) for international, Hongqiao (SHA) for mostly domestic — 40km apart. Do NOT mix them up.
- **Chengdu:** Tianfu (TFU) and Shuangliu (CTU) — TFU is newer and handles most flights now.

Part 4 — Pro Tips & Money-Saving Tricks

- Set price alerts on Google Flights 6-8 months before your trip. You'll get notified when prices drop — book within 24 hours of a drop.
- Check both airports for multi-airport cities. Shanghai Pudong (PVG) and Hongqiao (SHA) can have very different prices for the same route.
- Book flights and hotels together on Trip.com — bundle deals can save 30%+ compared to booking separately.
- Use incognito/private browsing when searching. Some platforms raise prices if they detect you've searched the same route repeatedly.
- Airline member days: Air China (8th), China Eastern (18th), China Southern (28th) sometimes release flash sales. Worth checking if your dates are flexible.



- Shoulder season (March-April, October-November excluding Golden Week) = 20-30% cheaper than peak, with better weather too.
- Multi-city China trip? Book all domestic flights on Trip.com at once for better routing options.

Quick Reference Card

What	When	How Much You Save
Book international flights	2-5 months ahead	Up to 25% vs last-minute
Book domestic flights	14-21 days ahead	8-12% vs peak pricing
Best day to book	Sunday	Up to 17% vs Friday
Best days to fly	Tue/Wed/Thu	Up to 13% vs weekends
Cheapest month (intl)	August	Up to 7% vs March
Cheapest time of day	Early AM / late PM	20-40% vs daytime
Avoid booking	CNY, Golden Week	Prices 2-3x normal

Quick reference: when to book and how much you save.

Kat's Final Tip: Don't overthink it. The biggest savings come from: (1) booking at the right time, (2) flying on the right days, and (3) using Trip.com. Everything else is fine-tuning. Get these three right and you've saved more than most travelers ever will.

For visa guides, hotel booking tips, transport guides, and honest local advice on what to actually do once you land, head to www.readychinatravel.com. We've got your back from booking to boarding to Beijing.

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

