



A Guide to the Chinese Railways for the International Traveller

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*Unless otherwise indicated, contents of this PDF document refers to the national rail system
in the Mainland of China only.*

Welcome (back) to China. Thanks for thinking of going Green by rail.

On 15 March 2023, the Chinese authorities reopened the border to all. Inbound group tourism resumed in April 2023. Rail, once again, is the best way to get across the country (even if you flew into the country). With this in mind, and considering the visible changes across the network, here is a guide to the Chinese railways for the international traveller.

A Brief History of Railways in China

The British were first building railways in China in the late 19th century. The first track was laid just outside the Imperial City in Beijing, but was opposed by the authorities and had to be removed, a similar fate which happened the Woosung Railway. The first permanent tracks laid on Chinese soil were what is now part of the Tianjin-Shanhaiguan Railway just by Tangshan.

Sun Yat-sen's Republic of China prioritised the development of an expansive rail network. After the Communist revolution of 1949, the newly-established People's Republic set about an ambitious plan to build railways — including tackling tough, mountainous terrain — and efforts to build the network were accelerated after Deng Xiaoping's reforms, most significantly due to increased demand.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the foundations were laid for the nation's world-famous High Speed network, through accelerating Classic services in six rounds, building passenger-only new trunk lines, and importing, then creating on their own, HSR rolling stock. In April 2007, the first HSR-savvy electrical multiple unit trains entered operation. On 01 August 2008, China's first 350 km/h (217 mph) line opened between Beijing and Tianjin. Today, China's HSR network is the largest in the world, with the fastest trains in operation there. Its national rail network is the second-largest globally.

The Network

The current network is a mix of both an 8x8 network for Classic Rail, and, mostly overlaid on top of this, a mostly separate 8x8 network for High Speed, complemented by intercity and suburban lines in larger agglomerations.

In future development plans, particular attention has been given in linking the country's four major urban hubs — Northern China (Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei), Eastern China (mostly Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang), Southern China (the Greater Bay Area comprising of Guangdong, Hong



Some stations in China are over a hundred years old. Up: Qinglongqiao (Chingloongchiao) station, part of the Imperial Peking-Kalgan Railway (now part of the Beijing-Baotou Railway), which opened in 1909 to traffic, and was the first such railway designed and built entirely by the Chinese. Below: Tangshan South (formerly "just" Tangshan) station, with its footbridge intact from 1923, a station on a railway line which was China's first permanent line (now part of the Tianjin-Shanhaiguan Railway).



中长期高速铁路网规划图



Official Chinese government map outlining the major routes on the High Speed network. North-south routes are highlighted in blue; east-west routes are in lime.

Kong, and Macau), and Southwestern China (Sichuan and Chongqing). Major hubs in the heartland, including Zhengzhou, Wuhan, and Xi'an, also stand to benefit from more and faster links.

Most tend to travel by High Speed, so here are the main 8x8 lines in the network (8 north-south and 8 east-west lines).

North-South:

1. Coastal HSR route (Dalian-Beihai, along the coast, going via Tianjin, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and others)
2. Beijing-Shanghai HSR
3. Beijing-Hong Kong/Taipei HSR (via Nanchang)
4. Harbin-Hong Kong/Macau HSR (via Beijing and Wuhan)
5. Hohhot-Nanning HSR
6. Beijing-Kunming HSR
7. Baotou-Haikou HSR (via Xi'an)
8. Lanzhou-Guangzhou HSR (via Chengdu)

East-West:

1. Suifenhe-Manzhouli HSR (via Harbin)
2. Beijing-Lanzhou HSR (via Hohhot and Yinchuan)
3. Qingdao-Yinchuan HSR
4. Eurasian HSR route (Lianyungang-Zhengzhou-Xi'an-Ürümqi)
5. Yangtze HSR route (Shanghai-Chengdu via Wuhan)

6. Shanghai-Kunming HSR
7. Xiamen-Chongqing HSR
8. Guangzhou-Kunming HSR

In practice, the presence of these specific routes (some of which are nearing completion) is hardly made to feel significant, as trains run between major destinations, and actual routes operated criss-cross the whole country. So it is quite possible for a train to use a number of these lines to finish one journey, or just part of a single line.

Stations on the network are usually named after a city, and sometimes for a specific part of town. Cardinal directions (as found on a compass) are also used. Names used including those in Chinese characters, Hanyu Pinyin, and English, although names in Hanyu Pinyin are sometimes used "in place" of English (eg: "Guangzhounan railway station" = Guangzhou South railway station). (The Hanyu Pinyin name is often used on tickets, departure boards, and some newer signs.)



Some station signage now reflect the Hanyu Pinyin name of the station, as is shown on printed tickets and itineraries, whilst others remain in English only. However, in both cases, the Chinese name is the same and determinant.

Getting Your Ticket

Everyone must have a ticket to travel. In nearly all cases, this must be bought before you travel. Access to platforms and trains are usually controlled by ticket gates, which usually are a combination of automated and staffed gates.

It is much easier if you buy using the China Railway 12306 smartphone app. You will find it much easier to travel, once it is set up. You can buy, change, and return tickets just using your mobile phone. An English version is available, or you could use the Chinese version if you want more functions.

Otherwise, you should buy your ticket at any railway station in Mainland China, or Hong Kong West Kowloon railway station.



This is the official logo of the China Railway 12306 online/mobile ticketing system. If you use a third-party service, you risk not being supported by the railways in the event of there being a problem with your booking, or with other issues.

Look for "Railway 12306" or "铁路 12306" on your app store. The app is bilingual.

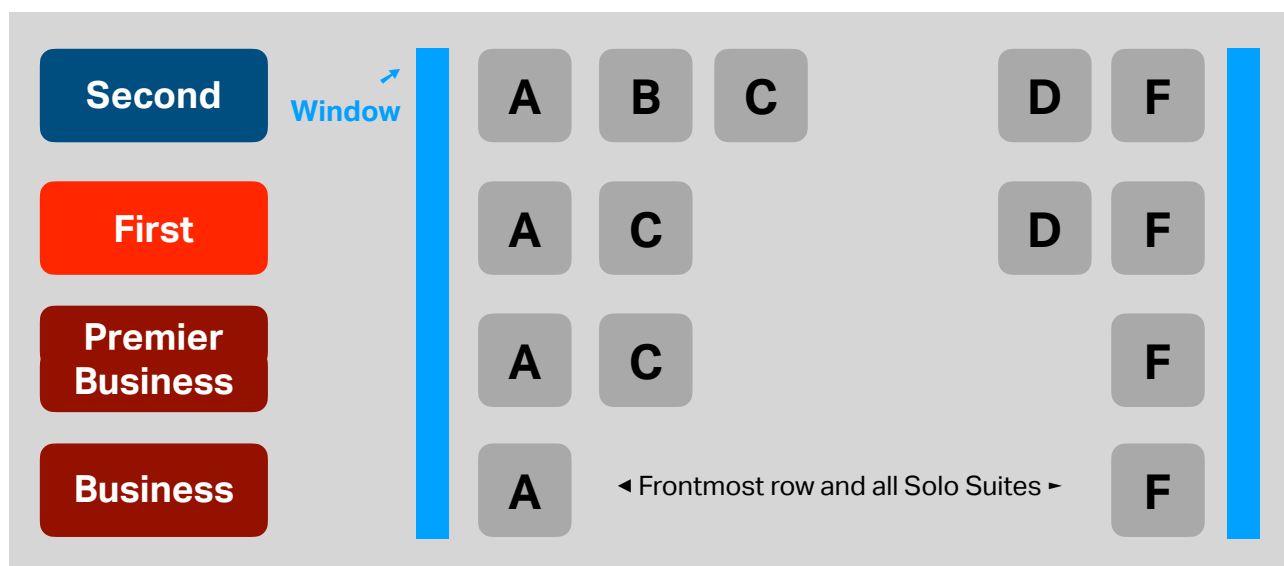
There are some sites operated by third parties whom will try to buy rail tickets for you. Please be aware that they are not authorised by the railways. If there is a ticketing problem, the railways will not be able to help you if you used these services.

The China Railway 12306 smartphone app accepts payments made in local (Mainland Chinese) bank accounts, local UnionPay cards, and Visa and MasterCard. If you are buying tickets in Hong Kong at machines or the ticket office, you could also use your Octopus public transport card.

If you have a Chinese Green Card, you will be able to use ticket machines, which are also available in English at some stations. A number of ticket machines elsewhere in the network claim to accept passports, although some have reported they consistently fail.

Nearly all tickets come with free compulsory seat reservation. Depending on the class of travel, especially on High Speed, you can choose whether you want solo, window, or aisle.

Window seats — Seats A and F
Aisle seats — Seats C and D (Seat D in First Class only)
Middle seat — Seat B (Second Class only)



On the new Business Suites, your solo seat is both a window and aisle seat. For all other Business Class seats, your F seat (and occasionally A seat) is both a window and aisle seat.

In Classic Rail, it is not easy to pick your ideal seat by the window. It is easier to choose between Upper, Middle, and Lower berths (Middle berth available only for Hard Sleeper class).

Tickets are available for the next 15 days of travel (with today counted as Day 1).

For example: on 01 March, you can buy tickets through to, and including, 15 March.

At ticket counters, they will be available for the next 13 days of travel. At some stations, they are available with a much more limited availability (eg: travel for the next three days only).

You will need government-issued ID to buy tickets. All foreign nationals may use national passports (they should be passport booklets). For those whom are settled in Mainland China, the Chinese Green Card (Foreign Permanent Resident ID Card) issued by the central government in Beijing will

also work. If your passport is lost, or with Immigration for a visa or permit application or extension, passport loss reports or Certificates of Application will also be accepted. A temporary passport or travel document issued by your home embassy will also work, but should have a valid Chinese visa or other permit affixed on it first. If you have a China-issued Alien Exit/Entry Permit, these will also work.

Only foreign passports and Chinese Green Cards are accepted for online booking.

Standby Ticketing

If you have an account on the official China Railways 12306 ticketing system, you may be able to get a standby ticket on trains in heavy demand.

You will need to complete online user verification (which is done within the app) to qualify.

You can choose your class of travel and wait online in that queue. You will need to make a payment first. If travelling in sleepers, you will need to pay the amount due for the most expensive berth (usually lower berth).

If the system is unable to buy a ticket for you through standby ticketing, you will be refunded in full. If travelling in sleepers, if your standby ticket purchased is less expensive than the one charged beforehand, any price difference will be returned to you.

Standby ticketing is not available if less than 2 hours remain before departure.

You might not be able to choose your seat if you use standby ticketing.



Changing Travel Plans

48 hours before the timetabled departure of your train is a critical time period when it comes to changing travel plans.

If you change travel plans **before** this cut-off time, you have far more options. You **can** change to any train whose tickets are still being sold, and you **can** change your destination as well.

For example:

It is now 14:30 on 15th June.

You can change your train you originally booked for at 16:10 on 17th June from Ji'nan West.

You can change this to any train on 29th June.

You can rebook your ticket so that your Ji'nan-Beijing train becomes a Ji'nan-Shanghai train.

If, however, you change travel plans after this cut-off time, you can **only** change to any train leaving no later than 24:00 on your date of departure (although you can also travel earlier). You **cannot** change your destination.

For example:

It is now 17:00 on 5th September.

You have a ticket for the 16:40 train from Xi'an to Shanghai, leaving at 16:40 on 7th September.

You can change this to the 20:52 train, also from Xi'an to Shanghai, leaving at 20:52 on 7th September, or even earlier (eg: on 6th September).

You cannot, however, change this for a train leaving on 10th September.

You cannot change this ticket from Xi'an-Shanghai to Xi'an-Guangzhou.

If you miss your train

If you miss your train, provided you have not made any changes to your ticket before, you **can** travel on the next available train on the same day, as long as tickets are still available.

You might not be able to choose your preferred seat.

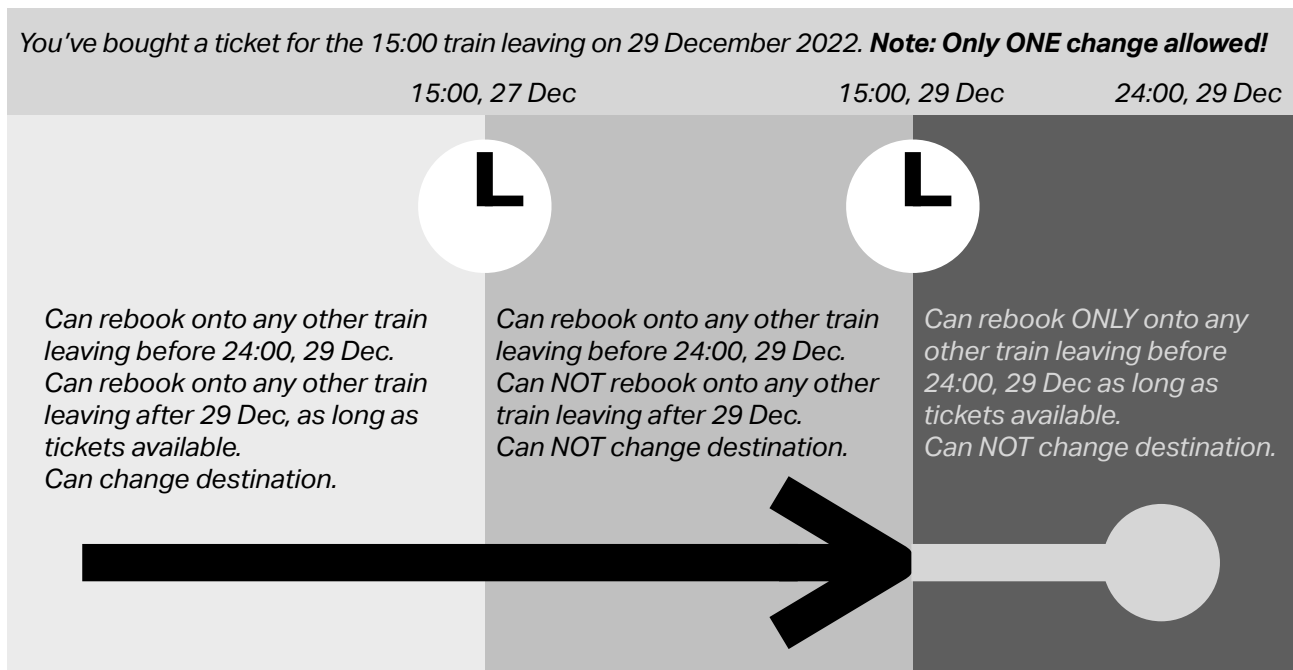
You **will not** be able to change your destination.

You **will not** be able to change your ticket to the next day or beyond.

You **will not** be able to return this ticket for a refund.

If all other trains running between your departure and arrival stations are fully booked out, you **will not** be able to travel on that ticket.

You **will not** be able to change travel plans a second time, except for if you are returning tickets which have been rebooked or otherwise changed, and you are making the refund before your train (as on the ticket) departs.



Returning Your Ticket for a Refund

Different rules may apply if your train crosses a national or territorial border (eg between Mainland China and Hong Kong).

For all-Mainland China trains, you do not pay a refund fee if you return your ticket between Day 8 and Day 15 before travel.

eg: If you turn your 10th November ticket in on 30th October, you pay no refund fee.

However, if you have rebooked your ticket, you might pay a 5% refund fee even after making changes to your ticket before. This applies when you've changed your date of travel 48 hours (or more; up to 8 days in advance) before your original departure, then rebooked onto a train leaving in 8 days or later, but then ask for your money back 8 days before travel.

eg: You bought a ticket for 17th April, then on 8th April, changed it for a train departing 24th April. If you return this ticket on 16th April, you might still pay the 5% refund fee.

Refund fees apply for all circumstances if less than 8 days remain before departure.

- 5% — Refund fee 48 hours - 8 days before departure
- 10% — Refund fee 24-48 hours before departure
- 20% — Refund fee if there are less than 24 hours before departure

You will be charged a refund fee even if you rebook, and there is a price difference to be paid. This is because, where a rebook results in a price difference, the original ticket is returned at the same time a new ticket is issued to you. You pay the percentage of refund fees due as if you were returning, not rebooking, the ticket.

You can get refunds online or at select ticket machines. All you need is your ID (or your user account on the China Railways 12306 app). However, if you have printed your ticket's expenses receipt (as a blue ticket), you will need to return that ticket first.

The railways are supposed to provide you with refund fee receipts, which, at least in Mainland China, are accepted as expenses receipts for reimbursement purposes.

Refund fees are **rounded to the next CNY 0.50**.

For amounts less than CNY 0.25, this part is not charged to you.

For amounts between CNY 0.25 and CNY 0.74, you pay CNY 0.50.

For amounts CNY 0.75 and larger (but less than 1 yuan), you pay CNY 1.—.

For example:

A refund fee of CNY 26.73 will result in you paying CNY 26.50.

A refund fee of CNY 192.24 will result in you paying CNY 192.—.

A refund fee of CNY 4.98 will result in you paying CNY 5.—.

If your ticket is of a very low value (eg: CNY 2.— or less), you might not be able to get a refund at all. You could hang on to the ticket as a souvenir.

There are some cases where refund fees are not charged at all, even following departure:

- in the event of natural disasters
- in the event the railways themselves cancel or reschedule the train
- if you fall ill or become injured (you might need to provide supporting documentation)

If your train suffers significant delays, you might be able to get your ticket refunded without fees as well.

In the event of public health emergencies, as was seen during Covid-19, the railways will waive all refund fees in the event of closed borders, cancelled trains, or other events making regular rail operations difficult or impossible.



Ticket Offices at Chinese Railway Stations

Newer stations offer a far better ticketing experience. Customers sit face to face with ticketing staff, and a queueing system with plenty of seats (for those who need to wait) is sometimes used. All counters can offer the vast majority of services, with one counter set out as the ID Office (for those who need to have their identity verified to get temporary traveller ID issued).

Older stations offer the more conventional “window counter + queue” system, which will require you to stand in line and wait until you are being served. Depending on the queue, and the counter itself, one or more services will be offered:

- Ticket sales (售票)
- Rebooking (改签), which includes changes to your destination
- Refunds (退票)
- Priority Care (重点旅客)
- Director on Duty (值班主任)
- ID Offices (公安制证)

If you find yourself in a difficult situation, the Director on Duty counter, where one is offered, is seen as the “troubleshooter’s counter”. Otherwise, approach the Priority Care counter.

Refund counters cannot sell or change your tickets. ID Offices cannot help you with any form of ticketing at all. So if you see a very short queue for refunds, but a long one for other ticketing services, you will unfortunately have to wait!

The railways now generally expect payment using WeChat Pay or AliPay. Cards issued abroad seem to work on the China Railways 12306 smartphone app only, although at Hong Kong West Kowloon station, they seem to work. But, if you continue to use cash or cards (Mainland China-issued UnionPay cards recommended, although Hong Kong-issued UnionPay cards sometimes seem to work as well), they will be accepted as well.

Please be aware that only ticket offices at major rail hubs operate 24/7, or for much of the day. Those at minor stations will operate far shorter business hours, and sometimes might be highly

irregular — they might be opened mostly only around when a train comes into the station and lets passengers on/off the train.



Newer stations, mostly on the High Speed network, use Service Centres where you can sit down and buy your ticket or make travel arrangements. All services are usually available. However, at older stations, you might need to form a queue at a specific ticket counter you require, and must stand.

Important Information About Your Railway Ticket

These form part of the fine print, which continue to be printed on all blue tickets acting as expenses receipts.

Keep your ticket with you at all times

Only a valid ticket is good for travel. As most places issue e-tickets with all tickets personal, your ID document itself will be the "ticket" requirement.

Change travel plans before departure

In most cases, you cannot suddenly decide to travel on another train — if you intend to make any changes to your travel plans, you must do so before departure. The exception is when you have missed your train, and still want to leave on the same day.

Watch the free baggage limit

Adults may carry 20 kg of free baggage per person. Children can only carry 10 kg. Diplomats may carry up to 35 kg. The combined length, height, and width of an item of baggage may not exceed 160 cm; this is 130 cm if travelling onboard High Speed Rail. No stick-like item may exceed 2 metres in height, and they must never be raised (risk of electrocution!). In reality, this rule is very loosely enforced (except the stick-like item rules).

Bulky items must be consigned

If you are carrying heavy or bulky items (such as bikes) they must be consigned and may not be brought with you onboard.

Dangerous items are not permitted

There is a whole list of what's not permitted, but in general, anything that's inflammable, explosive, or risks damaging the train will be considered dangerous and won't be allowed for transport. (As of late, sharps and portable power banks have also been checked more and more.)

Gates close before departure

You will need to arrive at your station early, as gates close before your train departs — this varies per station, but is usually 5 minutes before departure (but this can change!).

Remain only in parts of stations opened to the public

Never attempt to jump off the track, or to hold trains there. Never attempt to enter places out of bounds to the public.

Watch it! There's a blacklist

If you are using someone else's ticket, or travelling without a valid ticket, or are suspected of ticket-related fraud, you could be blacklisted for travel. Also, although the fine print doesn't mention this, smoking onboard High Speed trains, or in parts of Classic Rail trains where a ban applies, will land you on the blacklist for up to 180 days.

In case of...

In the event of changes to the timetables (initiated by the railways), and where your journey is impacted by this, the railways will offer free rebooking/destination rebook or refund services. You will not need to pay any fees. In the event of natural disasters, please follow instructions from rail crew.

Only buy tickets from official sources

The China Railway 12306 (铁路 12306) smartphone app and the 12306.cn website are the only official ticketing channels for the Chinese railways. Using any other service is at your risk and not recommended.

The China Railways Conditions of Carriage is generally its *Railway Passenger Transport Regulations* (铁路客运运输规程), last updated for 2023. Special rules apply to cross-border trains. Also, pay attention to station announcements, as last-minute changes could be announced there.

E-ticketing is supposed to be "invisible" to you; you just turn up with your identity document, check in, and travel. However, you can still print your ticket — either in the form of itinerary slips, or expenses receipts. Both are available to you at no extra cost.

Itinerary Slips

In the newer generation of rail ticketing systems, every journey is registered there and is, especially for journeys where ID is required, connected to an identity document. Therefore, it is possible to print a personalised itinerary slip.

The itinerary slip is in white, partially bilingual (largely bilingual if printed at Hong Kong West Kowloon), and contains information about your journey, your seat/berth reservation, dates and times, station names, and information on the traveller and linked ID. It can be printed for all journeys — including for children who go for free, as well as journeys paid via rail miles.

The slip itself is not valid for boarding. It can also be called directly, or displayed in another way, on the China Railway 12306 smartphone app. Although not good for travel on its own, it is useful to have, and sometimes asked for at stations (for faster processing).

Itinerary slips can be printed at ticket counters. You will need your ID document, and your type of ID document and its number, as well as name, and order number. They are also automatically printed for any journey booked or changed at ticket counters. Chinese Green Card users can also get them from standalone itinerary printers, or from most ticket machines. From machines, they can only be printed twice; at counters, they can be printed as often as is needed. They are available at any time

before you check in (by passing through the departure gates). Online, at 12306.cn, they are available even after you're onboard the train.

Expenses Receipts (Blue Tickets)

E-tickets can be printed as "regular" blue tickets (or in some cases, pink tickets on older devices). They are not valid for travel on their own, but serve as proof of payment.

Whether or not they are needed for reimbursement purposes depends on which company in which country you work for — in mainland China, the law dictates that reimbursement is not possible at all without this blue ticket (or pink ticket).

Expenses receipts can be printed at ticket counters. You will need your ID document, its number, and your journey's order number. Chinese Green Card users can also get them from ticket machines. They can only be printed once, and if lost, cannot be reprinted. They are also only available before departure (but after booking) and no more than 180 days after the end of a journey.

At the Station

Chinese railway stations vary greatly — some are very straightforward, almost hut-like stations by the highway, others are multi-level complexes with up to 34 national rail platforms and many metro lines.

In accordance with Chinese law, all passengers are expected to carry valid ID (such as a passport or Chinese Green Card), and to go through a security check. Some are almost airport-like (although generally speaking, you will keep your shoes on, and laptops do not need to be scanned separately). In some stations, only one security check is needed; in other stations, separate checks are needed in the rail or metro parts, respectively, or a second check might be required for ticket holders.

Larger hubs may limit access to the main Departures or Arrival halls to ticket holders, where members of the general public are not admitted beyond a certain point.

Passengers waiting for trains at smaller stations may just need to board from one or two ticket gates for all trains (or specific ones going in certain directions). Those leaving from larger hubs will need to choose their specific gate — sometimes split between A and B gates, for faster access to your specific carriage.

If you are leaving from a station which is considered a **halt for ticketing purchases**, unless you've bought a ticket in advance, you may be able to buy as you enter the station and/or board the train.

Platform tickets are no longer sold. In some cases, you can accompany a passenger requiring travel assistance (usually those requiring a wheelchair, whom are pregnant, or otherwise requiring special assistance), but will need to provide details of the train and your ID. Do not attempt to board trains in these situations.

Gates close before your train's departure. As a general rule, this is 5 minutes before departure. Do not attempt to force your way through departure gates — because station staff will check all have boarded and the doors to your train may close, in practice, as early as 2 minutes before departure!

At some stations (notably Badaling Great Wall railway station) the cut-off time for passing the departure gates is 12 minutes, because you will need to walk through longer passageways to get to your train. On occasion, a station may set different cut-off times for boarding per platform, but this is rare. It's always best to arrive at your station 20-30 minutes before the timetabled time of your train's departure, so you can pass through Ticket, ID, and Security Check, and familiarise yourself of where gates to your trains are.



At newer stations, your boarding gate usually corresponds to the platform your train will be travelling from (although there are very rare exceptions). At larger stations, A and B gates will be used to get you closer to your carriage. At older, smaller stations, there may be only a few or one central gate used.

Passing the Gateline

Access to trains is generally controlled via a gateline system. In most stations, just one check at the departure gateline will be required. At other stations, additional checks may be needed as you get to the station.

Most stations now use e-ticketing as well as the Personal Ticketing Policy, so your ID, especially your passport or Chinese Green Card, will suffice as the ticket itself. There's generally no need to print tickets before travel.

Passport holders

Some automated gates may come with a passport reader. Otherwise, generally all gateline barriers come with a standalone identity document reader with the passport reader integrated. Place your machine-readable or biometric passport there. Open the passport and place your data page face down flat on the reader (so your national emblem is showing). As some passports print all personal data on hardened polycarbonate, do not force your passport onto the reader — if the hardened polycarbonate snaps, your passport could end up invalidated on its own.

If the reader won't work, or if you have an older form of passport, present it to gateline staff, who will check you in via a handheld e-ticket inspection device.



If you are using a passport with a machine-readable zone on your data page, place that page flat on the reader, and hold it on the reader for 5- 10 seconds. (The emblem of your home country should be visible and face up.) For Chinese Green Cards, use it as if it was a contactless transport card.

Chinese Green Card holders

Tap your Chinese Green Card onto the reader just like locals do with their national identity cards.

Other forms of accepted ID

Please see gateline staff if you are carrying other forms of accepted ID for visitors or expats. These include passport loss reports, Certificates of Application, or China-issued Alien Exit/Entry Permits, as well as temporary passports issued by your home embassy.

At the Platform

Platform car markers are used in one way or the other, to ensure you are at the right part of the platform for boarding your train.

At most stations, this will be stickers affixed to the platform. These will be colour-coded, as some parts of the station serve 8-car trains, whilst others serve 16- or 17-car trains.

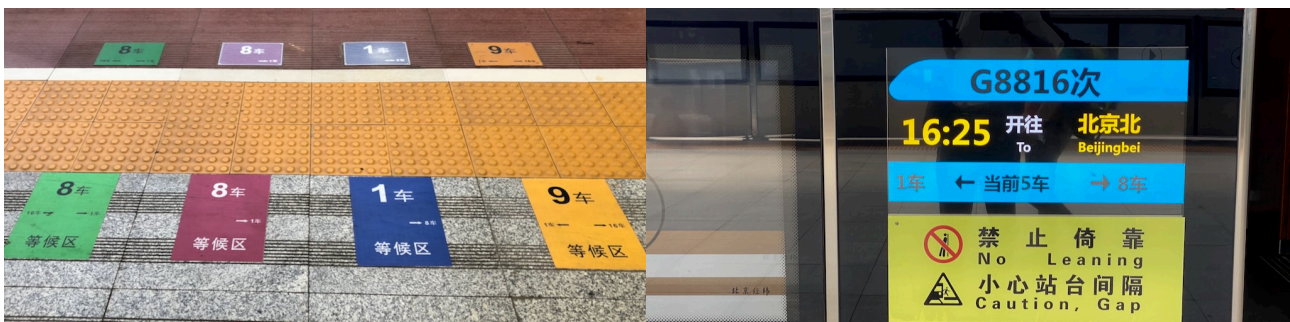
Remember the different colours and what they mean (as they might be shown on the screens):

- 黄色/橙色地标 = Yellow/orange marker ■
- 绿色地标 = Green marker ■
- 蓝色地标 = Blue marker ■
- 紫色/红色 = Purple/red marker ■

In some stations, these will be part of digital displays on the platform. Just follow the arrows to your part of your train.

At stations with platform edge doors or automatic fences, these will be on the platform edge door or automatic platform fence device itself, along with details of your train (eg train number and time of departure) on the device box (or screen door) itself.

At Hong Kong West Kowloon station, platform car markers are shown in suspended signage on the platform.



For faster boarding, always wait at the specific carriage of your train as indicated on your ticket. Depending on your train's direction of travel, or the length of your train, you might need to use a yellow/orange, green, blue, or purple/red marker. Also check displays on platform screen doors or elsewhere.

It's advisable to wait just by the doors as the train arrives. Let passengers exit first, and where possible, use any available door nearby for boarding. Only step on the yellow pavings or go beyond the safety line when a train is on the platform and the doors are opened; otherwise, you should

stand well back from the edge of the platform, as at some stations, trains pass through without stopping at speeds up to 350 km/h (217 mph)!

On older Classic Rail trains, generally only one set of doors is used, and quite a number of trains still require staff to open doors by hand. You might also not be able to move freely inside the train if you're crossing to a different class of travel.



Classic Rail trains used to come in all colours, but are now increasingly dark olive-yellow. High Speed trains are either white/blue (earlier trains), or are now generally red or orange. Lime trains are marketed as High Speed, but travel at much lower speeds. They are also more comfortable than Classic trains.

Onboard Trains

Trains in China have train numbers (or service numbers, alternatively known as train codes). Numbers ending in odd digits indicate trains leaving Beijing; those ending in evens indicate trains headed to the capital. It is not rare for trains to change numbers whilst enroute as they head closer to the capital, then at a major stop start moving away from Beijing.

Train numbers that are all numbers are the slowest trains, with those with a train number greater than 6000 the slowest. Although letters denote faster trains, an "A" train doesn't necessarily indicate a superfast HSR service. The letters, in terms of how fast a train is, are as follows:

- **G** (高速; *gao su*) — High Speed, fastest (up to 350 km/h or 217 mph)
- **C** (城际; *cheng ji*) — High Speed intercity, speeds up to 350 km/h or 217 mph, although most are notably slower
- **D** (动车; *dong che*) — High Speed regional (or HS sleeper), speeds usually between 160 km/h (100 mph) and 250 km/h (157 mph)
- **Z** (直特; *zhi te*) — Classic Direct Express, fastest Classic trains (160 km/h or 100 mph)
- **T** (特快; *te kuai*) — Classic Express, relatively fast Classic trains (140 km/h or 85 mph)
- **K** (快速; *kuai su*) — Classic Accelerated, in fact not as fast as it's marketed — usually 100-120 km/h (60-75 mph), sometimes slower

Other trains are Classic but by a specific purpose or marketed individually:

- **L** (临客; *lin ke*) — Temporary add-on train, almost always Classic Rail (and now increasingly rare)
- **S** (市郊; *shi jiao*) — Suburban train
- **Y** (绿哟; *lü you*) — Tourist train

These trains are known to be significantly slower.

Trains with five digits (and no letters) are reserved mostly for rail crew. On occasion, they *might* also let members of the public onboard, but there is not be a guarantee here.

The same train number system is used for trains to/from Hong Kong. For now, the Laos part of the China-Laos railway uses a similar system, but it's not known if there will be any changes when international passenger through trains start running.

For convenience in identification, Classic Rail trains (almost always) are olive-yellow in appearance. White, red, and yellow trains are High Speed. Lime trains are treated as High Speed, but run at far slower speeds (closer to Classic Rail, at 160 km/h / 100 mph).

When Onboard

Please get on and off trains quickly. Doors open and close automatically; unlike trains elsewhere, passengers should not operate the door controls on Chinese trains. Be aware that if you get off the train halfway through your journey, you are not allowed to continue your journey on that train, as you will have forfeited onward travel.

Smoking is discouraged, and you will find places and opportunities to take a smoke have vastly decreased. Only on some Classic trains is smoking permitted in the part between carriages. Smoking is banned on the Qinghai-Tibet railway especially at higher elevations (eg Golmud-Lhasa). Cigars, pipes, and e-cigarettes are generally treated on similar conditions as "ordinary" cigarettes. Heavy fines await anyone who breaches the smoking ban, and you risk being blacklisted from the railways for up to 180 days. Prosecution and/or imprisonment may also likely result, especially if serious consequences happen.

Catering is available onboard most trains, except Classic trains, short-haul trains over a shorter distance, and onboard some Suburban services. Onboard more and more High Speed trains, you will be able to order from your seat using the service QR code by your seat's armrest.

Classes of Travel



Business Suites offer the most exclusive way to travel, and are great for the privacy-obsessed. Onboard some trains, you even get your own closing door. However, some seats have poor access to windows. Regular Business Class seats feel less "cramped", but have less features than on Suites.

Onboard High Speed trains, Business, First, and Second Class are frequently seen. A handful of trains have Premier Class, but never onboard any train which also has Business Class, and vice-versa.

Business Class

1+1 seating throughout Business Suites, sometimes even with your own closing door, like onboard a good, modern airplane. Some have reported these seats appear somewhat cramped, but the ultimate in privacy is unbeatable. Every seat has its own TV set, although usually, travellers tend to use their own mobile devices instead!

1+1 seating at the frontmost row on other Business Class trains, otherwise 2+1 seating. The F seat is always a Solo seat. On a few select trains, there is wireless mobile device charging, as is standard with Business Suites. All Business Class seats come with a 220V power socket; some may even have at a USB-A port.

Premier Class

2+1 seating throughout (the F seat is almost always a solo seat, except in Premier Compartments). Premier Class costs slightly more than First Class, and is a little bit more exclusive, but actually has more cramped legroom. Recommended if travelling alone seeking a little bit more privacy; otherwise, First Class is a better alternative.

On some older CRH380A seats, part of the train may have Premier Compartments, which is a compartment of two 3-seaters with larger tables facing side by side. The idea was to roll them out the train especially in Business Class, but cost-cutting measures and the Wenzhou train crash in summer 2011 killed off plans for wider-scale deployment.

First Class

Usually 2+2 seating throughout. Spacious and a good deal between comfort and affordability. Available onboard all High Speed trains. Newer trains, in particular, come with power ports including USB ports.



Premier Class is usually a set of 8 seats (or less) at the far end of the train, although one a handful of trains, they are a 6-seat compartment. Legroom can be very cramped on some trains. First Class usually has no solo seats, but offers more legroom in comparison and is available on all HSR trains.

Second Class

Usually 3+2 seating throughout. Relatively spacious, can be crowded at times, but affordable and usually not fully booked except during peak travel periods.

With Classic Rail, most classes of travel on offer include Hard Seat, Hard Sleeper, and Soft Sleeper, and on occasion, Luxury Soft Sleeper and Soft Seat. Note: Onboard HSR, sleepers are also available — generally Soft Sleeper, and onboard newer trains, solo sleepers to the sides of the main aisle.

Hard Seat Class

Comparable to Second Class elsewhere. 3+2 seating in general. In spite of its travel class marketing, Hard Seat does not feel *that* hard to sit on. Fixed table, generally with a tray used as a litter collector. Tends to get quite crowded especially in period of heavy demand.

Soft Seat Class

Comparable to First Class elsewhere. Relatively rare. 2+2 seating in general. Seats are not sofa-like in "softness". This class of travel is more a status symbol, because during the days of the centrally-planned economy, only persons of a certain status or rank were permitted to travel on these.

Hard Sleeper

Open-plan bunks with upper, middle, and lower berths. Can be crowded. Watch out for people placing their feet way beyond the bunk frames! Usually each open-plan bunk carries 6 berths.

Soft Sleeper

Enclosed bunks of four berths in a compartment; only upper and lower berths available. Far less crowded and often the best way to travel long-distance on Classic Rail.

Luxury Soft Sleeper

Comparatively more rare. Two berths (one upper berth, one lower berth) along with private toilet (Classic Rail) or cupboard/wardrobe (High Speed).

Dining Car

Most Classic Rail trains and some High Speed trains have a full dining car. "Real" fires can be used onboard Classic Rail trains, which is why food from a Classic kitchen is known to taste far better than onboard High Speed, where only heated food packages are permitted.

Priority Care Passengers

If you are a passenger who needs special assistance, especially if you are elderly, travelling with infants, ill, disabled, or pregnant, Priority Care services are available to help you with your journey.

In particular, if you are using wheelchairs, crutches, are frail, or have a medical condition of concern, Special Priority Care services will help you make your journey a smooth one.

This travel assistance service is available for free, but needs to be booked. The best way to do this is by calling the China Railway Hotline on 12306 (within Mainland China). Ask for the English service, and make your request there.

It is best to reserve about 12 hours before travel, so to make sure travel is as smooth as possible.

Priority Care passengers have access to special dedicated lounges and can board and exit trains first. They are generally also always in the care of a member of staff.

In China, Priority Care is often done with staff at your side, in contrast to self-service access for the disabled and those less able to move.

Follow these signs to access these services:

重点旅客

Priority Care passenger

(爱心服务)

(special care)

The presence of Priority Care passengers is generally announced between staff, so to ensure you a safe and comfortable journey. Staff have shown themselves to be caring and professional.

Business Class Passengers

You get more if you travel by Business Class. More and more places are adding dedicated services for those travelling in Business.

Dedicated Entrance

At more and more stations, both big and small, dedicated access routes are available for Business Class passengers, allowing you to skip the queue and complete security check with less people.

Business Class Lounge

Most stations now feature Business Class Lounges, and more are making these available. They are a good place to relax. Some even come with private rooms for meetings (subject to availability).

Priority Boarding

At more and more stations, you will, thanks to the new e-ticket system, be checked in for boarding whilst you're in the lounge, so you get to skip the queues at the ticket gates.

Exit Assistance

You can book exit assistance at an increasing number of stations. Staff will be happy to help you with bags and assistance as you leave the station.

Families and Children

Very young children can travel for free.

Where the personal ticketing policy is practiced, age is determinant in ticket pricing. Children aged 5 and under travel for free (but only one child goes for free per paying adult). Children aged between 6 and 13 (and whom have not yet reached the age of 14) pay half price. Persons aged 14 and above pay full fare and are treated as adults. All children must provide their own ID document, but birth certificates (ideally those issued in Mainland China) will be accepted.

Where the personal ticketing policy does not apply, height is determinant in place of age. Children of a body height below 1.2 metres get to travel for free (but once again, only one child goes for free per paying adult). Children of a body height of and above 1.2 metres, but below 1.5 metres, pay half price. Persons of a body height of and above 1.5 metres are treated as adults, and must pay full fare.

More recent stations come with a children's playground. Most stations (especially those on the High Speed network as well as major hubs in cities) offer a family toilet and baby care facilities.

Both very young children and pregnant women qualify as Priority Care passengers.

Rail & Metro/Tram

An increasing number of cities in China are linked with a Metro system (known in some places as the Subway, after the US English term).

In major metropolises, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, multiple lines link one or more rail stations. For details of networks, check the transport system of the city you intend to use.

Usually, you will need to use a different local transport card per system, although if you have a card with the China T-Union logo on it, you can use it in major cities across Mainland China. Nearly all metro networks are supported. Alternatively, you could use a metro QR code ticket for access.

To use digital means of payment for travel, it is expected you have a local (Mainland Chinese) bank account, or at least WeChat Pay or AliPay.

Getting into Mainland China

The border into Mainland China has fully opened on 15 March 2023, when all visas were fully reinstated, and when tourists were welcomed back into the Middle Kingdom.

Certain nationalities may enter Mainland China visa-free, but must be in transit and may not return to their nation of origin. Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan count as places where transit is allowed.

For example:

OK: United Kingdom – Beijing – Hong Kong

Not OK: Japan – Beijing – Japan

If you are admitted under this programme, you must have, and must continue, to complete all accommodation registration procedures inside Mainland China. You will be admitted for 144 hours from midnight the day after you enter Mainland China, and are restricted to certain provinces or regions of China. (Some parts of China may be more strict). Generally speaking, these are the regions of China where you can travel between provinces in a bubble:

- Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei
- Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang

You can only be in the bubble if you've arrived in the bubble in the first place.

Note: If you are in the "Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang" bubble, try not to travel on High Speed trains between different parts of Jiangsu going through Anhui (eg Beijing-Shanghai HSR), as you risk running afoul of your conditions of stay, even if unintentionally.

Generally, you are expected to fly into Mainland China, except parts in Southern China, where ending your journey using a land crossing into Hong Kong or Macau may be accepted. (Elsewhere, you should exit from the border crossing you entered Mainland China from.)

This policy applies for the following nationalities:

- EU/EEA/Switzerland (except Liechtenstein, Norway) and UK+Ireland
- Rest of Europe: Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Monaco, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine
- Middle East: Qatar, United Arab Emirates
- Asia: Brunei, Singapore

- Oceania: Australia, New Zealand
- The Americas: Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Mexico, United States

You can also visit Hainan visa-free. Eligible are all citizens of the 144-hour visa-free policy, plus, in addition, citizens of the following countries:

- Europe: Norway
- Asia: Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea (Republic of), Malaysia, Philippines (the), Thailand

Rail Links Across the Mainland China Border

China reopened its borders on 08 January 2023, when it abandoned its Zero Covid policy. Mainland China-Hong Kong HSR rail links resumed a week later.

Borders between China and the rest of the world are not yet opened at this time for rail transport. For example, to cross from Mohan, China, into Boten, Laos, to travel on the China-Laos Railway, passengers must disembark at Mohan, complete immigration there, and travel separately to Laos and board the train at Boten station. For now, only freight trains may run across international borders.

Traveller Advice

When abroad, it is advisable to follow the rules of your host country at all times. Legal systems vary, and crimes and offences which are dealt with more leniently at home may be punished with more severity abroad. Remember a number of nations have not yet abolished capital/corporal punishment.

Exercise a heightened state of alert when travelling throughout mainland China.

Mainland China is safe but always carry some form of ID with you. Most recommended is your national passport (originals are best, as they allow you to travel by rail) or your Chinese Green Card. You may wish to also carry a copy of the accommodation registration form issued to you (especially when not staying in hotels).

Enforcement bodies tend not to bother tourists but be aware of your whereabouts. Avoid being near police, government, or armed forces sites, unless you have legitimate business in such places. Taking pictures of these locations is not advisable.

Part of the Internet is blocked. Travellers have claimed that access to these sites is possible using phones brought from their home countries, but there is no guarantee of access, so make backup plans. The use of VPNs is not recommended by a handful of embassies. Avoid posting content which is overtly critical of the local authorities, or is highly political and involves Chinese interests.

If you plan to be in China for a while, it is advisable to get at least a local SIM card, which gives you an 11-digit phone number. Or, buy a combined SIM card with both a local and Mainland Chinese phone number from Hong Kong or Macau (but you might need Hong Kong/Macau address proof). You will see that your 11-digit phone number will come into extensive use inside Mainland China. Proof of identity is required to register your 11-digit Mainland Chinese mobile number.

It is highly advisable to register your stay in China with your embassy. If you become resident in China, depending on your country of citizenship, it may be required to make a formal registration to your home embassy. Some embassies offer, to registered citizens living abroad, a certificate of nationality and/or address proof; having one on you can be to your benefit.

There are strict rules on drugs, and any drug which is illegal in Mainland China will subject you to corresponding legal sanctions all the way up to the death penalty. It is sufficient for the drug to be found in your body's system for proceedings to be initiated, regardless of where you consumed it.

The central government of the People's Republic of China in Beijing claims all of the mainland areas, plus Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, in its defined official territory of China. However, distinction is made in particular between the mainland and non-mainland territories, in line with the state's "one country, two systems" policy, something that finds particular application on matters concerning Hong Kong and Macau. Therefore, some rules, including railway rules, will apply exclusively to Mainland China. This is also why you need to pass through Customs and Immigration if your journey involves Hong Kong West Kowloon railway station.

Covid-19: Almost all rules have been removed, except for testing requirements (no tests required from Hong Kong or Macau, PCR or RAT required from other destinations depending on place of origin). It is advisable to carry a face covering with you and wear it in particular where you are asked to. You will not need to show evidence of recent Covid testing except for when trying to access high-risk places, specifically care centres for the frail and elderly. The border is open to all with valid travel documents (including valid visas, permits, or Chinese Green Cards, or who visit on visa-waiver arrangements). The vast majority of China is accessible to people regardless of their Covid vaccination status.

This is the end of the 03 April 2023 (Version 1.0) edition of A Guide to the Chinese Railways for the International Traveller by David Feng. Thank you for your time and please enjoy your rail journeys.

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This guide has been provided using publicly available information as well as verified sources in the Chinese railway world, including staff and other professionals. It also builds upon the extensive travel experiences of David Feng, totalling 500'000 km and beyond on national/territorial rail, metro, and tram networks across Greater China.

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Changelog.

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Information on further rail information about China

Trains Plus Network

An evolving network centred around rail, metro, and tram networks. The following sites offer news and information about the Chinese rail world:

- Tracking China » en.trackingchina.com (temporary new address: trackingchina.transplusnetwork.com) — general China rail industry updates
- Unlock 350 » en.travelclub350.com — a railway passenger user community with helpful updates on the railway systems of China

You may also follow these Twitter accounts: @TrainsPlusTweet, @Unlock350

Official Chinese railway authorities

- China national railways » china-railway.com.cn — including information in English. National rail operator. Also follow: @ChinaRailways on Twitter
- National railway administration, PRC » nra.gov.cn — Chinese only

Brief Get Info on David Feng

David Feng is an independent rail specialist in Beijing, China, and also one of the most travelled rail users. Since 2008, he has accumulated around 500'000 km of mileage on the national/territorial, metro, and tram systems of Greater China (Mainland, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan). Since 2013, he's been helping the Chinese railways improve their level of English-language services, authoring the Everyday Rail English series of books published by China Railway Publishing House, and drafting fresh new norms for stations and onboard services in English. He's taken this to the metro systems starting in 2018, ensuring that rail and metro use the same norm of English in the run-up to the 2022 Winter Games. Since 2017, he's also been doing Next Station: China, a station-by-station look at China. During Covid, he transitioned from an adjunct professor at universities across the UK and China to a full-time rail specialist. His rail engagements have been featured in English, German, French, Italian, and Chinese-language media across Europe, Asia, and the Americas, notably in his two countries of significant presence — Switzerland (where he is a citizen), and China (where he has that country's Green Card). More info at » en.davidfengtrains.com | Twitter: @DavidFengTrains

