



*Hiddenchina.net*

## Biking in Western China

- Bicycle tour on the banks of Qinghai Lake
- Gain an insight into local Tibetan families' way of life, their customs and culture
- Explore the Tibetan Plateau and its small villages, temples and monasteries
- Visit Bird Island: an excellent spot for bird-watching



## **WEST CHINA MOUNTAIN BIKE TOUR**

This tour will lead you from the capital of Sichuan province - Chengdu - to one of the world's highest altitude peat lands and to Qinghai Lake; an important sanctuary for thousands of migrant birds and is specially designed for people, who want to explore this beautiful region by bicycle.

- Best travel date: all year round; best months: June, July and August (this trip is not available from 14<sup>th</sup> July to 22<sup>nd</sup> July because of road restrictions during the Tour of Qinghai Lake International Road Cycling Race)
- Destinations: Chengdu, Tangke, Xiama, Heihe, Langmu Monastery, Xiahe, Xining, Xihai, Gangcha, Bird Island, Heimahe
- Duration: 13 days
- Starting in: Chengdu
- Ending in: Beijing/Chengdu
- Group size: min. 6 pax, max. 12 pax

## **QUICK INTRODUCTION**

### **Ruoergai (Roige) Grassland:**

The Ruoergai Marshes are located in the provinces of Sichuan and Gansu in the upper "Huanghe" Yellow River basin on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau. At an altitude of 3400m to 3900m, they are one of the world's highest altitude peat lands and consist of approximately 10'000 km<sup>2</sup> of peat bogs, sedge marshes, lakes and wet grasslands, interspersed with low hills and drier grasslands, which are inhabited by Tibetan people, who are almost exclusively pastoralists with vast herds of horses, sheep, yaks and goats.



### **Qinghai Lake:**

Qinghai Lake, the largest saltwater lake in China, is located in the west of Xining city in Qinghai in a depression of the Tibetan Plateau. It is famous for its fauna, especially its abundance of birds and fish. The lake is located at the crossroads of several bird migration routes across Asia. Many species use Qinghai as an intermediate stop during migration. At its northeast end are the "Bird Islands" (Cormorant Island and Egg Island), which have been bird sanctuaries of the Qinghai Lake Natural Protection Zone since 1997. The lake often remains frozen for three months continuously in winter.

Qinghai Lake is 5,694 km<sup>2</sup>, or 2,278 square miles large, and 360 km (220 miles) in circumference.

Twenty-three rivers and streams empty into it.



Tour of Qinghai Lake International Road Cycling Race (TDQL) is held in July every year. More than 100 riders in 20 teams from five continents participate in this event over a distance of approx. 1344 km. You will be cycling along this route amidst impressive scenery.

### **Sichuan:**

The province of Sichuan lies in central-western China and is one of the country's major industrial bases. The territory of the province and its vicinity were the cradle of unique local civilizations, which can be dated to at least 15th century BC. The area lies in the Sichuan basin and is surrounded by the Himalaya to the west, Qinling range to the north, and mountainous areas of Yunnan to the south. Because of its location and fertile plains, Sichuan is called "Tianfu Zhi Guo" in Chinese, which means "the Heavenly Country". The Yangtze River flows through the basin and thus is upstream to areas of eastern China. The Minjiang River in central Sichuan is a tributary of the upper Yangtze River, which it joins at Yibin.

The majority of the population is Han Chinese, who are found scattered throughout the province. Significant minorities of Tibetans, Yi, Qiang and Naxi reside in the western portion, which is a part of historic Tibet's Kham region.

### **Gansu:**

Gansu is a province located in the northwest of the People's Republic of China. It lies between Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, and the Huangtu Plateaus, and borders Mongolia to the north. The Huang He River passes the southern part of the province. It has a population of approximately 25 million and a large concentration of Hui Chinese. The capital of the province is Lanzhou, located in the southeast part of Gansu. Gansu province has an area of 454,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and the majority of its land is above 1 km over sea level. The Huang He (Yellow) River passes through the southern part of the province. The Yellow River gets most of its water from Gansu province. The Yellow River also flows straight through Lanzhou. Part of the Gobi Desert is located in Gansu.

The landscape in Gansu is very mountainous in the south and flat in the north. The mountains in the south are part of the Qilian mountain range. At 5,547 meters high, Qilian Shan Mountain is Gansu's highest elevation. Gansu province is home to 26,033,400 people. Most of the population, 73%, is still rural. Gansu is 92% Han and also has Hui, Tibetan, Dingxiang, Tu, Manchu, Uyghur, Yugur, Bonan, Mongolian, Salar, and Kazakh minorities.

### **Qinghai:**

The province of Qinghai is named after the enormous Qinghai Lake. It is located on the northeastern part of the Tibetan Plateau. It borders Gansu in the northeast, the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in the northwest, Sichuan in the southeast, and Tibet Autonomous Region in the southwest. Most of Qinghai is part of the traditional provinces of Kham and Amdo of Tibet. It is the birthplace and home to many influential Tibetan figures in history, including Tsongkapa (the greatest commentator in the history of Buddhism) and many of the Dalai Lamas. The Yellow River (Huang He) originates in the middle of the province, while the Yangtze and Mekong have their sources in the southern part.

The province of Qinghai boasts a population of 5.2 million, among which the Han accounts for 54.5%. Other groups include the Tibetans 20.87%, Tu, Hui, Salar and Mongols. Qinghai's culture is heavily influenced by Tibet, given the close proximity as well as a shared history.

**DAY 1      CHENGDU      (D)**

Upon arrival, you will be picked up at the airport by our guide and transferred to the “Tibet Hotel” (5\*). After having relaxed from the flight, we will drive to “Jinli Ancient Street”. Dating back to the Qin Dynasty (221-207 B.C.), Jinli Street used to be one of the busiest of the commercial boulevards of the Kingdom of Shu during the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280), where you can watch a Sichuan Opera and Face-Changing performance.

The capital of Sichuan - Chengdu - is located in southwest China. It is the fifth most populous city in China and also one of the country’s most important transportation and communication hubs. More than four thousand years ago, the prehistorical Bronze Age culture of Jinsha established itself in this region.

**DAY 2      CHENGDU - TANGKE      (B/L/D)**

After breakfast we leave Chengdu and pass through the West Sichuan Plain, go northward along the Minjiang River via Dujiangyan and the Zhegu Mountain and travel through the Miyalu Maple Leaves Scenic Resort. Our journey will lead us through the Hongyuan Grassland to the most important town at the Jiuqu (Nine-Bend) Yellow River where our staff has set up base camps. Enjoy dinner under the open sky in this amazing night scenery and camp in a tent.



Tangke Township is situated on the banks of the Yellow River and consists entirely of rolling hills covered in grassland.

**DAY 3      TANGKE - XIAMAN      (B/L/D)**

In the morning you can choose to either drive or ride a horse to explore the natural treasures of Jiuqu Yellow River. Afterwards we cycle northeast along the Black River and arrive at the second camp site --- Xiaman Base Camp. On the way there you can visit a Tibetan herdsman’s family to taste fresh milk, cheese and butter tea. In the evening you can swim in the lake and start a campfire to make dinner. You will sleep in tents tonight.

There are two rivers - the Hei (black) and Bai (white) rivers - crossing this area, so the region consists of marshland with many lentic ponds and small lakes. Because of its unique high plateau environment, it is one of the most famous plateau wetlands in the world.



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| <b>DAY 4</b> | <b>XIAMAN - HEIHE</b> | <b>(B/L/D)</b> |
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After breakfast we cycle to the Heihe pasture to discover the enchanting landscape of this region. The Heihe River Pasture is situated at the upper reaches of the Heihe River, which flows south to north, and constitutes an important tributary to the Yellow River. In the evening we will eat sitting around the campfire and sleep in tents.

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| <b>DAY 5</b> | <b>HEIHE - LANGMU MONASTERY - XIAHE</b> | <b>(B/L/D)</b> |
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After breakfast, we leave Heihe and drive to Xiahe via the Langmu Monastery. The small town of Langmu basically comprises a group of Tibetan monasteries around a valley, which are collectively known as the Langmu Monastery. Langmu means fairy in Tibetan. The monastery was so named because inside the cave is a rock bearing the resemblance of a beautiful young lady, believed to be the transformation of a fairy. The Grand Hall, the murals, the painted red columns and the tranquil surrounding are all awe-inspiring.

After arrival in Xiahe, which is found in the southern portion of Gansu province, along the border with Qinghai province and lies along the Daxia and Zhao Rivers - we will also visit the Labrang Monastery. It was first built in 1710 during the Qing emperor Kangxi's reign (1662-1722), and is one of the six patriarchal lamaseries of the Gelugpa Sect of Lamaism in China. Also the top college of Tibetan Buddhism in Northwest China, the monastery holds seven large-scale summons ceremonies a year, of which the summons ceremony in the first lunar month is the largest. Apart from a spectacular collection of monastic buildings, the Labrang Monastery is also a treasure house. The monastery is built in an attractive setting, with the



Daxia River winding by to the south and rolling mountains to the south and north. About 14 kilometers up the valley from the monastery, the Sangke Grasslands is an ideal place for hiking or horse-riding, with a limpid lake and snow-capped mountains on all sides. The town is populated largely by ethnic Tibetans, as well as some Hui and Han Chinese. The area is highly rural, pastoral and mountainous. You will stay overnight at the "Xiahe Hotel" (3\*).

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| <b>DAY 6</b> | <b>XIAHE - XINING</b> | <b>(B/L/D)</b> |
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We continue our journey by coach to the capital city of Qinghai - Xining - via Linxia. En route you will be amazed by the nature's magnificence along the Yellow River and the strange but magnificent Qixia (Red Rock) landforms. Because of its position on the central plains Xining used to be a chief commercial hub and a strategically important city on the caravan route to Tibet, handling especially with timber, wool and salt. Historically a part of Tibet, the Qinghai region passed to the Mongol overlords in the 14th century, when it became part of Gansu. It came under Chinese control after 1724 and was administered from Xining as the Koko Nor territory. In 1928, Qinghai became a province of China with Xining as capital. You will stay overnight at the "Xining Holiday Dynasty Hotel" (5\*).

**DAY 7 XINING - XIHAI (B/L/D)**

In the morning we drive to Xihai, the capital of an ethnic-Tibetan autonomous district where black yaks and white sheep graze peacefully on dry grassland, tended by Tibetan herdsman clad in bright orange. It is also an important place for the Tour of Qinghai Lake International Road Cycling Race. After check-in at the “Xihai Hotel” you will obtain an introduction to the annually held Cycling Race and its importance for the region as well as to the following days’ bike tour.

**DAY 8 XIHAI - GANGCHA (B/L/D)**

After breakfast we will cycle 72km along the lakeside road and have a picnic for lunch. Gangcha is located on the north bank of Qinghai Lake and belongs to Haibei Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. It is mainly populated by Tibetans, along with Han, Hui and Dongxiang. You will stay overnight at the simple but clean “Gangcha Guesthouse”.

**DAY 9 GANGCHA - BIRD ISLAND TOWN (B/L/D)**

We continue our journey along the lakeside to reach Bird Island Town after 59km of cycling. Again we will have a picnic for lunch and stay overnight at “Bird Island Hotel”.

**DAY 10 BIRD ISLAND TOWN - HEIMAHE (B/L/D)**

Heimahe is a rather small town located at the intersection of the road to Bird Island and Saltwater Lake at Chaka. We will have to ride 75km from Bird Island Town to Heimahe, have a picnic lunch on the way and stay overnight at the quite new, basic but clean “Heimahe Hotel”.

**DAY 11 HEIMAHE - BIRD ISLAND (B/L/D)**

In the morning we explore Bird Island by bike. Situated on the western shore of Qinghai Lake, it covers an area of slightly less than 1000 km<sup>2</sup> and attracts a lot of migrating birds in spring and summer. To these uncountable migrant birds, the island has become a very important sanctuary, where thousands of different bird species such as gulls, sandpipers, cormorants, geese, etc. nest. Therefore the island might be called a “piece of heaven” not only for the birds but also for birdwatching enthusiasts. The marshy area between the town of Heimahe and the lake is another good birding spot. After bird watching we cycle along the lakeside to reach the goal of our bicycle trip: Qinghai Lake Hotel (3\*). At lunch time we will take a break to have a picnic.

**DAY 12 QINGHAI LAKE HOTEL - XINING - BEIJING/CHENGDU (B/L/D)**

The morning is at your disposal. After lunch you will be transferred from the hotel to Xining airport by coach to take the flight CA6991 (14:50 or 17:00) to Beijing or Chengdu. We also offer optional extensions to this trip.

**DAY 13 BEIJING/CHENGDU (B/L/D)**

Transfer to the airport for your flight home or start of optional extension trip.

### Recommended optional extension 1: **Beijing**

We can tailor-make a program according to your personal needs and desires. You could for example explore Beijing's traditional Hutong by bike, learn how to cook traditional Chinese dumplings from a local family, visit an acrobatic show, learn how to make Chinese kites under the guidance of an experienced craftsman living in a courtyard, visit a local winery, etc. We also offer daily excursions to hidden places outside of Beijing. Please contact us for details.



### Recommended optional extension 2: **Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding**

HiddenChina.net works in close cooperation with the Chengdu Research Base for Giant Panda Breeding. With your visit you can contribute to the survival of this endangered species. We provide the opportunity to get to know the pandas under the guidance of an experienced keeper, feed the animals, and help perform a keeper's daily tasks. Furthermore we provide access to the laboratories under the guidance of experienced scientists. During one day you will gain an insight into current research, for example, an understanding of breeding and artificial insemination (AI) and its problems and successes.



[Contact us](#) per mail for a tailor-made itinerary and other optional extensions.

Our other trekking and biking tours in China:

[17 days Northern Yunnan and Eastern Tibet](#)

[9 days Xinjiang Silk Road Highlights and Trekking Tour](#)

[8 days Horse Riding and Trekking Tour Jiadengyu - Kanas Lake](#)

## **RATES**

**RATE PER PERSON IN TWIN: ON REQUEST**

**SINGLE SUPPLEMENT: ON REQUEST**

### **INCLUDED SERVICES:**

- experienced tour leader for all days, English/Chinese-speaking
- bicycle repairman who will follow the group on a motorbike during the bike tour
- cook who will prepare the meals during the bike tour
- accommodation in selected hotels in double rooms as mentioned in the itinerary
- outside the cities accommodation in basic, but clean guest houses in double rooms
- camping equipment: tents (one tent for 2 persons), mattresses (one mattress per person), air bed (one bed per person), white bed sheet ( 3 sheets per person), tent for bathing purposes
- sleeping bag, headlamp, first-aid bags and other biking equipment  
However it is suggested to bring your own sleeping bag due to sanitary reasons.
- full board except on free afternoons/evenings (described as B,L,D: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner)
- China-made mountain bicycles (one bicycle per person)
- all transfers mentioned in the itinerary
- Ford Transit tour bus on days 1-2, 5-7 and day 12
- entrance fees to sightseeing spots mentioned in the itinerary
- container truck following the group for carrying bicycles during transfers, luggage, camping and picnic equipment and provisions. It is also used as a dining car which will provide dinner on day 2, full board on days 3-4 and lunch on days 8-11

### **PROVIDED MEALS:**

- breakfast: milk, tea, coffee, fried eggs, oats porridge, bread and jam, potato pancake
- lunch and dinner: noodle soup, Italian noodles, rice with beef and potatoes, rice with eggs and green beans, rice with mashed potatoes, steak, salad, vegetable soup
- mineral water throughout the trip

### **NOT INCLUDED:**

- personal expenses such as laundry, tips etc.
- transports not mentioned in the itinerary (such as taxis in the evening, etc.)
- drinks and all meals not mentioned in the itinerary
- expenses for medical care
- insurances (travel insurance, travel cancellation insurance)
- repatriation flights in case of emergencies

**INSURANCE IS RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PARTICIPANT!**

Please visit our website [www.hiddenchina.net](http://www.hiddenchina.net) for more information



## **SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS**

For this tour you have to be in good condition. You need adequate travel gear and some preparation according to the local customs and special characteristics. For this tour, there are some special requirements:

Once arrived in China we will take care of a slow and adequate acclimatization and provide you with professional advice, but there always is some risk involved that due to the high altitude of some passages, some people might suffer from discomfort like headache, sleeplessness and other symptoms of altitude sickness. Please inform yourself about possible risks and preventive measures before the start of the trip.

As this tour leads into regions with very restricted infrastructure, accommodation facilities and meals can be very basic! As compensation, the traveler gets a unique insight into daily life of the local communities.

For the case of health problems, please bring a personal stock of medicines for your private use, as we are not allowed by Chinese law to provide any medication. Please also be aware that personal travel insurance for the entire trip is also necessary.

Please be informed that we cannot take any responsibility for incidences occurring due to act of nature beyond control, alpine risks or high altitude as long as they are not caused grossly negligent by our staff. Furthermore we reserve the right to make changes in the itinerary without prior notice.

### **IMPORTANT NOTE**

Traveling in China, especially off the beaten tracks and in rural areas, can be adventurous and carries also a certain amount of surprises and risks. HiddenChina.net ensures that in every situation we and our guides are trying to get out a maximum of comfort for our clients. All our guides are carefully chosen and selected by their abilities and experience. Nevertheless, there might be surprises. We hereby express that a voyage in China needs patience, adaptation and tolerance. In addition due to lack of infrastructure, in rural areas in China there is often a lack of western sanitary standards. Clients of hiddenChina.net accept - upon signing a contract - to be aware of these circumstances, and accept changes which may occur in order to keep security and comfort of the clients according to the circumstances to a maximum during the trip.

### **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR CHINA TRAVELERS**

Traveling in China is always an adventure. Quality of service can range from “top” in selected 5\* Hotels in the big cities to “very poor”. While traveling in China, even with an organized tour, the clients have to be ready for unexpected changes (e.g. due to natural disasters such as landslides or flooding) or other surprises. In hotels by example, it can happen that you will get phone calls in the middle of the night, offering you a special massage service. The following chapters will tell you more about what you should consider when traveling in China.

### **FACE**

You may have heard it before and for the experienced China traveler it’s a “must know”: In China, everything is about “giving and losing face”. Chinese people are very proud of their culture, food and traditions. Respect this fact and try not to bring a Chinese into an embarrassing situation, as he or she might lose his face in front of coworkers, friends, family members or even the authorities. Try to be polite, smile and - especially to English speaking Chinese - always praise their language skills. Chinese can be considered as reactive people. If you treat Chinese people in an arrogant and harsh way, you will be treated the same way. When you feel cheated, try to solve the situation in a gentle and charming way. You will achieve your goal much faster. Also try to react calmly in stress situations and stay friendly. For every problem in China there is a solution. It’s up to you how effective you will get to this solution. Being angry and aggressive is contra productive in the most cases.

### **SECURITY**

Especially large cities in China are extremely safe. Chinese people have to fear severe punishment when being caught by the authorities in illegal matters when foreigners are involved. However, be aware that pick pocketing happens everywhere, so keep an eye on your belongings and never leave your luggage unattended. When going out at night, China’s large cities are much safer than practically all European cities. A single woman has nothing to fear when walking in a dark alley even at 4 o’clock in the morning.

## **HEALTH**

It is also recommended to visit your house doctor before you go on a China trip and make all the necessary vaccinations. Your doctor will inform you what you will need. For travelers going to south China, it is also recommended to carry a supply of Malaria remedies. As the avian influenza is getting more and more a serious issue in Asia and a pandemic outbreak will happen sooner or later, the traveler should also consider buying a box of “Tamiflu” before the trip begins.

When traveling in China and especially when eating a lot of local food, a supply of remedies for stomach problems is highly recommended. We will always take care of taking you to clean restaurants with high quality standards. However, your body will have to deal with a wide range of unknown food, spices and other ingredients in China and also with different bacteria and viruses than in Europe’s clean environment. When being on a 3 week China trip, you have to reckon with stomach problems at least once. To cure them it is recommended to take pharmaceuticals, which are rich in salt and minerals and give you back the elements you will lose during a diarrhea. From our longtime China experience, one of the best remedies is to eat well-boiled Chinese mushrooms and bananas as well as to drink tomato juice. On many of our private trips, this helped much better than the Western medication like e.g. Imodium. Always take toilet paper with you, as you won’t find any in public toilets! Travelers going to high altitude areas such as Tibet are also recommended to take a supply of Diamox in case of altitude sickness. Please get advice from your doctor.

## **CLIMATE**

China has several different climatic zones. From high-altitude to sub-tropic and desert climate, there is everything. Depending on your date of arrival in China, you might be traveling in the rainy season. E.g. in southern China, this time mostly starts late May / early June and lasts until August. This year, in the provinces of Guangxi and Guizhou heavy flooding took the life of several hundred local people. However, we will adapt the trip according to your travel time and avoid the areas with heavy rain.

## **LUGGAGE**

Most airlines allow you to check-in 20 kg of luggage (economy class). It is not allowed to take nutrition products (cheese, meat) as well as pornographic material. Please ensure that your “Swiss army knife” and other “dangerous products” are checked in with your luggage and not in the hand luggage.

China offers you a wide range of shopping possibilities. So if you plan to go for extensive shopping, take a minimum of luggage to China. However, whenever you forgot something, don’t worry, more or less everything you need in daily life, can be bought much cheaper in China (see chapter below). Be aware that many customs authorities like the ones in Paris and Milan can fine you heavily when finding out that you try to import faked products from China such as Yves St Laurent bags, Gucci items or Prada clothes.

## **SHOPPING**

Except for imported luxury goods and high-end electrical equipment such as beamers or imported laptops, more or less everything is cheaper in China than in Western Europe. Especially clothes can be bought at a very low price. Many shopping areas offer faked products (sometimes in extremely good quality). However, in many places where no prices are indicated you have to bargain about the price (see chapter below). Please note that when buying a faked product, especially at the airport in Paris, you can get into trouble. The fight against faked products is now at a point, that authorities can or will take away your purchase and will heavily fine you. For the golf lovers, there is a wide range of possibilities to buy whole golf sets at a ridiculously low price. Have your suits tailor-made, buy ties, silk products, pearls etc. at a very low price. For most Europeans, DVD's are of special interest. For a DVD you pay between 8 and 10 RMB (about 1 EURO) and most of the movies are available even before they are shown in European cinemas. The advantage is that DVD's take away only little space and weight. But be aware that in many cases you are buying illegally copied and distributed products.

Credit cards are only accepted in major stores, 3\* hotels and upwards and western restaurants. Money can be withdrawn at ATM's at the Bank of China. Please note that these are hard to find in remote areas. Money can be changed at major branches of the Bank of China or in western hotels. Please note that you need to show your passport for changing money.

## **BARGAINING**

As mentioned in the "shopping" chapter, in many places you have to bargain for your price. Western tourists are mostly looked at as "big dollar signs" and accordingly the price will be set 400 – 500% above the price the vendor is ready to sell his or her merchandise. The first rule is to go below the first offered price. So when the vendor asks for 100 RMB, you can set your offer to 20-25 RMB. Then it depends on your bargaining skills at what price you will get it. A simple trick is, when it seems too expensive for you, to walk away from the vendor. If he or she doesn't follow you, you know that your bid was too low. Please also note, always stay friendly and smile when bargaining. Once you agreed for a price, you have to buy the product. Otherwise you and the vendor will lose face.

## **LANGUAGE AND BEHAVIOR**

Even in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, it is most unlikely that you find English speaking taxi drivers or personnel in the shops. Therefore it is recommended to take a phrase book with you, where you can show what you need. Chinese people are mostly friendly and curious towards foreigners. However, Chinese are also very proud of their country and culture and some behavior will be strange for travelers who come to China for the first time. In many places (even sometimes in public buses) people smoke a lot and for the non-smoker, China can be a terrible place. You also often see Chinese people spitting accompanied by strange noises. The best way to get around it is to ignore it and live with it. For the smoker on the other hand China is a paradise, as it is more or less everywhere allowed to smoke and cigarettes are extremely cheap, although some foreign brands might be faked. Please also note that you might be invited to test your drinking skills. The easiest way to avoid it without losing face is to tell your hosts that due to liver problems you're not allowed to drink.

## **TIPPING**

Although China is - especially away from the big cities - a very poor country, tipping only exists in the 5\* surroundings of the big cities. In restaurants or taxis and hotels (except 5\* hotels) tipping is a no-no. However, tour guides and drivers of organized tours should be tipped. Most guides and drivers are roughly paid with 10 Euro per day and rely on additional income. With Chinese tour groups (which often go shopping) the guides always get a commission in the shops, where they make most of their salary. As European groups usually do not visit as many shops as Chinese tourists, guides and drivers have to rely on tips.

Generally a tip of RMB 30 per person and day is reasonable. When you are in a tour group it is recommended that the group collects the tips and hands it to the guides and drivers in an envelope. It is also very helpful to take some souvenirs with you, like for example watches or picture postcards from your home country.

## **SMALL TALK AND CONVERSATION**

Small talk in China is a bit different than in Europe, but there are also topics which should be avoided and topics which are perfect for small talk.

One of the most common greetings in China is “Ni chi fan le ma?” which literally means “Have you eaten yet?” This emphasizes the importance of eating in China, and it is much more a social event than in the West, therefore food is always a welcomed topic.

In some cases you also might be confronted with rather private questions such as about your marital status and about family. The Chinese are very family oriented, so don't feel embarrassed when people ask you rather private questions, it's just small talk. Sometimes, especially in business surroundings, people also might ask you about your salary, which is quite normal in China. Here you can escape (if you don't want to tell the truth) by telling some fictional figure, or when telling the truth and your counterpart's eyebrows rise, you explain how expensive the life in Europe is.

Topics which should be avoided at all costs are all political related such as the Cultural Revolution, critics against the system or chairman Mao, the Tibet and Taiwan question, human rights or how to treat animals. If you want to have answers to these questions you might do it through your guide. Do not overload your guide with too many hard questions in the beginning though. Tactically it is wise to hide these questions in some compliments and be as subtle as possible (see also the chapter about “face”). Please note that young Chinese (below 30) are more open to discuss critical topics than people above 30.

Please also note that Chinese people tend to touch you, which is not a sign of homosexuality but just a sign of sympathy. In such a situation, when you feel uncomfortable, don't react in a rude or harsh way; just try to escape the contact by elegant means. Mostly a hearty fit of coughing does the trick (SARS is still in Chinese people's mind).

## **TRAFFIC AND TAXI**

The public transport system in China is basically quite convenient. Every major city has an airport; there are many train routes (even though there is mostly only one train per day between two destinations) and public buses. Public buses are very cheap although the comfort is sometimes a bit poor.

In the cities, the most convenient public transport is the taxi. You can, compared to Europe, basically take a taxi anytime and everywhere at a very low price. Be careful that on major tourist sites there are also drivers trying to make extra money. When a taxi has no taximeter (make sure that the driver in taxis with a taximeter always puts it on), negotiate the rate before you get into the vehicle. However, some drivers will still try to make you pay an extra fee at the end. Just tell him that you pay the negotiated price, nothing more, and nothing less. Please also note that most drivers don't speak English. So take a bilingual map, a taxi card or a guidebook with you. Tell the reception in the hotel to write down the addresses for you so you can show it to the driver. Please note that highway fares have to be paid by the customer and not the driver (for example, in Beijing the fee for the airport expressway is 10 Yuan for passenger cars). This fee will be added to the amount shown on the taximeter.

## **USEFUL THINGS TO TAKE ON A CHINA TRIP**

Several Swiss army knives, a compass, pharmaceuticals (see health chapter), a first-aid kit, tape, watches (not too expensive), money clip, camera (films can be bought and developed on spot for a very reasonable price), deodorant (rarely available in China), sunglasses, altimeter (for Tibet and Himalaya tours), GPS, safety belt for money, literature, guidebooks, credit-/bank card and a lot of patience.

For ladies: tampons are rarely available in China.