

OK, you've been everywhere and you're tired of take-out from the neighborhood Chinese restaurant. Now you're ready for the real thing. You're considering booking a flight to China. Here are just a few suggestions from a senior tourist who has been there several times. If this is your first time, it's best to limit your visit to one or two of three main cities: Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing. Beijing is the capital city, of course, but it is mostly history and Tiananmen Square, Forbidden City and the Olympic venues. Like Moscow, London and Washington, the Chinese people there are stuffy, bureaucratic and not too interesting. While in Beijing, you can make the required historic tours of the city and take the bus or train out to the Great Wall.



So, it's 15 centuries old, goes for a thousand miles and can be seen from satellites. It's very difficult for seniors with limited energy to climb the required stairways, then maybe stroll 100 yards or so on the slanted walkways just to get picture or video proof of having done it. There are many other interesting things to see and do in China.

Hong Kong was a freewheeling, fun-loving British colony for a century until the Chinese government took over about a decade ago. It has long been known for its great shopping, nightlife and fantastic restaurants. Fortunately, the up-tight Red Chinese bureaucrats have kept their heavy hands away from messing with financial and tourism success, and Hong Kong is still a great place to visit.

However, Hong Kong is eclipsed today by Shanghai, the most totally contemporary city in China. If you combined New York City, Beverly Hills and Las Vegas, you'd have the ingredients

for Shanghai. Soaring high-rises, neon-lit streets, endless shopping at bargain prices and some of the best restaurants in the world. For the first time senior American or British visitor to China, we recommend Shanghai.

However, any visit to China will start with a culture shock, and here are a few suggestions to make it a bit less of a problem. Despite enormous strides in individual freedoms, modernization and growing commerce over the past decade, the Chinese people still cling to many of their old lifestyles.

Along with a few teenagers with blue hair and draggy pants, you'll see most Chinese dressed in traditional drab Mao-era clothing. And because China's cities have attracted people from all over the country, they are really crowded. When you walk down the street of any big Chinese city, you may feel you're in a crushing line at the gate of an oversold football game.

Although the Chinese are some of the most polite people in the world, the senior tourist trying to get through their jammed big city streets may feel hemmed in by masses of elbows and knees. It may seem at times as if the entire billion-person population is there competing for space. So, whatever you do, just keep cool and patient, and you'll get to your destination eventually.

As for sanitation, it has improved enormously since China has industrialized, but the senior Western tourist should always play it safe by staying away from public restrooms and drinking water only from sealed bottles. In hotels, don't drink from spigots, but use just bottled or boiled water.

Never, no matter how attractive it looks, don't eat food bought from a street vendor. If it has been boiled in hot oil right in front of you for at least several minutes, you can give it a try and hope you'll be OK. Major restaurants must go through very strict inspections, but be careful to eat only thoroughly cooked meat, fish, poultry, veggies and milk-based desserts.

You should bring your own adequate supply of everyday medications and hygiene items. You may find prescription drugs cheaper in China, but you can never be sure of their quality or authenticity. In newer buildings of the big cities, you'll find Western style toilets, but not everywhere. Sometimes public restrooms offer little more than holes in the ground. A safe idea is to carry a basic supply of toilet tissue, paper towels and paper toilet seat covers when you venture away from your hotel.

Before you book that trip to China, do your homework on necessary official paperwork, medical facilities, traditions, basic words you could use, weather, hotels, transportation and all the other things that can make your first visit to vast country easier and more enjoyable.