

Free Offline Companion

Heading to China? Get your phone, payments, and tickets sorted before you land.

"My goal is to help you **land with confidence** and **travel like a local**."

Written by **Nick**, a Guangzhou (Canton) local · Former Nortel Networks employee · Event decorator for Guangzhou's expat community · English-speaking Mandarin & Cantonese tutor.

Small Problems That Can Ruin a First-Time Trip:

China is safe and easy to get around once your phone is set up. Most visitors don't run into danger; they run into small friction points:

- **"Will my card work?"** Many shops want an Alipay or WeChat Pay QR code, not a card swipe. Linking a foreign card works, but passport verification and bank SMS codes can trip you up if you wait until you land.
- **"Will Google and WhatsApp work?"** Not on hotel Wi-Fi or a local SIM. A roaming eSIM gets around that on cellular data, but not every "China eSIM" works that way.
- **"The tickets sold out before I woke up."** Sights like the Forbidden City release tickets 7 days ahead at 8 PM Beijing time (early morning in the US), and you book with your passport.
- **"My hotel isn't on the map, or it turned me away."** English hotel names return nothing in Chinese map apps—you need the Chinese registered name. Some small inns cannot register foreign passports.
- **"I can't read a word, and something just went wrong."** A driver calls in Chinese, a menu has no English, or a metro turnstile won't open.

Pre-Flight Timeline Checklist

● T-7 Days Before Flying:

- **Passport Verification on Alipay & WeChat Pay:** Download the apps, link your foreign Visa/Mastercard, and complete passport ID verification at home. Unverified accounts have strict limits and may fail at checkout.
- **Book Time-Slot Attractions:** High-demand sights like Beijing's Forbidden City release tickets 7 days ahead at 20:00 Beijing time.

● T-3 Days Before Flying:

- **Bank Travel Notice & SMS Roaming:** Inform your bank of your China travel dates. Ensure your home SIM can receive SMS codes abroad for 3D Secure verification.
- **Buy a Roaming Travel eSIM:** Ensure your plan explicitly confirms that cellular data is routed outside mainland China (Hong Kong or Singapore) so Google and WhatsApp work without a VPN.

● T-24 Hours / On Landing:

- **Fill Official Arrival Card Online:** Fill it in advance for free on the [National Immigration Administration \(NIA\) portal](#) or 12367 app.
- **Save Hotel Chinese Pins:** Screenshot the Chinese name and exact street address of your accommodations.
- **Keep Small Cash:** Carry a 50 or 100 RMB note as backup for metro token machines or small street stalls.

How to Pay in China: Alipay, WeChat Pay & Foreign Cards

Most everyday payments in China happen by scanning a QR code on your phone. Cash is still legal tender, but many small shops, food courts, and self-order screens are built around QR payments, so a phone wallet makes life much easier. Some hotels, malls, and metro stations also accept foreign Visa and Mastercard now. You don't need a Chinese bank account—link your foreign card directly. **Start with Alipay, then add WeChat Pay as a backup.**

Primary Wallet

1. Why Start with Alipay

- **English interface:** Dedicated international mode in English.
- **Transit and ride-hailing built in:** Open metro QR codes and hail a Didi directly inside Alipay in English.
- **Foreign cards:** Visa and Mastercard work for most travelers. Amex, Discover, Diners Club, and JCB are also supported on many accounts.

Backup Wallet

2. Why Add WeChat Pay Too

- **Some places only take WeChat Pay:** Many mini-programs (ticketing/table ordering) only accept WeChat Pay.
- **Businesses only:** Can pay merchant QR codes (restaurants, shops, taxis). Cannot transfer to individuals or send Hongbao without a mainland bank account.
- **Messaging:** Hotels, drivers, and local contacts prefer WeChat.

3. The 200 RMB Rule, Fees & Card Checks

- **200 RMB or less (~\$28): No platform fee (0%).**
- **Over 200 RMB:** A **3% platform fee** is charged on the *whole* payment, not just the part over 200. Your card issuer may add foreign transaction fees on top. (*Tip: Split larger restaurant bills into payments ≤ 200 RMB when possible*).
- **Verify with passport first:** Unverified accounts have much lower limits. Complete verification at home, not at a checkout counter.
- **Limits:** After passport verification, Alipay allows up to ~US\$5,000 per payment and US\$50,000 per year. WeChat Pay limits for foreign cards are usually lower.
- **Tell your bank & keep home number reachable:** Banks often text a one-time SMS code when linking a card. Keep your home SIM active with SMS roaming so setup doesn't fail.

4. Paying for the Metro (and a Cash Backup)

- **Switch cities in Alipay:** Open *Transport* (出行), choose the city you are in (Guangzhou, Beijing, Shanghai, etc.), and accept the local terms. Metro passes don't carry over city to city.
- **Guangzhou Contactless Card Tap:** Guangzhou Metro takes contactless physical Visa, Mastercard, American Express, and JCB at all gates. Tap the exact same card to enter and exit.
- **"Scan" vs "Show" code:** At metro gates and convenience stores, you *show* your QR code. At food stalls and table ordering, you *scan* their printed QR code.
- **Keep some cash:** Carry a 50 or 100 RMB note. If a gate rejects your code or a card gets declined, buy a single-ride token at the station service window or machine.

⚠ Payment Security Rule

Never show your Alipay or WeChat payment code to strangers or let someone scan it "to check." Your code is only for real checkouts. Nick will never ask for your card numbers, PINs, or verification codes.

Staying Connected: Travel eSIMs vs Local SIMs

On a domestic Chinese network, such as hotel Wi-Fi or a Chinese SIM card, Google, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Gmail, and many international news sites are blocked. Here is how internet access works for visitors.

1. How Travel eSIMs Work (No VPN Needed on Cellular)

If your phone supports eSIM and is unlocked, a travel data plan bought before you fly is usually the easiest option for a short or medium trip.

- **Roaming Data Routing:** Many travel eSIMs work through international roaming. Your data is routed through servers outside mainland China (Hong Kong or Singapore). That is why **Google, WhatsApp, and your usual apps work on cellular data without a VPN**.
- **Not Every "China eSIM" Works This Way:** Some plans connect directly to Chinese networks, and those stay blocked just like a local SIM. Before you buy, check that the plan says your data is routed outside China.

2. Important Things to Keep in Mind

Hotel Wi-Fi Reality

- **Blocked on Wi-Fi:** Roaming only applies on cellular data. On hotel Wi-Fi, blocked sites stay blocked. The simplest fix is to **turn Wi-Fi off** and use eSIM cellular data.
- If Wi-Fi asks for an SMS code to a Chinese number, ask the front desk for a room-number or password login.
- If you want a VPN for Wi-Fi, install it before arrival. Nick does not sell, install, or recommend VPNs.

Local Physical (+86) SIM

- Most travel eSIMs are data-only and have no phone number.
- **When it makes sense:** Staying >3 weeks, making domestic calls, or needing a +86 number for local food delivery apps (Meituan).
- Buy with your passport at Guangzhou Baiyun Airport or city carrier stores.
- **Quick rule:** Short trip = roaming eSIM. Long stay = add local SIM.

3. No Data? Check These 4 Steps First

1. **Roaming:** Is Data Roaming switched **ON** for the eSIM line in your phone settings?
2. **Cellular Data Line:** Is the eSIM selected as your active Cellular Data line?
3. **Wi-Fi:** Turn off Wi-Fi to force your phone onto roaming cellular data.
4. **Restart:** Restart the phone, then re-check that your plan routes data outside China.

Map Note

Google Maps may load on a roaming eSIM, but it is often inaccurate or incomplete in China. Use **Apple Maps** (works great in English) or the map and Didi inside Alipay.



Guangzhou Field Notes: Language, Maps & Dining

Guangzhou is an open and friendly city that welcomes visitors from all over the world. Here are practical tips for navigating street life, handling language barriers, and dining like a local.

1. Language on the Street & The Hotel Name Trap

Staff at major international hotels and airport international counters speak English. On the street (taxi drivers, subway staff, convenience stores, neighborhood restaurants), people mostly speak Cantonese and Mandarin.

The Hotel Name Trap in Maps (AMap & Didi)

Booking sites (Agoda, Trip.com) show English marketing names, but Chinese map apps index the officially registered **Chinese business name**.

📌 **Simple rule:** Open your booking, copy the hotel's Chinese characters (e.g. 广州海珠滨江宜尚酒店) and paste them into AMap or Didi. In Trip.com, use the "Show address to driver" option.

2. Six Useful Chinese Words to Recognize

You don't need to speak Chinese, but recognizing these 6 common phrases helps immensely:

买单

mǎi dān (埋单 maaí daan)

The Bill / Check Please

扫码

sǎo mǎ

Scan QR Code (To Order/Pay)

洗手间

xǐ shǒu jiān

Restroom / Toilet

不要辣

bú yào là

Not Spicy / No Chili

出口 / 入口

chū kǒu / rù kǒu

Exit / Entrance

过敏

guò mǐn

Allergy

3. Cantonese Dim Sum (Yum Cha 饮茶) Customs

- **Rinsing tableware (烫碗):** When seated, you are given a bowl of hot tea or boiled water. Many locals rinse their teacup, bowl, and chopsticks in it before eating. It is customary, and you are welcome to skip it.
- **Finger-tapping (叩指礼):** When someone pours tea for you, tapping two fingers on the table is a quiet way of saying "thank you".
- **Tea refill:** When your teapot needs hot water, leave the lid slightly open or tilted on the rim. The server will notice and refill it.

Wholesale Markets, Cantonese Food & Tourist Traps

1. Shopping & Wholesale Markets

Locals and traders buy at wholesale prices. Minimum orders of a few pieces are common; prices are negotiable. Mornings to mid-afternoon are the best time to visit.

Baima Garment Market (白马服装市场)

Near GZ Railway Station (Line 2/5)

Mid-range to higher-end clothing: coats, shirts, knitwear, streetwear. Sample pieces (拿样) sold if asked politely.

Shisanhang / New China Building (十三行 / 新中国大厦)

Liwan District

Trendy, low-priced fashion (especially women's). Very busy, bulk focus. Much easier with a Chinese speaker.

Fangcun Tea Market (芳村茶叶市场)

Fangcun (Metro Line 1)

One of the biggest tea markets in China. Free tea tastings (Pu'er, oolong, jasmine). Tasting is normal; never obliged to buy.

2. Authentic Cantonese Food: "Eating in Guangzhou" (食在广州)

- **Old Yuexiu & Liwan:** Wenming Rd (文明路) and Enning Rd (恩宁路) in Xiguan for double-skin milk pudding (双皮奶), slow-simmered herbal soup (老火靚汤), and steamed rice noodle rolls (肠粉).
- **Roast goose & BBQ pork (烧腊):** Look for neighborhood shops with hanging roast geese and char siu. Set meals with rice and soup are usually ~25–40 RMB (\$3.50–\$5.50).
- **Claypot rice (煲仔饭):** Rice cooked in clay pots with a crispy crust, cured sausage/beef, and sweet soy sauce.

3. Step 4: Common Tourist Traps & Mistakes to Avoid

The "Tea Ceremony / English Practice" Scam

On pedestrian streets (Beijing Rd in GZ, Nanjing Rd in Shanghai, Wangfujing in Beijing), friendly young people invite you to practice English or take photos, then lead you to a tea tasting or art show with bills >1,000 RMB.

👉 **Rule:** Never follow strangers from tourist streets into private back-alley tea rooms or galleries.

Unlicensed Airport Taxis ("Black Cabs")

At CAN Airport or GZ South Station, ignore touts saying "Taxi?". Always follow overhead signs to the **Official Taxi Queue** or use Didi inside Alipay.

Hotel Foreign Guest Registration

Hotels must register foreign guests with police within 24h. Some budget inns lack the system and turn foreigners away. Verify before booking.

Paperwork Safety & Emergency "Show-to-Local" Cards

Fake Ticket Sellers & Monday Closure

Big sight tickets are linked to your passport. Never buy from street touts. Forbidden City is closed Mondays and sells zero same-day tickets.

Free Entry Arrival Card (NIA 12367)

Foreign arrival card is 100% free online via the [NIA website](#) or 12367 app. Never pay third-party scam websites charging fees.

Emergency Show-to-Local Flashcards (Works 100% Offline)

If you hit a language barrier or data outage, show these bilingual cards directly on your phone screen:

Taxi / Ride Navigation

师傅，请带我去这个中文地址，谢谢！

Shīfu, qǐng dài wǒ qù zhège zhōngwén dìzhǐ, xièxie!

Driver, please take me to this address (Show your Chinese hotel address below):

Severe Food Allergy

我对花生 / 坚果 / 蚕豆严重过敏，菜里千万不要放，谢谢！

Wǒ duì huāshēng / jiānguǒ / cándòu yánzhòng guòmǐn, cài lǐ qiānwàn búyào fàng, xièxie!

I have a severe allergy to peanuts/tree nuts. Please ensure no nuts or peanut oil are used!

Dining / Paying

你好，买单！可以扫微信/支付宝吗？

Nǐhǎo, mǎidān! Kěyǐ sǎo Wēixìn / Zhīfùbǎo ma?

Check please! Can I scan your WeChat or Alipay?

No Spice

请完全不要放辣椒，一点辣都不能吃。

Qǐng wánquán búyào fàng làjiāo, yídiǎn là dōu bù néng chī.

Please make it completely non-spicy. No chili at all.

Metro / Transit Gate

我的乘车码刷不过去，可以用现金买票吗？

Wǒ de chéngchēmǎ shuā bú guòqù, kěyǐ yòng xiànjīn mǎi piào ma?

My code failed at the gate. Can I buy a ticket with cash?

Finding Restroom

请问洗手间 / 卫生间在哪里？

Qǐngwèn xǐshǒujiān / wèishēngjiān zài nǎlǐ?

Excuse me, where is the restroom?

Hands-On Help From a Local (Nick)

If you'd rather not handle Chinese-only apps or logistics alone, I offer direct, one-on-one assistance. Fees run from about the price of a coffee to a casual dinner out, with upfront transparent pricing before confirming anything.

1. Pre-Trip Setup Call

45-min video call

A 1-on-1 video call before you fly, so problems show up while you can still fix them from home.

- **Alipay & card:** Passport verification, linking Visa/Mastercard (you type card details; Nick never asks).
- **Transit & Didi:** City transit codes & ride-hailing setup.
- **Hotel maps & eSIM check:** Chinese address matching & data routing test. WeChat verification walk-through.

* Includes a bilingual itinerary card (PDF).

2. Ticket & Train Booking

Full refund guarantee

Try Trip.com/12306 first. Come to Nick when:

- **Release time sell-outs:** Forbidden City 7 days ahead at 20:00 Beijing time drops.
- **Chinese-only apps:** Sights sold only via Chinese mini-programs.
- **Card declined on 12306:** Fast real-name booking through Nick.
- **100% refund guarantee:** Full refund if tickets unavailable.

* Official price plus flat fee. Passport info deleted in 24h.

3. 7-Day / 3-Day Text Concierge

08:30 - 21:30 GMT+8

A local you can message while you travel anywhere in China (WhatsApp / WeChat / Alipay):

- **Hotel & destination pins:** Exact Chinese pins for Didi/AMap.
- **Menus & allergies:** Ingredient flag & ordering words.
- **Transit & driver help:** Speak directly to drivers if lost.
- **Guangzhou eating & shopping:** Wholesale bargaining tips.

4. Guangzhou Landing Pass

Central GZ

In-person arrival help in Tianhe district for travelers needing a local +86 SIM:

- **Local SIM registration:** In-person carrier store registration.
- **Metro & payment test:** Test Alipay transit QR & purchase.
- **App check:** Verify maps, Didi, and translation apps.

How It Works (3 Steps)

1. Message me your dates and what you need.
2. I reply with what I can do, what it costs, and payment method (PayPal/Venmo/Alipay/Cash).
3. You decide. Nothing is charged until you say yes.

My Commitments & Privacy

- **Payment safety:** Never ask for PINs, passwords, or codes.
- **Passport privacy:** Deleted within 24h of confirmation.
- **Clear scope:** Logistics & comms help (not agency/doctor/lawyer).

110

Police (报警)

120

Ambulance (急救)

122

Traffic (交警)

12367

Immigration 24h Multilingual

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