China is simply too much - too big, too grand, too vast, too busy, too complex - to fit neatly into the space of a few pages.

It is the massive stone wall spread along the spine of China; the little girl in the pink dress sitting on her grandfather’s lap in a Beijing park; the river that has carried a nation on its broad back; the utter rush of Shanghai and Hong Kong; and delicate songs of a Chinese opera. For more than five centuries, emperors ruled from the magnificent Forbidden City with its 9,999 rooms. In distant southeast China, ordinary people crafted some 2,415 statues, paintings and 50,000 Buddhist scriptures, textiles and historic documents in the grottoes of Magao Caves over the course of a thousand years. An emperor created a red clay army of more than 7,000 soldiers, horses and chariots. The country’s majestic legacy had been forged in the ancient water towns of Jiangnan and along the legendary Silk Road. Tibet is a wealth of ancient palaces, rich religious history, temples and monasteries. From momentous civilizations to phenomenal human achievements, China’s influence has been felt across the globe. What scale, what style, what an adventure!
Day 1: Beijing, China
The national capital city, Beijing has more treasures to explore than most people have time.

Days 2/3: Beijing
Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, Great Wall and Sacred Walk of Statues are just a part of the Beijing experience.

Day 4: Beijing / Xian
Xian, the capital for 11 dynasties, is also the gateway to the ancient Silk Road.

Day 5: Xian
Xian is the site of the spectacular archaeological site of the army of terra cotta soldiers and horses.

Day 6: Xian / Guilin
Guilin is China's great scenic city on the poetic Li River.

Day 7: Guilin / Yangshuo
A cruise on the Li River sails past cormorant fishermen, bamboo groves and limestone pinnacles to Yangshuo.

Day 8: Yangshuo / Lishan / Shanghai
Breathtaking scenery, centuries-old rice terraces and some of China’s ethnic minorities are part of the story here.

Day 9: Shanghai
Shanghai is a city of skyscrapers and high tech that also respects its Art Deco waterfront and teeming Old Quarter.

Day 10: Shanghai / Suzhou / Shanghai
The city of Suzhou dates back 2,500 years and boasts grand canals and private gardens.

Day 11: Shanghai / Depart

Custom Options

Dunhuang (3 days)
Mogao Grottoes houses 492 caves with more than 2,415 painted statues and paintings related to Buddhism.

Hong Kong (3 days)
This is quintessential East meets West, where traditional street opera complements classic Hong Kong ballet.

Shanxi Province (Coal Belt) (3 days)
One of the gems of this area are the amazing Yungang Grottos, a series of 53 Chinese Buddhist temple grottoes.

Silk Road (8 days)
The ancient route was known for trade, but it also became a road of ideas, technologies, philosophies and religions.

South China (8 days)
Kunming, Lijiang and Yangshuo are noted for striking scenery and fascinating ethnic Chinese minorities.

Tibet (5 days)
Tibet’s capital, Lhasa carries its nickname, ‘City of Sunlight’ well; and remains an entirely unique and spiritual city.

Water Towns Of Grand Canal (4 days)
Charming old water towns with canals and arched bridges offer a tranquil contrast to the not-too-distant Shanghai.

About China

Beijing: This mammoth city has uncounted stories to tell. The mythical Forbidden City is the largest imperial palace complex in the world, and has 9,999 rooms – one room short of the number that ancient Chinese believed represented ‘Divine Perfection.’ For 500 years, the palace was the administrative center and the residence of emperors and empresses of Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. Also on an imposing scale, Tiananmen Square is said to be able to hold one million people. The Great Wall snakes through five provinces, a distance of 4,163 kilometers / 2,587 miles. Beijing’s historic temples include the 16th-century Temple of Heaven, Temple of Confucius, Great Bell Temple, Niujie (Ox Street) Mosque and Yonghe monastery. The Summer Palace is a classic garden of serene beauty.

Guilin & Xian: Guilin has long been renowned for its unique setting surrounded by hills. A short cruise from Guilin to Yangshuo travels through countryside layered with folk tales and legends, past valleys, bamboo groves and limestone pinnacles. Jingjiang Princes’ City is a famous walled city within Guilin, dating from the Ming Dynasty. It once served as an ‘inner city’ occupied by the princes and their families. The area has fascinating formations such as Seven Star Cave, Reed-Flute Cave, Camel Mountain and Elephant Trunk Hill. Xian, the capital for 11 dynasties, exemplifies the extraordinary continuity of Chinese civilization. The phenomenal Terra Cotta Warriors were discovered here. Life-size warriors guarded the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, first emperor of the Qin Dynasty (246-209 BC). More than 7,000 soldiers, horses, chariots and weapons have been unearthed at this UNESCO World Heritage Site. Here, too, is the Banpo Village Remains, a settlement typical of the Neolithic Yangshao culture. Archaeologists have discovered nearly 10,000 tools, 45 houses, 200 cellars, pottery kilns and burial sites.

Hong Kong: Hong Kong’s story is unique in all of China. It is as western as it is Asian. Under British control for more than 150 years, it was returned to China in 1997. Hong Kong is one of two special administrative regions that operate under the “one country, two systems” policy. The Chinese government is responsible for the territory’s defense and foreign affairs, while Hong Kong maintains its own legal system, police force, monetary system and customs and immigration policies. Hong Kong emerged as a leading financial center in the late 20th century. It is an intriguing city, including the New Territories and Macau. Victoria Peak, reached by a tram, offers panoramic views of the magnificent harbor. Ocean Park is one of top theme parks and aquariums in Southeast Asia. Aberdeen Harbor is home to hundreds of trawlers on which generations of fishermen and their families have lived. From the Hong Kong Disneyland to the traditional Po Lin Monastery and Big Buddha to high-fashion shops, Hong Kong is a destination of delightful eccentricities.
Shanghai & Water Towns Of The Grand Canal: Shanghai is a modern international metropolis that is never motionless as it strives to balance its rich heritage with its future dreams. The Bund on the waterfront is a mix of building styles from Art Deco to ultra-modern. Nanjing Road’s 600 or so shops draw shoppers from around the globe. Shanghai Museum houses art, pottery and paintings. Jade Buddha Temple features white jade Buddhas imported from Burma in the 19th century. Jin Mao Tower in the finance district in Pudong is the world’s third tallest building.

In this area, the fabled Yangtze River begins to thin and spread its fingers, stretching them into tributaries. Jiangnan means “South of the Yangtze,” and usually refers to the area between Shanghai and its two neighboring provinces, Jiangsu and Zhejiang. The longest canal in the world today is China’s ancient Grand Canal. Begun in 605, it is 1,794 kilometers / 1,115 miles long, and was originally built to carry the Emperor Yang Guang between Beijing and Hangzhou. Along the way, the ancient canal system intermingled with natural rivers and lakes. Much of the canal is not functioning today, but the canal in Jiangnan is still heavily trafficked. A collection of ancient water towns are sprinkled along the way such as Zhouzhuang, Luzhi, and Tongli near Suzhou, and Xitang and Wuzhen near Hangzhou, each with its own personality. These towns recall images of lovely Chinese silk paintings.

Shanxi Province: The province is called the coal belt because of the number of coal mines located within this province. In Datong, Yungang Grottos encompasses a series of 53 Chinese Buddhist temple grottoes, dating from 460-494. Taiyuan is known for its phenomenal hanging temples that are some 1,400 years old, and seem to hang impossibly from the cliffs. During the Qing Dynasty, Pingyao was a financial center in China. Its history stretches back over some 2,700 years. It is one of the best-preserved ancient cities in the known world. A UNESCO World Heritage, the city has preserved Ming- and Qing-style residences that number close to 4,000. The streets and storefronts largely retain their historical appearance. In 1986, China designated Pingyao as one of the Chinese Historic and Cultural Cities.

Silk Road: Extending 6,500 kilometers / 4,000 miles, the Silk Road began in the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD). Trade along this route was a major factor in the growth of the civilizations of China, India, Persia and Arabia. Stations became towns, then cities such as Kashgar. The last station in China, Kashgar is noted for the Abakh Hoja Tomb, Id Kah Mosque and its famous Sunday Bazaar, where thousands come every Sunday to trade and sell everything from goats to garments. Gaocang was built in the first century BC, and became an important trading center. It was destroyed during the 14th century and its ruins are just southeast of modern Turpan. The city of Kuche (Kuqa) was another early stop. An ancient Buddhist kingdom ran along the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert. It became the center of the later Uyghur Kingdom. In Kuche, the Tang Dynasty Thousand Buddha Cave has stone carvings dedicated to Buddhism. By the third century, this was a major center for Buddhism. The statues in Kuche have a different appearance than those in Turpan and Dunhuang. Here, the statues appear more Asian or European. In Turpan, the carvings look more like the Uyghur people while in Dunhuang, the look is Chinese. Kucha’s 112 surviving cave temples date from the fifth century to the time they were abandoned in the 11th century. This site is not open to the public. Big Five has arranged for private VIP access. The city of Gaochang was the old Uyghur village of Tuyuk. Other sights in the region include the red sandstone hills of the Flaming Mountains, Bezeklik Buddhist Caves and the town-fortress of Jiao He with its local bazaar. Dunhuang skirts the Taklamakan Desert, and two branches of the Silk Road met here the final leg to China’s capital. A number of Buddhist cave sites are located in the Dunhuang area, the most important of these are the Mogao Caves, which are located 25 km southwest of Dunhuang. There are 735 caves in Mogao, and the caves in Mogao are particularly noted for their Buddhist art as well as the hoard of manuscripts, the Dunhuang manuscripts, found hidden in a sealed-up cave. It is also known for its 492 Mogao Grottoes began back in the fourth century. This phenomenal site features about 44,995 square kilometers / 17,373 square miles of frescos, 2,415 painted statues, paintings, and about 50,000 Buddhist scriptures, textiles and historic documents. The murals and stucco sculptures were created over a span of nearly a thousand years. Big Five has also arranged for a special VIP visit to two of the caves closed to the public.

Tibet: At an average elevation of 4,877 meters / 16,000 feet, Tibet’s first ruler was Songtsān Gampo, about 604 – 650 BC, who united and ruled Tibet as a kingdom. The country has preserved its ancient palaces, rich religious history, temples and monasteries. Potala Palace, originally built in the seventh century, was rebuilt in 1645, and is noted for grand buildings, complex constructions and spiritual atmosphere. Jokhang Temple in the center of old Lhasa, built in the mid-seventh century, has a four-story temple with superb golden roofs. Tibet’s mountains, lakes and rivers are ideal for biking, trekking, rafting and climbing.

Yangshuo, Longsheng, Kunming & Lijiang: This region is known for its extravagant scenery of jagged mountains, lovely rivers and charming towns. The Li River winds through Yangshuo, a small town that can be explored on foot or by bicycle. The road to Longsheng passes by the dramatic ‘Dragon’s Backbone’ rice terraces, where farmers have grown rice the same way since the 13th century. Here, too, are several Chinese ethnic minorities such as Zhuang, Miao, Yao and Dong. Kunming is a political, economic and cultural center. Its old city, once walled, coexists with modern commercial districts, astronomical observatory and universities. About 121 kilometers / 75 miles from Kunming is Yunnan Stone Forest, a fantasy forest of karst formations covering more than 2,985 hectares / 115 square miles. More than 200 million years old, thousands of limestone rock peaks, pillars, and stalagmites rise abruptly out of the earth. Lijiang is a thriving city, home to more than a million people. Its most endearing feature is Old Town. In and around Lijiang ethnic minorities developed, including the Dongba and the Naxi.

Best Time To Go
Due to its size, China has great climatic variations, but is mainly in the northern Temperate Zone. Most rainfall comes during monsoon season between May and October. Northern China has severe winters with temperatures below zero. Central China is milder with temperatures ranging from 1°C / 30°F in winter to 26°C / 80°F in summer. Eastern China has hot wet summers, while the western desert can reach the 35°C / 100°F range. China has a climate dominated by dry seasons and wet monsoons, which leads to clear temperature differences in winter and summer. In winter, northern winds coming from high latitude areas are cold and dry; in summer, southern winds from sea areas at lower latitude are warm and moist.

$350 - $600 per person per day
Land only, double occupancy

Consider enhancing your adventure by including the following destinations: Cambodia & Laos (p49-52), India (p57-62), Indonesia (p67-68), Japan (p63-66), Thailand (p81-84), Vietnam (p85-88)