

China Internet *Survival Guide*

2026 Edition

Everything you need to know before you land in China.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- 01 What's Blocked in China
- 02 eSIM vs VPN — Which One You Need
- 03 How to Set Up Your Connection
- 04 Essential China Apps
- 05 Pre-departure Checklist

Mainland China's Great Firewall blocks or degrades many overseas services using DNS filtering, IP blocking, traffic inspection, and active disruption. Access can change by city, carrier, app version, and political timing, so treat this as a practical travel baseline rather than a permanent blacklist.

BLOCKED

Google Search BLOCKED	Gmail BLOCKED	Google Maps BLOCKED	YouTube BLOCKED
WhatsApp BLOCKED	Instagram BLOCKED	Facebook BLOCKED	X / Twitter BLOCKED
ChatGPT BLOCKED	Gemini BLOCKED	Claude BLOCKED	Telegram BLOCKED
Snapchat BLOCKED	Pinterest BLOCKED	Dropbox BLOCKED	

UNAVAILABLE OR LIMITED

Netflix LIMITED	Spotify LIMITED	LinkedIn LIMITED
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PARTIAL (works with limitations)

Zoom PARTIAL	iCloud PARTIAL	Skype PARTIAL	Some overseas banking and airline apps PARTIAL
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WORKS WITHOUT VPN OR ESIM

WeChat WORKS	Alipay WORKS	Douyin / TikTok China app WORKS	Apple Maps WORKS
Amap / 高德地图 WORKS	DiDi WORKS	Trip.com WORKS	Tongyi Qianwen / Qwen WORKS
Kimi WORKS	Doubao WORKS		

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TOURISTS

China Travel eSIM

- + Usually the most stable option for Google, WhatsApp, Instagram, Gmail, YouTube, and overseas work apps
- + No VPN app or tunnel configuration required
- + Install before departure, enable data roaming after landing
- + Works on phones; laptops can connect through hotspot if the plan allows tethering
- + Price varies by provider and plan; avoid quoting per-day pricing unless the unit is clear

BEST IF YOUR HOME CARRIER OFFERS A GOOD CHINA PACKAGE

Home carrier roaming data plan

- + Keeps your normal phone number active for SMS and banking verification
- + No eSIM switch if your current SIM already supports China roaming
- + Often easier for business travelers who need their original number
- + May cost more than a travel eSIM and may have stricter fair-use limits

BACKUP OPTION ONLY

VPN

- Useful for laptops and hotel Wi-Fi if it works
- Must be installed and tested before flying
- Can break mid-trip, especially around sensitive dates or major political events
- In sensitive periods, including early March, around October holidays, or major meetings, VPNs may face broad disruption
- Do not make VPN your only way to access essential travel information

Side by side comparison

Dimension	Travel eSIM	Home roaming plan	VPN
Best use	Phone-first tourists	Travelers who need their original number	Laptop and Wi-Fi backup
Setup required	Install eSIM before departure	Buy/enable roaming package before departure	Install app and test before departure
Blocked apps on mobile data	Usually work	Usually work	Depends on provider and timing
If it breaks mid-trip	Contact eSIM provider or switch plan	Contact home carrier	Often hard to fix inside China
Laptop support	Via hotspot if allowed	Via hotspot if allowed	Native laptop support
Sensitive-period risk	Lower	Lower	Higher

01

BEFORE YOU BUY**Confirm your phone can actually add travel eSIMs**

Use an overseas eSIM-capable phone. Many China mainland-sold phones cannot add or activate travel eSIMs, even if the same model name supports eSIM elsewhere. Carrier-locked phones may also fail. In Settings, confirm you can add an eSIM, then check the provider's device list before buying.

02

BEFORE DEPARTURE**Install the eSIM or enable your roaming package at home**

Purchase online, receive the QR code or in-app install prompt, and add the eSIM before departure. Do not wait until you are in mainland China to install it. If using your home carrier, buy the China roaming package and confirm roaming is enabled before you leave.

03

DAY OF ARRIVAL**Enable data roaming and test essential apps**

After landing, enable the travel eSIM or home roaming line, turn on data roaming for that line, and test maps, messaging, payment verification, and translation before leaving the airport.

04

DURING THE TRIP**Keep the installed eSIM unless support tells you to delete it**

Some eSIM QR codes are single-use or limited-use. Save your provider login, order number, QR code, and support contact offline, but do not delete an installed eSIM just to troubleshoot unless the provider instructs you to.

COMPATIBLE PHONE GUIDANCE

iPhone: Use overseas eSIM-capable models. Do not assume China mainland-sold iPhones can add travel eSIMs.

Samsung: Recent Galaxy S models often support eSIM, but support depends on region, model variant, and carrier lock.

Google Pixel: Pixel models with eSIM support can work, but confirm region and carrier lock status before purchase.

Others: Check Settings for "Add eSIM" or "Add mobile plan", then confirm with the eSIM provider before buying.

Payments

Alipay first, cash as backup

Alipay — Best first choice for foreign visitors. Supports overseas phone numbers and major international cards such as Visa and Mastercard.

WeChat Pay — Useful if you already have WeChat or need to interact with local contacts, groups, hotels, guides, or mini programs.

Foreign-card payments may show a service fee on larger transactions, often around 3% above RMB 200 depending on current policy and card route. RMB cash remains legal tender and is useful as backup.

Ride Hailing

DiDi is the practical Uber replacement

DiDi — Use the DiDi app or DiDi mini program inside Alipay or WeChat. Add your international card before arrival if possible.

Street taxis — Keep your destination in Chinese characters, including phone number, and show it directly to the driver.

Do not rely on drivers reading English addresses or Google Maps coordinates.

Translation

Prepare offline tools

Google Translate — Download the Chinese offline pack before departure. Camera and text translation are useful for menus and signs.

Microsoft Translator / Youdao Translate — Good backups for voice, camera, and offline translation.

Test offline mode before boarding.

Offline Backup

Screenshots can save the day

Screenshots — Hotel Chinese name, Chinese address, phone number, passport page, booking confirmations, eSIM order, and emergency numbers.

Paper backup — Keep one printed hotel address and emergency contact in your bag.

110 = Police · 120 = Ambulance · 119 = Fire

Maps & Transit

Do not rely on Google Maps

Apple Maps — On iPhone, Apple Maps is one of the most foreigner-friendly options in China and uses AutoNavi / Amap data in mainland China.

Amap / 高德地图 — Best local navigation depth for walking, metro exits, buses, traffic, malls, and points of interest. Use English mode if available.

Google Maps may open through eSIM or roaming, but China location data is often outdated or inaccurate.

Tickets & Hotels

Use foreigner-friendly booking flows

Trip.com — Best all-round option for high-speed rail, flights, hotels, and attractions with passport support and English interface.

12306 — Official China Railway app. Useful for changes/refunds, but the flow can be less friendly for short-term visitors.

Use your passport name exactly as it appears on the document.

Communication

WeChat is useful, but not always mandatory

WeChat — Essential if you need to contact Chinese friends, guides, hotels, restaurants, landlords, or local services.

WhatsApp — Works through many travel eSIMs or roaming plans, but usually not on ordinary mainland Wi-Fi or local SIM data.

New WeChat accounts often trigger security verification. Start registration weeks before departure and be ready for friend-assisted verification, card verification, or passport verification if offered.

Several of these are difficult or stressful to fix after landing. Do them while you still have normal access to your home network, app store, email, SMS, and bank verification.

INTERNET ACCESS

- Buy and install China travel eSIM or enable home-carrier China roaming**
Install and test before departure; enable data roaming after landing
- Confirm phone eSIM compatibility and region support**
Avoid China mainland-sold phones for travel eSIM plans
- Save provider login and order details offline**
Do not delete an installed eSIM unless support tells you to
- If using VPN: install and test before flying**
Keep it as backup only; sensitive periods can cause broad disruption

NAVIGATION

- Save hotel in Apple Maps and Amap**
Apple Maps uses AutoNavi / Amap data in mainland China
- Install Amap / 高德地图**
Enable English mode and save airport, hotel, and key stations
- Install DiDi**
Add payment method and test the English ride-hailing flow
- Save Chinese destination names**
Taxi drivers may not read English addresses or map pins

COMMUNICATION

- Try WeChat registration 2-4 weeks early**
New accounts may need assisted verification
- Keep WhatsApp for overseas contacts**
Works through many travel eSIMs or roaming plans, not ordinary mainland networks
- Save hotel phone number**
Useful for taxi drivers and emergency communication

PAYMENTS

- Set up Alipay**
Link Visa or Mastercard and complete verification outside China
- Optional: set up WeChat Pay**
Useful if you already have WeChat or local contacts
- Carry some RMB cash as backup**
Useful for rural areas, older vendors, outages, or card issues
- Check foreign-card fees before confirming large payments**
Larger transactions may show a service fee depending on current policy

AI & TRANSLATION

- Test Qwen or Kimi before departure**
Use China-accessible AI instead of relying on ChatGPT, Gemini, or Claude
- Download Chinese offline translation pack**
Test camera and voice translation without internet
- Save key phrases in Chinese**
Hotel address, allergies, dietary needs, and emergency phrases

OFFLINE BACKUP

- Screenshot hotel Chinese name, address, and phone**
Show directly to taxi drivers or station staff
- Save passport, visa, bookings, and insurance offline**
Keep both phone screenshots and one cloud copy
- Save eSIM QR/order/support details offline**
Keep QR and account details, but avoid deleting installed eSIMs casually
- Save emergency numbers**
110 Police · 120 Ambulance · 119 Fire