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PRACTICAL CHINA GUIDES

2026 EDITION / CHINA ENTRY

Entering China

A Complete Guide

Visa-free checks · Airport arrival · Self-drive entry
Accommodation registration · Common fixes · Official checks

Updated November 2026 · Verify current rules before departure

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A practical sequence from visa-free eligibility through airport arrival, self-drive entry, accommodation registration, and official verification.

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1. Confirm Which Entry Rule Applies

Visa-free rules depend on nationality, purpose, length of stay, and mode of entry. Check your category before departure because airlines may deny boarding without the correct documents.

30-day unilateral visa-free entry

Through December 31, 2026, ordinary passport holders from 48 countries may enter China visa-free for business, tourism, visiting relatives, exchange visits, or transit for stays of no more than 30 days.

Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, Ireland, Hungary, Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Australia, Poland, Portugal, Greece, Cyprus, Slovenia, Slovakia, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Andorra, Monaco, Liechtenstein, South Korea, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Malta, Estonia, Latvia, Japan, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Uruguay, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Sweden, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

- Brunei ordinary passport holders also receive 30-day visa-free entry.
- Russian ordinary passport holders receive up to 30 days for comparable short-term visits from September 15, 2025 through December 31, 2027.

> Visa-free entry is for short-term purposes only. Work, study, news reporting, and other activities requiring prior approval still need an appropriate visa before entry.

240-hour (10-day) transit

Travelers from 57 eligible countries may use visa-free transit when they hold a valid international travel document and a confirmed onward ticket to a third country or region departing within 240 hours. Entry is available at 65 open ports, including Beijing and Shanghai, and travel is limited to designated areas.

- The itinerary must be a genuine transit: Country A -> China -> Country B or region, not A -> China -> A.
- The permitted activity area is limited and is not the entire country.
- The arrival port must be on the eligible list. Verify each sector before departure.

Hainan 30-day visa-free entry

The Hainan scheme applies to ordinary passport holders from 61 countries entering through Hainan's open ports for tourism, business, visits, medical treatment, exhibitions, sports, and other short-term purposes. The stay may not exceed 30 days and is limited to Hainan Province. Work and study are excluded.

24-hour transit

All nationalities may use 24-hour transit at China's open ports with a valid travel document and onward ticket, provided they stay in the restricted port area for no more than 24 hours. Leaving that area requires a temporary entry permit from immigration inspection.

> Verify at least once before departure through the National Immigration Administration website, the NIA 12367 app or mini-program, the 12367 hotline, and customs or port announcements.

2. Airport Arrival

Step 1: Complete the China Digital Arrival Card (CDAC)

The CDAC is not a visa, but it is required even for visa-free entry. Every traveler, including minors, must submit a separate form and keep the resulting QR code ready for immigration inspection.

- Submit through the National Immigration Administration website: https://s.nia.gov.cn/ArrivalCardFillingPC/
- Use the NIA 12367 app, WeChat mini-program, or Alipay mini-program.
- You may also scan the airport QR code or use an on-site self-service device.
- Online submission is available within 72 hours before arrival and usually takes 5-10 minutes. The system supports 13 languages.

> Critical field: visa-free travelers must write VISA-FREE in capital letters in the Visa No. field. Do not leave it blank and do not enter a passport number.

CDAC may be waived for permanent residents, certain Hong Kong/Macau permit holders, group visa or group visa-free arrivals, direct 24-hour transit remaining in the restricted area, certain cruise passengers, e-channel users, and foreign transport crew.

Step 2: Immigration inspection

- Show a valid passport; six months of remaining validity is recommended, while transit schemes often require at least three months.
- Show the CDAC QR code on your phone.
- Be ready to show a return or onward ticket.

Officers may ask the purpose of entry and your accommodation address. Answer truthfully. Visa-free stay periods normally begin the day after entry.

Step 3: Baggage and customs

Collect checked baggage, then proceed through customs. General health declaration and pre-departure nucleic-acid testing are no longer routinely required, but travelers with fever, vomiting, or other symptoms should proactively report them.

- Use the red channel and complete a customs declaration if you have goods to declare.
- Use the green channel if you have nothing to declare.
- Baggage is subject to X-ray screening.

Step 4: After customs

After customs you have formally entered China. Major airports generally provide currency exchange, ATMs, SIM-card counters, taxis, and ride-hailing pickup areas.

3. Entering by Car

Requirement 1: China does not accept an International Driving Permit (IDP)

Foreign license holders must obtain a temporary motor-vehicle driving permit. A short application and road-safety video normally lead to a 90-day permit. Vehicle-office windows operate at major airports including Beijing Daxing, Shanghai Pudong, and Chengdu Tianfu; otherwise use a local vehicle-management office.

Requirement 2: Foreign vehicles cannot be cleared personally at the border

Foreign vehicles must be handled through a qualified travel agency or customs broker that provides a guarantee. Mature routes include Mohan for Laos, Horgos for Kazakhstan, and Gyirong for Nepal. Preparation may take 30-60 days. The process usually includes customs clearance, a three-month temporary plate, and compulsory insurance.

> Right-hand-drive vehicles are prohibited on Chinese roads. If the vehicle is right-hand drive, self-drive entry is effectively unavailable and the trip should be redesigned.

Vehicle entry sequence

- Contact a qualified agent several weeks before departure.
- Provide vehicle registration, foreign driving license, notarized Chinese translations, insurance, and a statement of purpose.
- The agent applies for temporary admission and completes the customs guarantee.
- At the port, customs checks the vehicle identification number, documents, plate, temporary license, and compulsory insurance.
- Temporary admission is normally three months, extendable up to six months in qualifying cases. Verify city restrictions and traffic rules.

> Vehicle policies, border procedures, and processing times change frequently. Confirm the latest rules with China Customs and the relevant port authority.

4. Accommodation and Common Questions

Accommodation registration

Hotels normally complete the registration for you. If you stay with friends or family, rent an apartment, or use a homestay, you or the host must report to the local public-security station within 24 hours of check-in with a passport and proof of address. Online registration is available in selected pilot provinces and municipalities.

> Confirm before arrival who will handle registration. Complete it on the first day rather than waiting until the end of the trip.

SIM cards and mobile data

Bring your passport to a China Telecom, China Mobile, or China Unicom branch. Some operators support eSIM. Airport counters are convenient, but city branches often offer more plans.

Mobile payments

Install WeChat or Alipay and link an internationally issued Visa or Mastercard. Major hotels, malls, and chain restaurants often accept foreign cards directly, while small shops, markets, and taxis rely more heavily on QR payments.

Extending a visa-free stay or changing purpose

Unilateral and transit visa-free entry cannot be converted directly to work or study status. If you need to remain longer, apply to the exit-entry administration for an extension before the permitted stay expires and provide a valid reason.

Hong Kong and Macau

Mainland visa-free rules and the CDAC do not govern Hong Kong or Macau. Returning to the mainland requires a new mainland entry process, including another CDAC, and the visa-free entry rule must permit another entry.

Emergencies

NIA 12367 provides multilingual immigration information and urgent assistance. Police: 110. Ambulance: 120.

5. Quick Checklist

Stage	Must do	Most common mistake
Before departure	Confirm visa-free category and stay; complete CDAC and save the QR code; print return or onward tickets.	Treating transit as unrestricted entry; omitting VISA-FREE.
At the airport	Show passport and CDAC; answer immigration questions; use the correct customs channel.	Ignoring fever or other symptoms that must be reported.
Self-drive	Use a qualified customs agent; obtain temporary permit, plate, license, and insurance.	Arriving without an agent; right-hand-drive vehicle; expecting IDP acceptance.
First 24 hours	Hotel registers automatically; non-hotel stays must be reported locally.	Skipping registration and risking fines or exit problems.
Daily travel	Arrange a SIM card; link a foreign card to WeChat/Alipay; save 12367.	Relying only on cash or only on a foreign card.

6. Official Verification and Final Reminder

- National Immigration Administration website.
- NIA 12367 app, WeChat, or Alipay mini-program.
- 12367 service hotline.
- General Administration of Customs and arrival-port announcements.

Visa-free entry does not mean unconditional admission. Border officers retain discretion. Accommodation registration, consistency between stated purpose and actual activity, and avoiding overstays are essential. Verify official rules shortly before departure.