HIDDEN TREASURES OF CENTRAL CHINA

17 days
HIDDEN TREASURES OF CENTRAL CHINA

Countries visited
China

Tour Highlights
• Starting point of the Silk Road at Xi'an
• Wartime stronghold city of Yan'an
HIDDEN TREASURES OF CENTRAL CHINA

• Ancient rock carvings of Helan Shan
• Historic Western Xia tombs
• The Tibetan-style 108 Dagobas
• Colourful Gao Temple of Zhongwei
• Buddhist cave temples of Xumi Shan
• Thousand Buddha Caves and Bingling Temple
• Hear the echoing sand mountain of Dunhuang
• Stunning Buddhist art of Mogao Caves

Places visited
Xi'an • Yan'an • Yulin • Mizhi • Yinchuan • Moon Lake (Tengger Desert) • Great Wall at Sanguankou • Helan Shan Rock Carvings • Gao temple of Zhongwei • Xumi Shan • Tongxin Great Mosque • Lanzhou • Thousand Buddha Caves and Bingling Temple • Xiahe • Labrang monastery • Sangke Grassland • Milarepa Temple in Hezuo • Dunhuang • Mogao Caves • Gobi Desert • Beijing

What's included
• Arrival & departure transfers
• Ground transport with driver
• Domestic flights
• Train tickets
• Accommodation
• Meals (refer to itinerary for meal plan)
• English-speaking guides
• Entrance fees to sites & parks

What's not included
• Meals not mentioned in itinerary
• Drinks
• Visa fees
• Insurance
• Tipping
• Camera / video camera fees
• Personal items (laundry, telephone, etc.)
• Medical expenses
• Any services not mentioned in itinerary

All accommodation subject to availability. Final accommodation choices will be confirmed after booking.
Your Itinerary Map
Your Itinerary Explained

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Place visited</th>
<th>Meals</th>
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The first part of the text in each day is the itinerary schedule and will explain what you will normally see/do during this day of your itinerary.

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The part of the day’s text in italics (and comes after the three dashes “---”) is background information on the places or sites on that day of your itinerary. It is not part of your itinerary and may mention places that will not be visited on your itinerary. If you have any questions please ask us. Travel times where noted are only meant as a guideline.

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Tour Itinerary

**Day 1**

**Arrival into Xi'an**

Arrival into Xi'an, where you will be met by your local guide and transferred to your hotel. Enjoy a welcome dinner and hear more about your upcoming tour. Overnight in Xi'an.

**NOTE:** Pre-trip extensions to visit Xi'an, the Terracotta warriors etc are available.

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**Xi'an**, formerly known as Chang'an, was the ancient imperial capital of China. Today it is the capital city of Shaanxi Province in northwest China. It is one of the oldest cities in China and marks the starting point of the famous Silk Road, where countless momentous journeys started or finished. Key sights in Xi'an include the Xi'an Ancient City Wall, which dates back to the 14th Century, the Little Wild Goose Pagoda and the nearby Terracotta Army.

**Day 2**

**Xi'an - Yan'an**

Transfer to the station where you will get the train to Yan'an. On arrival, spend the rest of the day touring the city, including a visit to the Yangjialing Revolutionary Site, Zaoyuan Site and the Revolutionary Memorial Museum. Overnight in Yan'an.

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**Yan'an** became famous as the wartime stronghold of the Chinese communists in the 1930s and 1940s and has therefore become a symbol of the Chinese communist revolution. After the famous Long March the party leaders chose Yan'an as their base and it was here that Mao Zedong consolidated his control over the party. The city was largely destroyed during the Japanese bombing of the Second World War where most residents took to living in yaodongs, which were caves carved into the hillsides.
Day 3  
Yulin

Depart Yan’an and travel by train to Yulin, where you will be transferred to your hotel. Overnight in Yulin.

Day 4  
Yulin

Spend the day touring the region, beginning the day with a trip to Jiangshi Ancient House. Enjoy the views of Red Rock Valley and Zhengbei Terrace, before later visiting the old town of Yulin and nearby Mizhi. Overnight in Yulin.

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The city of Yulin is situated in the Shanbei region of Shaanxi province. The city is surrounded by mountains, deserts and rivers. In ancient times, this was the northern border of China, and today the border for Inner Mongolia lies just north of the city. Its strategic location resulted in many dynasties building and fortifying portions of the Great Wall there in order to improve their defenses. The city of Yulin has a long history, and is home to the relics of the Yangshao and Longshan cultures - dating back 6,000 years.

Mizhi is known as the birthplace of Shaanxi culture and has a history stretching back over 800 years. It is home to Lizicheng Palace - a unique wooden palace - the Diao Chan Cave and the Ming dynasty Wenping Hill bell tower. It is also famous for traditional Yangge dancing and Xintianyou folk singing.

The Zhengbei Terrace was the largest watchtower along the length of the Ming era Great Wall. The tower stands at over 30 metres tall at the top of Hongshan Mountain. This terrace historically functioned as a guard post, and today, visitors can still enjoy the magnificent views it provides of the Great Wall and its surrounding scenery.

Jiangshi Ancient House was built during the Qing dynasty and can be found in Liujiamao village of the Mizhi County. The house, that was once home to the Jiangshi family, is made up of a series of caves and courtyards - built in this way to keep warm in winter and cold in summer. Today, it is a well preserved heritage site, provides an example of traditional Chinese architecture that is recognised as one of the most distinctive historic residential buildings in the Shaanxi region.
### Day 5  
**Yulin - Yinchuan**

Drive to Yinchuan. On arrival, visit Ningxia Autonomous Region Museum and the Chengtiansi Pagoda, whose history dates to the 11th Century. Overnight in Yinchuan.

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*The Yellow River runs through the city of Yinchuan, creating a beautiful natural setting and the perfect agricultural condition for rice farming and fishing. Visitors can see the impressive Pagoda of Chengtian, which dates back to the Qing dynasty. Yinchuan is also home to the Ningxia Museum which displays Hui culture in the form of stone rubbings from the Helan mountains and Western Xia relics.*

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### Day 6  
**Moon Lake (Tengger Desert) - Great Wall at Sanguankou**

In the morning, travel through the Tengger Desert by jeep towards Moon Lake. Spend some time at this natural oasis, before travelling on to the Sanguankou section of the Great Wall. Return to Yinchuan for overnight stay.

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*Moon Lake is a natural oasis that is situated in the east of the Tengger Desert in a remote region of Inner Mongolia. The lake's shimmering blues are in stark contrast to the vast desert land that surrounds it. Crops grow beside its shores, whilst rare animals - including yellow-white ducks - inhabit the waters.*

**Sanguankou** is a remote section of the Great Wall of China that is rarely visited by foreign travellers. Running along the border between Ningxia and Inner Mongolia this section of the wall was originally built during the Ming Dynasty in 1531 - beginning in Daba Fort in the south and running for 50 miles along to Sanguankou in the north. Sanguankou, literally translates as 'three passes', and is named after the three ancient passes, of Toudaoguan, Erdaoguan and Sandaoguan, that lie along this stretch of the wall. It is a beautiful stretch of the Wall where you will see few if any people.

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### Day 7  
**Around Yinchuan**

Spend the day visiting key sights, including the Western Xia Tombs, the Helan Shan Rock Carvings and the Twin Pagodas of Baisikou. Overnight in Yinchuan.

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*The Western Xia tombs are rough pyramid-shaped tombs at the foot of the Helan Mountains. These tombs symbolise the regions cultural and military history as ongoing excavation and preservation has unveiled nine large mausoleums and 250 smaller tombs, holding the remains of imperial leaders and officials of the Western Xia Dynasty (11th to 13th century). The history and meaning behind some of the mausoleum architecture is still to be learned, making the Xia tombs all the more fascinating.*

At the east foot of Helan Mountain stand the ancient Baisikou twin pagodas. The twin pagodas were built in the late Western Xia period (11th to 13th century). The towers stand around 40m high and demonstrate an advanced architectural and artistic skill. The buildings that once surrounded the towers have since been destroyed in earthquakes leaving only the twin pagodas standing.

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The rock carvings of Helan Shan contain an accumulation of ancient engravings, depicting human figures, animals and symbols, which date back to between three and ten thousand years ago and are set in a stunning gorge in the Helan Shan mountains. This area represented a meeting point between sedentary and nomadic peoples. The Yinchuan World Rock Art Museum is situated nearby and explains the history of these rock carvings and rock art throughout China and around the world.

Day 8  Yinchuan – Zhongwei


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108 Dagobas is an unusual arrangement with 12 rows of 108 Tibetan-style Buddhist dagobas, which are brick, vase like structures dating back to the Yuan dynasty (beginning around 1280). Some say that during the Ming dynasty (14th to 17th century) 108 officers and men died on these river banks whilst defending the Great Wall and that the dagobas were built and arranged in this formation to commemorate them. Others believe that counting a dagoba removes a worry, and that counting all 108 dagobas will take away all worries.

The Gao temple of Zhongwei is a marvellous mishmash of colourful and ornate styles reflecting the diversity of the religions it serves - Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Bizarrely it also served as a bomb shelter, and more bizarrely this section can today be visited as a grisly depiction of hell - with a vast array of inventive tortures awaiting earthly sinners on display. The temple was originally built during the Ming dynasty (14th to 17th century), but was destroyed in an earthquake and then rebuilt. However this temple was later burnt to the ground by a fire in 1942.

Day 9  Tongxin - Xumi Shan

Drive to Tongxin, visiting its Great Mosque. Continue on to Wangtuan, where you will experience the Hui Islamic culture and taste local cuisine. Later, travel to see the ancient grottoes of Xumi Shan. Overnight in XXX.

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The Xumi Shan are Buddhist cave temples that were built on the edge of Mount Xumi between the fifth and tenth century. The site can be divided into five sites - Dafo Tower, Zisun Palace, Yuanguan Temple, Xiangguo Temple and Taohua Cave. It is thought that these grottoes once housed monks, inside each is a collection of wall paintings, inscriptions and statues. The iconic feature of the site is the 65 foot stone carving of Buddha.

Tongxin Great Mosque, or Qingzhen Mosque, is the oldest and largest mosque in Ningxia. Dating back to the 14th century, it presents a unique example of Ming and Qing era Islamic architecture. Despite being a mosque it looks more Han in architectural style but with Islamic decoration, which may have helped it survive the Cultural Revolution unlike the majority of mosques that existed in China before this period.
The Hui people are an ethnic group in China who, although ethnically and linguistically indistinguishable from Han Chinese, are followers of Islam. Hui communities can be found across China, but are especially concentrated in Northwestern provinces of the country, especially Ningxia. The Hui people follow Islamic practice, including dietary laws, which has led to the creation of distinctive cultural characteristics - setting them apart from Han Chinese communities. Despite these differences the Hui are one of China's best integrated and most successful minority groups.

**Day 10**

**Lanzhou**

Drive to Lanzhou. Spend the rest of your day touring the city. Visit Lanzhou Waterwheel Exhibition Park, where you will also see the Yellow River Mother Sculpture. Overnight in Lanzhou.

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**The Yellow River Mother Sculpture** was designed by the famous sculptor, He E. Built from granite, the sculpture is more than 6 meters in length and weighs over 40 tonnes. It displays carved patterns of ripples and fishes - a style that resonates with ancient Gansu artwork. In the sculpture, a mother is lying with her child. It is said to by symbolic of how generations of Chinese have been nourished by the Yellow River.

**Lanzhou** is the capital and largest city of Gansu Province in Northwest China. It is stretched out along the banks of the Yellow River and is famous all over China for its beef noodles.

**Lanzhou Waterwheel Exhibition Park** displays the irrigation tools that were used during the Ming dynasty. The ancient device uses flowing water and a system of wheels and paddles to create power. The park is comprised of 12 Lanzhou waterwheels, cofferdams and watermills - where running river water exemplifies how the system would have traditionally been used.

**Day 11**

**Bingling Si & Thousand Buddha Caves**

Today you will drive to Xiahe. En route take a boat out on the Yellow River at Liujiaxia to visit the Thousand Buddha Caves and Bingling Si Temple. Later, continue on to Xiahe, where you will stay overnight.

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**Bingling Thousand Buddha Caves** is a series of grottoes that are filled with Buddhist sculptures, carved into the natural caves of the canyon along the Yellow River. Visited today by boat the caves were created over hundreds of years (from 581 to 1370 AD), spanning many dynasties, including the Sui, Tang and Yuan. Bingling Temple contains a Maitreya Buddha carving, which stands almost 30 metres tall.

The town of Xiahe lies on the Daxia River in Gansu province. It is a significant site for Tibetans and is the home of world famous Labrang Monastery. In order to protect this sacred town, there is a limit on the number of tourists who are allowed to visit each year.
Day 12  Labrang Monastery  Meals

Spend the morning touring Labrang Monastery. Later, stop at the Sangke Grasslands, before returning to Xiahe for overnight stay.

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**Sangke Grassland** is made up of a vast meadow, surrounded by mountains. Sheep and yaks graze along the Daxia River that winds through the highlands. This is an ideal place to experience Tibetan cuisine, snacks and yak butter tea and learn about Tibetan culture.

Labrang monastery is a perennial favourite with its endless lines of squeaky prayer wheels, longhorn and Tibetan bells soundtrack and throngs of colourful Tibetan pilgrims.

Outside of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, the monastery and town are a little slice of Tibet that are both more accessible to visitors but also less restricted for locals than Tibet itself. The monastery was founded by Ngagong Tsunde - the first generation of Jamyang, or living Buddhas. It is one of the six major Tibetan monasteries and was once home to over 4000 monks (today about 1600).

Day 13  Free day  Meals

Spend the day at your leisure in Xiahe, absorbing the Tibetan culture or strolling around Labrang Monastery. Overnight in Xiahe.

Day 14  Hezuo - Dunhuang  Meals

Spend the morning in Hezuo and visit the Milarepa Temple. Later, continue on to Lanzhou railway station where you will board an overnight train to Dunhuang.

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Hezuo is the capital of Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, that is situated in the southern Gansu province of western China. It is home to the famous Milarepa Temple. This vast nine-storey tower is packed full of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, effigies and yak-butter lamps. The walls of the temple are lined with prayer wheels, whilst different spiritual leaders are worshipped on each floor. From the eight floor, visitors can enjoy beautiful views over the hills and surrounding land. This grand temple lies next to Hezuo’s main monastery, Tsu Gompa.
Day 15 | Dunhuang | Meals
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On arrival in Dunhuang, begin your day with a tour of the Mogao Caves. Later, travel to the fringes of the Gobi Desert to visit Crescent Lake. Overnight in Dunhuang.

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The Gobi Desert covers a large expanse of northern China and southern Mongolia, south of the great Altai Mountains, east of the Taklamakan Desert, and north of the Tibetan Plateau. The remote and barren landscape transcends time with towering sand dunes, dramatic canyons, traditional yurt camps and ancient Silk Road cities.

Dunhuang, sat on the fringes of the Gobi desert and at the end of the famous Hexi Corridor, became a key junction on the Silk Road. Travellers heading west would decide here whether to go north or south of the mighty Taklamakan desert.

Crescent Lake is an oasis in the edge of the Gobi Desert called Mingsha Shan, on the fringes of Dunhuang. This freshwater lake is thought to have existed for 2,000 years. It came under threat with a rise in water consumption and desertification, which recently led to government action of refilling and protecting the oasis.

The Mogao Caves are a unique and unparalleled collection of grottoes that are carved into the cliffs above the Dachuan River in the Dunhuang region of Gansu Province. Dating back to 366AD, these UNESCO-listed caves contain some of the most important and beautiful Buddhist art in the world, including murals, sculptures and a 35.5m high Buddha from the Northern Wei, Sui, Tang and Qing dynasties.

Day 16 | Dunhuang - Beijing | Meals
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Spend the morning at your leisure in Dunhuang. Later transfer to the airport where you will fly to Beijing. Overnight in Beijing.

NOTE: Post-trip extensions to visit Beijing and the surrounding areas are available.

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The city of Beijing lies in northern China and is one of the largest and most populous cities in the world. As one of the country’s six ancient cities, it is thought to be the point where historic and modern China meet. This vibrant capital is home to world-famous ancient sites, including the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, as well as some of the world’s most innovative modern architecture, including the 2008 Olympic Park.

Day 17 | Departure from Beijing | Meals
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Transfer to Beijing airport where you will continue your onward journey.

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