



# Xi'an

**X**i'an (Western Peace), population three million, has served as China's capital many times and at its peak it was described as the most prosperous city on the planet. These days, although the city is polluted, hot as an oven in summer and cold as a freezer in winter, it manages to remain one of China's most attractive and charismatic destinations, gracefully blending its historic architecture with newer developments. Although there's plenty to see within the city and the surrounding region, the main reason visitors flock to Xi'an is to stare out over the unforgettable

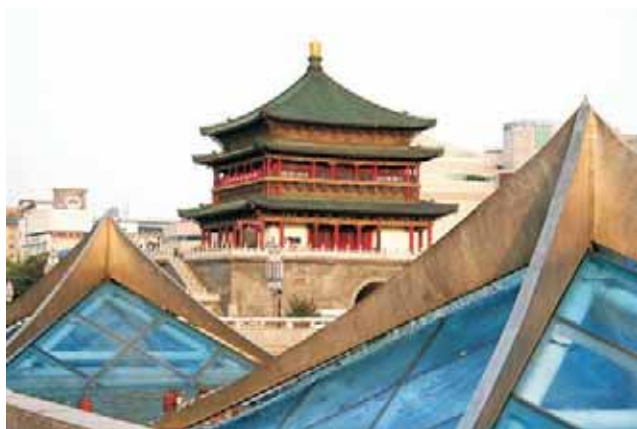
**Terracotta Warriors** which were discovered in 1974 in the district of Lintong, 20 miles outside of the city.

While the warriors deservedly attract the limelight, the city itself is certainly worth a visit in its own right and within its stunning early **Ming dynasty walls** you'll find intact **bell and drum towers**, an **ancient mosque** and a fascinating **Muslim quarter**. Beyond the walls lies another host of sights, including impressive pagodas, one of the best museums in the country, the

**Shaanxi History Museum** and, just a few miles to the east, **Banpo** is one of the best preserved examples of Yangshao Culture (see p. 5) in China. Farther to the east, **Huashan** is one of China's five holy mountains – feasible as a day trip. Xi'an is in Shaanxi

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*New mirrors old in Xi'an*

province, which is famous as one of the regions where **pandas** still survive in the wild, and you can arrange trips to a panda reserve in the **Qingling Mountains** at Zhouzhi, two hours away. Culinary travelers will also find a feast awaits in Xi'an – the city is famous for its dumplings and there are plenty of opportunities to sample (and even make) them, while the Muslim quarter has outdoor treats aplenty.

## History

### Ancient Capital



Xi'an's strategic location between the loess plateau to the north and east, and the Qingling mountains to the south have seen the city and its environs serve as China's capital for 11 dynasties, starting with the Western Zhou dynasty (1122 to 771 BC, see p. 6), over 3,000 years ago. A few hundred years later, the founder of the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC, see p. 6), **Qin Shi Huang**, chose Xianyang, a little north of the modern city, as the capital of his short-lived empire, and was buried 20 miles east of the city at Lintong, guarded by his secret, but now infamous Terracotta Warriors. The succeeding **Han** (206 BC-220 AD, see p. 8) built a new capital not far from Xianyang, which they named Chang'an (Eternal Peace). The Han were one of China's most successful dynasties and under its emperors Chang'an prospered from its position at the start of the **Silk Road** across Central Asia.

When the Han fell, Chang'an was ransacked and China fell into turmoil for the next 400 years. But Xi'an remained the favorite imperial residence and the brief Sui dynasty (581-618 AD) based itself here, as did the successive and more successful **Tang dynasty** (618-907 AD), which really breathed life into the city. Under the Tang, Chang'an is said to have been **the most populous and prosperous city in the world** and the arts and religion thrived in the city. The Tang was a tolerant dynasty and, with the influx of influences coming along the Silk Road, Buddhism flourished while both Nestorianism and Islam gained a foothold and the Great Mosque (see p. 242) was built. The tremendous wealth of the city also allowed for developments in the arts, notably the tri-color pottery still produced in the region today.

### After the Tang

After the Tang, things went downhill for Xi'an and it never fully regained its former imperial splendor, although the city walls, bell and drum towers that you can see today were built during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The city continued its decline, with occasional moments in the spotlight, such as the Empress Dowager Cixi's forced relocation here and the kidnapping of Chiang Kaishek by his own forces at nearby Huaqing Pool (see p. 245) in order to coerce an alliance with the Communists in what became known as the **Xi'an Incident** (see *Japanese Encroachment and Civil War*, p. 20).

In 1974 Xi'an received an unexpected blessing – the discovery of Qin Shi Huang's Terracotta Warriors 20 miles east of the city, near Lintong. The subsequent opening up of China to tourism has resulted in a new heyday for the city as one of China's premier tourist destinations. The combination of this new-found popularity and the city's industrial background has made Xi'an a wealthy city and today the streets are lined with shoppers busy flexing their financial muscle. However, this prosperity has led to an influx of rural migrants seeking work day-by-day, or begging on the streets, and industry has contributed to severe pollution. In spite of these problems, Xi'an remains an attractive and engaging city and its cosmopolitan blend of old and new continues to attract domestic and foreign tourists, while its manageable size and comparatively low cost of living have also made the city a popular place to study Chinese.

## Getting Here & Away

### By Air



Xi'an's airport is some 30 miles from the city and it takes a good hour's bus journey to get there. Airport buses leave from the Melody Hotel by the Bell Tower and the Jiefang Hotel by the train station. They cost ¥25. A taxi should cost around ¥150 to or from the airport. You can book air tickets through your hotel, hostel or the CAAC, west of the city wall on Laodang Nan Lu (☎ 029-8879-0042).

### Destinations, frequencies & durations

**Beijing** (18 daily; 1 hr 40 mins), **Chongqing** (5 daily; 1 hr 10 mins), **Guangzhou** (8 daily; 2 hrs 45 mins), **Guilin** (6 daily; 2 hrs), **Hangzhou** (5 daily; 1 hr 50 mins), **Hong Kong** (2 daily; 3 hrs), **Shanghai** (17 daily; 2 hrs), **Shenzhen** (6 daily; 2 hrs), **Yichang** (1 daily; 1 hr 10 mins).

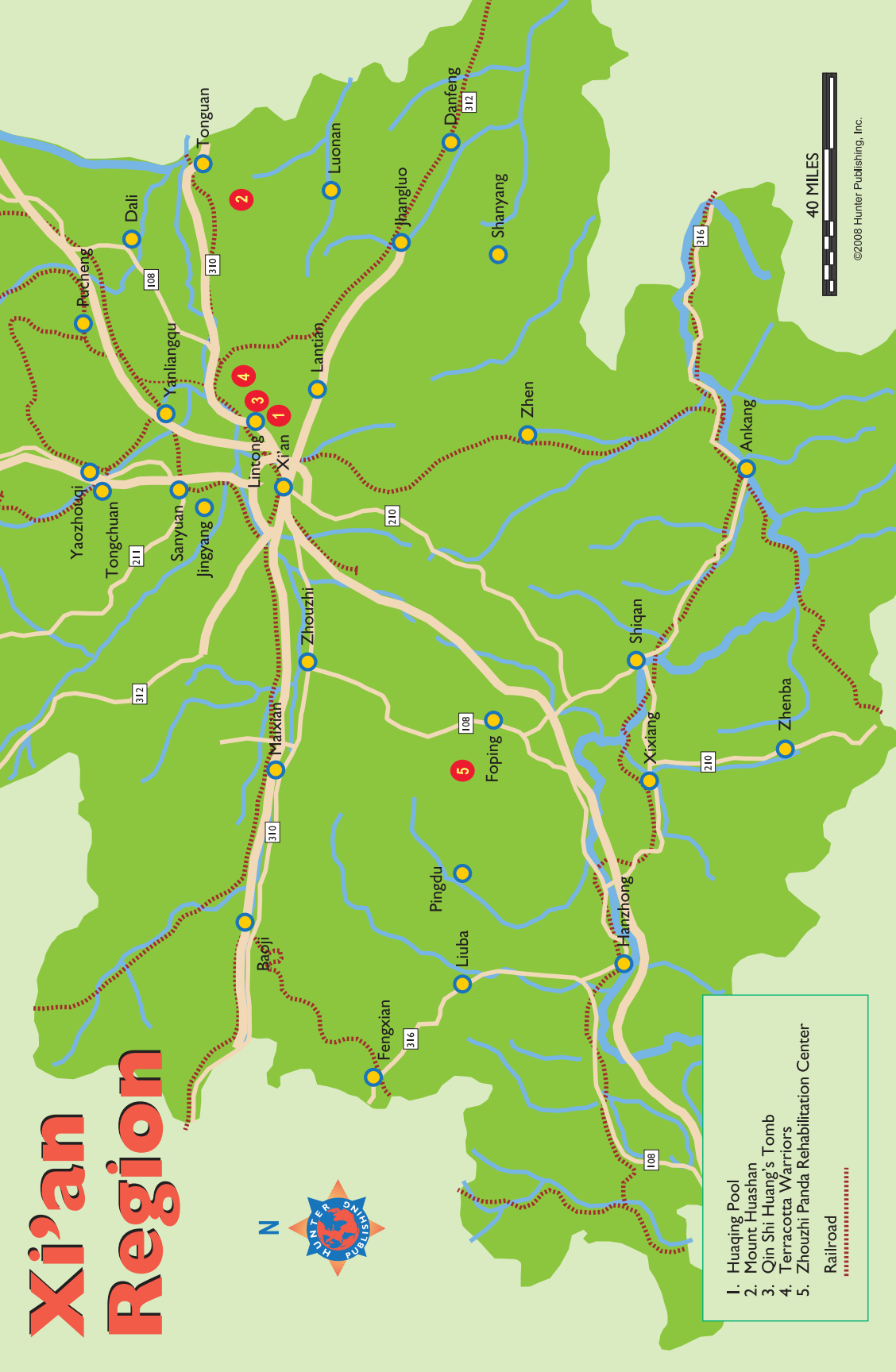
### By Rail



Xi'an is near a major rail branch divide, with one line heading east to Luoyang and Shanghai and another running north to Beijing. It's a popular stop and thus it's worth buying a ticket as soon as you arrive in order to get the train you want a few days later. The train station is conveniently located just outside of the northern city wall, but the roads on the way out here can get seriously gridlocked – some taxi drivers will drop you just inside the gate to save getting snarled up, which is fine if you don't have too much luggage! The ticket office is at the eastern end of the station and, although the lines appear long, they move fairly quickly, but hostels and some hotels can also book train tickets. To get into town, take a taxi, or bus #603 runs down Jiefang Lu, west to the Bell Tower and then south to Nanmen (South Gate).

# Xi'an Region

N



1. Huaqing Pool
2. Mount Hua
3. Qin Shi Huang's Tomb
4. Terracotta Warriors
5. Zhouzhi Panda Rehabilitation Center

Railroad

40 MILES

## Destinations, frequencies & durations

**Beijing** (5 daily; 12-15 hrs), **Chongqing** (1 daily; 14 hrs 30 mins), **Guangzhou** (1 daily; 26 hrs 20 mins), **Guilin** (1 daily; 28 hrs), **Hangzhou** (2 daily; 24 hrs), **Shanghai** (1 daily; 16 hrs 30 mins), **Suzhou** (1 daily; 15 hrs 30 mins), **Yichang** (1 daily; 15 hrs 45 mins).

## By Road



Destinations within a few hours of Xi'an are feasible by bus, but anything longer is far more comfortable by plane or train. Buses run from Dongguangchang Station, just south of the train station to Banpo, Huashan and Lintong.

## Getting Around

The main sights within the walled city are close enough to one another so walking is an easy way to get around, but if your legs are tired or you want to head outside of the walls, taxis are cheap. Roads can be gridlocked at rush-hour within the city walls, however.

## By Bus



Since taxis are cheap, there is little point in taking public buses, which are invariably crowded, but a few useful numbers are included where appropriate, notably sightseeing buses that allow you the freedom to jump on and off throughout the day – route #5 heads to most of the major sights.

## By Taxi



Xi'an's army of green taxis seems to overrun the streets and (except in rain or snow) it's fairly easy to hail one. At ¥6 minimum for the first two km (1.2 miles) and ¥1.4 per km (0.6 miles) after this, Xi'an's taxis are some of the cheapest in the country and it's worth making use of them.

## By Bicycle



Bicycle is a great way to get around Xi'an's backstreets and along the city walls. Some hotels and all the hostels (¥20 per day) have bikes for rent, and they are also available at the South Gate for rides around the wall. Wherever you rent, you'll need to put down a ¥100-200 deposit. For routes see *Adventures On Wheels*, p. 255.

# Orientation



Xi'an's **ancient city walls** encircle the old city which makes it easy to navigate. Many of the main sights are within the city walls and this central zone is bisected by four major roads. They run along the points of the compass to their respective gates in the wall and are named Bei, Dong, Nan and Xi Dajie (North, East, South and West Avenues). These roads meet just south of the center at the **Bell Tower**. To cross this busy intersection you need to use the subterranean tunnel, which has access points from each of the four roads. A little west of the Bell Tower, across a large public plaza, you'll see the **Drum Tower**, marking the entrance to the atmospheric **Muslim quarter**. With its tangle of alleys, this is one of the only parts of the city you're likely to get lost in, but it's great fun. Sooner or later you'll emerge somewhere you recognize, or where you can flag a cab.

Within the Muslim quarter, the **Great Mosque** is the main sight, and it's easy to find – there are signs, but you can just follow the souvenir stalls. In the southeast of the old city there is an artist's quarter, which is definitely worth a stroll. You'll also find the **Beilin Stone Tablet Museum** here.

Outside the city walls the sights are a little more spread out. Not too far south of the South Gate you'll find the **Little Wild Goose Pagoda** and, farther south still, the **Shaanxi History Museum** and, to the east, the **Big Wild Goose Pagoda**. Although there are a few hotels out this way, you're much better off staying within the city walls, which has options for most budgets. Likewise, the best eating and drinking are within the old city, particularly the lively **Muslim markets** and **Defuxiang Bar Street**.

## LEARNING THE LINGO

Starting on page 598, there's a section with useful phrases written in both Romanized Chinese (pinyin) which will enable you to try and pronounce them, and Chinese characters, should verbal communication fail! The major attractions, hotels and restaurants are also shown in Chinese characters. This will allow you to get into a taxi, point at the relevant characters and get to your destination. Chinese vocabulary specific to **Xi'an** begins on page 611.

## Information Sources



There is a visitor center (☎ 029-8552-0555) on the eastern side of the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, but the best source of information in Xi'an tends to be the hostels, which are used to foreigners wanting to do things their own way. Larger hotels might be able to provide good information, but they're of more use for booking tickets and tours than anything else. For online resources, [www.toureeasy.net/expat](http://www.toureeasy.net/expat) has information on hotels, restaurants, shopping, sightseeing and travel. You can buy **maps** marked in English outside the train station and from vendors in the central plaza. The best map is *Xi'an Traffic and Tourist Map*.

## Communications

**Telephone code:** 029

**Post Office:** On the northeast corner of the Bell Tower intersection.

**Internet Access:** Most of the hostels have net cafés (around ¥8 per hour), but there are also plenty of places along Dong Dajie, including Hong Shu Lin at #424.

**Bank of China:** Halfway down Nan Dajie street on the eastern side and another branch with 24-hour ATMs at the eastern end of Dong Dajie on the north side of the street.

**Public Security Bureau:** 123, Xi Dajie (☎ 029-8727-6241). Extending your visa usually takes two-three days.

**Medical Services:** Xi'an Number Four Hospital (☎ 029-8403-5110) on Jiefang Lu.

## Sightseeing



Xi'an is overflowing with sights, from the big drawcards like the Terracotta Warriors and the History Museum to the more abstract pleasures of a wander through the Muslim markets. Many lie within the old city walls, which are an attraction in themselves, but if you have enough time there are sights outside the walls, and still more outside the city, from ancient temples, to pandas and holy mountains.

Within the city it's easy enough to walk, cycle or take taxis between the sights, but to get out to the outlying attractions you might want to take a tourist bus or join a tour. They are run by all hotels, with cheaper (and sometimes more adventurous) options run by the hostels.

### THE BEST OF XI'AN

Arrive in Xi'an, check into your hotel and take a taxi down to the **Shaanxi History Museum**, which will give you an overview of Xi'an's immense history. Continue to the **Big Wild Goose Pagoda** and then take a taxi back to the south gate of the Ming dynasty city walls. Wander through the artists' quarter of **Shuyuanmen** (and maybe visit the **Beilin Stone Tablets Museum**), before ascending for a sunset **walk or bike ride around the city walls** (see *Adventures On Foot or On Wheels*, p. 255), which will give you a feel for the city's layout. Return to the center, freshen up and head to Defachang (see p. 258) for a **dumpling banquet** fit for an emperor.

The next morning rise early and beat the crowds to the **Terracotta Warriors**. Spend time taking in their lifelike splendor. Return to the city for a stroll to the **Drum Tower**, then through the **Muslim quarter** to the intricately designed **Great Mosque**. After your visit, do some souvenir shopping, then take a dinner of lamb skewers in the atmospheric Muslim markets. Round your trip off with a stroll through the lively central square, surrounded by the Bell and Drum Towers.

## Historic Highlights

★ **The Bell Tower** (daily 8:30 am-9:30 pm, 8 am-6 pm Nov 1 to Mar 31; ¥20, or ¥30 for a combination Bell and Drum Tower ticket; tourist bus #5). Drum and bell towers around the country were used to mark out the time in days of old, but Xi'an's are the most prominent of any large city and the Bell Tower dominates downtown, stranded in the middle of a large traffic circle. The original tower was located west of its current location in the old city center, but the triple-eaved, 200-foot, two-story tower you see today was built in 1582 under the Ming dynasty and restored in 1792. Inside the tower you'll see intricate roof truss work, chime displays and, as you'd expect, a large bronze bell, although this is not the original. The balcony, which runs around the edge of the tower, offers views over the traffic across to the Drum Tower. To get to the Bell Tower you'll need to take the subterranean passageway that runs under Bei Dajie.

★ **The Drum Tower** (daily 8:30 am-9:30 pm, 8:30 am-6 pm Nov 1 to Mar 31; ¥20, or ¥30 for a combination Bell and Drum Tower ticket; tourist bus #5). The Drum Tower was built at the same time as the original Bell Tower and has remained in place ever since. The enormous drum was used to mark time, and in times of war, to warn citizens of impending attack. Both the Bell and Drum Towers are illuminated at night, and the Drum Tower offers attractive evening views over the plaza below and on to the Bell Tower. The tunnel through the center of the tower's base leads to the Muslim quarter. There are daily drum beatings at 9, 10 and 11 am and 2, 4 and 6 pm.



*The Drum Tower*

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★★★ **The City Walls** (daily 7 am-10:30 pm, 8 am-6 pm Nov 1 to Mar 31; ¥40). A wander or a bike ride along Xi'an's 40-foot-high city walls offers great vistas and, given that the walls are completely flat, it's a much easier venture than many of the other walls you might ascend in China! From the 500-year-old walls you can see the thronging new city, yet remain comfortably and quietly removed from it all. You can access the wall from any of the four major gates and can then walk, cycle or take an electric buggy (¥50 for the complete circuit of one hour and 10 mins or ¥5 for any one of the 15 sections). You can see as much or as little of its nine-mile circumference as you want. Guides are available at ¥30 for half the wall, or ¥50 for the whole thing, but there's little for them to point out beyond a basic introduction.