

Study Abroad in Beijing, China Experience Report

What (not) to Pack:

Typically there are two type of packers; the ones who bring everything they've ever owned ("I wont be able to find anything I need in China!"), and the ones who bring nothing but the clothes on their backs ("I can buy anything I need in China!"). Neither are the wisest of choices. It is best to pack a few outfits for every type of weather; however, pack a little extra *quality* winter clothes, i.e. socks, hats, long johns. You can find just about anything you could want as far as clothes go, but unfortunately, quality isn't a guarantee. In China, they are more concerned with the products being affordable than them fulfilling their purpose, for example keeping you warm in the brutal winter or lasting longer than a few washes.

As far as shoes are concerned, be sure to bring at least one pair of very durable walking/tennis shoes. You can not but quality shoes out here; that is a fact. You can find any style imaginable, but they are usually knock-offs and fall apart very fast. Ladies, it's probably a good idea to leave your dress shoes at home. Save the space for other things. The women out here wear heels daily, so you can find new ones for while you're in China. Also, remember Beijing is a very dusty dirty place, so your favorite white shoes will not resemble white for long out here. So as a word of caution, if you have some article of clothing you love and would like to still have in top shape for some time later, it may be best to leave it at home.

Some things I wished I packed more of or even knew to pack were mostly things we take for granted as everyday items we can get at the grocery store. Number one was nighttime cold/flu medicine. They have all sorts of cold/flu goodies out here, but its not the same as taking a sip of Dimetapp and calling it a night. Two, Ibuprofen. As someone who enjoys sports and, therefore, gets sore from time to time I prefer IB to Tylenol, which is easier to find out here. Third is tampons. Tampons do not exist here! I can't count the times I tried to get information regarding this matter before I left, but all I ever got as a reply was they "should" have them. But they don't, so pack them. The rest of general feminine products they should have, just go to any *Watson's* on the corner and they will have the widest selection. Fourth is mosquito repellent and anti-itch cream. Mosquitoes are a huge problem in the hot weather. Last but defiantly not least is stomach medicine. Bring plenty anti-gas anti-diarrhea medicine and probably some for the days that things aren't going so *smoothly* too. The food is very greasy and oily out here, so it will no doubt take your stomach a bit to readjust.

Cultural Differences

When you arrive to Beijing, it won't take you long to realize we have different views on manners and common courtesies. People in China have no problem walking right into you on the street; it's kind of like a non-stop game of Chicken. Cars also like to play this game. If you look timid or scared to cross the street, they simply won't let you and will continue to drive. Yes there are traffic laws and street lights, but I'd say those are more of *guidelines* than actual rules. People

drive on the wrong side of the street, pile four cars into three lanes, etc. Use extreme caution on the street until you have adjusted to the environment, especially when on bikes. People in my program have been hit by cars, so be careful! Another difference is lines; they don't exist. People will cut you in line anywhere and everywhere, especially if they feel you are taking too long. When waiting to pay, for example, be prepared before it is your turn and have your money out, otherwise you will be cut numerous times before you get a chance to pay. Don't take it personally, that's just how it is.

Hygiene is something that shocked me the first time I came to China. It is not rude to spit, pick your nose, or "snot rocket" in public places or even inside restaurants. So use caution when sitting on the ground (which you will never see a local do. They always either sit on newspaper or squat). Also, wash your hands every chance you get. You'll be amazed how fast your hands get dirty.

Odds and Ends

I will list a few details that may be a little of a surprise the first time you encounter them and some things to look out for.

1. Don't drink the water! Only bottled water should enter your mouth.
2. No TP in the toilet. You must throw it away in a waste basket. There is no separation of waste in China, so anything that is flushed will go into the ocean. Also, the pipes aren't built to handle paper, the toilet will clog.
3. You will have to hang-dry all of your clothes unless you want to pay for laundry service.

4. Read the news often and from international sources. China strictly filters their media and often will not tell you what you want or need to know.
5. Cab drivers are a kick! They are fun to talk to, but will take you on the longest route possible if you don't know where you are going. Also, there are times when they will play the "you are a foreigner so I will cut you a deal by giving you a flat rate and not run the meter" game. Don't play that game, you will lose! Also it is wise to take the receipt from the driver because if you forget something, this is the only way to *possibly* get it back.
6. Your bike will get stolen, buy a new one.
7. Something will be wrong with your cell phone, pay to get it fixed; there's nothing you can do.
8. Remember you are the "Rich American". This is one thing that really bothers me, a poor college student. You will be viewed as a wealthy American everywhere you go and as a result charged extra. But you must remember you are an exchange student who must save money. You can bargain for just about anything and are crazy not to. The more confident you are and the more Chinese you use the better. Especially when you tell them you are a student *living* in Beijing. It's a game we all have to play.
9. Bargain Bargain Bargain. It's how things work.
10. Street food is tasty, but be careful when you first get out here; your tummy may not be ready for it.
11. Don't eat the skin of fruit when you first arrive, your tummy's not used to that either.

12. Be careful who you talk politics with. Remember China is still very communist so some views may not be welcomed with open arms.
13. You will be stared at.
14. A personal piece of advice is, don't give beggars money, especially the children. The reason for this is they often don't get to keep the money and have to give it to someone else. Buy them FOOD! No one can take that away from them.
15. You may hear Urban Legends about Hei Che's (black market cabs), but sometimes they are a much better choice. You agree on a flat rate before you set out and that price is honored. This is the best choice for long trips and during traffic times. Plus they will get you to your destination as fast as possible since they aren't making money by the clock.

You are going to China so be prepared for things to not be what you expected, it isn't like traveling to Europe where everyone is very westernized. Studying abroad is an amazing experience and something you will never forget. China is an amazing country with amazing people and culture. Be respectful of everyone and everything will work out fine. The small inconveniences are nothing compared to the great time you will have and all that you will learn inside and out of the classroom. Have Fun!

: ARRIVAL / SETTLING

Upon arrival in Capital Airport in Beijing, China, things look as if they had not changed from 3 years ago. The usual haggling with "black cars" or illegal taxis to get a fair price into the city -- which should be 80yuan + 10yuan toll -- and the sky, overcast with a yellowish milky film from the northern district of Shunyi to the city of Beijing.

I arrived in Beijing a week before the beginning of the semester because I had planned to look for an apartment off-campus. In a 3-4 day span, I had worked with 3 rental agencies and looked at 15 apartments within a 20min bike ride of Peking University (PKU). It was quite exhausting to say the least, everyday from 6am - 8pm, looking at apartments that all seem to not feel like home. Tip: if you come to PKU, you can expect to find two kinds of housing: a gong1yu4 (gy) which is more like a western-style apartment or a ming1zai3 (mz) which is more like a chinese apartment. The difference? A mz is more-or-less restricted to Chinese "looking" folks or Chinese speaking folks. If you're white and don't speak a lick, best not to try this route because signing the contract and understanding the terms will be a headache, not to mention the weird looks you will get from your neighbors and neighborhood "management" (i.e. security guards etc). Mz's are usually 6 story buildings and with monthly rent ranging from 800RMB for furnished but unrefurbished 2br to 3000RMB for a remodelled and fully furnished modern looking 2br apartment. You might live in a mz high rise which are a bit newer than the 6 storied ones but the down-side to that is that the elevator stops running at midnight. That's a lot of hoofing after hours, which is what I would've had to do if I took the 21st story apartment I was shown on the 3rd day. Most foreign exchange students live out of PKU's east gate where there are some mz's and further down in Wu3Dao4Kou3, there is Hua1Qing1Jia1Yuan2, a gy where most of the exchange students from PKU, Qinghua Univ., and Beijing Culture & Language University live. It's a pretty lively neighborhood with all buses running to PKU and a 15 minute bike ride will get you to class. WDK is also where a lot of the coffee shops, bars and restaurants are, in addition, there is a light rail stop which will speed -- sort of -- you into city center (although the better option is to cab it). I helped some classmates negotiate apartment prices there and it seems that fully-furnished 2br run about 4500RMB to about 8000RMB for a 3br. The apartments aren't big, mind you, most aren't even 400sq.ft. for

the 3br!

In any case, I live in a mz south of campus near People's University's west gate. It is about a 12min bike ride to school and there are a few markets nearby. I pay 3000RMB for a large 2br (about 400sq.ft.) on the 9th floor (yes, I hoof it on occasion). The apartment actually has a shower and an oven -- which is rare -- most people shower between the sink and the toilet on the floor, and a two burner stove top. It is far from anything cool but I wasn't going to pay more than I was paying back in San Francisco, and so far it has been fine. Some things you should know about renting in China: paying your phone, electricity, gas and water are kind of a pain, requiring long waits at the bank and surly bank tellers -- count on it! The rental agency will require a "finder's fee" if the apartment is more than 3000RMB/mo. Ask about this when you see the apartment because it is actually quite arbitrary which ones and how much you have to pay. For example, I would have had to pay a whole month's rent for the finder's fee but I negotiated with the rental agent -- behind the landlord's back -- and in the end I paid 400RMB while the landlord paid 1100RMB. Also, it is common practice for landlords' to ask for 6months to a year's rent up front. Don't ask why -- in China nothing has to make sense -- just clarify the terms clear and negotiate. Haggling is your friend!