

# Gānsù 甘肃



For over a millennium Silk Road camel caravans wound their way through the mountain and desert corridor of Gānsù, transferring goods and ideas between China and Central Asia along the world's first information superhighway. Travellers, pilgrims, artists and merchants entered the Middle Kingdom using a string of oasis towns as stepping stones. The Buddhist art, military garrisons, beacon towers and tombs they left behind form one of the Silk Road's richest treasure troves.

While Gānsù is most known for its Silk Road legacy – the series of ancient Buddhist grottoes stretching from the eastern edge to western tip – what makes the province truly spectacular is the unexpected variety of landscapes and peoples within its elongated borders.

Despite its rich history, an unforgiving arid climate has made life hard here. Outside of the oases, most of the land west of the capital is barely habitable, and up until recently Běijīng did little to relieve the area of its isolation. Even with the completion of the vital Lánzhōu–Ūrúmǐ railway line in 1963 and the subsequent development of mining and industry, Gānsù remains one of China's five poorest provinces.

Nevertheless, for travellers Gānsù is a highlight of the northwest. The province contains an unimaginable trove of Buddhist paintings and sculptures, a fascinating glimpse of the vibrant Tibetan culture of Amdo and the idyllic, little-visited rural scenery in the southeastern corner. Some of the diverse people you might meet on your way include the Hui, Tibetans, Mongols, Salar, Dongxiang and Kazakhs.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Step back into the origins of Chinese Buddhist art at the **Mogao Caves** (p866)
- Stock up on good karma at Xiàhé's Tibetan **Labrang Monastery** (p856), with its traveller cafés and pilgrim shops
- Explore forgotten Silk Road remains around **Tiānshuǐ** (p869) and **Luómén** (p871)
- Hike through hazy **Moon Canyon** (p872) or up the ridges of the **Qilián Shān range** (p860)
- Take the yak-inhabited back roads to Sichuān via **Lángmùsì** (p859)



POPULATION: 26.4 MILLION

www.gansu.gov.cn/en

## Climate

Gānsù can be roughly divided into three climatic regions: the low-altitude green belt south of Tiānshuǐ; the arid Hexi Corridor extending from Lánzhōu to Dūnhuáng; and the alpine grasslands rising up along the borders of Qīnghǎi and Sīchuān. Since the province rarely sees rain, dust storms are not uncommon, particularly in the spring. Winters get nippy from November to March. May, June, September and October are probably the best months to visit; June to September is the 'high season'.

## Language

Gānsù has its own group of regional Chinese dialects, loosely known as Gansuhua (part of the northwestern Lanyin Mandarin family). On the borders of Qīnghǎi and Sīchuān is a significant Tibetan population speaking the Tibetan Amdo dialect.

## Getting There & Around

Lánzhōu has flights around the country; other airports such as Dūnhuáng and Jiāyùguān only have a handful of flights to major cities, with fewer flights in the winter.

Train is the best way to connect the province's Silk Road sights and continue along the popular rail routes to Xīnjiāng or Xī'ān.

A major highway construction programme will soon shave off bus times to southern sights around Xiàhé and Lángmùsì. A new train station at Dūnhuáng and upgraded airport at Jiāyùguān will further aid access.

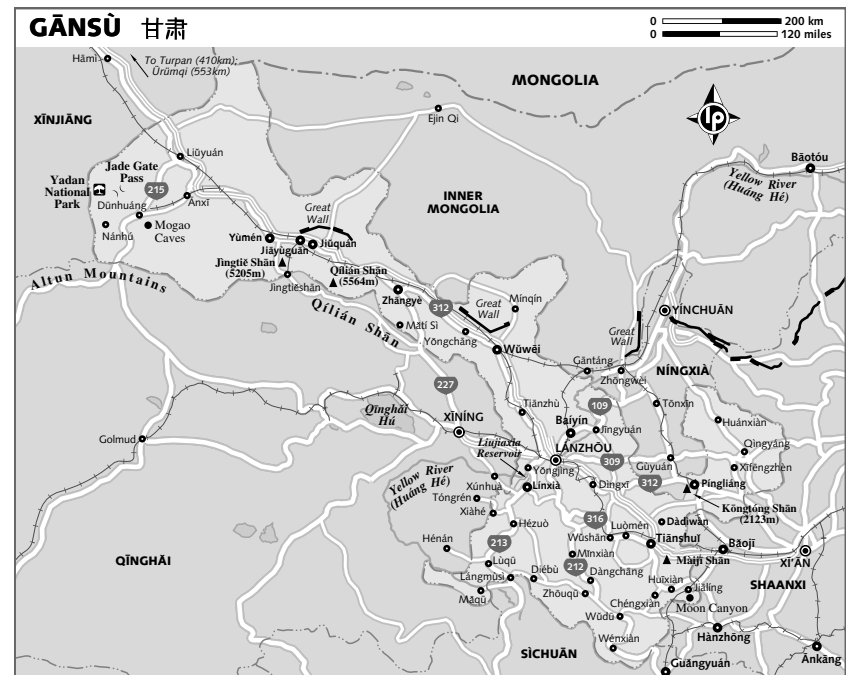
# LÁNZHŌU & SOUTHERN GĀNSŪ

Most travellers end up passing through Lánzhōu but the real gems lie further south in the Muslim- and Tibetan-flavoured grasslands around Xiàhé, Hézuò and the roads south to Sīchuān.

## LÁNZHŌU 兰州

☎ 0931 / pop 2,804,600

The first major city along the Yellow River (Huáng Hé), Gānsù's capital has been an important garrison town since ancient times. Following the communist victory and the



GĀNSŪ

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city's integration into the expanding rail network, Lánzhōu developed quickly, perhaps too quickly – for a time in the late 1990s it was considered the world's most polluted city.

Lánzhōu is a major transport hub, and the beginning of some epic overland journeys into Xinjiāng, Sìchuān and Tìbét. While there are a number of great destinations surrounding the capital, there's little reason to linger here any longer than it takes to extend your visa or book your train ticket.

## Orientation

Geography has conspired to make Lánzhōu a city of awkward design. At 1600m above sea level, it's crammed into a narrow valley walled in by steep mountains, forcing it to develop

westwards in a long, urban corridor that extends for more than 20km along the southern banks of the Yellow River. The most practical area to base yourself is in the east.

## Information

**Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Yínháng; Tianshui Lu; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri) You can change travellers cheques (counter 10 or 11) and use the ATM here.  
**Chāofán Guódù** (Tianshui Lu; per hr Y2; ☎ 24hr) Internet access.

**China International Travel Service** (CITS; Zhōngguó Guójí Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 883 5566; www.citsgs.com; 11th fl, Tourism Bldg, Nongmin Xiang) Located on the street running behind the hotel Lánzhōu Fāndiàn.

**Foreign Languages Bookshop** (Wàiwén Shūdiàn; 35 Zhāngye Lu; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm)

**LÁNZHŌU 兰州**

0 1 km  
0 0.5 miles

**EATING**  
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 Liúxiāngjī Húndūnguān 刘香记馄饨馆 .....(see 19)  
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 Water Wheels 水车园 .....9 B2  
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 Lánzhōu Fāndiàn 兰州饭店 .....14 D3  
 Lanzhou Legend Hotel 兰州飞天大酒店 .....15 D4  
 Yíngbīn Fāndiàn 迎宾馆 .....16 D4  
 Yóuyì Bīnguǎn 友谊宾馆 .....17 A1

**Main Post Office** (yóuji; cnr Minzhu Lu & Pingliang Lu; ☎ 8am-7pm)

**PSB** (Gōngānjú; 482 Wudu Lu; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) The foreign-affairs branch is located on the ground floor, next to a giant Orwellian tower. Visa extensions are generally granted on the same day. One photo required.

**Western Travel Service** (Xībù Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 885 0529; 486 Donggang Xilu) Located on the 2nd floor of the west wing of Lánzhōu Fāndiàn. It has English-speaking staff, and offers competitive-priced tours and ticket bookings.

## Sights

**GANSU PROVINCIAL MUSEUM** 甘肃省博物馆

Gānsù's **museum** (Gānsù Shěng Bówùguǎn; Xijín Xilu; admission Y30; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is the one sight definitely worth visiting in Lánzhōu. Major renovations finally came to a close in late 2006. Significant exhibits include 10,000-year-old painted pottery taken from Dàdiwān, 300km southeast of Gānsù.

Other displays dating from the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) include inscribed wooden tablets used to relay messages along the Silk Road, and a graceful bronze horse galloping upon the back of a swallow. The latter, known as the 'Flying Horse of Wuwei', has become a popular symbol throughout northwest China since its discovery in 1969. One piece that may set your mind pondering is a 2nd-century BC silver plate depicting Bacchus, the Greco-Roman God of Wine – it was unearthed 120km northeast of Lánzhōu.

## WHITE CLOUD TEMPLE 白云观

This renovated Qing-dynasty **Taoist temple** (Báiyún Guān; Binhe Zhonglu; ☎ 7am-5.30pm) comes complete with a former opera stage, fortune-telling monks and kite-eating trees. Overlooking the Yellow River, it's one of the city's few links to the past. A short stroll from here are two huge **water wheels** (admission Y2), copies of irrigation devices that once lined the Yellow River. East of here is a **beach** area, bursting on weekends with volleyball games, kites, speedboats and coracle raft trips across the chocolate-coloured river (Y30).

## LANSHAN PARK 山公园

Rising steeply to the south of the city is the Lánshān mountain range, whose **park** (admission Y6; ☎ 8am-8pm) offers fine views and a cool repose in the summer heat. The quickest and easiest way up is by the **chairlift** (lānchè; one way/

return Y20/25; ☎ 8am-8pm May-Oct), accessible from behind **Wuquan Park** (Wúquān Gōngyuán; admission Y6; ☎ 6am-6pm).

From the train station take bus 31 or 34 five stops, get off and continue walking until you reach Jinchang Nanlu. Turn left here and walk about 500m to the Wuquan Park ticket office. The cable car is a five-minute walk down a side alley – ask the way often. As the ticket office says, 'the joy will be boundless'.

## WHITE PAGODA HILL 白塔山

This **park** (Báitǎ Shān; admission Y5; ☎ 6.30am-8.30pm summer) is on the northern bank of the Yellow River. At its zenith is **White Pagoda Temple** (Báitǎ Sì), originally built during the Yuan dynasty (AD 1206–1368), from where there are good views across the city. There's a **chairlift** (one way/return Y15/20) spanning the river; the terminal is just to the west of Zhongshan Bridge. Bus 34 comes here from in front of the train station on Tianshui Nanlu.

## Sleeping

It's always worth asking for a discount in Lánzhōu. Note that most budget hostels in the vicinity of the train station won't accept foreigners.

**Lánshān Bīnguǎn** (☎ 861 7211; 6 Tianshui Nanlu; 天水南路6号; s/tw/tr with bathroom Y98/138/168, without bathroom Y46/56/60) This old dinosaur is not yet extinct, but only those looking for bargain-basement beds will want to consider it. Hot water is available from 8pm to 11pm.

**Huálián Bīnguǎn** (☎ 499 2000; 7-9 Tianshui Nanlu; 天水南路7-9号; d without bathroom Y58, s Y98, tr Y138-278) Directly across from the train station, the Hualian has excellent-value rooms and good discounts of 20% to 40%. The only drawbacks are the traffic noise and the slow lifts. Hot water is available mornings and evenings.

**Yóuyì Bīnguǎn** (Friendship Hotel; ☎ 233 3051; 16 Xijín Xilu; 西津西路16号; tw old wing Y60, tw with bathroom Y108-198, new wing Y380; ☎) This long-standing hotel is on the western side of the city, handy for the museum and south or west bus stations. The old-fashioned cheapo rooms feel like a boarding school but are decent, with shared bathrooms. The architecture is best described as 'Great Wall of Kitsch'.

**Yíngbīn Fāndiàn** (☎ 888 6552; 37 Tianshui Nanlu; 天水南路37号; tw with bathroom Y80-158; ☎) Unfortunately, the dimly lit rooms aren't quite as nice as the lobby; the cheaper en suite rooms don't have a window. The cheapest

rooms with shared bathrooms are off-limits to foreigners.

**Lánzhōu Fāndiàn** (☎ 841 6321; fax 841 8608; 434 Donggang Xilu; 东岗西路434号; tw Y360-800; 📶) This large, constantly renovated Sino-Stalinist edifice has cosy four-star rooms (50% discounts) and nonsmoking floors; the cheaper rooms aren't up to much.

**Lanzhou Legend Hotel** (Lánzhōu Fēitiān Dǎjiùdiàn; ☎ 853 2888; www.lanzhoulegendhotel.com; 529 Tianshui Nanlu; 天水南路529号; r Y920; 📶) This four-star joint-venture hotel is well run and very comfortable, with good restaurants, English-speaking staff and money-changing facilities. Discounts drop the price by up to 50% and credit cards are accepted.

## Eating

Lánzhōu's big highlight is eating out. The Hezheng Lu night market, extending from Tianshui Lu to Pingliang Lu, is one of the best places to savour the flavours of the northwest. The mix of Hui, Han and Uighur stalls offers everything from goat's head soup to steamed snails, as well as *ròujiābǐng* (肉夹饼) – mutton served inside a 'pocket' of flat bread.

Lánzhōu is also known for its *niúròumiàn* (牛肉面), beef noodle soup that's spicy enough to make you sweat, even in winter. Two handy phrases are 'jiǎ ròu' (with beef; 加肉) and 'bùyào làjiāo' (without chillies; 不要辣椒).

**Nénggrénjù** (Tianshui Lu; hotpot for 2 people Y50) Try this eatery, south of the university, which serves mutton hotpot accompanied by a delicious peanut sauce. Recognise it by the façade of Beijing opera masks.

**Liúxiāngjì Húndìngguǎn** (204 Tianshui Lu) Next door to Nénggrénjù, this place serves some of the city's best *bāozi* (steamed savoury buns with tasty meat filling; 包子; Y4).

**Promenade Bakery** (Tianshui Nanlu) Just next to Lanzhou Legend Hotel, this bakery makes brick-sized banana bread (Y12) – great for day hikes.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Lanzhou has daily flights to Běijīng (Y1340), Chéngdū (Y940), Guǎngzhōu (Y1890), Ūr-ümqī (Y1600) and Xī'ān (Y600). Other weekly destinations include Jiāyùguān (Y910) and Dūnhuáng (Y1030). Discounts can bring fares down by 40%. Thrice-weekly flights to Lhasa are in the pipeline.

**China Eastern** (Zhōngguó Dōngháng; ☎ 882 1964; Donggang Xilu; ✈ 8.30am-9pm)

**Gānsū Airport Booking Office** (Gānsū Jīchǎng Jítuān Shòutiào Zhōngxīn; ☎ 888 9666; 520 Donggang Xilu; ✈ 8.30am-9pm) Next to China Eastern (not at the airport), this office can book all airlines at discounted prices.

## BUS

Lánzhōu has at least four bus stations. The **main long-distance bus station** (chángtú chēzhàn; Pingliang Lu) and the **south bus station** (qīchē nánzhàn; Langongping Lu) are the most useful (see the table, opposite). Touts can be very pushy at the south bus station. All stations have departures for Xīníng.

The **west bus station** (qīchē xīzhàn; Xijin Xilu) handles departures to Liújiāxiá (Y12, two hours); for Bīnglíng Sì, see opposite.

The **east bus station** (qīchē dōngzhàn; Pingliang Lu) has a few additional departures to such eastern destinations as Gùyuan (Y44, eight hours, 6.30am).

## TRAIN

Lánzhōu is the major rail link between eastern and western China and trains run to every corner of China. Heading west, there are overnight trains to Jiāyùguān (10 hours), Dūnhuáng (12 hours) and Turpan (22 hours). The most popular route west is to Ūrümqī (24 hours) on train T295 (hard sleeper Y365) and east is to Xī'ān on train K120 (hard sleeper Y175). In summer buy your onward tickets a couple of days in advance to guarantee a sleeper berth.

A soft seat in one of the double-decker express trains is by far the most civilised way to get to Xīníng (hard/soft seat Y33/50, 3½ hours). Trains depart at 8.25am and 3.43pm.

For details on trains to Lhasa, see p924.

## Getting Around

The airport is 70km north of the city. **Airport buses** (☎ 896 8555) leave from beside the China Eastern office three hours before scheduled flight departures (Y30, one hour). A speedier taxi costs around Y120, or Y30 per seat.

The most useful bus routes are buses 1, 31 and 137 running from the train station to the west bus station and Yōuyī Bīngguān via Xiguan Shizi. Bus 111 runs from Zhongshan Lu (at the Xiguan Shizi stop) to the south bus station. Buses 7 and 10 run from the train station up the length of Tianshui Nanlu before heading west and east, respectively. Public buses cost Y1; flagfall for taxis is Y7 (for the first 3km).

## LÁNZHŌU BUS TIMETABLES

The following services depart from the south bus station:

Destination	Price (Y)	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Hézuò	44	6hr	half-hourly	7.30am-4pm
Lángmùsī	71	10hr	1 daily	8.30am
Línxià	27-29	3hr	half-hourly	7am-5pm
Xiàhé	45	6hr	3 daily	7.30am, 8.30am, 2pm
Zhāngyè	98	12hr	1 daily	6pm

The following services depart from the main long-distance bus station:

Destination	Price (Y)	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Píngliáng	76	5hr	5 daily	7.30am-4pm
Tiānshuǐ	60	4hr	half-hourly	7.30am-5pm
Yínchuān	96	6hr	two hourly	7.30am-5pm
Xīníng	53	2½hr	90min	8am-5pm
Zhāngyè	79	8hr	hourly	8am-2pm

## BĪNGLÍNG SÌ 炳灵寺

Due to its relative inaccessibility, **Bīnglíng Sì** (adult/student Y50/25) is one of the few Buddhist grottoes in China to survive the tumultuous 20th century unscathed. Over a period spanning 1600 years, sculptors dangling from ropes carved 183 niches and sculptures into the porous rock along the dramatic canyon walls. Today the cliffs are isolated by the waters of the Liujiaxia Reservoir (Liújiāxiá Shuǐkù) on the Yellow River. All considered, come here for a nice day out rather than for the cave art alone, which doesn't compare to somewhere like Dūnhuáng.

Like other Silk Road grottoes, wealthy patrons, often traders along the route west, sponsored the development of Bīnglíng Sì, which reached its height during the prosperous Tang dynasty. The star of the caves is the 27m-high seated statue of Maitreya, the future Buddha, but some of the smaller, sway-hipped bodhisattvas and guardians, bearing an obvious Indian influence, are equally exquisite. Photos are allowed. Across the canyon is a large 1500-year-old sleeping Buddha, his heart ripped out by treasure seekers. Art buffs can climb the staircase to Tang-dynasty caves 169 and 172 for an extra fee of Y300.

If you've hired your own boat, and thus have more time at the site, you can take a jeep (Y40) or hike 2.5km further up the impressive canyon to a small Tibetan monastery.

Note that from November to March water levels may be too low to visit the caves, so check before setting off.

## Tours

**Western Travel Service** (Xībù Lúxíngshè; ☎ 0931-885 0529; 486 Donggang Xilu) in Lanzhou can organise a visit to the caves for two people for Y340 per person.

## Getting There & Away

You can visit Bīnglíng Sì as a day trip from Lánzhōu or en route to Línxià.

Frequent buses from Lánzhōu's west bus station (Y12, two hours) run past the Liujiaxia Reservoir, and will drop you 500m from the boat ticket office. Ironically this bus is the only route left in Gānsū where you might be pestered for local insurance.

Going rates for a covered speedboat (seating up to eight people) are Y400 for the one-hour trip. The boat ticket office is good at hooking up independent travellers with small groups, which will make the price around Y65 to Y80 per person. For this you'll get about 1½ hours at the site, which is really a minimum. Private operators near the dam will pester you with similar rates, and perhaps cheaper speedboats (Y200). For those with time, the ferry (May to October) is just Y30 return, but it's a pretty dreary seven-hours return trip! Bring snacks, sunscreen and cold drinks.



If you're heading to Línxià after the caves, you can arrange for a speedboat to drop you off at Liánhuātái (莲花台) on the way back. From there, minibuses will taxi you on to Línxià (Y10, one hour).

## LÍNXIÀ 临夏

☎ 0930 / pop 203,200

Línxià was once an important terminus on the Silk Road. Since then it's become a major centre for Hui Muslims, as reflected by the large number of skullcaps, wispy beards and onion-domed mosques in town. Línxià maintains a market crossroads atmosphere, and shops sell a variety of products from carved gourds, daggers, saddlery, carpets and oversized brown spectacles to Muslim and Buddhist religious paraphernalia.

Surrounding Línxià are pockets of the Dongxiang people, who speak an Altaic language and are believed to be descendants of 13th-century immigrants from Central Asia, moved forcibly to China after Kublai Khan's Middle East conquest.

## Information

**Bank of China** (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; Jiefang Lu; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri) Changes travellers cheques and cash, five minutes' walk north of the hotel Shuiquán Binguān.

## Sights

### WANSHOU TEMPLE 万寿观

If you have a bit of time to kill, this cedar-scented **Taoist complex** (Wànshòu Guān; admission Y10; ☎ 7am-8pm) extends seven levels up the hillside at the northwest fringe of Línxià. Along the cliffs you can visit other surrounding temples overlooking the city. Take bus 6 to the west bus station and head for the nine-storey pagoda on the ridge that is located opposite.

### LÍNXIÀ BUS TIMETABLES

The following services depart from the south bus station:

Destination	Price (Y)	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Hézuò	13	2½hr	half-hourly	6am-5pm
Lánzhōu	27	3hr	half-hourly	5.30am-4pm
Xiàhè	13.5	3hr	half-hourly	7am-4.30pm
Xīníng	45	9hr	1 daily	6am

## Sleeping & Eating

**Shuiquán Binguān** (水泉宾馆; ☎ 631 4715; Sandaoqiao Guangchang; 三道桥广场; s/d/tr Y20/36/45, tw with bathroom Y56-88) At the intersection 200m to the right as you leave the south bus station, this lively hotel attracts an array of mountain characters. Some mattresses are better than others.

**Hehai Mansion** (Héhǎi Dàshà; 河海大厦; ☎ 623 5455; 50 Hongyuan Lu; 红园路50号; tw Y102-142; ☎) Near Línxià Fāndiàn, this is a solid two-star option, with decent rooms.

**Línxià Fāndiàn** (临夏饭店; ☎ 623 2100; 9 Hongyuan Lu; 红园路9号; tw from Y120; ☎) The new block here boasts the freshest rooms in Línxià, although it's not in the most exciting part of town.

Línxià is not a great place for eating, so don't knock yourself out looking for food. The open-air Muslim restaurants by the Shuiquán Binguān are a good bet.

## Getting There & Away

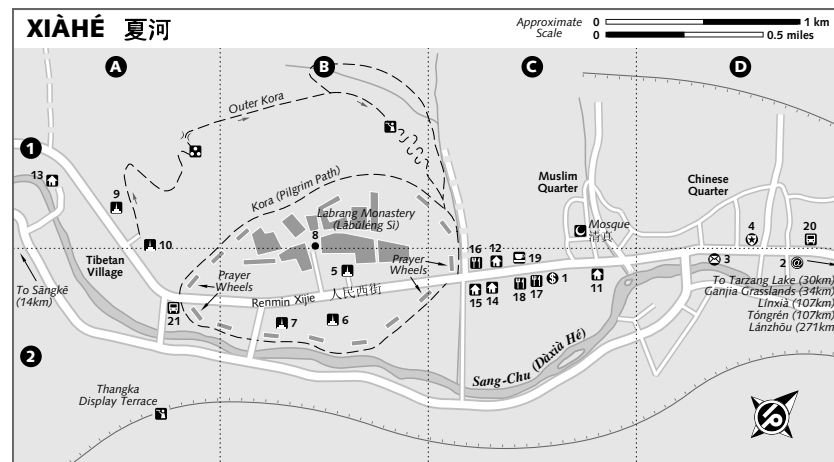
There are two long-distance bus stations in Línxià, the south (*nán zhàn*) and the west (*xī zhàn*). There's little reason to go to the west bus station, though you may be dropped off there. Bus 6 runs between the two bus stations, or take a taxi for Y4. For bus details, see the table (below).

One interesting route is to Xúnhuà (Y20, three hours) in Qinghǎi, for the Mengda Nature Reserve (p906). Buses leave every hour or two from a courtyard behind the Liángyóu Fāndiàn (粮油饭店), five minutes' walk east of Shuiquán Binguān.

## XIÀHÈ 夏河

☎ 0941

Set in a beautiful mountain valley, Xiàhè is most definitely worth a visit, especially if you can't get to Tibet. It's the leading Tibetan



### INFORMATION

Agricultural Bank	1 C2
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### EATING

Everest Café	(see 14)
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### DRINKING

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### TRANSPORT

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monastery town outside of Lhasa and many Tibetans come here on pilgrimage dressed in their finest, most colourful clothing. Walking through the warrens and alleys of the huge Labrang Monastery (Lābūléng Sì), side by side with the prostrating pilgrims and monks in fuchsia-coloured robes, feels like you've entered another world, which in many ways you have. The surroundings were long part of the Tibetan region of Amdo.

The religious focal point is Labrang Monastery, one of the six major Tibetan monasteries of the Gelugpa order (Yellow Hat sect of Tibetan Buddhism). The others are Ganden, Sera and Drepung Monasteries near Lhasa; Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse; and Kumbum (Tǎ'èr Sì) near Xīníng, Qinghǎi (see p903).

Labrang is the seat of the Jamyang, a line of reincarnated rinpoches (Living Buddhas) that rank third in importance after the Dalai and Panchen Lamas. The current Jamyang works for the government in Lanzhou.

Xiàhè is a microcosm of southwestern Gānsū, with the area's three principal ethnic groups represented. In rough terms, Xiàhè's population is 50% Tibetan, 40% Han and 10% Hui.

## Orientation

At 2920m above sea level, the Sang-Chu (Dàxià Hé) river flows through the town. Labrang Monastery is roughly halfway along, and marks the division between Xiàhè's mainly Han and Hui Chinese eastern quarter and the Tibetan village to the west. Note that street names haven't been provided for listings in this section as they are all on Xiàhè's only street, Renmin Xijie.

## Information

**Agricultural Bank** (Zhōngguó Nóngyè Yínháng) Changes cash US dollars and euros, and should have an ATM by the time you read this book. Change travellers cheques before you arrive.

**Lèlè Wāngbā** (per hr Y2; ☎ 24hr) Internet access diagonally across from the bus station.

**OT Travels & Tours** (☎ 712 2642; othotel@public.lz.gs.cn) This reliable travel agency at the Overseas Tibetan Hotel can arrange cars and guides to nearby sights. Contact Losang.

**Post office** (yóujú; ☎ 8am-6pm)

**PSB** (Gōngānjiú) Does not handle visa extensions; you'll need to go to Hèzúo, Línxià or Sōngpān.

## Sights

### LABRANG MONASTERY 拉卜楞寺

Ngagong Tsunde (E'angzongzhe in Chinese), the first-generation Jamyang, from nearby Gānjiā, founded **Labrang Monastery** (Lābūléng Sì; admission Y40) in 1709. At its peak the monastery housed nearly 4000 monks, but their ranks were greatly reduced in the Cultural Revolution. The numbers are recovering, and are currently restricted to 1200 monks, drawn from Qinghǎi, Gānsù, Sìchuān and Inner Mongolia.

In addition to the numerous chapels, residences and living quarters for the monks, Labrang is also home to six *tratsang* (monastic colleges or institutes), covering Esoteric Buddhism, Theology, Medicine, Astrology and Law.

The only way to visit the interior of these buildings is with a tour, which generally includes the Institute of Medicine (currently under renovation), the Manjushri Temple, the Serkung (Golden Temple) and the main Prayer Hall (Grand Sutra Hall), plus a museum of relics and yak-butter sculptures. English tours of the monastery leave the ticket office around 10.15am and 3.15pm; take the morning tour if you can as there's more to see. An alternative is to latch on to a Chinese tour. Even better is to show up at around 6am or

7am to be with the monks. At dusk the hillside resonates with the throaty sound of sutras being chanted behind the wooden doors.

There are a couple of separate smaller chapels. The **Barkhang** (admission Y5; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm) is the monastery's traditional printing press (with over 20,000 wood blocks) and is well worth a visit. Photos are allowed.

The rest of the monastery is best visited by walking the kora path (see the boxed text, below). The 31m-tall **Gongtang Chörtén** (Gōngtáng Bāotā; admission Y10) is a spectacular new stupa with some lovely interior murals and great views from the roof. If you're keen, the **Dewatsang Chapel** (admission Y10), built in 1814, houses a large 12m-statue of Manjushri.

Access to the rest of the monastery area is free, and you can easily spend several hours just walking around and soaking in the atmosphere. Try to make friends with a monk or two: they'll probably be happy to invite you into their living quarters, which always makes for an interesting house call. The Tibetan greeting, in the local Amdo dialect, is 'Cho day mo' (How do you do?) – a great icebreaker.

The best morning views of the monastery come from the Thangka Display Terrace, a popular picnic spot, or the forested hills south of the main town.

### OTHER SIGHTS

Xiàhé also has a welcoming **nunnery** (*ani gomba* in Tibetan, *nígūsi* in Chinese) on the hill above the Tibetan part of town.

Next door is the **Ngakpa Gomba** (Hóngjiào Sì; admission Y5), a small Nyingmapa (Red Hat) school monastery, whose lay monks wear striking red and white robes and long braided hair.

### WALK LIKE A TIBETAN

The best way to get a feel for Labrang Monastery is to take the 3km **kora** (pilgrim path) past rows of prayer wheels (1174 of them!), *chörtens* (Tibetan stupas) and chapels that encircle the monastery. Late afternoon is a particularly good time to join in. En route you can pop into the Gangtong Chörtén and Dewatsang Chapel (see above). Look also for the tiny meditation cells on the northern hillside.

If you're up for a short hike, the more strenuous **outer kora** path takes about an hour and climbs high above the monastery. From the nunnery in the west of town make your way up the ridge behind and to the left, winding steeply uphill to a bunch of prayer flags and the ruins of a hermitage. The views of the monastery open up as you go along. At the end of the ridge there's a steep descent into town; alternatively descend into the small valley to the side, passing a sky burial site en route.

If you're interested in multiday treks around Labrang, check out Gary McCue's *Trekking in Tibet*, which has details of the **five-day trek** from Labrang to Repkong (Tónggrén).

## Festivals & Events

Festivals are important not only for the monks, but also for the nomads who stream into town in multicoloured splendour from the grasslands. Since the Tibetans use a lunar calendar, dates for individual festivals vary from year to year.

The **Monlam (Great Prayer) Festival** starts three days after the Tibetan New Year, which is usually in February or early March. On the morning of the 13th more than 100 monks carry a huge *thangka* (sacred painting on cloth) of the Buddha, measuring more than 30m by 20m, and unfurl it on the hill facing the monastery. This is accompanied by spectacular processions and prayer assemblies.

On the 14th there is an all-day session of Cham dances performed by 35 masked dancers, with Yama, the lord of death, playing the leading role. On the 15th there is an evening display of butter lanterns and sculptures. On the 16th the Maitreya statue is paraded around the monastery.

During the second month (usually starting in March or early April) there are several interesting festivals, with a procession of monastery relics on the seventh day.

## Sleeping

**Tara Guesthouse** (Zhuōmǎ Lùshè; ☎ 712 1274; tsering tara@aol.com; dm Y15-25, tw Y60-70) This hotel is the best budget choice, but the bathrooms are pretty basic. Rooms are small but fairly comfortable – the nicest digs (including *kang*-style twins; ie with a traditional Chinese raised sleeping platform) are on the top floor. There's a nice sitting area, and a rooftop terrace with fantastic views over the monastery. Hot water is available from 6.30pm to 10pm. Access is through the back of the shop.

**Overseas Tibetan Hotel** (Huájiào Fàndiàn; ☎ 712 2642; othotel@public.lz.gs.cn; dm/tw Y20/80, d with bath-room Y200; ☎) A well-run and bustling place focusing on budget tour groups, but with cheaper twins and dorm beds out the back. The comfortable en suite rooms are decorated with Tibetan paintings. There's a popular café, bike hire and travel agency, and the friendly owner does a great job.

**Labrang Baoma Hotel** (Lābūléng Bāomǎ Bīnguǎn; ☎ 712 1078; www.labranghotel.com; dm Y25, tw Y150-180; ☎) Friendly Tibetan place with a nice interior courtyard and comfortable en suite rooms. Bike hire and laundry are available.

**Lābūléng Bīnguǎn** (☎ 712 1849; dm Y30-40, tw Y120-260) The location by the river outside of town is serene and some rooms are in the former summer palace of the Jamyang (known as the Tashi Rabten), but the rooms are showing serious wear. The kitschy concrete tents have to be seen to be believed. A minivan here costs about Y5.

There are lots more Chinese-style hotels in town, including the **Gāngjiān Lóngzhū Bīnguǎn** (☎ 712 3600; tw Y100-160), which has the cheapest en suite rooms in town.

## Eating

Popular Tibetan dishes that you'll find in Xiàhé are *momo* (boiled dumplings) and *tsampa*, a porridge of roasted barley flour.

**Nomad Restaurant** (Mùmin Qíquán Fànzhūguān; dishes Y5-25) Not only does it have a great location and a sunny terrace, but it also offers the best Tibetan cooking around. *Jaathik* (noodle soup) and boiled yak meat (better than it sounds) are two local dishes to try here. It's on the 3rd floor just before the monastery walls.

**Everest Cafe** (dishes Y10-30) Part of the Overseas Tibetan Hotel, the Everest has the best breakfasts in town (Y15), and also offers delicious Nepali-style curries (Y20), sizzlers (Nepali-style dish that comes on a heated iron plate) and masala tea.

**PS Café** (dishes Y4-8) A couple of doors down from Tsewong's Cafe, this cheap local place serves much-praised *shakshuka* (Israeli vegetable dish).

**Tsewong's Cafe** (☎ 712 5842; tsewong@yahoo.com; dishes Y20-30) A switched-on travellers café with great pizzas and kebabs (more like a Turkish Iskender kebab, with tomatoes, yoghurt and bread), plus internet access.

For Chinese or Hui food, try the restaurants around the bus station.

The string of upper-storey teahouses across the road are a great place to take in some sun and write a postcard.

## Shopping

Xiàhé is one of the best places to pick up Tibetan handicrafts, including cowboy hats, *chubas* (Tibetan cloaks), juniper incense, furry yellow monks' hats, prayer flags, brocade silks (around Y40 per metre), Tibetan cloth and even Tibetan-style tents. You can pick up a pair of authentic monks' boots for Y120.

**XIÀHÉ BUS TIMETABLES**

The following services depart from Xiàhé.

Destination	Price (Y)	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Hézuò	9	2hr	half-hourly	6am-5pm
Lángmùsì	41	6½hr	1 daily	7.30am
Lánzhōu	44	5-6hr	3 daily	6.30am, 7.30am, 2.30pm
Línxià	13	2½-3hr	half-hourly	6am-5.30pm
Tónggrén	21	5hr	1 daily	7.30am
Xīnǐng	46	7hr	1 daily	6am

**Getting There & Away**

There are continual rumours of an airport being built at Sāngkē, but for the time being Xiàhé is accessible only by bus. Most travellers head on to either Lánzhōu or Sīchuān; the road less travelled takes you over the mountains to Tónggrén. See the table (above) for details.

If you can't get a direct ticket to/from Lánzhōu, take a bus to Línxià and change there (see p854 for details).

**Getting Around**

Most hotels and restaurants hire bikes for Y10 to Y15 per day. Minivans cost Y1 per seat for a short trip around town, including to the bus station or monastery.

**AROUND XIÀHÉ**  
**Sāngkē Grasslands** 桑科草原

Around and beyond the village of Sāngkē, 14km up the valley from Xiàhé, are large expanses of open grassland, where the Tibetans graze their yak herds. In summer these rolling pastures are at their greenest and abound with wildflowers. Unfortunately, development is rapidly turning the grasslands cheesy, with touristy horse rides and fake tourist yurts.

You can cycle up in about one hour. The twice daily bus to Dǎjiūtān (达久滩; Y8) passes by Sāngkē but timings mean you have to hitch back. A minivan costs about Y25 return.

**Gānjia Grasslands** 甘加草原

If you're willing to spend a little more, the Gānjia Grasslands (Gānjiā Cǎoyuán), 34km from Xiàhé, are much less developed and offer a great day trip from Xiàhé.

The bumpy road crosses the Naren-Ka pass and quickly descends into the wide grasslands. Past Gānjiā Xiàn village a side road climbs

12km to **Trakkar Gompa** (白石崖寺; Bǎishíyá Sì; admission Y5), a monastery of 90 monks set against a backdrop of vertical rock formations. A 10-minute walk behind the monastery is the **Nekhang** (白石崖溶洞; admission Y20), an awesome cave complex where pilgrims lower themselves down ropes and ladders into two sacred underground chambers. A Dutch traveller fell to his death here in 2006, so you'll have to see if it's closed to tourists. It's incredibly slippery so take extreme care. A reliable torch is essential.

From Takkar it's a short drive to the impressive 2000-year-old Han-dynasty city of **Bǎijiǎo** (八角; Karnang in Tibetan), whose remarkable 12-sided walls now shelter a small village. From here, it's a short 5km diversion to the newly renovated **Tseway Gompa** (佐海寺; Zuohǎi Sì; admission Y10), one of the few Bön monasteries in Gānsù. There are great views of Bǎijiǎo from the ridge behind the monastery.

OT Travels & Tours (see p856) and Tse-wong's Café (p857), both in Xiàhé, can arrange a car for four people and an English-speaking guide for Y200 to Y300 for the day.

**Tarzung Lake** 达尔宗湖

Around 30km from Xiàhé towards Lánzhōu is this small sacred Tibetan **lake** (Dǎěrzhōng Hú; admission Y5). It's a lovely spot but has recently been given the Chinese tourism kiss of death – car parks, techno music and entry tickets. You can bicycle here or take a Hézuò- or Línxià-bound bus, get off when you see a white-on-blue sign by the road and hike an hour uphill to the lake.

**HÉZUÒ** 合作

☎ 0941

The booming regional capital of Gānnán prefecture, Hézuò is a transit point for travellers plying the excellent overland route between Gānsù and Sīchuān provinces.

To extend visas, walk 500m to your right (south) as you exit the main bus station to the **PSB** (公安局; Gōngānjú; ☎ 821 2812; Tengzhi Jie). The **China Construction Bank** (中国建设银行; Zhōngguó Jiànyì Yínháng), across from the bus station, changes money.

About 2km from the bus station along the main road towards Xiàhé is the towering **Milarepa Palace** (Sekhar Gutok; Jiǔcéng Fógé; 九层佛阁; admission Y20; ☎ 8am-6pm), whose nine-storey interior is a head-spinning blur of colourful murals and Tantric deities. The tower design is almost unique in the Tibetan world. There's also a sacred meteorite inside. The town's main monastery, **Tso Gompa**, is a short walk from here. Bus 1 runs here from the centre of town.

If headed north, you won't have to spend the night here. If headed south, there are some cheap homestays 100m south of the south bus station, including the **Línmao Lǚshè** (临茂旅舍; ☎ 330 2495; dm Y15). Alternatively, there's the **Jīndū Bīnguǎn** (金都宾馆; ☎ 821 1135; 60 Tengzhi Jie; 腾志街60号; dm/tw Y30/90), to the left (north) as you exit the main bus station, or the better **Gānnán Fàndiàn** (甘南饭店; ☎ 821 2611; Maqu Lu; 玛曲路; dm Y30, tw Y100-200) in the southwest corner of the central square.

**Getting There & Away**

Hézuò is where buses from Zōigè (Ruòègài), in Sīchuān, and Xiàhé meet. The central main bus station has frequent buses to Xiàhé (Y9, 1½ to two hours), Línxià (Y12.5, two to 2½ hours) and Lánzhōu (Y44, five to six hours) from 6.30am to 4pm.

Going south is a different story. There is only one bus daily to Zōigè, leaving at 7.30am (Y50, five hours), and two daily to Lángmùsì (Y28, three hours), leaving at 7am and 12.20am. Both of these depart from the south bus station.

A taxi between the two bus stations costs Y2 per person.

**LÁNGMÙSÌ** 郎木寺

☎ 0941

Straddling the border between Sīchuān and Gānsù is Lángmùsì (Taksang Lhamo in Tibetan), a rural Tibetan village nestled among steep grassy meadows, evergreen forests and snow-clad peaks. An enchanting place, surrounded by countless red and white monastery buildings and with numerous possibilities for hikes and horse treks, it's easy to spend a few relaxing days here.

The government allegedly has plans to 'renovate' the entire town in 2007 and 2008, which has us wincing, so you should expect some disturbance.

Note that street names haven't been provided for listings in this section as they are all on Lángmùsì's only street.

**Information**

Note there's nowhere to change money in Lángmùsì.

**Internet access** (wǎngbā; per hr Y3; ☎ 1.30am-11pm)

Available on the 2nd floor of the building opposite the Lángmùsì Bīnguǎn.

**Sights & Activities**

The White Dragon River (Báilóng Jiāng) divides the town in two. On the Sīchuān side is **Kerti Gompa** (Nàmo Sì; 纳摩寺; admission Y15), built in 1413 and home to around 700 monks. Behind the monastery is a gorge, which has several sacred grottoes, one dedicated to the Tibetan goddess Palden Lhamo, the other known as the Tiger's Cave, which gives the town its Tibetan name. There's good hiking here.

On the Gānsù side, higher up on the hills, is the smaller and less impressive **Sertri Gompa** (Sàichì Sì; 赛赤寺; admission Y16), dating from 1748. Unfortunately buying an entry ticket here doesn't guarantee that any of the chapels will be open! On the hill above the monastery is a sky burial site (see p790). Both monasteries are best visited in the morning (7am to 8am and 10.30am to 1pm) and late afternoon (6pm to 8pm).

**Lángmùsì Tibetan Horse Trekking** (☎ 667 1504; www.langmusi.net), across from the Lángmùsì Bīnguǎn, runs good horse treks from one to four days, overnighting at nomads' tents en route, with the option of climbing nearby Huàgài Shān. Prices are Y120 to Y150 per day.

Kelsang at the Lángmùsì Bīnguǎn can arrange guides (Y150 per day) for hikes up the gorge behind Kerti Gompa and transport (Y80 to Y120) for a trip to some hot springs outside town.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Lángmùsì Bīnguǎn** (郎木寺宾馆; ☎ 667 1086; dm Y10-30, tw with bathroom Y60-90) The English-speaking staff are very friendly and the rooms with bathrooms are comfortable, making this the obvious choice. Staff can do laundry, and hot water is available evenings only.



**Lhamo Monastery Hotel** (郎木寺院宾馆; Lángmù Sìyuàn Bīnguǎn; dm Y15-20, s/tw with bathroom Y60/70) Across the road, this modern monastery-owned block has good-value rooms, but more staff.

Two quiet and clean budget places include the tiny **Xiūfēng Bīnguǎn** (秀峰宾馆; ☎ 667 1020; dm Y20), run by a friendly Hui family, and **Sànnà Bīnguǎn** (萨娜宾馆; ☎ 667 1062; dm/d Y20/50), accessed through the back of a shop. Both are on the main street, and have common toilets and hot-water showers.

**Leshā Restaurant** (丽莎咖啡馆; Lìshā Kāfēiguǎn; ☎ 667 1179) This wonderful place is along the main road. Leshā whips up fresh apple pie, Yunnanese coffee, 'yak attack' burgers and even burritos. Be warned – the servings are humungous!

### Getting There & Away

There's one daily bus to Zōigē (Ruòèrgài; Y20, three hours) at 7am and two daily buses to Hézuò (Y28, three hours), departing at 7am and noon. For Sōngpān you have to overnight in Zōigē, hitch or hire a car (Y700).

If you don't take a direct bus to Lángmùsì, you'll have to get off at the intersection 4km from the town, from where minivans ferry passengers into town for Y2.

## HEXI CORRIDOR

Bound by the Qilián Shān range to the south and the Mǎzōng (Horse's Mane) and Lóngshǒu (Dragon's Head) ranges to the north, this narrow strip of land, around which the province is formed, was once the sole western passage in and out of the Middle Kingdom.

### ZHANGYÈ 张掖

☎ 0936 / pop 98,000

Zhāngyè is a pleasant, if slightly bland, town. The main reason to stop here is to visit China's largest sleeping Buddha and do some hiking in the Qilián Shān range around Mǎtí Sì.

The **Great Buddha Temple** (Dàfó Sì; 大佛寺; ☎ 821 9671; adult/student Y41/21; ☎ 7.30am-6.30pm) originally dates to 1098 (Western Xia dynasty) and contains a 35m-long sleeping Buddha surrounded by deteriorating clay arhats and Qing-dynasty murals. Take a good look at the main hall – it's one of the few wooden structures from this era still standing in China. Out the back is an impressive white stupa (*tǔ tǎ*).

One block north, in the main square, you'll find the **mù tā** (wooden pagoda; 木塔; admission Y5; ☎ 7.30am-6.30pm), a brick and wooden structure that was first built in AD 528.

For orientation, the drum tower (鼓楼; *gǔlóu*) stands in the centre of town; the Great Buddha Temple complex is on a Qing-style pedestrian street two blocks south and one block west of here.

The **Bank of China** (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; Dong Jie) by the Liángmào Bīnguǎn has an ATM and changes travellers cheques.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Liángmào Bīnguǎn** (粮贸宾馆; ☎ 825 2398; Dong Jie Shizi; 东街什字; dm Y18, tw Y60-120) Five minutes' walk east of the drum tower is this seven-storey hotel with a wide range of clean, airy rooms.

**Xīnyuán Bīnguǎn** (馨园宾馆; ☎ 825 1766; Oushi Jie Shizi; 欧式街什字; tr without bathroom Y120, tw with bathroom Y168; ☎) This place has the best-value midrange rooms, offering discounts of 40%, in the western half of town near the Marco Polo statue and the west bus station.

To eat, head 300m west of the drum tower and look for Mingqing Jie (明清街), an alley of faux-Qing architecture that is lined with dozens of clean, friendly restaurants.

### Getting There & Away

The town has three bus stations, in the south, east and west. The south bus station (*nán zhàn*), near the Great Buddha Temple, is the most convenient, but the modern new west bus station (*xī zhàn*) has the most frequent departures (see the table, opposite).

While arriving by train is no problem, departures are limited. The train ticket office can book sleepers on the T295 to Dūnhuáng (Y125 hard sleeper, 6¼ hours, 11.45pm) and train 908 to Lánzhōu (Y94 hard sleeper, 11 hours, 8pm). A taxi to/from the train station is Y10 or take bus 1 (Y1).

### Mǎtí Sì 马蹄寺

In the foothills of the icy Qilián Shān range lie the former Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist grottoes of **Mǎtí Sì** (Horse Hoof Monastery; admission Y45). While the area isn't a national park, it very well could be, with kilometres of trails rising up along the high ridges overlooking the Hexi Corridor. There are several good day hikes, including the five-hour loop through pine forest and talus fields to the Linsong

### ZHANGYÈ BUS TIMETABLES

The following services depart from the west bus station:

Destination	Price (Y)	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Dūnhuáng	100-135	12hr	3 daily	7.50am, 5pm & 6.30pm (sleepers after 5pm)
Jiàyùguān	32-45	4-5hr	8 daily	9.30am-5pm
Lánzhōu	70-76	9hr	hourly	7am-9pm (sleepers after 5pm)
Xīníng	71	10hr	2 daily	7am & 6pm

Waterfall (临松瀑布; Línsōng Pùbù) and back down past 'Sword Split Stone' (剑劈石; Jiànpīshí). For unrivalled panoramas, take the elevator-like ascent of the ridge behind the white *chörten* at Sānshísāntiān Shíkū (三十三天石窟). Unfortunately the temples here, built miraculously into the sandstone cliff, have mostly been destroyed inside.

The **Wólóng Shānzhūāng** (卧龙山庄; dm/tw Y20/100) at Mǎtí Sì is a good place to stay. If you're adequately prepared for camping, some overnight trips are also possible.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses leave every 30 minutes from Zhāngyè's south bus station for the crossroads village of Mǎtí Hé (Y7.5, 1½ hours), from where you can catch a minibus or taxi (Y15) for the final 7km or so. Direct buses to Mǎtí Sì depart at 3.40pm and you might find a direct bus on weekend mornings. The last bus back from Mǎtí Hé leaves at 4pm.

### Jiàyùguān 嘉峪关

☎ 0937 / pop 130,900

Jiàyùguān marks one of the defining points of the Silk Road. Following the construction of the Ming-dynasty fort here in 1372, Jiàyùguān came to be known colloquially as the 'mouth' of China, while the narrow Hexi Corridor, leading back towards the *nèidì* (inner lands), was dubbed the 'throat'.

Even today the metaphor remains lodged in the Chinese psyche, and Jiàyùguān continues to mark the symbolic end of the Great Wall, the western gateway of China proper and, for imperial Chinese, the beginning of nowhere.

A mandatory stop for tour groups, the city and its surrounding sights aren't unmissable but are well worth a stop if you have an interest in Silk Road history.

### Information

**Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Yínháng; Xinhua Zhonglu; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) Changes cash and travellers cheques. Other branches change cash only.

**China Telecom Internet Café** (cnr Xinhua Zhonglu & Xiongguan Donglu; per hr Y2; ☎ 10am-10pm) Next to the post office. There are plenty of other internet places along Xinhua Zhonglu.

**Jiǔdiǎn Wǎngbā** (Lanxin Xilu; per hr Y2; ☎ 8am-midnight) Internet café next to the bus station.

**Post office** (yóujú; cnr Xinhua Zhonglu & Xiongguan Donglu; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) At the traffic circle in the centre of town.

**PSB** (Gōngānjú; ☎ 631 6927, ext 2039; 312 Guodao; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri) At the southern edge of town, diagonally opposite the stadium. Visa extensions available.

### Sleeping

**Wùmào Bīnguǎn** (☎ 628 0855; 8 Shengli Nanlu; 胜利南路8号; dm from Y30, tw Y60-180) Just west of the bus station, this is a slightly run-down budget option.

**Jīnyè Bīnguǎn** (☎ 620 1333; 12 Lanxin Xilu; 兰新西路12号; d without bathroom Y60, tw Y160-280; ☎) Discounts of 40% are standard here, making the en suite rooms particularly good value. It's clean and quiet, with a useful location by the bus station.

**Tàihé Shānzhūāng** (泰山山庄; ☎ 639 6622; Jiayuguan Fort; 嘉峪关城楼; d Y80-120) This peaceful hotel has been designed to look like a Qing-era courtyard house. It's located at Jiayuguan Fort, next to the museum, 5km from town; take the back entrance to the fort.

### Eating

Restaurants are few and far between in Jiàyùguān. If in doubt, head for the food stalls at the Fuqiang Market (Fúqiáng Shìchǎng), north of the traffic circle.

**Liuyuan Restaurant** (Yuànzhōngyuán Jiǔdiàn; Lanxin Xilu; dishes from Y15) Directly across from the bus station is this classy Sichuan restaurant. The cooking and ambience is a notch above your standard fare, and there's an English menu.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Jiāyùguān's newly renovated airport offers flights to Lánzhōu (Y1140), Xī'ān (Y1790), Běijīng (Y1880) and Ūrǔmqi (Y790).

Book tickets at **Air China** (Guójì Mínháng; ☎ 623 6778; ✉ 8am-10pm), at the front gate of the Jiāyùguān Bīngguǎn.

### BUS

Jiāyùguān's bus station is by a busy six-way junction on Lanxin Xilu, next to the main budget hotels. See the table (opposite) for travel details.

### TRAIN

Jiāyùguān lies on the Lánzhōu-Ūrǔmqi railway line. From Jiāyùguān it's four hours to Liúyuán (for Dūnhuáng) and three hours to Zhāngyè. Sleeper tickets to Lánzhōu (nine

hours) and to Xī'ān (20 hours) are generally available, but the only sleepers to Ūrǔmqi (15 hours) have an inconvenient 3am departure.

You can purchase tickets at the **train booking office** (huòchē zhàn shòupiào chù; Xinhua Zhonglu; ✉ 9.30am-5.30pm), to the right of the huge China Construction Bank, for a commission of Y5.

Jiāyùguān's Luhua train station is 5km south of the town centre. Bus 1 runs here from Xinhua Zhonglu (Y1). A taxi costs Y10.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is 13km northeast of the city. A taxi costs Y30.

### BICYCLE

Bikes are excellent for getting to some of the surrounding attractions. The gatekeeper at the Jiūgāng Bīngguǎn hires them for Y6 per day (with a Y300 deposit).

### TAXI

A taxi to the Wei Jin Tombs, Jiayuguan Fort and the Overhanging Great Wall in half a day should cost you no more than Y100; if you just go to the fort and Overhanging Wall, figure on Y50. A one-way trip to the fort costs about Y10.

## AROUND JIĀYÙGUĀN

### Jiayuguan Fort 嘉峪关长城楼

One of the classic images of western China, the **Jiayuguan Fort** (Jiāyùguān Chénglóu; Y61/31; ✉ 8.30am-7.30pm) guards the pass that lies between the snow-capped Qilián Shān peaks and Hei Shān (Black Mountains) of the Mázōng Shān range.

#### INFORMATION

Bank of China 中国银行	1	B3
China Telecom Internet Café 电信多媒体俱乐部网吧	2	B2
Jùdiǎn Wǎngbā 聚典网吧	3	A3
Post Office 邮电局	4	B2

#### SLEEPING

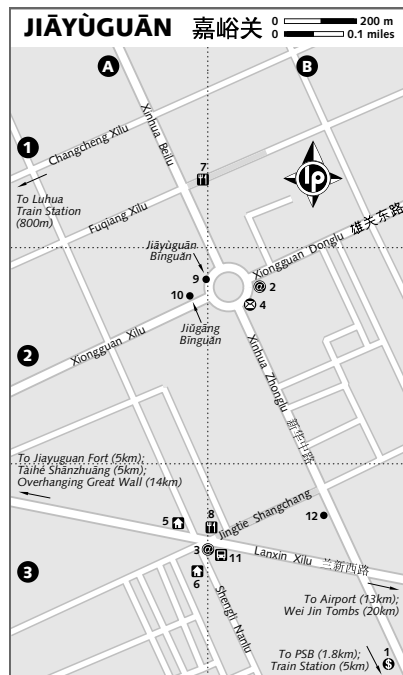
Jīnyè Bīngguǎn 金叶宾馆	5	A3
Wùmào Bīngguǎn 物贸宾馆	6	A3

#### EATING

Fuqiang Market Entrance 富强市场	7	A1
Liuyuan Restaurant 苑中苑酒店	8	B3

#### TRANSPORT

Air China 国际民航售票处	9	A2
Bike Hire 出租自行车	10	A2
Bus Station 汽车站	11	B3
Train Booking Office 火车站市内售票处	12	B3



## JIĀYÙGUĀN BUS TIMETABLE

The following services depart from Jiāyùguān:

Destination	Price (Y)	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Dūnhuáng	66.5	7hr	3 daily	9am, 10.30am, 11.30am
Lánzhōu	150	12hr	3 daily	2.30pm, 4.30pm, 6.30pm (all sleepers)
Zhāngyè	30-44	4-5hr	half-hourly	9am-3pm

Built in 1372, the fort was christened the 'Impregnable Defile Under Heaven'. Although the Chinese often controlled territory far beyond the Jiāyùguān area, this was the last major stronghold of imperial China – the end of the 'civilised world', beyond which lay only desert demons and the barbarian armies of Central Asia.

At the eastern end of the fort is the Gate of Enlightenment (Guānghuà Mén) and in the west is the Gate of Conciliation (Róuyuǎn Mén), from where exiled poets, ministers, criminals and soldiers would have ridden off into the oblivion. Each gate has 17m-high towers with upturned flying eaves and double gates that would have been used to trap invading armies. On the inside are horse lanes leading up to the top of the inner wall.

Admission also includes an excellent Great Wall museum, with photos, artefacts, maps and Silk Road exhibits.

Only 5km west of town, it's possible to cycle here in about half an hour.

## Overhanging Great Wall 悬壁长城

Running north from Jiāyùguān, this Ming-dynasty section of **wall** (Xuánbì Chángchéng; adult/student Y21/11; ✉ 8.30am-dusk) is believed to have been first constructed in 1539, though this reconstruction dates from 1987.

A nearby second section of **wall** (Shíguānxiá Xuánbì Chángchéng; 石关峡; admission Y10; ✉ 8.30am-5.30pm) was restored in 2001 by a private individual and offers perhaps a more authentic experience, as not all of the wall has been restored. From the upper tower high on a ridge you get a sweeping view of the desert and the glittering snow-capped peaks in the distance. Both sections of wall are 9km from the fort.

## Wei Jin Tombs 新城魏晋墓

These **tombs** (Xīnchéng Wěijīnmù; admission Y31; ✉ sunrise-sunset) date from approximately AD 220-420 (the Wei and Western Jin periods) and contain

extraordinarily fresh brick wall paintings depicting scenes from everyday life, from making tea to picking mulberries for silk production. There are literally thousands of tombs in the desert 20km east of Jiāyùguān, but only one is currently open to visitors, that of a husband and wife. The small museum is also worth a look. You can preview some of the painted bricks at the Jiayuguan Fort museum.

## July 1st Glacier 七一冰川

The **July 1st Glacier** (Qīyī Bīngchuān; admission Y51) sits high in the Qilián Shān range at 4300m. It is about 90km southwest of Jiāyùguān and is reached via the train (Y4.5) to the iron-ore town of Jingtiēshān, which departs from Jiāyùguān's Luhua train station at 8.10am. It's a scenic three-hour train trip to Jingtiēshān, where you can hire a taxi to the glacier (Y120 return, 20km). Hikers can walk a 5km trail alongside the glacier. It's not possible to visit between November and March; in fact at this elevation it gets cold even in summer, so come prepared.

You could theoretically do this in one day, but it's better to stay the night in Jingtiēshān. This leaves you with enough time the next morning to hire a taxi (Y50 return) up to Tiān'é Hú and the Tibetan village of Qíqīng. Return trains depart around 1.40pm. There is a cheap and basic hostel (*zhāodàisù*) in town. A return taxi here from Jiāyùguān costs around Y400.

## LIÚYUÁN 柳园

☎ 0937

Liúyuán, a forlorn little town on the Lánzhōu-Ūrǔmqi railway line, is the jumping-off point for Dūnhuáng, 130km to the south. The **Liútiē Fàndiàn** (柳铁饭店; ☎ 557 2102; dm Y30, tw with bathroom Y100-120) is to the right of the train station, but unless you're catching an early morning train, there should be no need to stay here.



There are six trains daily in each direction. Going west, the T197 is a good option to Turpan (eight hours) and Ürümqi (10 hours), departing at 11.16pm. The overnight T194/1 is a good option eastbound to Lánzhōu (12½ hours) or Xī'ān (23 hours), departing at 11.37pm. Trains 1046 and 1084 leave in the morning for Jiāyùguān (four hours).

Tickets can be purchased up to three days in advance, here or at the booking office in Dūnhuáng (p866). There are also daily departures to Běijīng, Chéngdū, Shànghǎi and Xī'ān.

Minibuses for Dūnhuáng (Y15, two hours) depart from in front of the train station when trains arrive. A shared taxi generally costs around Y30 per person.

## DŪNHUÁNG 敦煌

☎ 0937

After travelling for hours towards Dūnhuáng (Blazing Beacon), the monotonous desert landscape suddenly gives way to lush, green cultivated fields with mountainous rolling sand dunes as a backdrop. The area has a certain haunting beauty, especially at night under a star-studded sky. It's not so much the desert dunes and romantic nights that attract so many tourists to Dūnhuáng, but the superb Buddhist art at the nearby Mogao Caves.

## Information

**Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Yínháng; Yangguan Zhonglu; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6.30pm) Change travellers cheques or use the ATM here.

**Feitian Travel Service** (☎ 882 2726, ext 8619; Fěitiān Bīnguǎn, 22 Mingshan Lu) Can arrange buses to Mogao, local tours and car hire.

**Laundry** (Gānxidiàn; Huancheng Nanlu; per piece Y2; ☎ 8am-9pm) Attached to the Yóuhǎo Bīnguǎn.

**Post office** (yóujú; cnr Yangguan Zhonglu & Shazhou Beilu; ☎ 8am-7pm) Located in the China Telecom building on the main traffic circle.

**PSB** (Gōngānjú; Yangguan Zhonglu; ☎ 886 2071; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6.30pm Mon-Fri) Same-day visa extensions.

**Shikong Wǎngbā** (Mingshan Lu; per hr Y2; ☎ 8am-midnight) Internet access.

## Sights

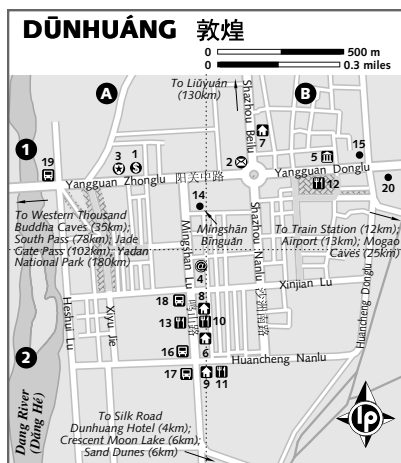
**DUNHUANG MUSEUM** 敦煌博物馆

This local museum (Dūnhuáng Bówùguǎn; ☎ 882 2981; Yangguan Donglu; admission Y15; ☎ 8am-6pm) is really a disappointment. There's not much here that you can't see at the Mogao Caves (p866) or the museum at the Jade Gate Pass (p868).

## Sleeping

Competition among Dūnhuáng's hotels is fierce, and you should get significant discounts outside of summer.

**Fěitiān Bīnguǎn** (☎ 882 2337; 22 Mingshan Lu; 鸣山路22号; dm Y20-30, tw Y160-360; ☎) This long-standing two-star hotel is in a good location. Dorms are clean and spacious, with communal hot showers, and the air-conditioned twins (50% discount available) are comfortable.



## INFORMATION

Bank of China 中国银行.....1 A1  
Feitian Travel Service  
飞天旅行社.....(see 6)  
Laundry 干洗店.....(see 9)  
Post Office 邮局.....2 B1  
PSB 公安局.....3 A1

Shikong Wǎngbā  
时空网吧.....4 A2

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Dunhuang Museum  
敦煌博物馆.....5 B1

## SLEEPING

Fěitiān Bīnguǎn 飞天宾馆.....6 A2  
Grand Sun Hotel 太阳大酒店.....7 B1  
Jiànrì Dàjiǔdiàn 假日大酒店.....8 A2  
Yóuhǎo Bīnguǎn 友好宾馆.....9 A2

## EATING

Charley Johng's Cafe.....10 A2  
John's Information Café.....(see 6)  
Lǎozhǎo Jīngyuǎn Yánggāoróu  
老字号靖远羊羔肉.....11 B2  
Night Market 沙州市场.....12 B1  
Shirley's Cafe.....13 A2

## TRANSPORT

Air Ticket Office  
鸣山航空售票处.....14 A1  
CAAC 民航售票处.....15 B1  
Long-Distance Bus Station  
长途汽车站.....16 A2  
Minibus 3 Stop  
路小公共汽车站.....17 A2  
Minibus Stand 小车站.....18 A2  
Minibuses to Nánhú  
到南湖的小公共汽车.....19 A1  
Train Booking Office  
铁路售票处.....20 B1

**Yóuhǎo Bīnguǎn** (☎ 882 2678; 25 Mingshan Lu; 鸣山路25号; tw with bathroom Y80-160, tr Y180) These are the cheapest en suite twins in town. The air-conditioning doesn't really work, but each room gets a fan.

**Jiànrì Dàjiǔdiàn** (☎ /fax 882 5258; 18 Mingshan Lu; 鸣山路18号; s/tw Y180/380; ☎) Opened in 2004, the 'Holiday' is bright, clean and offers discounts of up to 60% most of the time.

**Grand Sun Hotel** (Tàiyáng Dàjiǔdiàn; ☎ 882 9998; www.dhsuntravel.com; 5 Shazhou Beilu; 沙洲北路5号; tw Y488-688; ☎) The Tàiyáng is a reliable mid-range place, with some Japanese touches and spacious rooms.

**Silk Road Dunhuang Hotel** (敦煌山庄; Dūnhuáng Shānzhūang; ☎ 888 2088; www.the-silk-road.com; Dunyue Lu; 敦月路; tw US\$100-150, ste US\$250-1200; ☎) If you're going to splurge on one hotel in north-west China, this would be a good choice. About 2km from the Míngshān Shān sand dunes, the rooms match the desert landscape perfectly. Imagine Central Asian rugs, a cool stone floor and tasteful Chinese antiques. It's worth coming for a sunset beer (Y10 to Y20) from the rooftop. A taxi from town costs Y10 or take minibus 3.

## Eating

There are three Western travellers cafés in town, all with similar food and prices (dishes Y10 to Y20): **Charley Johng's Cafe** (☎ 388 2411; 21 Mingshan Lu), **Shirley's Cafe** (Mingshan Lu) and **John's Information Cafe** (☎ 882 7000; Fěitiān Bīnguǎn courtyard, 22 Mingshan Lu). In addition to providing internet access and bike hire, these are good spots to exchange information with other travellers. There are loads of other local restaurants along Mingshan Lu.

Dūnhuáng's night market is an extremely lively scene and worth a visit. Spilling out of a large courtyard off Yangguan Donglu, it houses scores of restaurants and kebab stands.

Gastronomes can try the town's dubious speciality, *lǚròu huáng miàn* (驴肉黄面; noodles with donkey meat).

A popular Central Asian dish is *dàpánjī* (大盘鸡), a whole chicken cut up and stir-fried with noodles, onions and peppers, then drowned in a pool of chilli sauce. For an authentic meal, the raucous restaurant **Lǎozhǎo Jīngyuǎn Yánggāoróu** (Huancheng Nanlu) around the corner from the Yóuhǎo Bīnguǎn is a sure bet. One serving will feed three people (Y45). For noodles and dumplings at Chinese prices, try the stalls along Shichang Xiang.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

There are regular flights to Lánzhōu (Y1140), Xī'ān (Y1790) and Běijīng (Y1990), Ürümqi (Y820) and Chéngdū (Y2190), although flights are less frequent from November to March. Seats can be booked at **CAAC** (Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎ 882 2389; 12 Yangguan Donglu; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-8pm) or at the **air ticket office** (míngshān hángkòng shòupǎo chù; ☎ 882 3619; 6 Mingshan Lu) in the Míngshān Bīnguǎn.

### BUS

Dūnhuáng's long-distance bus station is located in the heart of the action on Mingshan Lu. Arriving in Dūnhuáng you may be dropped off at a station just south of Yóuhǎo Bīnguǎn. See the table (below) for details.

The regular bus to Golmud leaves at 8am, and takes a rugged but scenic route that crosses the Altun Mountains. There's also a sleeper bus in the evening (take warm clothes). To get to Turpan by bus, you'll need to change buses in Hāmi.

Buses leave hourly for the train station at Liúyuán (Y20, two hours), or you can get a seat in a faster taxi for Y30. If there's a sand storm blowing, the trip can take up to four hours.

## DŪNHUÁNG BUS TIMETABLES

The following services travel direct to/from Dūnhuáng:

Destination	Price (Y)	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Golmud	89-98	9hr	2 daily	9am & 7.30pm (sleeper)
Hāmi	70	7hr	2 daily	8.30am & 5pm
Jiāyùguān	67-79	7hr	hourly	7am-10.30pm
Lánzhōu	227	17hr	2 daily	8.30am & 10.30am (both sleepers)
Ürümqi	180	14 hr	1 daily	6pm (sleeper)

**TRAIN**

By the time you read this Dūnhuáng's new train station should have direct services to/from Lánzhōu and Ürümqi, and maybe other destinations. Other trains will continue to go only to Liūyuán (p863), even though they may be marked 'Dūnhuáng' on timetables. In short, check exactly where your train is going when shelling out for a ticket.

You can purchase tickets at the **train booking office** (tiělù shòupiàochù; Yánguān Donglù; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6pm), to the right of a small Bank of China branch, for a commission of Y5.

**Getting Around**

You can hire bikes from the travellers cafés for Y1 per hour. Getting to some of the outlying sights by bike is possible, but hard work at the height of summer.

To charter a ride for the sights around town, the minibuses across from the Jiàri Dàjiùdiàn on Mingshan Lu is one place to start negotiations.

Dūnhuáng's airport is 13km east of town. A taxi costs Y20.

**AROUND DŪNHUÁNG**

Most people visit the Mogao Caves in the morning, followed by the Mingshā Shān sand dunes in the late afternoon.

**Mogao Caves 莫高窟**

The Mogao Caves (Mògāo Kū) are, simply put, one of the greatest repositories of Buddhist art in the world. At its peak, the site housed 18 monasteries, over 1400 monks and nuns, and countless artists, translators and calligraphers. Wealthy traders and important officials were the primary donors responsible for creating new caves, as caravans made the long detour past Mogao to pray or give thanks for a safe journey through the treacherous wastelands to the west. The traditional date ascribed to the founding of the first cave is AD 366.

Following the collapse of trade along the Silk Road after the Yuan dynasty, this vast series of grottoes – stretching 1700m along a canyon wall and containing over a millennium of art – lay forgotten for centuries amid the encroaching sands of the Gobi. Only in the early 20th century was this treasure house of art 'rediscovered' by a string of foreign explorers (see Foreign Devils on the Silk Road, opposite).

**NORTHERN WEI, WESTERN WEI & NORTHERN ZHOU CAVES**

The earliest caves are distinctly Indian in style and iconography. All contain a central pillar, representing a stupa (symbolically containing the ashes of the Buddha), which the devout would circle in prayer. Paint was derived from malachite (green), cinnabar (red) and lapis lazuli (blue), expensive minerals imported from Central Asia.

The art of this period is characterised by its attempt to depict the spirituality of those who had transcended the material world through their asceticism. The Wei statues are slim, ethereal figures with finely chiselled features and comparatively large heads. The Northern Zhou figures have ghostly white eyes. Don't be fooled by the thick, black modernist strokes – it's the oxidation of lead in the paint, not some forerunner of Picasso.

**SUI CAVES**

The Sui dynasty (AD 581–618) began when a general of Chinese or mixed Chinese-Tuoba origin usurped the throne of the Northern Zhou dynasty and reunited northern and southern China for the first time in 360 years.

The Sui dynasty was short-lived, and very much a transition between the Wei and Tang periods. This can be seen in the Sui caves: the graceful Indian curves in the Buddha and Bodhisattva figures start to give way to the more rigid style of Chinese sculpture.

**TANG CAVES**

During the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907), China pushed its borders westward as far as Lake Balkash in today's Kazakhstan. Trade expanded and foreign merchants and people of diverse religions streamed into the Tang capital of Chang'an.

This was the high point of the cave art at Mogao. Painting and sculpture techniques became much more refined, and some important aesthetic developments, notably the sex change (from male to female) of Guanyin and the flying *apsaras*, took place. The beautiful murals depicting the Buddhist Western Paradise offer rare insights into the court life, music, dress and architecture of Tang China.

Some 230 caves were carved during the Tang dynasty, including two impressive grottoes containing enormous, seated Buddha figures. By this time space in the caves was

at a premium and many murals were painted over existing images. The statue residing in cave 96 (believed to represent Empress Wu Zetian, who used Buddhism to consolidate her power) is a towering 34.5m tall, making it the world's third-largest Buddha. The Buddhas were carved from the top down using scaffolding, whose anchor holes are still visible.

**POST-TANG CAVES**

Following the Tang dynasty, the economy around Dūnhuáng went into decline, and the luxury and vigour typical of Tang painting began to be replaced by simpler drawing techniques and flatter figures. The mysterious Western Xia kingdom, who controlled most of Gānsù from 983 to 1227, made a number of additions to the caves at Mogao and began to introduce Tibetan influences.

**ADMISSION**

Entrance to the **caves** (☎ 886 9071; admission Y100; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5.30pm Nov-Mar) is strictly controlled – it's impossible to visit them on your own. The general admission ticket grants you a two-hour tour of 10 caves, including the infamous Library Cave (No 17 – see Foreign Devils on the Silk Road, below) and a related exhibit containing rare fragments of manuscripts in classical Uighur and Manichean. Excellent English-speaking guides are always

available (costing Y20), and you can generally arrange tours in many other languages.

The 20 'open' caves are rotated fairly regularly, making recommendations useless, but tours always include the two big buddhas, 34.5m and 26m tall respectively. It's also possible to visit 12 of the more unusual caves for an additional fee. Prices are from Y100 (No 217, early Tang) to Y500 (No 465, Tantric art).

Most caves are lit only by indirect sunlight from outside, making a torch (flashlight) imperative. Your guide will have one, but bring your own if possible. Photography is strictly prohibited everywhere within the fenced-off caves area, and cameras and bags must be deposited at an office near the entrance gate. Note that if it's raining, snowing or sandstorming, the caves will be closed.

Despite the high admission and the rigidity of the guide system, don't be discouraged – entering your first cave will make it all seem worthwhile.

After the tour it's well worth visiting the Dunhuang Research Centre, where eight more caves, each representative of a different period, have been flawlessly reproduced, along with selected murals.

If you have a special interest in the site, check out the **International Dunhuang Project** (<http://idp.bl.uk>), an online database of digitalised manuscripts from the Library Cave at Mogao.

**FOREIGN DEVILS ON THE SILK ROAD**

Few things raise the ire of a Chinese intellectual faster than the subject of cultural relics destroyed or carted off by marauding Western imperialists. Near the top of the list of crimes is Dūnhuáng's Library Cave (No 17), where in 1900 the self-appointed guardian, Wang Yuanlu, discovered a hidden library filled with tens of thousands of immaculately preserved manuscripts and paintings, dating as far back as AD 406. It's hard to describe the exact magnitude of the discovery, but stuffed into the tiny room were texts in rare Central Asian languages, military reports, music scores, medical prescriptions, Confucian and Taoist classics, and Buddhist sutras copied by some of the greatest names in Chinese calligraphy – not to mention the world's oldest printed book, the *Diamond Sutra* (AD 868). In short, it was an incalculable amount of original source material regarding Chinese, Central Asian and Buddhist history. Exactly to whom this information should belong, however, went on to become something of a thorny issue.

Seven years after the discovery rival archaeologists Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot – only two of the numerous European adventurers hauling away Central Asian Buddhist art from the old Silk Roads – together managed to get their hands on close to 20,000 of the cave's priceless manuscripts, smuggling them to museums in England and France respectively. Today defenders of the pair point to the widespread destruction that took place during the Cultural Revolution, and the defacing of Buddhist artwork by Muslim iconoclasts. But what really provokes the wrath of the Chinese is the amount the two 'donated' to Wang Yuanlu for their haul: in total, the paltry sum of UK£220.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

The Mogao Caves are 25km (30 minutes) from Dūnhuáng. A bus leaves at 8.30am from in front of Fēitiān Bīnguǎn (each way Y10), returning at noon, which isn't really enough time at the site. A return taxi costs from Y60 to Y80 for the half day.

Some people ride out to the caves on a bicycle, but be warned that half the ride is through total desert – hot work in summer.

**Western Thousand Buddha Caves****西千佛洞**

These little-visited **caves** (Xī Qiānfó Dòng; adult/student Y30/20; ☎ 7am-5.30pm), 35km west of Dūnhuáng, stand in stark contrast to the intense tourist conveyer belt at Mogao.

There are 16 caves hidden in the cliff face of the Dàng Hé gorge, of which six are open to the public. The caves range from the Northern Wei to the Tang dynasties. While the art doesn't compare to Mogao, the lack of crowds make it much more conducive for appreciating the artwork. You can even wander off on a walk through the desert canyon.

The caves are best reached by taxi (Y60 return) or minibus. Alternatively catch a bus to Nánhú (南湖) at the intersection of Heshui Lu and Yangguan Zhonglu in Dūnhuáng and ask the driver to drop you off at the turn-off to the caves, from where it's a 10-minute walk across the desert.

**Crescent Moon Lake 月牙泉**

Six kilometres south of Dūnhuáng at **Mingshā Shān** (Singing Sands Mountain; admission Y80; ☎ 6am-10pm), the desert meets the oasis in a most dramatic fashion. From here it's easy to see how Dūnhuáng gained its moniker Shāzhōu (Town of Sand). At the base of the colossal mega dunes, whose highest peak stands at 1715m, lies a miraculous pond, known as **Crescent Moon Lake** (Yuèyáquán). The climb to the top of the dunes is sweaty work, but the view across the undulating desert sands and green poplar trees below makes it a spectacular sight.

In recent years the dunes have turned into a no-holds-barred tourist playpen, with the mayhem including camel rides (Y60), dune buggies, 'dune surfing' (sand sliding, Y10), paragliding (jumping off the dunes with a chute on your back, Y60) and even micro-lighting. If your sole interest is in appreciating the dunes in peace, you'll do better to

hire a bike and find your own stretch of sand elsewhere.

You can ride a bike to the dunes in around 20 minutes. Minibus 3 (Y1) shuttles between Dūnhuáng and the dunes from 8am to 9.30pm. A taxi costs Y10 one way. Most people head out here at about 6pm when the weather starts to cool down.

Western cafés like Charley Johng's offer overnight camel trips to the dunes (Y300 per person), as well as five- to eight-day expeditions out to the Jade Gate Pass and even as far as Lop Nor in the deserts of Xinjiāng.

**Yadan National Park & Jade Gate Pass****雅丹国家地质公园, 玉门关**

The weird eroded desert landscape of **Yadan National Park** (Yādān Guójiā Dìzhì Gōngyuán; admission Y60 ind tour) is 180km northwest of Dūnhuáng, in the middle of the awesome nothingness of the Gobi Desert. A former lake bed that eroded in spectacular fashion some 12,000 years ago, the weird rock formations provided the backdrop to the last scenes of the Zhang Yimou's film *Hero*. The desert landscape is dramatic, but you can only tour the site on the group minibus, so there's little scope to explore on your own.

To get to Yadan you have to pass by (and buy a ticket to) the **Jade Gate Pass** (Yùmén Guān; admission Y30), 102km from Dūnhuáng. Both this and the South Pass (Yáng Guān; 阳关), 78km west of Dūnhuáng, were originally military stations, part of the Han-dynasty series of beacon towers that extended to the garrison town of Loulan in Xinjiāng. For caravans travelling westwards, the Jade Gate marked the beginning of the northern route to Turpan, while the South Pass was the start of the southern route through Miran. The Jade Gate derived its name from the important traffic in Khotanese jade.

The entry fee includes a small but interesting museum (with scraps of real Silk Road silk); a nearby section of Han-dynasty Great Wall, built in 101 BC and impressive for its antiquity and refreshing lack of restoration; and the ruined city walls of Hécāng Chéng, 15km away on a side road.

The only way to get out here is to hire a car for a long day trip to take in Yadan, the Jade Gate and the Western Thousand Buddha Caves. The Feitian Travel Service (see p864) organises air-conditioned cars for about Y450; you might get a minivan for around Y350.

**EASTERN GĀNSŪ**

The southeast of Gānsū holds some of the prettiest country in northwest China. Tamped earthen houses and terraced wheat and corn fields are interspersed with lush, forested hills, and the Silk Road remnants at Tiānshuǐ and Luòmén are in relatively good condition compared with much of what you'll see to the west.

**TIĀNSHUǐ 天水**

☎ 0938 / pop 400,000

Located near one of the legendary cradles of Chinese civilisation, Tiānshuǐ is famous for the nearby Buddhist caves at Mǎiji Shān and the less interesting Fu Xi Temple in Qínchéng. Booming Tiānshuǐ is the second-largest municipality in Gānsū, but it's not too overwhelming and is a pleasant first stop for those following the Silk Road west. Of note are the ancient cypress trees, some more than 1000 years old, growing in the temples of Qínchéng.

**Orientation**

Tiānshuǐ is in fact two separate towns connected by a long freeway – the gritty railhead sprawl, known as Běidào, and the central commercial area to the west, known as Qínchéng. While Běidào is ultimately more convenient, Qínchéng is marginally the nicer place to stay. Mǎiji Shān is 35km south of Běidào.

**Information**

In Běidào you can change cash and use the ATM at the **Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Yínháng; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm) opposite the train station. For travellers cheques go to the branch on Weihe Nanlu, 600m south of here, or the main branch on Minzhu Donglu in Qínchéng.

The **post office** (yóujú; Ziyou Lu; ☎ 8am-6pm) is in Qínchéng, with a branch on Yima Lu in Běidào.

There is a **CITS** (Zhōngguó Guójiā Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 821 3621; 8 Minzhu Donglu) office in Qínchéng, 200m east of the Bank of China.

In Qínchéng there are a few internet cafés in the Wénmiào Shāngchǎng pedestrian area. In Běidào there are two internet cafés by the Diānxin Zhāodàisuǒ. Access at all costs Y2 per hour.

**Sights**

The grottoes at Mǎiji Shān are the main reason to come to Tiānshuǐ, but if you have time to kill you could explore the other sights.

The Ming-dynasty **Fu Xi Temple** (Fú Xī Miào; admission Y30; ☎ 8am-6pm) was begun in 1483. The main hall is one of the most elaborate structures in Gānsū, with intricate wooden door panels and original paintings of the sixty-four hexagrams (varying combinations of the eight trigrams used in the I Ching) on the ceiling.

One of the mythic progenitors of the Chinese people, leaf-clad Fú Xī was reputedly a Chenji local (present-day Tiānshuǐ) who introduced the domestication of animals, hunting and the eight trigrams (used for divination) to early Chinese civilisation.

Situated on the hillside above Qínchéng is the rambling Taoist **Yuquan (Jade Spring) Temple** (Yùquán Guǎn; adult/student Y20/10; ☎ 7.30am-6.30pm). Although the 'vicissitudes of life' have taken their toll, it's still a pleasant place to wander.

**Sleeping & Eating**

Tiānshuǐ has plenty of accommodation, so discounts of up to 40% are pretty standard.

**Diānxin Zhāodàisuǒ** (☎ 261 4938; Yima Lu; 一马路; rm Y30-50) A clean and friendly cheapie near the train station. The Y50 doubles are surprisingly stylish, if you don't use the bathroom.

**Tièlù Zhāodàisuǒ** (☎ 493 9660; 26 Yima Lu; 一马路 26号; d/tr without bathroom Y50/60, tw with bathroom Y100) A convenient place near the train station for simple but cheap rooms. Turn right as you leave the square in front of the train station and continue for about 50m.

**Tiānshuǐ Dàijiùdiàn** (☎ 828 9999; 1 Dazhong Lu; 秦城大众南路1号; d Y50-90, tw with bathroom Y90-192) The *pitōng* (economy) rooms with shared bathroom are perhaps the best budget bet in this part of town, with hot showers down the hall and a very central location.

**Dōngān Fāndiàn** (☎ 261 3333; Yima Lu; 一马路; s/d/tw Y180/268/280) A comfortable and double-glazed three-star option 50m east of the train station. Discounts of 40% make it great value.

In Qínchéng, there are scores of good restaurants and snack stalls down Xiaoqi Jie (Snack St) and Guangming Xiang, to the east and south of the Tiānshuǐ Dàijiùdiàn.

There's more great snack food in Běidào down Erma Lu, the pedestrian alley just south of the train station. Best of these is



Lǚji' Tiēbānshāo, which offers you excellent teppanyaki-style sizzling dishes for pennies.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

See the table (opposite) for travel details.

Buses to Lánzhōu also depart throughout the day from the forecourt of the train station in Běidào. There are also two morning departures a day from here to Huìxiàn.

### TRAIN

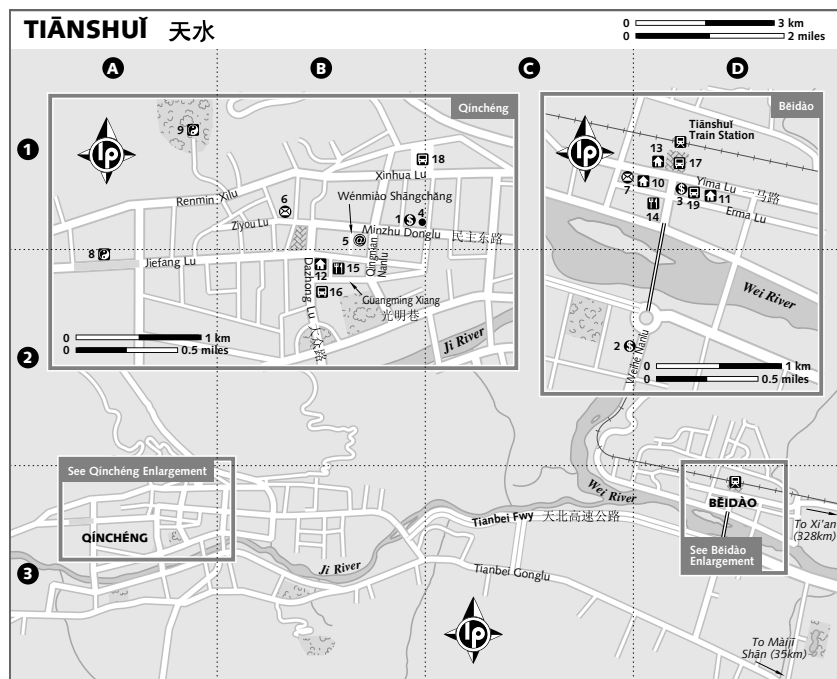
Tiānshuǐ is on the Xī'ān–Lánzhōu railway line; there are dozens of daily trains in either

direction. If you arrive early, you can visit Mǎiji Shān as a day trip, avoiding the need to stay overnight in Tiānshuǐ.

From Tiānshuǐ it's four to six hours to either Lánzhōu (Y52 hard seat) or Xī'ān (Y51).

## Getting Around

Taxis shuttle passengers between Qínchéng (from the Tiānshuǐ Dàjiūdiàn and long-distance bus station) and the train station in Běidào for Y5. Alternatively take the much slower bus 1 or 6 (Y2.2, 40 minutes) from Dazhong Lu.



INFORMATION	SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	EATING
Bank of China 中国银行.....1 B1	Fu Xi Temple 伏羲庙.....8 A2	Lǚji' Tiēbānshāo 吕记铁板烧.....14 D1
Bank of China 中国银行.....2 C2	Yuquan Temple 玉泉观.....9 A1	Snack St 小吃街.....15 B2
Bank of China 中国银行.....3 D1	<b>SLEEPING</b>	<b>TRANSPORT</b>
Dōngān Fǎndiàn 东安饭店.....11 D1	Diànxìn Zhāodàisù 电信招待所.....10 D1	Buses 1 & 6 Terminus 一路车和六路车终点.....16 B2
Internet Cafés 网吧.....5 B1	Tiānshuǐ Dàjiūdiàn 天水大酒店.....12 B2	Buses to Lánzhōu and Huìxiàn 往兰州和徽县的汽车.....17 D1
Internet Cafés 网吧.....(see 10)	Tiēlù Zhāodàisù 铁路招待所.....13 D1	Long-Distance Bus Station 长途汽车站.....18 B1
Post Office 邮局.....6 B1		Minibus 34 to Mǎiji Shān 往麦积山的34路车站.....19 D1
Post Office 邮局.....7 C1		

## TIĀNSHUǐ BUS TIMETABLES

The following services depart from the depart from the long-distance bus station in Qínchéng:

Destination	Price (Y)	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Huìxiàn	30	3hr	hourly	6.30am-6pm
Gūyūán	42	7hr	1 daily	7am
Lánzhōu	49-57	4hr	hourly	7am-6pm
Línxià	47	8hr	1 daily	6.30am
Luòmén	15	3hr	1 daily	6.30am
Píngliáng	45	5-6hr	7 daily	7am-3pm
Yínchūān	80	12hr	2 daily	12.30pm & 4.30pm

## AROUND TIĀNSHUǐ

### Mǎiji Shān 麦积山

These **grottoes** (Haystack Mountain; adult/student Y70/35; ☎ 8am-6pm) are one of China's four largest temple groups; the others are at Dàtóng, Luòyáng and Dūnhuáng. The solitary rock formation, sticking up out of the verdant, rolling landscape like a giant haystack (kind of, anyway), is riddled with niches and statues carved principally during the Northern Wei and Zhou dynasties (AD 386–581), though new grottoes were added continuously over the following fifteen centuries. Catwalks and steep spiral stairways have been built around the cliff face, so while the art is not as amazing as at Dūnhuáng, getting to it is more fun, and you have more freedom to venture at your own pace.

Besides the hard-to-miss Sui-dynasty trinity of Buddha and Bodhisattvas (No 13), the most impressive sculptures are along the upper walkways, especially at the marvellous seven niches of Cave 4, with their powerful protector statues. It's not certain just how the artists managed to clamber so high; one theory is that they created piles from blocks of wood reaching to the top of the mountain before moving down, gradually removing them as they descended. Stone was evidently brought in from elsewhere, since the local rock is too soft for carving, as at Dūnhuáng.

An English-speaking guide charges Y150 for the day. It's possible to view a selection of normally closed caves for an extra fee of Y500 per group. The admission ticket includes entry to a small **botanical garden** (*zhíwùyuán*).

Minibus 34 leaves every seven minutes from in front of the Tiānshuǐ train station (Y4, 40 minutes). It may drop you at the crossroads, 5km before the site, from where a minivan or

tractor costs Y2 per seat. The ticket office is 1.5km before the site. A taxi from Tiānshuǐ costs around Y100 return.

### Luòmén 洛门

A trip to the **Water Curtain Caves** (Shuǐlián Dòng; 水帘洞; admission Y11; ☎ 7am-7pm), 17km from Luòmén, is like visiting the China of your dreams. Eroding sandstone domes rise above lush canyon walls, and Taoist and Buddhist temples lie hidden in the cliffs, seemingly transported from a Song-dynasty landscape painting. OK, it's not that good...but it's close.

The main sight is Lāshāo Sì, an overhanging cliff sheltering an amazingly vibrant 31m-high painted figure of Sakyamuni (the historical Buddha) seated cross-legged upon a throne of lotus petals, lions, deer and elephants. The bas-relief carving and accompanying mint-green and salmon coloured frescoes were completed in the Northern Wei dynasty (AD 386–534).

The secondary sights here are the eponymous Taoist temple of Shuǐlián Dòng, a short walk uphill, and the faded remnants of the

## SHÍKŪ: GROTTTO

# 石窟

The top of the character *shí* (stone, rock) is like the corner of a rock or a cliff, whereas the bottom half is a cake of rock. The top of *kū* means a cave or an earth room. The bottom half sees someone bending to carry something into or out of the cave or room, which would usually have a very low ceiling.

Thousand Buddha Cave (Qiānfó Dòng), a 10-minute walk up a side valley. Minibuses in Luòmén will take you to the Water Curtain Caves for Y60 return; a motor tricycle is cheaper at around Y35.

Luòmén is on the Lánzhōu–Xī'an rail line, but only a couple of trains per day stop here. The best option is the 7.38am train from Tiānshuǐ (train 347; Y12, 70 minutes). One direct bus daily leaves from Tiānshuǐ's long-distance bus station (in Qínchéng; three hours, Y15) at 6.30am; otherwise change buses in Gāngǔ (甘谷). From Luòmén it's a 20-minute minibus ride (Y2) on to Wǔshān (武山) and then a short bus ride to Lóngxī (陇西), from where there are frequent trains to/from Lánzhōu.

The only place to stay is the decent **Luòmén Bīnguǎn** (洛门宾馆; ☎ 322 7668; tw with/without bathroom Y60/30).

## MOON CANYON 月亮峡

Tucked in a hidden corner of southeastern Gānsū, the rushing rivers and towering rock walls of **Moon Canyon** (Yuèliàng Xiá; admission Y20) and the surrounding Three Beaches National Park (Sāntān Zírán Bǎohùqū) is a rare corner of the Middle Kingdom that still has some pristine wilderness. The bad news is that the tranquillity of the valley is under threat from clumsy tourism development, so get here soon.

At the entrance to the valley is **Moon Canyon Retreat** (月亮峡度假村; Yuèliàng Xiá Dūjiàcūn; ☎ 755 7888; www.threebeaches.com; dm/tents/cabins Y50/100/120, tw with bathroom Y220; ☞ Apr-Oct), where the four spartan but low-impact lodges will soon be dwarfed by an ill-conceived 100-bed hotel and swimming pool.

Perhaps a better place to stay is two hours' hike away, up to the village of Yánpíng (尹平

坪), where there are half a dozen **homestays** (nóngjiālè; 农家乐; dm Y10), marked by tourism signs. Accommodation is basic but friendly, and local dishes are available. It's a great base for hikes around the valley. There is one shop in the village, so bring some snacks.

For those with camping equipment, it's a five-hour hike up to the Sān Tān (Three Beaches); one possible three-day trek is to the purported old growth forest (原始森林; yuánshǐ sēnlín) upstream. Jeeps ferry Chinese tourists up to the first pool (Y250 return) but not beyond.

## Getting There & Away

Moon Canyon is on the Chéngdū–Xī'an rail line near the village of Jiǎlíng (嘉陵). There is only one stop per day in either direction (both at around 1pm) – the closest major rail links are Guǎngyuán (Sichuān) and Bǎoji (Shaaxi). Frequent buses run between Tiānshuǐ and Huīxiàn (徽县; Y25 to Y30, three hours), from where you can hire a minivan (Y60) for the final 26km. Alternatively take a minibus on to Jiǎlíng and then hire a minivan (Y20) or walk (6km) from there.

## PÍNGLIÁNG 平凉

☎ 0933 / pop 106,800

Píngliáng is a quintessentially booming Chinese mid-size town. The busy shop-lined streets hardly seem like the sort of place a Taoist immortal would want to hang around, and, in fact, all of these folks have wisely retired to Kōngtóng Shān – the main reason for visiting the area.

## Orientation & Information

The train station is in the northeastern part of town and the main bus station in the far western part. They are connected by Dajie,

home to the town's major hotels, restaurants and shops.

The **Bank of China** (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; 17 Xi Dajie; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) and the **post office** (邮局; yóujú; 91 Dong Dajie; ☎ 8am-7pm) flank the main intersection, 200m apart. Internet cafés are in the Sizhong Alley market (see below).

## Sleeping & Eating

**Qinghuá Bīnguǎn** (清华宾馆; ☎ 823 4241; 90 Xi Dajie; 西大街90号; dm Y25-35, d with bathroom Y90) A friendly budget place next door to the Píngliáng Bīnguǎn.

**Píngliáng Bīnguǎn** (平凉宾馆; ☎ 825 3361; 86 Xi Dajie; 西大街86号; tw Y160-228) Centrally located old-school place, with slightly smoky rooms but friendly staff.

If you plan to arrive or leave town at an unsociable hour, there are a couple of decent budget places by both the train station and west bus station.

About 200m west of the Píngliáng Bīnguǎn is the Sizhong Alley market (*sizhōng xiàng shìchǎng*), with numerous restaurants and stalls.

## Getting There & Away BUS

See the table (opposite) for travel details. For Tiānshuǐ there are more frequent departures from the east bus station (*qīchē dōngzhàn*).

## TRAIN

Getting to Píngliáng is easiest by train. There are overnight trains to Lánzhōu (train N905; Y86, 11 hours), Xī'an (Y98, seven hours) and Yínchuān (train K361; 8½ hours).

## Getting Around

Bus 1 runs from the train station to the main bus station along Dajie. A taxi to town is Y5.

## AROUND PÍNGLIÁNG Kōngtóng Shān 崆峒山

On the border of Níngxià in the Liùpán Shān range, **Kōngtóng Shān** (admission Y60; ☎ 8am-6.30pm) is an important peak in the Taoist universe. It was first mentioned by the philosopher Zhuangzi (399–295 BC) and illustrious visitors have included none other than the Yellow Emperor. Numerous paths lead over the hilltop past dozens of picturesque temples to the summit at over 2100m.

The main entrance is on the north side of the mountain. You can make a nice loop trip by descending the mountain via the steps on the south side and taking a taxi from the base. If you'd rather not walk, a vertigo-inducing cable car (*suōdào*; Y30 return) Taoist reservoir on the south side of the mountain to the top of the cliffs.

There is accommodation and food on the mountain at the **Kōngtóng Shānzhūāng** (崆峒山庄; dm Y40-60, tw Y240; ☎ closed Nov-Apr).

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Kōngtóng Shān is 11km west of Píngliáng. You might find a minibus from the opposite side of the park across from the main bus station (Y5), or hire a minivan for Y20/40 one way/return. Both will drop you near the ticket office, where you need to pay for a separate vehicle to take you the 3.5km up to the mountain (per person/car Y10/50). Hourly buses also pass the park's main entrance on the way to Jīngyuán in Níngxià.

### PÍNGLIÁNG BUS TIMETABLES

The following services depart from Píngliáng's main bus station, in the western part of town:

Destination	Price (Y)	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Gúyuán	15	1½hr	hourly	8.30am-5pm
Lánzhōu	62-80	5hr	hourly	7am-4.30pm
Tiānshuǐ	42	7hr	2 daily	6.40am & 8.50am
Xī'an	50	6hr	5 daily	9am-3pm
Yán'an	82	9hr	1 daily	6am

# Níngxià 宁夏



Níngxià resembles a leftover puzzle piece that doesn't quite fit between its neighbouring deserts and mountain ranges. Hanging precariously to the Yellow River (Huáng Hé) that runs along its northern border, the region was never solid ground for the Chinese, who began building earthen fortifications in the Liúpán Shān as early as the Warring States period (475–221 BC). Níngxià's brightest moment in history came under the Western Xia (Xìxià; AD 1038–1227), a powerful kingdom that rose up around Xìngqìng (Yínchuān) and controlled an enormous swath of today's northwest.

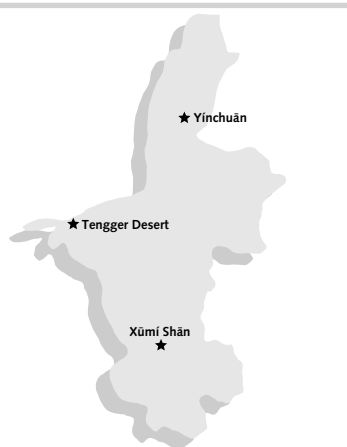
In terms of age and size, the province is no more than a mere babe, belatedly formed as an autonomous region for the Hui in 1958. The Hui, Muslim descendants of Arab and Persian traders who began settling in China during the Tang dynasty, comprise one third of the population and live primarily in the poorer south.

Day-to-day existence here is anything but a bed of roses. Beyond the Yellow River and the ancient irrigation channels that run off it, the land is parched – bad news for a population that consists mainly of farmers. Poor land reform, little social aid and recurrent droughts have turned many of the inhabitants into migrant workers, forced to venture out to big cities such as Lánzhōu and Hohhot in order to support their families.

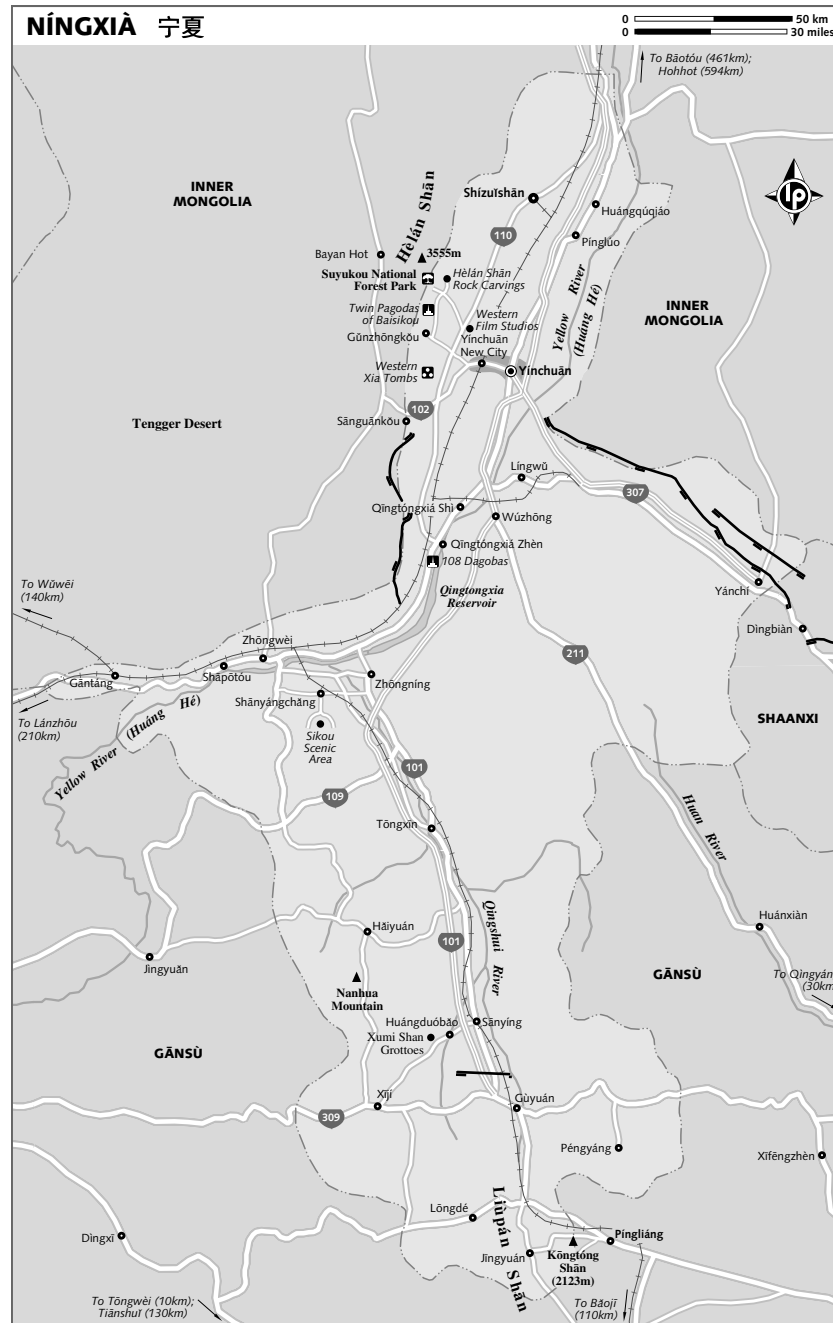
Entirely off the beaten track, this small province remains a place of specific interests: the beautiful but harsh desert, remnants of the enigmatic Western Xia and a look at how Islam functions in a largely forgotten corner of China.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the mysterious pyramid tombs of the Western Xia outside Níngxià's capital, **Yínchuān** (p879)
- Raft down the Yellow River past the sand dunes of the **Tengger Desert** (p882)
- Seek out the isolated Buddhist grottoes at **Xūmí Shān** (p882)



■ POPULATION: 5.9 MILLION





## Climate

Part of the Loess Plateau, Ningxia is composed primarily of arid mountain ranges and highlands. Summer temperatures soar during the day, and precipitation is generally no more than a fond memory. Winters are long and often freezing, but spring is lovely, though blustery. April, May, September and October are probably the best months to visit.

## Language

Ningxia's dialect is grouped together with the northwestern dialects of Gansu and Qinghai, an umbrella group known to linguists as Lanyin Mandarin.

## Getting There & Around

Train is the easiest way to traverse the deserts that envelop Ningxia but getting around this tiny province is easiest done by bus. Transport times are generally short – you can cross the province in just a few hours.

## YINCHUAN 银川

☎ 0951 / pop 1,000,000

Sheltered from the deserts of Mongolia by the high ranges of Helan Shan to the west and abundantly supplied with water from the nearby Yellow River, Yinchuan occupies a favoured geographical position in otherwise harsh surroundings.

The city was once the capital of the Western Xia (Xixia), a powerful Buddhist empire founded during the 11th century. Today it's one of China's more pleasant, relaxed provincial capitals, with some interesting outlying sights and a lively market atmosphere.

## History

The Western Xia, or Tanguts, were descendants of tribes forced to flee the northeastern Tibetan plateau towards the end of the 10th century. Although short-lived, at the kingdom's height it encompassed an area composed of modern-day Gansu, Ningxia, Shaanxi and western Inner Mongolia, and it even rivalled the Song and Liao dynasties. The Western Xia present such an enigma today because nearly all traces of their civilisation disappeared in one fell swoop – thanks to the Mongols, who supposedly obliterated them (and almost everyone else) in 1227. Nevertheless, if one were to believe Marco Polo, and more convincingly, archaeological

evidence uncovered in Kharakhoto (near Ejin Qi, Inner Mongolia), it's possible that some form of Western Xia culture existed for at least another hundred years.

## Orientation

Yinchuan is divided into two parts. The new industrialised section, Xixia Qū, is near the train station. The Old City (Xingqing Qū) is about 8km to the east and has most of the town's sights, hotels, restaurants and shops, and the long-distance bus station. The main landmarks in the Old City centre are the Yuhuang (Jade Emperor) Pavilion (Yuhuang Gé) and the Drum Tower, both currently empty.

## Information

**Bank of China** (Zhongguo Yínháng; 170 Jiefang Xijie;

☎ 8am-noon & 2.30-6pm) You can change travellers cheques and use the ATM at this main branch. Other branches change cash only.

**China International Travel Service** (CITS; Zhongguo Guóji Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 504 8006; 3rd fl, 116 Jiefang Xijie; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri) There are several other reliable travel agencies on this block.

**Foreign Languages Bookshop** (Wàiwén Shūdiàn; 46 Jiefang Xijie; ☎ 9am-7pm daily)

**Lóngbā Wǎngbā** (Xinhua Dongjiejie; per hr ¥1.5-2.5;

☎ 8am-midnight) Centrally located internet café, down a courtyard.

**Post Office** (yóujú; cnr Jiefang Xijie & Minzu Beijie; ☎ 8am-6pm)

**PSB** (Gōngānjiú; 472 Beijing Donglu; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri) For visa extensions. Take the bus 3 from the Drum Tower.

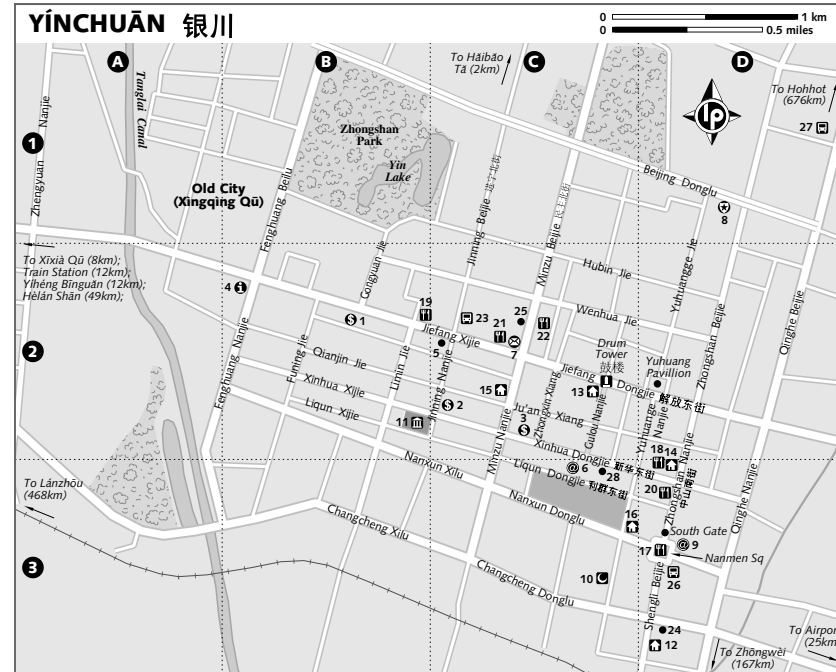
**Tiānlóng Wǎngbā** (Nanmen Sq; per hr ¥2-3; ☎ 24hr) Internet café just north of the bus station.

## Sights

**NINGXIA PROVINCIAL MUSEUM** 宁夏省博物馆

Ningxia's **museum** (Ningxia Shèng Bówùguǎn; ☎ 503 6497; 32 Jinning Nanjie; adult/student ¥22/12; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) is in the former Chengtian Temple. Its collection includes an excellent exhibit of Western Xia artefacts and writing (which deceptively resembles some sort of feathery, esoteric Chinese script), a sample of the Helan Shan rock carvings and a poor introduction to the Hui culture.

Located within the leafy courtyard is **Chéngtiānsī Tǎ**, also known as Xī Tǎ (West Pagoda), which you can climb via 13 tiers of steepish stairs.



### INFORMATION

Bank of China (Main Branch) 中国銀行 ..... 1 B2

Bank of China 中国銀行 ..... 2 C2

Bank of China 中国銀行 ..... 3 C2

CITS 中国国际旅行社 ..... 4 B2

Foreign Languages Bookshop 外文书店 ..... 5 C2

Lóngbā Wǎngbā 龙吧网吧 ..... 6 C3

Post Office 邮局 ..... 7 C2

PSB 公安局 ..... 8 D1

Tiānlóng Wǎngbā 天龙网吧 ..... 9 D3

Ningxia Provincial Museum 宁夏省博物馆 ..... 11 B2

SLEEPING

È'ěrduōsī Dǎjiùdiàn 鄂尔多斯大酒店 ..... 12 D3

Gúlóu Fǎndiàn 鼓楼饭店 ..... 13 C2

Xīnhuá Fǎndiàn 新华饭店 ..... 14 D3

Yuánhèng Dǎjiùdiàn 元亨大酒店 ..... 15 C2

Yìshèng Bīnguǎn 伊盛宾馆 ..... 16 C3

EATING

Huailian Supermarket 北京华联超市 ..... 17 D3

Napoli 那波理 ..... 18 D3

Shǎojiāngōng 烧鸡公 ..... 19 B2

Xiǎnhè Lóu 仙鹤楼 ..... 20 D3

Yíngbīnlóu 迎宾楼 ..... 21 C2

Àlǐ Dàngāo 里蛋糕 ..... 22 C2

TRANSPORT

Bus 20 20路公共汽车 ..... 23 C2

CAAC 中国民航 ..... 24 D3

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Long-Distance Bus Station 银川汽车站 ..... 26 D3

Northern Bus Station 北门车站 ..... 27 D1

Train Booking Office 火车票售票处 ..... 28 C3

## Hǎibǎo Tǎ 海宝塔

Also known as Běi Tǎ (North Pagoda), this fifth-century **pagoda** (admission ¥10; ☎ 9am-5pm) was toppled by an earthquake in 1739 and rebuilt in 1771 in the original style. You can climb up the nine storeys for views out over the Helan Shan to the west and the Yellow River to the east. Check out the *Alice in Wonderland*-style 2m-tall incense sticks.

Take minibus 20 north on Jinning Beijie for five stops to the 'Běitǎ Lùkǒu' (北塔路

口) and then walk north for 15 minutes, or take a taxi (¥5).

## NANGUAN MOSQUE 南关清真寺

Yinchuan's main **mosque** (Nánguān Qīngzhēnsī; Yuhuangge Nanjie; admission ¥10; ☎ 8am-6pm) is a modern Middle Eastern-style structure that was originally constructed in the Ming dynasty, razed in the Cultural Revolution and rebuilt in 1981. There's little here to justify the entry fee but the shops beside

**HUÍ** 回

The Huí are in some respects one of the country's more unusual minority groups. Scattered throughout most provinces of China, their various communities generally have little in common except Islam. And if the idea of a communist government using religion to define ethnicity seems like a paradox, even stranger is the fact that nearly 80% of the Huí live outside of their own designated autonomous region.

the entrance have some interesting Islamic knick-knacks.

**Sleeping**

There are lots of good sleeping options in the Old City centre. The following places all offer discounts of 20% to 30% from the rates listed here.

**Yìshèng Bīnguǎn** (☎ 604 1888; 235 Nanxun Donglu; 南薰东路235号; tw Y118-128) In a very convenient location near the bus station, this useful place has spacious, bright rooms, though it's not brilliantly maintained.

**Èrduōsī Dàjiùdiàn** (☎ 409 1612; Shengli Beijie; 胜利北街; d/tr Y55/90, d with bathroom Y138) A good-value and welcoming place, both for budget rooms and spacious en suite rooms, with 24-hour hot water.

**Gūlóu Fāndiàn** (☎ 602 8784; fax 602 2573; 26 Jiefang Dongjie; 解放东街26号; s/d Y138-198, with shared bathroom Y60/76) The Gulou is right in the heart of the action and, though slightly knackered, tries hard, with the odd Chinese *huaniào* (bird and flower) painting and some rooms overlooking the Drum Tower.

**Xīnhuá Fāndiàn** (☎ 603 1353; 203 Xinhua Dongjie; 新华东街203号; r Y186-238; ☎) A good option, this place is super clean, with some surprising flashes of style and classy wooden floors.

**Yuánhèng Dàjiùdiàn** (☎ 602 9998; 58 Zhongxin Xiang; 中心巷58号; tw Y208-338) This place is an excellent lower midrange option, with a good location, modern rooms and good-value discounts. There are lots of small restaurants nearby.

**Yíhéng Bīnguǎn** (☎ 396 5366; Xingzhou Beijie; 兴洲北街; tw Y278-398; ☎) Way out in the New City and just 500m south of the train station, this midrange hotel is handy if you're leaving by train at some odd hour of the night. Discounts

of more than 50% are standard. Next door is a huge 24-hour internet café.

**Eating**

**Āli Dàngāo** (Ali Cake; 55 Minzu Beijie; coffee Y3) This cake shop is a pleasant place to sit down and have breakfast or write a few postcards.

**Yíngbīnlóu** (Jiefang Xijie; dishes from Y10) This raucous place is popular with the locals. The restaurant on the upper floor serves excellent Chinese dishes, while the muttonly ground-floor canteen offers hotpot, yoghurt and ice cream.

**Xiānhè Lóu** (118 Zhongshan Nanjie; dishes Y12-22) You can't go wrong here, with great *kāoyángpái* (烤羊排; barbecued ribs) and *jīngjiāng ròusī* (京酱肉丝; soy pork), which you wrap up in little pancakes. Check out the *shuǐjiāo* (boiled ravioli-style dumplings) production line in the southern of the two branches here (they're located about 30m apart).

**Shāojiégōng** (Jiefang Xijie; small dishes Y36) The speciality of this restaurant is the spicy chicken stew. You cook it up yourself and you can add various vegetables and noodles to the broth. A small serving will be enough for two people.

**Napoli** (Nàbōlì; 195 Xinhua Dongjie; buffet Y39) Heaving at lunch and dinner for its chopstick-free buffet of pizza, fruit and salad.

For self-caterers, the **Hualian Supermarket** (Huálián Chāoshì; Nanmen Sq), underneath Nanmen Sq, stocks everything from roast chicken to deodorant.

**Getting There & Away****AIR**

Yínchuān's main ticket office of the **Civil Aviation Administration of China** (CAAC; Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎ 691 3456; 540 Changcheng Donglu; ☎ 8am-6pm) is located south of the bus station. You can also buy tickets from **China Air Express** (Mínháng Kuàidì; ☎ 401 3333; 36 Minzu Beijie), across from Āli Dàngāo.

Plane flights connect Yínchuān with Běijīng (Y1080) and Chéngdū (Y1110), Guǎngzhōu (Y1890), Shànghǎi (Y1500), Ūrǔmǐ (Y1350, three weekly) and Xī'ān (Y600), among other destinations.

**BUS**

The long-distance bus station is in the south-eastern part of town on Nanmen Sq near the South Gate (Nán Mén). For some northern destinations you may be referred to the north-

**YÍNCHUĀN BUS TIMETABLES**

Destinations from the long-distance bus station include the following:

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Gùyúán	Y46-71	4-6hr	half-hourly	8am-8.50pm
Lánzhōu	Y96	6hr	hourly	8am-4pm
Xī'ān	Y128-138	11-14hr	6 daily	7.40am-4.30pm
Yán'ān	Y67-98	8-12hr	4 daily	7.15am, 8.40am, 9.10am, 5.30pm (sleeper)
Zhōngwèi	Y24-37	2-3hr	hourly	8am-5.45pm

ern bus station (*běimén zhàn*); to get there from the long-distance bus station hop on bus 4(Y1).

The frequent *kuàikè* (express buses) to Zhōngwèi and Gùyúán are definitely worth the added expense.

**TRAIN**

Yínchuān is on the Lánzhōu-Běijīng railway line, which runs via Hohhot (11 hours) and Dàtóng (13 hours) before reaching Běijīng (19 hours). If you're heading for Lánzhōu (8½ hours, Y97 hard sleeper), the handy overnight train N901 leaves at 10.05pm. For Xī'ān (14 hours), try train 2587 (Y122 hard sleeper), leaving at 4.16pm, or train K359, leaving at 8.38pm. The train station is in the New City, about 12km west of the Old City centre.

There's a **train booking office** (*huòchē shòupào-chù*; 140 Xinhua Dongjie; commission Y5; ☎ 8am-7pm) in the Old City, in the ICBC Bank (Gongshang Yínháng), next to Dico's Burgers. Buy tickets at counter No 1.

**Getting Around**

The airport is 25km from the Old City centre; buses (Y15) leave from in front of the CAAC office. Coming from the airport you can ask to be dropped off at the Yúhuáng Gé. A taxi to/from the airport costs around Y40.

Bus 1 (Y1) runs from the long-distance bus station in the Old City, along Jiefang Jie and then on to the train station in the New City, between 6am and 11.30pm. Minibus 1 (Y2) covers the same route faster. Count on a minimum 30-minute trip.

Taxis cost Y5 for the first 3km. A taxi between the train station and the Old City costs around Y15.

**AROUND YÍNCHUĀN****Western Xia Tombs** 西夏王陵

About 33km west of Yínchuān, these remarkable pyramid-shaped **tombs** (Xixia Wánglíng; adult/student Y40/20; ☎ 8am-7pm) are easily Níngxià's most famous sight. The series of tombs was started a millennium ago by the Western Xia's first ruler, Li Yuanhao. There are nine imperial tombs, plus 200 lesser tombs, in an area of 50 sq km.

Leading up to the main tomb is a processional way, flanked by carved stellae bases, a sacrificial platform and watchtowers. The 23m-tall main tomb was originally built as an octagonal seven-storey wooden pagoda, similar to the Genghis Khan mausoleum near Dōngshèng (see p894), but all that remains is the large earthen core.

The examples of Buddhist art in the good site **museum** offer a rare glimpse into the ephemeral Western Xia culture, and point to clear artistic influences from neighbouring Tibet and Central Asia.

If you have time, the best way to get a feel for the site is to hike out to some of the remoter tombs, the most impressive of which are the photogenic 'twin tombs', 5km to the south, or Tomb No 5, 5km to the west. During summer you can take an electric car out to the former for Y10 per person. Dozens of smaller tombs litter the plains to the north. You can't enter any of the tombs (which are actually underground), so it's more of a visual experience.

A return taxi to the tombs costs around Y90. You could take bus 2 to its terminus in Xixia Qū and then take a cheaper taxi (Y15 each way) from there. In summer you might just find a direct bus from Yínchuān's long-distance bus station.

## Hèlán Shān 贺兰山

The razorback ridges of the Helan Mountains are clearly visible from Yinchuan. The range forms an important natural barrier against desert winds and invaders alike, and the foothills are peppered with graves taking advantage of the range's excellent feng shui.

About 54km northwest of Yinchuan's New City is the historic pass village of **Gūnzhōngkǒu** (滚钟口; admission Y20, car Y10), with walking trails leading up past pagodas and temples into the surrounding hills.

Another 9km north of Gūnzhōngkǒu are the **Twin Pagodas of Baisikou** (拜寺口双塔; Baisikou Shuangta; admission Y10), which are 13 and 14 storeys high and decorated with Buddha statuettes.

A further 6km on is **Suyukou National Forest Park** (苏峪口国家森林公园; Sùyūkǒu Guójiā Sēnlín Gōngyuán; admission Y40, car Y5, museum Y20), which offers some good hiking if you have time for more than a passing visit. A cable car (Y25 up, Y45 return) whisks you up to cool pine-covered hills.

Another 5km past the junction is a boulder-strewn gorge filled with **rock carvings** (贺兰山岩画; Hèlánshān Yánhuà; admission Y25) thought to date back 10,000 years. There are over 2000 pictographs, depicting animals, hunting scenes and faces, including one (so local guides like to claim) of an alien. Most of the carvings are by the valley mouth, on the north side. Don't miss the images of the Rastafarian-like sun god (climb the side steps up the hill) or the tiger (continue along the main trail to the reservoir). The pictographs are the only remnants of early nomadic tribes who lived in the steppes north of China.

On the way back to Yinchuan, fans of the Zhang Yimou film *Red Sorghum* can stop at the **Western Film Studios** (镇北堡西部影城; Zhènbeibǎo Xībù Yǐngchéng; admission Y40; ☎ 8am-6pm), where the film was shot. The fortress and old city movie sets are honey but fun.

Public transport is almost nonexistent here. A taxi for the day (130km) should cost about Y200, and you can generally throw in the Western Xia tombs for the same price. **CITS** (Zhōngguó Guójiā Lǚxíngshì; ☎ 504 8006; 3rd fl, 116 Jiefang Xijie, Yinchuan; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri) asks double this price, but includes an English-speaking guide. Tourist buses head out to Suyukou National Forest Park (Y30 return) from Yinchuan's north bus station between May and October if there are enough people.

## 108 Dagobas 108 塔

These unusual Tibetan-style **Buddhist dagobas** (Yibailingba Ta; admission Y20; ☎ 8am-7pm), or stupas, are 83km south of Yinchuan, near the town of Qingtongxia Zhen. The 12 rows of white, vase-like structures date from the Yuan dynasty and are arranged in a large triangular constellation on the banks of the Yellow River. Be warned – the stupas were heavily renovated.

To get here, jump on one of the frequent buses (Y11, 2½ hours) from Yinchuan's long-distance bus station to Qingtongxia Zhen (you may have to change at the larger town of Qingtongxia Shi). Once you arrive, walk 15 minutes south to the dam, up the steps and down the eastern river bank to the dock, where you can take a boat to the far bank (Y15 return).

## Bayan Hot 阿拉山左旗

Bayan Hot (Alashan Zuǒqí) is a town just across the border in Inner Mongolia, some 105km from Yinchuan, and a worthy day trip. It lies surrounded by desert and has an outpost feel to it. In town is the **Yánfú Sì** (延福寺; admission Y10), a small Mongolian temple that dates back more than 300 years; once populated by 200 lamas, it now houses around 30.

Halfway to Bayan Hot ('Rich City') the road brochures crumbling, yet still mighty, remains of the Great Wall at **Sānguānkǒu** (三关口).

Frequent buses depart from Yinchuan's long-distance bus station for Bayan Hot (Y25, 2½ hours). The return buses peter out after about 5pm.

## ZHONGWÈI 中卫

☎ 0953

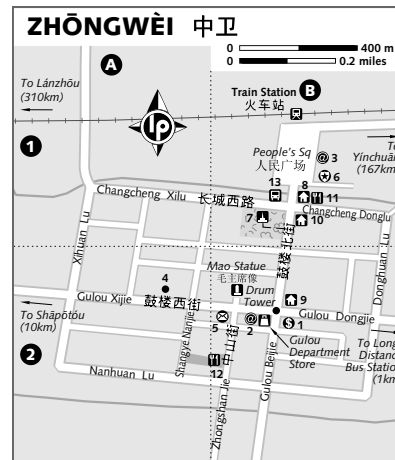
Zhōngwèi lies 167km southwest of Yinchuan on the Lanzhou-Baotou railway, between the sand dunes of the Tengger Desert (Ténggélí Shāmò) to the north and the Yellow River to the south. In addition to its unusual setting, Zhōngwèi has a fairly relaxed pace – a nice change from the rush of most Chinese cities.

### Information

**Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Yínháng; cnr Gulou Beijie & Gulou Dongjie; ☎ 9am-5pm) Has an ATM.

**Desert Travel Service** (Shāpōtǒu Lǚxíngshì; ☎ 703 3415; shamo@ypall.com; Gulou Beijie) Pricy but professional outfit for camel and rafting trips (see p882), in the Zhōngwèi Dàjiūdiàn.

**Fèitiān Wǎngbā** (Gulou Xijie; per hr Y2; ☎ 24hr) Next to the Gulou Department Store, on the 4th floor inside a



### INFORMATION

Bank of China 中国银行	1 B2
Desert Travel Service 沙漠旅行社	(see 10)
Fèitiān Wǎngbā 飞天网吧	2 B2
Internet Cafés 网吧	3 B1
Peace Travel 和平旅行社	4 A2
Post Office 邮局	5 B2
PSB 公安局	6 B1

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Gāo Miào 高庙	7 B1
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### SLEEPING

Xíngxiáng Bīnguǎn 兴祥宾馆	8 B1
Yíxīng Dàjiūdiàn 逸兴大酒店	9 B2
Zhang's Hotel 张氏集团后楼宾馆	(see 8)
Zhōngwèi Dàjiūdiàn 中卫大酒店	10 B1

### EATING

Chongqing Restaurant 重庆餐厅	11 B1
Night Market 夜市 (中卫商城)	12 B2

### TRANSPORT

Minibuses to Shāpōtǒu 去沙坡头的中巴	13 B1
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courtyard, is this internet café. There are also internet cafés on the east side of Renmin (People's) Square.

**Peace Travel** (Héping Lǚxíngshì; ☎ 701 4880; Gulou Xijie) English-speaking travel agency at the entrance to the Zhōngwèi Dàjiūdiàn (for tours, see p882).

**Post office** (yóujú; Gulou Xijie)

**PSB** (Gōngānjú; Renmin Sq)

## Sights

### GĀO TEMPLE 高庙

The main attraction in town is the **Gāo Temple** (Miào; Gulou Beijie; admission Y20; ☎ 7am-6.30pm), an eclectic, multipurpose temple that at one time

catered to the needs of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. It's still a hodgepodge of architectural styles, but the revitalised Buddhist deities have muscled out the original Taoists and Confucians.

The real oddity is the former bomb shelter, built beneath the temple during the Cultural Revolution and later converted into a Buddhist hell/haunted house. The eerie, dimly lit tunnels echo with the haunting screams of the damned. Try not to get too freaked out.

## Sleeping & Eating

A nice alternative to staying in town is the desert guesthouse at Shāpōtǒu (see p882).

**Xíngxiáng Bīnguǎn** (☎ 701 9970; 61 Changcheng Donglu; 长城东路61号; dm Y20-30, tw Y80-180) The rock-hard dorm beds here are offset by heat lamps in the common showers.

**Zhang's Hotel** (Zhāngshì Jítuán Hóulóu Bīnguǎn; ☎ 701 0808; 61 Changcheng Donglu; 长城东路61号; dm Y25, tw 80-166; ☎) For slightly nicer twins, ask the Chóngqing Restaurant (below) about this hotel, located just behind Xíngxiáng Bīnguǎn.

**Yíxīng Dàjiūdiàn** (☎ 701 7666; 2 Gulou Beijie; 鼓楼北街2号; tw Y150-368; ☎) This is the most up-market place in town, overlooking the Drum Tower. Discounts of 30% are common.

**Zhōngwèi Dàjiūdiàn** (☎ 701 2219; 53 Gulou Beijie; 鼓楼北街53号; tw Y290-318; ☎) Check if this place is still discounting its plush and spacious midrange doubles to as low as Y120; if so, it's the best deal in town.

**Night Market** (Yeshì; Zhongshan Jie) The best place to eat is this happening spot with lots of cheap eats. Two favourites are *ròujiāmó* (肉夹馍; fried pork or beef stuffed in pita bread, sometimes with green peppers and cumin) and *shāguō* (沙锅; minihotpot).

**Chóngqing Restaurant** (Changcheng Donglu; 长城东路; dishes from Y7) This friendly home-style restaurant is excellent; staff are often willing to prepare smaller, cheaper versions of dishes for solo travellers.

## Getting There & Away BUS

The **long-distance bus station** (*chángtú qì-chēzhàn*) is 1km east of the Drum Tower, on the southern side of Dong Dajie. A taxi here is Y3. Frequent buses to Yinchuan (Y24, three hours) leave every half hour from 6.30am to 6pm; express buses (Y34, two hours) make the trip six times daily. To get to Gūyuán, you'll need to first get to Zhōngníng (Y9,



one hour) or Tōngxīn (Y17, two hours) and change there.

### TRAIN

From Zhōngwèi you can catch trains heading to the north, south and southeast. By express train it will take you 2½ hours to reach Yínchuán, six hours to Lánzhōu (train K43; 9.20am) and 12 hours to Xī'ān (train 2586; 7.08pm). For Gùyuán (3½ hours) take the Xī'ān train.

## AROUND Zhōngwèi

### Shāpōtóu 沙坡头

The desert playground of **Shāpōtóu** (admission Y65; ☎ 7am-5.30pm), 10km west of Zhōngwèi, lies on the fringes of the Tengger Desert, at the dramatic convergence of desert dunes, the Yellow River and lush farmlands. It's based around the Shapotou Desert Research Centre, which was founded in 1956 to battle the ever-increasing problem of desertification in China's northwest.

Shāpōtóu has become something of a desert amusement park, with camel rides, speed boats, zip lines (Y60), bungee jumps (Y120), sand sleds (Y20) and a climbing wall (Y30). The scenery is impressive, but it's heavily commercialised. There are two entrances to the area: the main one at the guesthouse and the other at the top of the sand dunes, from where you can access the main desert (a camel ride here costs Y60).

A traditional mode of transport on the Yellow River for centuries was the *yángpí fāzi* (leather raft) made from sheep or cattle skins soaked in oil and brine and then inflated. An average of 14 hides are tied together under a wooden framework, making a strong raft capable of carrying four people. Touts at Shāpōtóu offer boat rides up to Shuāngshīshān (双狮山) for Y60 per person, from where you can raft back downstream.

A day trip up the river to a working water wheel at Běichángtān (北长滩), some 70km west from Zhōngwèi, costs Y320.

### TOURS

Both **Peace Travel** (Héping Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 0953-701 4880; Gulou Xijie, Zhōngwèi) and **Desert Travel Service** (Shāpōtóu Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 0953-703 3415; shamo@ypall.com; Gulou Beijing, Zhōngwèi) in Zhōngwèi offer several enticing river and desert trips. A three-day camel trek through the Tengger Desert with a visit to the Great Wall and camping in the

dunes costs around Y300 per person per day for transport, guide and accommodation (minimum three people).

Another option is a one-day leather raft trip down the Yellow River, starting at the water wheel at Běichángtān and ending at Mèngjiāwān. This costs Y250 per person, including transport to and from Zhōngwèi, or you can add it on to a camel trip for Y100.

### SLEEPING

**Shāpō Shānzhuāng** (沙坡山庄; ☎ 768 9073; tr/tw per bed Y40/50; ☎ Apr-Oct) It's nice to be out of the town on the Yellow River by the sand dunes but the accommodation itself is uninspiring. With its choice location at a bend in the Yellow River, is a decent choice if you want to sleep near the dunes, though the surroundings are more inspiring than the rooms. There's a small restaurant on the premises.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are frequent public minibuses between Zhōngwèi and the main entrance of Shāpōtóu (Y4, 45 minutes), petering out around 6.30pm. They leave from inside a courtyard opposite the long-distance bus station, stopping briefly at the Gulou Beijie and Changcheng Xilu intersection in Zhōngwèi. A taxi costs Y10/50 one way/return.

### Sikou Scenic Area 寺口风景区

One new place worth exploring is the **Sikou Scenic Area** (Sikou Fēngjǐngqū; admission Y60), a dramatic sandstone area of gorges, temples and caves, 56km southeast of Zhōngwèi. South of Shānyāngchǎng the road branches at a pagoda, leading to the two halves of the scenic area. The western section boasts a suspension bridge over the dramatic gorge, while the eastern section features the Sikou gorge, caves, walkways and plenty of scrambling. The cliffs offer some of northwest China's best rock climbing. The only way to get here is to hire a taxi for the day (from Y200 to Y300).

## GÙYUÁN 固原

☎ 0954

Gùyuán on the border of southern Ningxià is of little interest, except perhaps for its **Museum** (固原博物馆; gùyuán bówùguǎn; Xicheng Lu; admission Y20; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun), currently under renovation. Fifty kilometres northwest of Gùyuán, however, are the little-visited Buddhist grottoes of **Xūmí**

## THE WORLD ACCORDING TO MA YAN

Gender inequality and rural poverty are hardly breaking news in China, but rarely does one have the chance to view them first-hand through the eyes of a young girl. In 2001, 14-year-old Ma Yan found herself face-to-face with a future not uncommon to Chinese women: unable to pay the tuition fees for three children, Ma Yan's parents decided to pull her out of school, for the sake of her brothers' education.

Ma Yan's school diaries were later thrust upon a French journalist, at the time a last-ditch cry for help from a desperate mother, herself deprived of an education and married at 16. Reading them can be an unsettling experience – some days she has no more than a bowl of rice to eat, other days even less. But no other book will bring you closer to understanding just how hard it is to make ends meet in Ningxià, or the extremity with which the Communist Party has turned its back on its original *raison d'être*.

The subsequent translation and publication of extracts from the diary not only introduced the world to the people of Ningxià, it also changed the fates of hundreds of families. Readers sent in personal donations to keep Ma Yan in school, and continuing interest sparked the publication of the entirety of Ma Yan's diaries in book form. Royalties from sales and reader donations were put into a grass-roots fund to help provide tuition fees for children throughout the province. Ma Yan herself is still in high school. Her plans? To enrol in Běijīng's Qinghua University to study journalism.

*The Diary of Ma Yan* has since been translated into 17 languages, and the organisation **Enfants du Ningxia** ([www.enfantsduningxia.org](http://www.enfantsduningxia.org)) has helped ensure the right to an education for several hundred children in southern Ningxià – no small accomplishment for the diary of a teenage girl.

**Shān** (须弥山; admission Y30). Xūmí is the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit word *sumeru*, a Buddhist paradise.

Cut into the five adjacent sandstone hills are 132 caves housing more than 300 Buddhist statues dating back 1400 years, from the Northern Wei to the Sui and Tang dynasties. Cave 5 contains Xūmí Shān's largest statue: a colossal Maitreya (future Buddha), standing 20.6m high. It remains remarkably well preserved, even though the protective tower has long since collapsed and left it exposed to the elements. Around the corner in cave 1 is a smaller standing Buddha. Further uphill, the best statues are protected by the Yuanguan (caves 45 and 46; 6th century) and Xiangguo (cave 51; 7th century) Temples, where you can walk around the interior and examine the artwork up close – amazingly, the paint on several of the statues has yet to wear away.

There's one direct bus a day to the caves (Y8, 1½ hours), leaving Gùyuán at around 2.30pm and returning the next morning at 8am, so you'd have to overnight at the site **guesthouse** (dm Y30), which isn't a bad idea at all. Otherwise, catch a bus from Gùyuán to Sānyíng (三营; Y6, one hour), on the main road 40km north of Gùyuán near the Xūmí Shān turn-off. From Sānyíng you can hop on a

minibus to Huángduóbǎo (Y2 when full) and then find a tractor or hire a minivan for the 9km to the caves. A minibus from Sānyíng to Xūmí Shān is the best bet at Y50 return.

### Sleeping

**Tiědào Bīnguǎn** (铁道宾馆; train station; 火车站; s/d Y40/80) If you arrive late at night, this place has excellent-value rooms.

**Gùyuán Bīnguǎn** (固原宾馆; ☎ 203 2479; Zhengfu Jie; 政府街; tw Y140-180, without bathroom Y60-100) Gùyuán's government hotel is fresh and clean, with a wide range of rooms. A taxi from the bus station costs Y3.

**Liùpánshān Bīnguǎn** (六盘山宾馆; ☎ 202 3339; 77 Zhongshan Jie; 中山街77号; tw Y80) Five minutes' walk to the right as you exit the bus station is this hotel's main building; from here you'll be directed to the dependable twins in the foreign-approved wing.

**Xīnshìjī Bīnguǎn** (新世纪宾馆; Wenhua Jie; 文化街; tw without/with bathroom Y80/50) Just outside the bus station, to the right, this clean and good-value place is the most convenient option.

There are lots of good restaurants on Zhengfu Xiang, such as the Níngfēng Shífù (宁丰食府). Take a left out of the bus station, then another left to the alley. The Gùyuán Bīnguǎn has a good buffet (Y18), if you can't face grappling with another Chinese menu.

### Getting There & Away

Gùyuan is on the Zhōngwèi–Bǎoji railway line, with trains to Xī'ān (eight hours), Yínchuān (six hours) and Lánzhōu (10 hours), but sleeper tickets are near impossible to get, and the majority of trains depart in the middle of the night. Useful local trains include the 11.14am (train 8782) to Zhōngwèi (five hours); 8.22am (train 1014) and 4.37pm (train 8781) to Píngliáng (2½ hours); and 9.32pm overnight to Lánzhōu (train N905). To get to the train station you'll need to take bus 1 or a taxi (Y5).

Gùyuan is one of the last places in the country to try to charge foreigners double fare. Buses to Yínchuān (Y37 to Y60, 4½ hours) leave every half-hour between 8am and 5.30pm from the long-distance bus station.

There are buses running once daily to Lánzhōu (Y51, nine hours) and Tiānshuǐ (Y42, seven hours) at 6am, and three morning buses to Xī'ān (Y57, seven hours). There are also frequent buses to Píngliáng (Y15, 1½ hours) and Jīngyuán (Y20, two hours).