

Shānxī 山西



Despite mountainous terrain and a generally inhospitable climate, Shānxī was long a coveted square on the chessboard. Wedged between ancient capitals of the Chinese heartland and the grasslands to the north, the area was a key centre of trade and cultural exchange – as well as bearing witness to centuries of war. But continuous fighting brought more than just destruction; it provided an impetus for Buddhism’s philosophy to take root. No other part of China devoted so much early patronage to the religion, and the vestiges, from the Yungang Caves to Tang dynasty temples near Wūtái Shān, are among the oldest Buddhist sites in China.

One of the major reasons Shānxī has such an impressive collection of rare old buildings and cultural relics is undoubtedly the parched landscape. Left only to farm, Shānxī’s inhabitants would have had a dismal time of it, as there is little here that facilitates agriculture. What kept the economy alive over the years was a booming trade in salt, tea, silk, grain and wool, carted back and forth between southern China and Mongolia.

Unfortunately, the province was poorly positioned to take advantage of the 20th century’s changes. Isolated by mountain ranges, the region began a long slide back into obscurity, and has found itself having to rely entirely on its enormous resources of coal and ore.

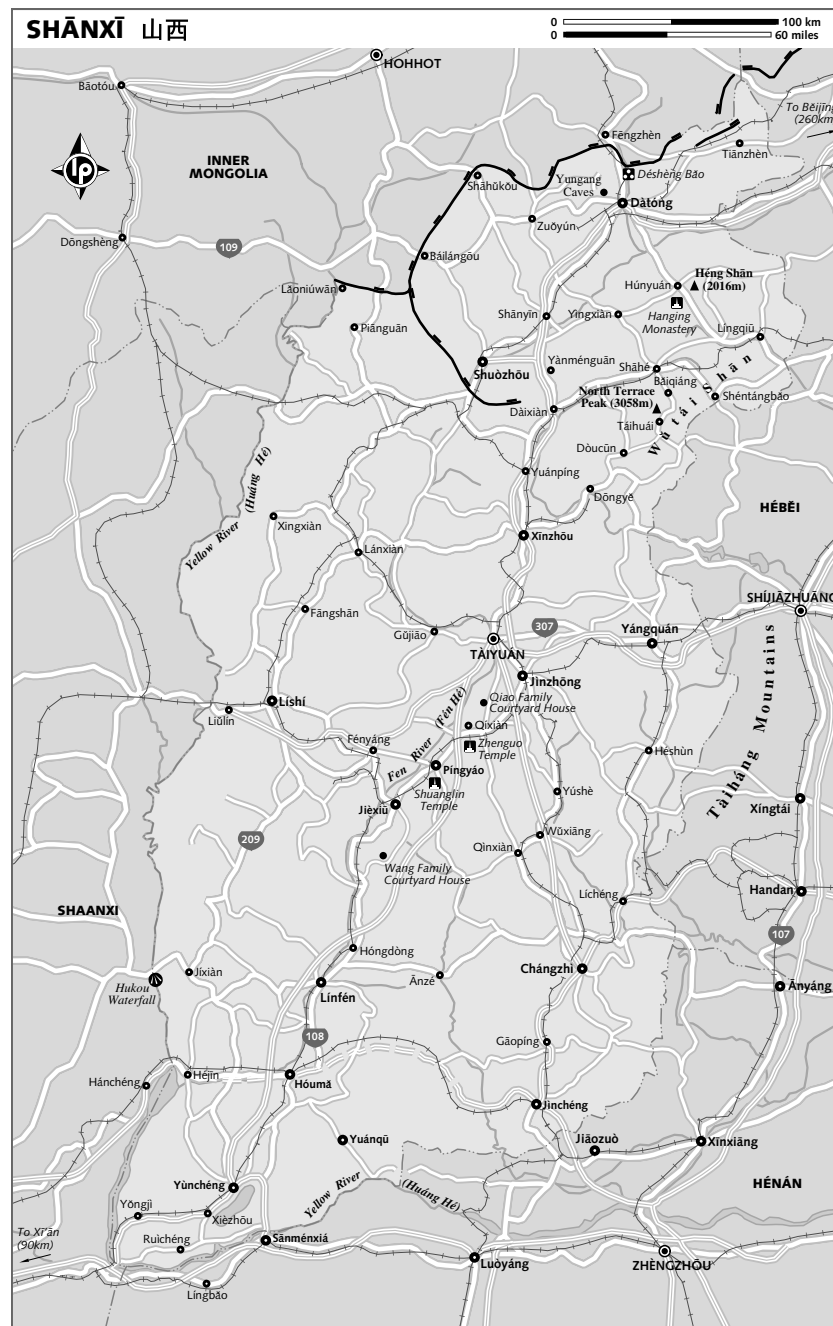
Visiting Shānxī is thus somewhat akin to sitting on a seesaw: the high end rises to see northern China at its traditional best – sacred Buddhist mountains, ancient architecture and the Great Wall – while the other end dips perilously into a future shrouded in coal dust, refinery smoke and all the other environmental ills of the energy-hungry dragon.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Find inspiration – artistic, historic or spiritual – at the Buddhist **Yungang Caves** (p416)
- Pedal a bike through the old-timey streets of **Pingyáo** (p407)
- Ascend sacred peaks and chat with monks at **Wūtái Shān** (p411)
- Delve into the province’s fascinating past at the **Shanxi Museum** (p405) in Tàiyuán
- Set out in search of the fragmented remains of the **Great Wall** (p417)



■ POPULATION: 33.3 MILLION



History

Throughout history, Shānxī has flip-flopped from China's defensive bulwark to a springboard for invaders descending upon the fertile north China plain. The Tuoba were the first outsiders to set up camp here, instating Dátóng as their capital during the northern Wei (AD 386–534). Eventual assimilation and intermarriage with powerful Han Chinese clans resulted in a new line of aristocratic families, who went on to play an important role in the Sui and Tang dynasty courts. As China weakened following the collapse of the Tang, northern invaders moved back into Shānxī, most notably the Khitan (907–1125), whose western capital was again based in Dátóng.

After the Ming regained control of northern China, Shānxī was developed anew as a defensive outpost, with an inner and outer Great Wall constructed along the northern boundaries for enforced protection. Local merchants (known as *Jin shāng*) took advantage of the military development to do a brisk business in trade, eventually transforming the province into the country's financial centre during the Qing dynasty.

Climate

Shānxī ('West of the Mountains') gets its name from the Taihang range that runs along its eastern border. Nearly 70% of the province is mountainous, with much of the population residing in the inner Loess Plateau (thick layers of microscopic silt that blew down from Siberia beginning in the Ice Age). The hallmarks of China's 'yellow earth' are cave houses (*yáodòng*) and a fissured, treeless landscape.

Shānxī is as dry as dust – precisely 0cm of rain in February is normal. All in, the province averages a mere 35cm of rain a year; the only time it really does rain is July, but it's usually only 12cm.

Thankfully skies are often blue, because temperature fluctuations can be intimidating. In Tàiyuán expect lows of around -8°C in January, with wind chills icing that down quite a bit; the summer average high is a relatively comfortable 25°C. Much of the province outside Tàiyuán is mountainous, so adjust temperatures accordingly. Plan to arrive in May or September for optimal conditions.

Language

Shānxī has 45 million speakers of Jin. Linguists argue whether it should be classified

as a distinct language rather than a Mandarin dialect (since it has eight subgroups inside the province); if so, it is the 22nd-most spoken world language. Jin uses a final glottal stop, unlike standard Mandarin; other unique features are complex grammar-induced tone shifts and breaking monosyllabic words into two.

Getting There & Around

Modern and extensive rail lines and highways split Shānxī on a northeast–southwest line, so getting from Běijīng to Tàiyuán and thence to Xī'ān (in Shaanxi province) is no problem. Outside of that, lots of mountain roads and endless convoys of coal lorries await to bog you down.

TÀIYUÁN 太原

☎ 0351 / pop 1,830,000

Tàiyuán is a nice place as far as Chinese cities go, cosmopolitan enough to indulge in modern luxuries, but without the fast-paced rush characteristic of urban conglomerations on the coast. The real reason to spend some time here (instead of immediately hurrying on to Pingyáo or Wütái Shān) is the fantastic new Shanxi Museum, opened in 2005 and easily one of China's best.

Orientation

Yingze Dajie runs east to west through Tàiyuán. To the east is the train station; everything of necessity is west of here towards May 1st Sq (Wūyǐ Guǎngchǎng).

Information

There are several internet cafés (网吧; *wǎngbā*) on Wuyi Dongjie; another is located on the south side of the train station square.

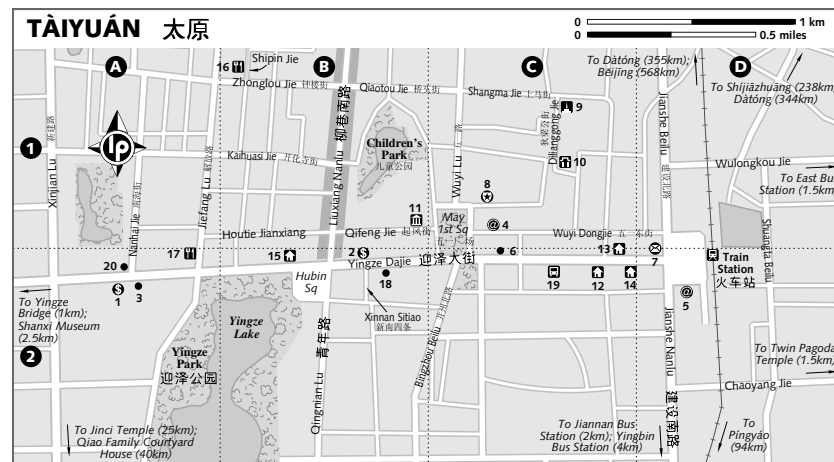
Bank of China (Zhōngguó Yínháng) main branch (288 Yingze Dajie; ☎ 8am–5.30pm); smaller branch (169 Yingze Dajie; ☎ 8am–6pm) Both branches have an ATM inside. To change travellers cheques, go to the main branch.

China International Travel Service (CITS; Zhōngguó Guójí Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 406 3562; 282 Yingze Dajie) Next door to the Bank of China.

Kodak (Jiǎdá Shùmà Zhōngxīn; 93 Yingze Dajie) Burn digital photos onto CDs here; ¥10 per disc.

Post & telephone office (yóujú) Diagonally opposite the train station.

Public Security Bureau (PSB; Gōngānjú; 9 Houjia Xiang; ☎ 8.30–11.30am & 3–5pm Mon–Fri) Has a foreign affairs office near May 1st Sq (Wūyǐ Guǎngchǎng).



INFORMATION

Bank of China (Main Branch)

中国银行1 A2

Bank of China

中国银行2 B2

CITS 中国国际旅行社3 A2

Internet Café 网吧4 C1

Internet Café 网吧5 D2

Kodak 佳达数码中心6 C2

Post & Telephone Office

邮电大楼7 D2

PSB 公安局8 C1

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Chongshan Temple 崇善寺9 C1

Confucian Temple 文庙10 C1

Shanxi Provincial Museum

山西省博物馆11 B1

SLEEPING

Chángtāi Fàndiàn

长泰饭店12 C2

Huáyuan Bīnguǎn 华苑宾馆13 C2

Huáyuan Bīnguǎn 华苑宾馆14 C2

Yingzé Bīnguǎn 迎泽宾馆15 B2

EATING

Food Street 食品街16 B1

Táiwān Yǒnghé Dòujiāng Dǎwáng

台湾永和豆浆大王(see 14)

Tàiyuán Miànsī Diàn 太原面食店17 A2

TRANSPORT

China Eastern Airlines Booking

Office 东方航空公司售票处18 B2

Long-Distance Bus Station

长途汽车站19 C2

Train Booking Office 火车票售票处20 A2

Sights

SHANXI MUSEUM 山西博物院

Shānxī need no longer suffer from an inferiority complex: this new **museum** (Shānxī Bówùguǎn; Binhe Xilu Zhongduan; admission ¥20, audio guide ¥10 & ¥100 deposit; ☎ 9am–5pm, last entrance 4pm, closed 15th & 30th each month) leaves all neighbouring provincial museums in the loessial dust. Three floors walk you through all aspects of Shānxī culture, from prehistoric fossils and rare northern dynasty tomb relics to a pantheon of Buddhist statues and detailed local opera and architecture exhibits. All galleries are imaginatively displayed and contain English captions. Highlights include animal-shaped bronze sacrificial vessels (*zūn*) from the state of Jin (2nd floor), coffin paintings and burial artefacts from the Northern Wei and Qi (3rd floor), a shadow puppet collection (3rd floor) and the architectural exhibit (4th floor).

To get here, take bus 1 across the Yingze Bridge (迎泽大桥), walk back towards the river and then zigzag northeast 15 minutes; look for the inverted pyramid.

CHONGSHAN TEMPLE 崇善寺

The double-eaved wooden hall in this Ming **temple** (Chóngshàn Sì; Dilianggong Jie; admission ¥2; ☎ 8am–5pm) contains three impressive statues: Samantabhadra (the Bodhisattva of Truth), Guanyin (the Goddess of Mercy with 1000 arms) and Manjusri (the Bodhisattva of Wisdom with 1000 alms bowls). The entrance is down an alleyway off Dilianggong Jie.

SHANXI PROVINCIAL MUSEUM

山西省博物馆

The old provincial museum has two separate locations. The **main museum** (Shānxī Shèng Bówùguǎn; Qifeng Jie; admission ¥5; ☎ 9am–5pm) is in a temple dedicated to the Taoist immortal Lü Dongbin and contains a ragtag collection of Taoist and Buddhist statues. The **Confucian Temple** (Wén Miào; Dilianggong Jie; admission ¥2; ☎ 9am–noon & 2.30–6.30pm May–Oct, 9am–5pm Nov–Apr, closed Monday) is located south of Chongshan Temple, and has attractive Ming buildings that hold temporary calligraphy exhibitions and the like.

TWIN PAGODA TEMPLE 双塔寺

This **temple** (Shuāngtǎ Sì; admission Y6; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) has two Ming dynasty pagodas, each a 13-storey octagonal structure almost 55m high. It is possible to climb one of the pagodas, but it's only recommended for those who enjoy dark, slippery spiral stairs. Catch a taxi (Y7) here, or take bus 19 or 802 from the train station, both of which get you relatively close.

Sleeping

Tièlù Bīnguǎn (☎ 404 0624; 18 Yingze Dajie; 迎泽大街18号; tw without bathroom Y50-80, tw with bathroom Y98-160, tr Y75, q Y100-120; 🍽️) The Tièlù does things right: in addition to comfy budget digs, there's a super-friendly staff, a good 2nd-floor restaurant and a blind-massage parlour (per hour Y35).

Chángtài Fàndiàn (☎ 223 0888; fax 403 4931; 60 Yingze Dajie; 迎泽大街60号; s Y180, d & tw Y200-300, tr Y238; 🍽️) This is a reasonable midrange place to stay. The cheaper rooms are generally better, with newer floors and furnishings. There's a rail ticket office in the lobby.

Huáyuàn Bīnguǎn (☎ 882 8555; fax 404 6980; 9 Yingze Dajie; 迎泽大街9号; s & tw Y288-318; 🍽️) A decent three-star hotel, with an impressive lobby and unremarkable rooms. English is spoken here.

Yingzé Bīnguǎn (☎ 882 8888; fax 882 6688; 189 Yingze Dajie; 迎泽大街189号; d from Y1180; 🍽️ 🚿) A plush four-star hotel that might be a horror to look at, but at least it has the trappings of luxury: mahogany furnishings, English-language satellite TV, sauna, gym and medical clinic. You want the west (capitalist) block, not the decaying east (communist) block.

Eating

Shānxī's killer vinegar-noodle combo has garnered fame throughout the world – well, Běijīng's world at least. If you need more than noodles to fuel your stay (gasp!), head to the **food street** (Shípín Jiē) northwest of Yingze Dajie, where you'll be able to find restaurants of all flavours.

Tàiyuán Miànshí Diàn (Tàiyuan Noodle House; 5 Jiefang Lu; meals from Y20) The 2nd floor here is *the* place to sample Shānxī's bewildering variety of noodles. Classic forms (named after their shape, not ingredients) include cat's ears (貓耳朵; *māo ěrduo*), scissored-wheat noodles (剪子面; *jiǎnzi miàn*), rolled fish (搓鱼; *cuōyú*) and pulled noodles (拉面; *lāmiàn*). Garnishes

consist of pork (肉炸醬; *ròuzhàjiāng*) and mutton (羊肉; *yángrou*), among other things. Spoon it on the noodles, add some vinegar and dig in. There's no English menu – for the best experience, befriend a local and invite them to dinner.

Tàiwān Yǒnghé Dòujiāng Dàwáng (Yingze Dajie; from Y1) Stuck for a place to eat near the train station? Try this handy 24-hour chain next to the Tièlù Bīnguǎn, with steamed buns (馒头; *mántou*; Y1), noodles (面条; *miàntiáo*; Y6), set lunches (套餐; *tàocān*; Y18) and other snacks.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

The **China Eastern Airlines booking office** (Dōngfāng Hángkōng Gōngsī; ☎ 417 8605; 158 Yingze Dajie; ☎ 8am-8pm) is the main purveyor of tickets in town and is where you hop aboard the airport bus. Useful flights include Běijīng (Y660), Guǎngzhōu (Y1520), Shànghǎi (Y1290) and Xī'ān (Y730).

BUS

Tàiyuán's long-distance bus station (*chángtú qīchēzhàn*) is a five-minute walk west of the train station. Departures include Dàtóng (Y56 to Y86, three hours), Běijīng (Y121, 6½ hours), Zhèngzhōu (Y97 to Y143, 6½ hours), Luòyáng (Y89 to Y94, eight hours) and Xī'ān (sleeper Y139, departures 7pm, 8pm and 10pm).

The Jiannan Bus Station (建南站; Jiànnán Zhàn), 3km south of the train station, serves Píngyáo (Y20, 1½ hours) from 7.30am to 7.30pm; take bus 611 from the train station. Buses to Wútái Shān leave from the east bus station (东客站; *dōng kèzhàn*) and in front of the train station (see p412 for details). Take bus 61 from the train station to get to the east bus station.

TRAIN

It's fairly easy getting sleeper tickets for trains originating from Tàiyuán, but difficult for other trains. For advance purchases go to the **train booking office** (huòchē shòupàochù; Yingze Dajie; ☎ 8am-7pm) or the lobby of the Chángtài Fàndiàn. Services leaving from Tàiyuán include trains to Chéngdū (Y296, 28 hours, departure 3.30pm), Dàtóng (Y60, 5½ hours), Luòyáng (Y183, 13 hours, 7.33pm), Zhèngzhōu (Y91, 10 hours, 8.12am) and Shànghǎi (Y310, 22 hours, 6.12pm).

The best trains to Xī'ān (Y99, 10 to 12 hours) leave at 3.30pm and 5.53pm; sleeper berths sell out quickly. The best departures to Běijīng (Y150, eight to 10 hours) leave at noon and 9.30pm.

Getting Around

The useful bus 1 runs the length of Yingze Dajie. Taxi meters start at Y7.

AROUND TÀIYUÁN
Jinci Temple 晋祠寺

Dating from AD 1023, this Buddhist **temple** (Jinci Sì; admission Y40; ☎ 8.30am-6pm) is at the source of the Jin River and is a good start for those interested in Shānxī's impressive collection of ancient wooden buildings.

The main building here is the **Hall of the Sacred Mother**, constructed nearly 1000 years ago, with eight wooden dragons twining up the first row of pillars. Inside are 42 Song dynasty clay maidservants of the sacred lady, the mother of Prince Shuyu, who founded the state of Jin (772–403 BC). Adjacent is the **Zhou Cypress**, an unusual tree which has been growing at an angle of about 30 degrees for the last 900 years.

The temple is 25km southwest of Tàiyuán. To get here, take bus 804 from Tàiyuán's train station (Y2, one hour).

PÍNGYÁO 平遥

☎ 0354 / pop 40,000

Possibly the best-preserved ancient walled city in China, Píngyáo has a movie-set charm that makes the hearts of even the most hardened expats skip a beat. But it's not just the superficial beauty of red lanterns swaying against grey-brick walls that makes Píngyáo special; it's the fact that the entire town is still in existence – and unmarred by bathroom tiles. Wander at random through the cobbled, dusty streets and you'll come across government offices, residences and temples, offering rare insight into various aspects of life in imperial China.

It should be no surprise that Píngyáo is mobbed with megaphone-wielding tour groups on weekends and holidays, particularly when the weather is nice. But get beyond the main souvenir strip and it remains very much a real town: the locals are still hanging laundry in courtyards, careening down alleyways on bicycles or sunning themselves in doorways, unchanged even in fame.

QIAO FAMILY COURTYARD HOUSE

乔家大院

This ornately decorated **residence** (Qiáo Jiā Dàyuàn; admission Y40) is where Zhang Yimou's chilling movie *Raise the Red Lantern*, starring Gong Li, was filmed. The complex consists of six courtyards, containing more than 300 rooms, and was built by Qiao Guifa, a small-time tea and bean-curd merchant who rose to riches.

To get to the house from Tàiyuán take any Píngyáo-bound bus. On the right-hand side of the highway you'll see red lanterns and a large gate marking the complex. It's 40km southwest of Tàiyuán. Be forewarned that it's generally packed to the rafters.

History

Píngyáo was a thriving merchant town during the Ming dynasty and centre of a large network of trade that extended from the south of China to Mongolia. Local businessmen had become so successful by the Qing dynasty that they created the country's first banks and cheques, in order to facilitate the transfer of enormous amounts of silver from one place to another. The city fell into poverty in the 20th century, and, without the cash to modernise, Píngyáo's streets have since gone unchanged.

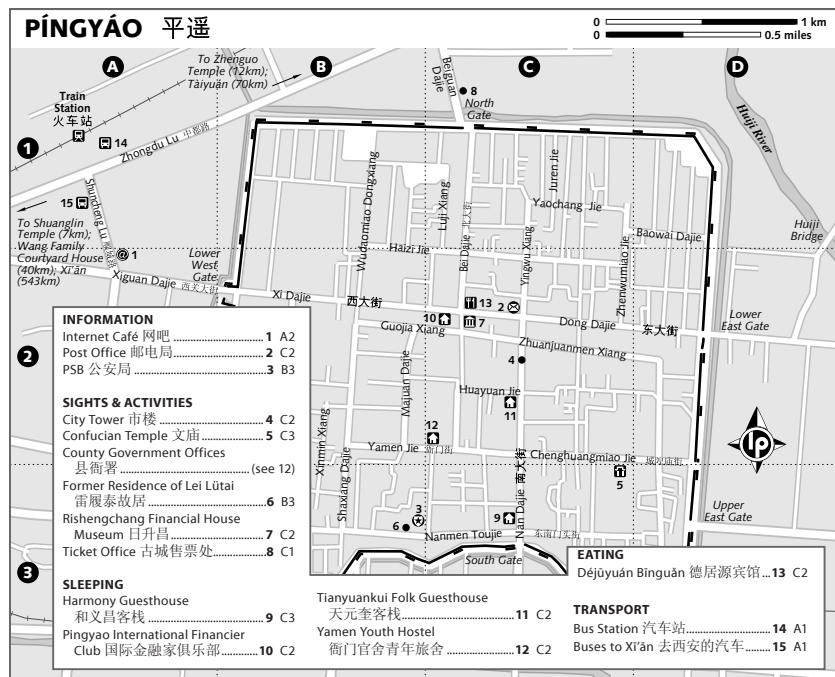
Orientation & Information

The city's main drag is Nan Dajie, also known as Mingqing Jie. Guesthouses, restaurants, museums, temples and souvenir shops are positively ubiquitous on all streets branching off it.

Take cash with you; there's (ironically) no bank. Internet is available at hotels (per hour Y10) or outside the walls on Shuncheng Lu (per hour Y3). The post office is near the corner of Nan Dajie and Xi Dajie. The PSB is in the southwestern part of the old town.

Sights & Activities

Exploring Píngyáo's streets makes for fascinating discovery, leading you past more historic sights than could possibly be covered in this book. There's a one-time admission ticket (Y120, valid for three days) that covers 20 residences, temples and monuments; the ticket office (*gūchéng shòupàochù*) is in front of the North Gate. A few of these places stage



performances, which can cost extra. Opening hours are generally from 8am to 7pm (to 6.30pm in winter).

Among the best sights in town are the **city walls** (*chéng qiáng*), which date from the early Ming dynasty (1370); notice the stamped bricks beneath your feet. The sloping walls are 10m high, more than 6km in circumference and punctuated by 72 watchtowers, each containing a paragraph from Sun-tzu's *The Art of War*. The main entrance is at the North Gate.

Also not to be missed is the **Rishengchang Financial House Museum** (Rìshēngchāng), the first of many draft banks, or *piàohào*, which operated from the city. It started off as a small dye shop in the late 18th century; as it expanded, a system of cheques and deposits for the remote offices was introduced, which eventually grew into a financial agent for other businesses, individuals and the Qing government, with 57 branches around China. The museum has nearly 100 rooms, including offices, living quarters and a kitchen, as well as several old cheques.

The **Former Residence of Lei Lütai** (Leilütai Gùjū), the founder of Rishengchang, offers a

great glimpse at the layout of a lavish courtyard residence. Main rooms are built in the arched *yáodòng* (cave house) style particular to northern China; there are deteriorating frescoes on the walls and heated beds (*kàng*) in each room.

Other sights to check out include the sprawling **county government offices** (*xiányáshù*), with tax offices, a court, prison and (most importantly) opera stage; and the imposing **Confucian Temple** (Wén Miào), where bureaucrats-to-be came to take the imperial exams. At the centre of everything is the old **City Tower** (Shì Lóu; admission ¥5), the tallest building in the city.

Tours

Mr Liu, who runs the Harmony Guesthouse (see opposite), gives reader-approved day-long tours for ¥120.

Festivals

A good time to visit Píngyáo is during the Lantern Festival (15 days after Chinese New Year, during the full moon), when a small, country-style parade takes place. Locals flood the streets and vendors sell *yuán xiāo*, a tra-

ditional snack made of glutinous rice flour, filled with a sweet sesame and walnut paste and served in soup.

Sleeping & Eating

Harmony Guesthouse (Héyíchāng Kèzhàn; ☎ 568 4952; 165 Nan Dajie; 南大街165号; tw Y100; 🚗 🚲) Run by a knowledgeable local couple who speak excellent English, this is a comfortable choice if you don't need antique furnishings.

Yamen Youth Hostel (Yámén Guānshè; ☎ 568 3539; 69 Yamen Jie; 衙门街69号; dm Y40, tw with/without bathroom Y160/120; 🚗 🚲) A former Ming residence (the governor's, to be precise), with a beautiful outdoor courtyard, a stylish café and simple but clean rooms.

Tianyuankui Folk Guesthouse (Tiānyuánkuí Kèzhàn; ☎ 568 0069; www.pytyk.com; 73 Nan Dajie; 南大街73号; tw/tr/stē Y298/270/498; 🚗 🚲) One of the more popular and attractive hotels. Traditional courtyard rooms sport *kang*-style beds (ie raised beds heated beneath by a stove), a black-brick interior and obligatory red lanterns; suites are particularly sumptuous.

Píngyáo International Financier Club (Guóji Jīnróngjiā Jùlèbù; ☎ 588 8888; www.pibc.cn; 56 Xi Dajie; 西大街56号; d/stē Y1280/1480; 🚗 🚲) Contemporary high-rollers can live out their Ming fantasies in this gorgeous 18-courtyard compound, replete with carved wooden screens and lacquered furniture.

Píngyáo is a good place to sample Shānxī's infinite variety of wheat and buckwheat noodles, as well as local treats like *tú dòu shāo niúròu* (土豆烧牛肉; fried Píngyáo beef and potatoes).

Déjūyuán Bīnguǎn (Xi Dajie; 西大街; dishes ¥5-35) Superb Shānxī cuisine served in a traditional courtyard lit by candles and lanterns in the evening.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The Píngyáo bus 'station' is really just the train station parking lot; buses depart for Tàiyuán (¥20, 1½ hours) as they fill. There are theoretically five daily buses to Xi'an (¥150, six hours; via Yunchéng, ¥100, four hours) leaving from Shuncheng Lu from 8.30am to 4pm, but check when you arrive to verify which ones are definitely running.

TRAIN

Most visitors arrive on a day trip from Tàiyuán, or overnight from Běijīng. There are

loads of trains between Tàiyuán and Píngyáo (Y8 to Y22, 1½ to two hours); a good one leaves at 8.35am. From Beijing West there are two trains at 7pm (arrives 5.20am) and 7.43pm (arrives 6.53am); a hard sleeper costs ¥140. Although there are also two sleepers back to Běijīng, tickets are extremely limited. You'll have better luck in Tàiyuán.

From Píngyáo to Xi'an (Y86, 9½ to 11 hours) can be problematic. Guesthouses can sometimes land sleepers (¥40 commission) but don't count on it, especially on weekends in summer or holidays. You may need to pay for a Tàiyuán–Xi'an ticket (¥99).

Getting Around

Píngyáo can be easily navigated on foot, or you can rent a bike for the day (¥10 to ¥20) at your hotel or one of the shops on Xi Dajie. Electric carts whiz around town and to and from the train station for ¥5; the city core is closed to motor vehicles.

AROUND PÍNGYÁO

Two notable Buddhist temples within biking distance are **Shuanglin Temple** (双林寺; Shuānglín Sì; admission ¥25), 7km south of Píngyáo, and **Zhenguo Temple** (镇国寺; Zhènguó Sì; admission ¥20), 12km north. Shuanglin Temple contains rare Song and Yuan painted statues. The interiors of the Sakyamuni Hall and flanking buildings (for the Gods and Goddesses of Hell, Harvests, Protection and Compassion) are particularly exquisite. Zhenguo Temple is less visited, though the restored Hall of Ten Thousand Buddhas supposedly dates back to 926 and contains many 10th-century statues. A taxi to either temple from Píngyáo is ¥40 return.

If residential architecture is more your cup of *chá*, both the **Qiao Family Courtyard House** (see the boxed text, p407) and the **Wang Family Courtyard House** (王家大院; Wáng Jiā Dàyuàn; admission ¥66) are nearby. The latter is more of a conspicuous castle than cosy home, impressive in grandeur (123 courtyards) but somewhat redundant and lacking in furnishings. Take a bus or train to Jièxiū (介休; ¥4, 40 minutes), then switch to the complex-bound bus (¥3, 40 minutes) at the station.

YUNCHÉNG 运城

☎ 0359 / pop 204,600

If you enjoy exploring obscure parts of rural China, try to stop off at Yunchéng, near where the Yellow River (Huáng Hé) completes its

LORD OF THE MAGNIFICENT BEARD

Red-faced, black-whiskered Guān Yǔ is one of the most popular of all Chinese gods. He appears on altars in restaurants and shops, as a character in the opera and video games, and you'll often see him pasted onto front doors. He's known in the West as the God of War, although, like many Chinese deities, he has a confusing assortment of names and roles, also going by Guān Di, Guān Gōng, Guān Lǎoyè and, best of all, Měirán Gōng (Lord of the Magnificent Beard). His various personas are revered by Taoists, Buddhists, entrepreneurs, the police, secret societies, gangs and the unwell alike. So how did one god come to take on so much?

Like many folk heroes, Guān Yǔ was a real person, born in Xièzhōu sometime during the 2nd or 3rd century AD. He was apparently a formidable general while alive, but it was only after he died that his career really took off. Guān Yǔ's growing popularity as a personage in hand-me-down legends caught the attention of the Buddhists, and in the 6th century they inducted him as Protector of the Dharma. The Taoists were a bit slower on the uptake, although they eventually found a spot for him as a demon-smiting immortal in the celestial palace – after he received a Song emperor's seal of approval, of course.

But it was the 14th-century novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义; *Sānguó Yǎnyì*) that gave Guān Yǔ the biggest boost of all. His heroic exploits as a military general were immortalised against a backdrop of action-packed storytelling, and his character traits – loyalty, bravery, righteousness, benevolence (and arrogance) – came to be inseparable from his divinity. He thus symbolises loyalty and honour to secret societies and rebels; honesty and prosperity to businesses; protection and peace for the common folk and the power of healing for those who are ill.

Understandably, China's emperors took no chances with such an omnipotent being. They officially promoted him to the rank of celestial emperor in the late Ming dynasty, tacked on the *nom de guerre* God of War in the early Qing and finally extended his title to a tongue-twisting 24 characters in the 19th century. And who's to say what's to come next?

great sweep through northern China and begins to flow eastwards. Southwestern Shānxī is an unrolling tableau of traditional cave houses, fruit orchards and verdant fields of wheat and rape, though the main attraction is the largest temple in the country dedicated to Guān Yǔ (see the boxed text, above).

This **temple** (关帝庙; Guāndi Miào; admission Y48; ☎ 8am–6.30pm May–Sep, 8.30am–5pm Oct–Apr) is full of unusual imagery, beginning with the sufficiently gory battle murals on the third gate and fierce cavalry decorating the fourth gate. Next is the unusual Bagua Tower (and more carved warriors), followed by Guān Yǔ's terrestrial palace, Chongning Hall, supported by 26 pillars with sinuous dragons in bas relief. You can climb up to the second floor of the **rear building** (Spring and Autumn Tower; admission Y20) for good views of the painted eaves, glazed roof tiles and surrounding landscape.

The temple is in Xièzhōu, 18km south of Yùnychéng. Bus 11 (Y2, 30 minutes) from Yùnychéng's train station terminates here. **Guāngyuè Bīnguǎn** (广悦宾馆; ☎ 208 0950; 333 Fenghuang Beilu; tw Y50-100; 🍽️) is a well-run hotel near the Yùnychéng train station.

Getting There & Away

Yùnychéng is on the Tàiyuán–Xī'ān train line; all trains, including daily expresses, stop here. There are direct bus connections from Yùnychéng to Luòyáng in Hénán province (Y47, three hours) and Tàiyuán to the north (Y83 to Y92, 4½ hours). There are also regular and express air-con buses to Xī'ān (Y48 to Y62, three hours) departing half-hourly; these pass by Huá Shān (p433) in neighbouring Shaanxi province. Buses generally run from 6.30am to 6pm.

Buses 1, 2 and 12 run between the bus station and train station.

AROUND YÙNCHÉNG

At Ruìchéng (芮城), located 93km south of Yùnychéng, is the Yuan dynasty **Yongle Taoist Temple** (永乐宫; Yǒnglè Gōng; admission Y30), dedicated to the immortal Lǚ Dongbin. The valuable 14th-century frescoes inside are unfortunately poorly lit, though the two-hour bus ride from Yùnychéng (Y16) – you can get on or off in Xièzhōu – passes over mountains and through enchanting countryside, making for an unusual detour en route

to Xī'ān. In 1959 the temple was moved here brick by brick from a dam site on the Yellow River.

WÚTÁI SHĀN & TÁIHUÁI 五台山、台怀

Wútái Shān, or 'the Five Terrace Mountains', is Buddhism's sacred northern range and the earthly abode of Manjusri (Wénshū), the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. Enclosed within a valley formed by five main peaks is the town of Táihuái, the site of some 15 temples and meandering groups of monks and nuns, where countless visitors come to temporarily escape the world of illusion.

The forested slopes outside of town eventually give way to alpine meadows and another 20 temples or so scattered across the hillsides. The windswept summits are located in China's five cardinal directions (north, east, south, west and centre), with the highest being North Terrace Peak (北台顶) at 3058m. Besides temple hopping, Wútái Shān offers some great hiking and, with enough persistence, you just might be able to momentarily detach yourself from the world of red dust.

Avoiding high season isn't a bad idea (it's a zoo), but remember that temperatures are often below freezing from October through March, and roads can be impassable. Even in summer the temperature drops rapidly at night.

History

For almost as long as Buddhism has existed in China, Wútái Shān has been a place of pilgrimage and study. It's believed that by the 6th century there were already 200 temples in the area, and in the Tang dynasty it was one of the major centres of worship in Asia, attracting tens of thousands of pilgrims from across China, India, Korea and Japan. Almost all temples were destroyed during the official persecution of Buddhism in the 9th century, except for two southwest of Táihuái (see p413). In the Ming dynasty, Wútái Shān began attracting large numbers of Tibetan Buddhists (principally from Mongolia) for whom Manjusri holds special significance.

Many temples in Táihuái contain a statue of Manjusri, who is generally depicted riding a lion and holding a sword used to cleave ignorance and illusion. If you have an affinity for either flaw, watch your step.

Information

Take plenty of cash, as there was no place to change money at the time of writing. For internet access, ask the locals where the *wǎngbā* (网吧) is, as it changes location often. If you need to reach the PSB for any reason, talk to the owner of the hotel you're staying at.

Sights

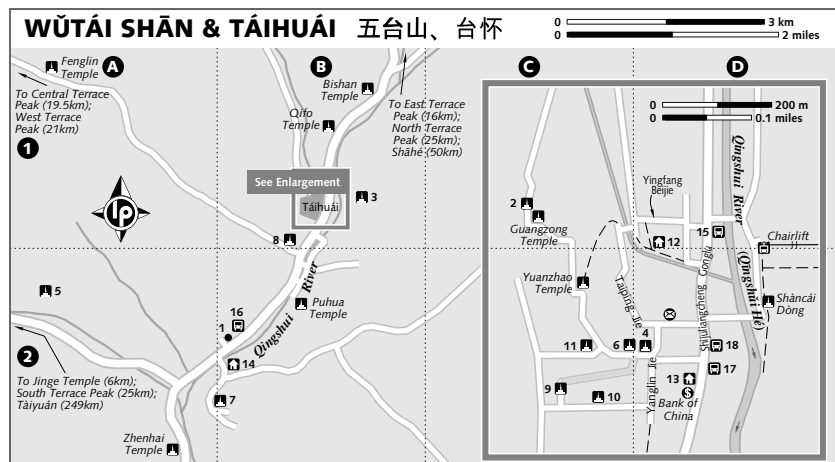
Touring Táihuái will result in temple overdose if you're not careful – and there's no known antidote. It's best to pick a few in town and spend the rest of the time wandering the hillsides, where the crowds thin out and the scenery is at its best. Temple admission prices vary from free of charge to Y8. All travellers – unless you're a card-carrying Tibetan pilgrim – are charged a Y95 entrance fee (Y75 from 15 October to 15 April) for the area.

The distinctive white stupa rising above **Ta-yuan Temple** (Tàiyuán Sì) is the most prominent landmark in Wútái Shān; almost all pilgrims come through here to spin the prayer wheels at its base. Behind the stupa is the Scripture Hall, whose 9th-century revolving sutra case originally held scriptures in Chinese, Mongolian and Tibetan.

One of the more captivating temples is the enormous **Xiantong Temple** (Xiāntōng Sì). The whitewashed brick Beamless Hall holds a miniature Yuan dynasty pagoda and remarkable statues of contemplative monks meditating in the alcoves. Further on is the Hall of Manjusri, with a 15-faced, 1000-armed statue of the Bodhisattva. Up the steps from this is the blinding Bronze Hall, 5m high and weighing 50 tonnes. A miniature replica of a Ming pavilion right down to the floral-patterned lattice windows, it was cast in 1606 and is purportedly gilded gold (don sunglasses); ten thousand mini-Buddhas fill the interior. If you continue past Xiantong Temple after exiting, you'll eventually attain **Bodhisattva Peak** (Púsà Dǐng), reached via 108 steps, the number of beads on the Buddhist rosary.

For the best bird's-eye view of Táihuái, you can make the somewhat strenuous trek (or cheat by chairlift, ascent/round trip Y25/48) up to **Dailuo Peak** (Dàiluó Dǐng), on the eastern side of Qingshui River.

About 2.5km south of Táihuái is the isolated and fortress-like **Nanshan Temple** (Nánshān Sì). Beautiful stone carvings adorn many of the archways here. Taoist themes are quite common – you'll see the famous eight immortals



(above the main entrance) in addition to Lao-tzu. In the upper parts of the temple (also known as Yòuguó Sì; 佑国寺) are carvings of the mythic *Journey to the West*. Enjoy wonderful views of four of the five sacred peaks from the top.

Other temples of note include the **Luo-hou Temple** (Luóhòu Sì), **Guangren Temple** (Guǎnggrén Sì), **Longquan Temple** (Lóngquán Sì) and **Shuxiang Temple** (Shūxiàng Sì). Ten kilometres west of town is the serene **Jingge Temple** (金阁寺; Jīnggé Sì), which houses a large 32-armed Guanyin.

In the summer, free Shanxi opera performances are given during the evenings at 7.30pm (and some mornings around 11.30am) at **Wanfo Temple** (Wǎnfó Gé).

Tours

Privately operated minibuses make half-day and full-day tours (in Chinese; Y40 to Y60) of the outlying temples and peaks, departing from a local minibuses tour station on the main road. South Terrace Peak (南台顶; Nántái Dǐng) is said to be the prettiest.

For the two Tang dynasty temples (see opposite), contact **CITS** (☎ 654 3210; Shijuliangcheng Gonglu), located just past the bus station south of town. English-speaking guides are not always available.

Sleeping

There are more hotels in town than there are temples, though most are either very basic or run-down. Guesthouses are in the northern

part of town; the standard price per bed ranges from Y20 to Y50. Top-end hotels are south of town and are generally closed out of season. Wherever you stay, make sure to bargain.

Fóguó Bīnguǎn (☎ 654 5962; Zhenjianfang Jie; dm with/without private bathroom Y48/30, d Y100) In a warren of back alleys, this isolated place has a quiet location but so-so rooms. Innumerable similar options surround it.

Number 5 Hotel (Dì Wǔ Zhàodàisù; ☎ 654 5373; Shijuliangcheng Gonglu; tw/tr Y100; 🏠) An old standby that's in better shape than the Fóguó.

Fóyuàn Lóu (☎ 654 2659; Shuxiang Sì; tw Y360; 🏠) Showing some wear, this is still one of the best-managed hotels, in an auspicious and secluded location next to Shuxiang Temple.

Qìxiángé Bīnguǎn (☎ 654 2400; fax 654 2183; d & tw from Y380, ste Y898; 🏠 May-Oct; 🏠) With a peaceful setting at the foot of the mountains, this hotel is a top choice. Well-furnished rooms have lovely views of the mountainside.

Eating

Prices are higher here, as nearly all food has to be trucked into the area. Basic but tasty *liángpi* (potato noodles in a spicy soup), fried noodles, fried rice and dumplings are the norm. You'll find a few excellent vegetarian restaurants; most have English menus.

Getting There & Away

Getting to Wútái Shān is easiest from Tǎiyuán. Buses (Y44 to Y51, four hours) depart from the east bus station from 8am to 1.30pm; two buses also leave from in front of the train sta-

INFORMATION		Shuxiang Temple 殊像寺..... 8 B1		Qìxiángé Bīnguǎn	
CITS 中国国际旅行社..... 1 B2		Tayuan Temple 塔院寺..... 9 C2		栖贤阁宾馆..... 14 B2	
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Wanfo Temple 万佛阁..... 10 C2		TRANSPORT	
Bodhisattva Peak 菩萨顶..... 2 B1		Xiantong Temple 显通寺..... 11 C2		Buses to Dàtóng 去大同的汽车..... 15 D1	
Dailuo Peak 黛螺顶..... 3 C1		Yonguo Temple 佑国寺..... (see 7)		Bus Station 汽车站..... 16 B2	
Guangren Temple 广仁寺..... 4 D2		SLEEPING 🏠		Local Tour Minibuses	
Longquan Temple 龙泉寺..... 5 A2		Fóguó Bīnguǎn 佛国宾馆..... 12 D1		一日游中巴士..... 17 D2	
Luohou Temple 罗侯寺..... 6 C2		Fóyuàn Lóu 佛缘楼..... (see 8)		Public Buses to Tǎiyuán	
Nanshan Temple 南山寺..... 7 B2		Number 5 Hotel 第五招待所..... 13 D2		去太原的汽车..... 18 D2	

tion at around 9.30am. Alternatively, take the scenic route from Dàtóng (see p415), which is slightly longer. At present, one train from Běijīng (departure 9.15pm) stops 50km away in the town of Shāhé (砂河), but it arrives at a groggy 3.39am. If you take this option, note when buying tickets that the station is called Wútái Shān, not Shāhé. Minibuses onwards from Shāhé (Y20, one hour) are infrequent – you may have to catch a taxi (Y70).

There are plenty of buses from Wútái Shān to Tǎiyuán (Y50, four hours), leaving between 7am and 4pm. Buses to Dàtóng (Y52, five hours) leave three or four times daily from 6am to 1.30pm. In the off-season, there's only one bus at 7.30am; it doesn't run on Sundays. Try cajoling your driver into stopping off at the Hanging Monastery (p417) for 30 minutes en route.

Both buses troll the main strip fishing for passengers. The Wútái Shān bus 'station', some 3km south of the village centre, is generally empty.

AROUND WÚTÁI SHĀN

The two oldest wooden buildings in China (clocking in at a wheezing 12 centuries) are located southwest of Tǎihuái. Both date from the Tang dynasty and, remarkably, see relatively few visitors. Tang buildings were simpler and squatter in appearance, built on raised stone platforms and featured prominent ceiling brackets to hold up the long eaves, which were designed to protect the paper-covered windows from rain falling off the roof.

Near the town of Dòucūn (豆村), 43km from Tǎihuái, is **Foguang Temple** (佛光寺; Fóguāng Sì; admission Y10), whose elongated main hall was built in 857. It contains three Buddhas surrounded by plump tricolour attendants, all sculpted during the Tang.

A further 45km southwest, near Dōngyě (东冶), is **Nanchan Temple** (南禅寺; Nánchán Sì; admission Y10), which contains a smaller but strikingly beautiful hall built in 782. Both

temple complexes contain impressive 12th-century buildings as well.

Most Wútái Shān-Tǎiyuán buses pass through both towns (make sure to ask your driver), allowing you to hop off and take a taxi the rest of the way. The **CITS** (☎ 654 3210; Shijuliangcheng Gonglu) outside Tǎiyuán can also arrange private transport to Foguang (Y100) or both temples (Y200).

DÀTÓNG 大同

☎ 0352 / pop 580,000

Dàtóng isn't going to win any beauty pageants, but who needs good looks when you've got art? Border town extraordinaire, the city has long held a strategic position on the edge of the Mongolian grasslands, first rising to greatness as the capital city of the Tuoba: a federation of Turkic-speaking nomads who united northern China (AD 386–534), converted to Buddhism and, like most other invaders, were eventually assimilated into Chinese culture. The Tuoba's main claim to fame is the Yungang Caves (p416), a collection of sublime 5th-century Buddhist carvings that capture a quiet, timeless beauty that has all but vanished from the modern world.

Despite the area's impressive sights, don't pin too many hopes on finding enlightenment here – Dàtóng is the poster child for all that's environmentally wrong with fossil-fuel addiction. The uplifting remains of times past are balanced out by sulphurous air pollution, contaminated groundwater and suburban slag heaps that grow by 80 million tonnes annually.

Information

ATM (qúkuǎnjī; 19 Xiao Nanjie; 🏠 24hr) Outside a small branch of the Bank of China.

Bank of China (Zhōngguó Yínháng; Yíngbīn Xīlù) The main branch and only place to cash travellers cheques.

Chain Net Bar (Liánsuǒ Wǎngbā; Xīnjīan Beilù; per hr Y2) There are several other internet cafés on Huayansi Jie near Huayan Temple.

Buses run hourly between Běijīng's Liuliqiao Station (Y81 to Y92, 4½ hours) and (strangely) Dàtóng's train station. Traffic is sometimes excruciatingly slow on this route, so it's safer to take the train. One bus to Hohhot also leaves from in front of the train station at 7am (Y55, four hours). Express buses to Tàiyuán (Y72 to Y87, three hours) leave the Xinnan Bus Station half-hourly from 7am to 8.30pm.

Getting to Wútái Shān is trickier. One local bus leaves the north station at 7am (Y52) year-round, taking anywhere from five to seven hours; it may not run on Sundays. Xinnan Bus Station serves Wútái Shān from May through September (Y52, five hours, departure 7.30am); in theory this bus is faster than the north station bus. If you've overslept, Xinnan Bus Station also has regular buses to Shāhé (砂河; Y32, three hours), where you can catch a taxi (Y70) onwards (see p412).

TRAIN

The Běijīng and Inner/Outer Mongolia lines meet in a Y-junction at Dàtóng. It is possible to do Dàtóng as a day trip from Běijīng using night trains coming and going, but you can never be guaranteed of getting a berth back. Trains leave Běijīng's main station at 7.40am (arriving 2.10pm) and 0.46am (arriving 7.03am); tickets are Y105. Other trains depart from Beijing West.

From Dàtóng, there are several trains to Beijing West (Y70 to Y94); the best leave at 8.50am (arriving 2.20pm), 12.27pm (arriving 6.30pm) and 10.20pm (arriving 6.30am). Other destinations include Tàiyuán (hard seat Y30, 5½ hours), Hohhot (hard seat Y40, 4½ hours) and Lánzhōu (Y330, 22 hours). There's also an overnight train to Píngyáo (Y70, nine hours) leaving at 11pm. The shortest queues are at the **advance booking office** (huòchē shòupiàochù; cnr Nanguan Nanjie & Nanguan Xijie; ☎ 8am-6pm), but be aware that sleeper tickets are often booked out. CITS may be able to get you a berth (Y40 commission), but no guarantees.

Getting Around

Flag fall for taxis is Y6. From the train station to Xinnan Bus Station is Y15 (or Y23 on the meter), and from town to the airport is about Y35. Bus 30 (Y1, 30 minutes) runs from the train station to Xinnan Bus Station. Bus 4 goes from the train station through the centre of town, up Da Beijie and turning west on Da Xijie.

AROUND DÀTÓNG

Yungang Caves 云冈石窟

Begun around AD 460, these **grottoes** (Yúngāng Shíkū; admission Y60; ☎ 8.30am-6pm, 8.30am-5pm winter) are the earliest Buddhist carvings in China. Unlike their contemporaries on the Silk Road, the Mogao Caves in Dūnhuáng (p864) and the Kizil Caves in Kuqa (p832) – both of which feature murals and terracotta sculpture as opposed to stone carvings – the Yungang Caves are quite a distance from the initial influx of Buddhism into China. One reason for this is that the Tuoba were eager to promote an aspect of society that, like themselves, came from beyond the Middle Kingdom.

The mixture of new ideas and artistic styles – from India, Persia and even Greece – resulted in an explosion of youthful creativity, and the figures here emanate an ethereal yet life-like aura. Images surrounding the main statues are equally delicate, and include the omnipresent '1000 Buddha' motif (tiny Buddhas seated in niches), flying *apsaras* (angels draped in flowing silk), pagodas in bas-relief and obvious Chinese symbols such as dragons and phoenixes. The principal colours – cobalt, turquoise, cinnabar and burnt orange – are reminders of the Central Asian influence. Work went on for over 60 years: by the time the Tuoba had moved their capital to Luòyáng in 494, the majority of the 50,000 statues had already been carved in 252 caves, the numinous legacy extending 1km along the sandstone cliffs of Wūzhōu Shān.

Today, there are 21 main grottoes, many of which were originally fronted with wooden temples, now gone. To start with the earliest caves, turn left at the main entrance and walk down to Cave 20 (west of here are the smaller Caves 21 to 51, which can also be visited).

Caves 16 to 20 each feature a giant Buddha (representing Wei emperors), the most sublime of which is the seated Sakyamuni in Cave 20, an impressive 14m high and flanked by a standing Bodhisattva. The standing Sakyamuni in Cave 18 was carved with amazing detail, down to the miniature figures in the folds of his robe.

Proceeding from here back towards the entrance are **Caves 5 to 13**, carved between 462 and 495, and containing the finest artwork at Yungang. Caves 9, 10 and 12 are notable for their front pillars and figures bearing musical instruments. The guardians at the entrance to Cave 8 include the Hindu gods Vishnu, seated

upon a Chinese peacock or phoenix, and a three-headed, eight-armed Shiva astride a bull. An obviously foreign trident also makes a cameo appearance. Cave 6 contains a central stupa adorned with eight large Buddhas, elephants, musicians, warriors and *apsaras*. The grotto walls are lined with Buddhist parables (the damaged bottom row), each panel a different scene from Siddhartha's life up until enlightenment. Cave 5 is one of the most striking, containing a 17m seated Buddha who radiates a powerful halo of red light and turquoise flames.

Further east are the final **Caves 1 to 4**, whose highlights include intricately chiselled pagodas and, in capacious Cave 3, a seated Buddha flanked by two Bodhisattvas. No guides are available, but decent English descriptions are found in most caves.

The Yungang Caves are located 16km west of Dàtóng, opposite an enormous coal mine. To get here, take bus 3 (Y1.5, 30 minutes) from Dàtóng's Xinkāili bus station (road work may alter this – check with your hotel). Bus 4 runs to Xinkāili bus station from the train station through the centre of town. The CITS tour also spends half a day at the caves.

Scattered across the countryside and above the caves are the remains of Ming beacon towers (烽火台; *fēnghuǒtái*), part of the signal system used to protect the pass leading to Mongolia. You can visit a beacon tower and spur of the Great Wall by taking bus 3 from the Yungang Caves one stop back towards town, then walking some 15 minutes up through the mining village, or hiring a motorcycle (Y10) to take you the rest of the way.

Great Wall 长城

Shānxī's section of the **Great Wall** (Chángchéng) is much different from what you see around Běijīng: it's made entirely of earth and there's little tourism or, unfortunately, conservation. With a little advance research, you'll be able to find a smattering of historic forts, scenic ruins and occasional hikes through the countryside – tempting fare for the intrepid.

One possibility is **Déshèng Bǎo** (得胜堡; Achieving Victory Fort), a 16th-century pass 45km due north of Dàtóng. Buses to Fēngzhèn

(丰镇) should be able to drop you off here (or close). A taxi (Y100 return), however, will facilitate further exploration.

Hanging Monastery 悬空寺

Built precariously into the side of a cliff, the Buddhist **Hanging Monastery** (Xuánkōng Sì; admission Y60; ☎ 7.30am-6pm) is made all the more stunning by the long support stilts that extend downward from its base, furthering the appearance that there really isn't a whole lot keeping the structure from one day smashing to bits in the riverbed below. The temple was originally lower to the ground and was raised over the centuries to protect it from floods rushing down the Jinlong Canyon. The halls have been built along the contours of the cliff face and are connected by rickety catwalks and corridors. Be forewarned that the place is pretty touristy – if you skip it, you missed some great photos, but it's no cultural heavyweight like the Yungang Caves.

The monastery is located on Taoism's sacred northern mountain (Héng Shān), 5km outside the town of Húnyuán and 65km southeast of Dàtóng. Buses to Húnyuán (Y15, one hour) run from Dàtóng's regional bus station. From Húnyuán you can catch a taxi (Y30 return). The standard CITS tour also runs here.

Another option is the bus from Wútái Shān, which goes directly past the monastery and may stop for half an hour (don't count on it).

Mù Tǎ 木塔

The 11th-century **Wooden Pagoda** (admission Y60; ☎ 7.30am-7pm, 8am-5.30pm winter) is one of the planet's oldest wooden buildings. Not a single nail was used in the construction of the nine-storey, 67m-high structure, which has thus far survived seven major earthquakes.

The pagoda is located in Yingxián, 70km south of Dàtóng. It's possible to travel here from the Hanging Monastery, then head to Wútái Shān the next morning. Yingxián has a couple of decent hotels.

Tours of the Hanging Monastery sometimes include Mù Tǎ. Otherwise, buses run to Yingxián from Dàtóng's Xinnan Bus Station (Y13, 1½ hours).

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