

Drivers Notes

China

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Introduction

Driving through China in your own vehicle is a challenge but it is an amazing experience and the effort is well worthwhile. You will need to plan ahead and look at the detail. It is expensive but you can spread the cost if you go in a group. You will need to have a guide and to have a predetermined route. You will have to arrange to be at the border on a specified day and you cannot overstay your visa without incurring a heavy fine.

Suitable Vehicles

It is entirely feasible for a standard motor caravan to go to China. You can drive almost everywhere on paved roads. However the ports of entry may pose some restrictions. Some of the roads in Tibet are not suitable although it is quite a reasonable proposition to drive to Lhasa via Golmud and exit into Nepal.

Route

You will have to employ a Chinese Travel Agency to make all the necessary arrangements of which more below. You can leave it up to them to give you a suggested route with details of each days travel. From experience I would recommend you don't do this as the tendency is to make each days travel much too great.

First of all you need to decide three things

- a Your date of entry and exit bearing in mind that you will only get a maximum 90 day visa.
- b Your ports of entry and exit. These will depend on your intended route both before and after your visit to China. The most widely used ones are
 - 1 Across the Torugut pass from Kyrgyzstan to Kashgar
 - 2 Across the Irkeshtam pass from Kyrgyzstan to Kashgar
 - 3 Using the Karakoram Highway from Pakistan and across the Kunjerab pass to Tashkorgan
 - 4 Across the Lalung La pass from Katmandu in Nepal to Lhasa
 - 5 From Muang Namu in Laos through the border to Kunming
 - 6 By ship to Hong Kong
 - 7 From Ulaan Batar, Mongolia and through the border at Erlianhaote
 - 8 From Korgas, Kazakhstan to Urunqui

Please see Appendix for details concerning these crossing points.

- c The average number of kilometres you expect to drive every day. Some days of course will not be driving days – these will be rest days or used for sightseeing, repairs and maintenance etc. Driving days will also have to allow time for coffee breaks, shopping, refuelling, getting water and a myriad of other things. Averaged over every day of your trip (including non driving days) I have found the journey to be relaxed with an average of 100 – 110kms per day. Comfortable if 110 – 130 and brisk if over 130. This will give you a rough idea of your pace through China and the number of kilometres you can cover in the 90 days. You also need to include an allowance for the time taken to process

your documentation both on entering and leaving China. Day 1 starts on the day you arrive even if it's 23:55.

The classic route is to enter China across the Torugut Pass and drive eastwards to visit Dunhuang, Xian for the Terracotta Warriors, Beijing, Shanghai, then south to visit Guilin, Kunming, then across Tibet to Lhasa and exit to Nepal.

Roads can be tricky. Expressways may look good on the map but they may not exist yet or worse, they may be under construction. Other roads may be in poor condition with many bumps. Don't underestimate the traffic problem. We were once stuck in a traffic jam for 2 days.

In deciding these matters it is important to check out the weather patterns along your route. I can't imagine you would want to drive through say Kazakhstan in March where temperatures plummet below – 20C or cross Tibet in winter, or arrive in the middle of the monsoon season in Laos.

Once you have all this in mind you can work out a route. Its a good idea to put in a rest day (for sightseeing or whatever) after every 4 days or so and bits of route that can be cut out if you get delayed for any reason.

With this sorted you can give it to the Chinese Agency to hone it for you and they will then give you a quotation for the cost.

Choosing an Agency

There are two ways to choose an agency. You can approach a UK travel agency and get them to organise everything for you through a Chinese agency of their choice. Or you can go direct to the Chinese agency yourself. I would recommend the second option for these reasons.

- 1 Cost – due to mark up by UK agency
- 2 Better control and speed of communications
- 3 Reduces the chances of misunderstandings

There are hundreds of Chinese travel agencies. However only a few will arrange overland travel in self drive vehicles and of those fewer still are willing to organise the formalities of bringing your own vehicle into the country. Check out the internet for possibilities and make out a short list – many web sites are in English.

You may wish to use the agency I would recommend. This is China Overland

Website www.chinaoverlandinfo.com
Contact paulbys@chinaoverlandinfo.com

Paul is very knowledgeable, helpful and generally replies very promptly to emails. This agency will also form groups from individual travellers to keep down costs.

Issues to be considered when driving through China

You must specify your date of entry and the date of departure from China. Documentation is prepared for these dates.

You must specify the port of entry and the port of departure

You must agree a route with the agency. A few areas of the country are restricted so you may have to change the route to allow for this. If you have any side trips, make sure the towns and cities in specified on the paperwork.

You may not at any time drive your vehicle without the guide or being part of the group under the control of the guide.

You will have to provide a seat in the lead vehicle for the guide unless you are prepared to pay the additional costs for a vehicle, driver and accommodation.

It takes a minimum of 3 months to obtain all the permissions needed. To this time scale you should add the time you need to plan, negotiate with agency, agree everything with your fellow travellers if any, and make payment of the costs incurred. Maybe 5 months in all.

Issues to be considered when agreeing a contract with the agency

- 1 Specify the ports of entry and departure
- 2 Specify the dates of entry and departure
- 3 Specify your route preferably on a daily basis
- 4 The cost can usually be fixed either in Yuan or your own currency. In the first instance you have the benefit of - or pay the cost of, any exchange rate fluctuation. In the second instance that rests with the agency.
- 5 The cost should be specified for the number of vehicles and the number of travellers. Its advisable to establish the cost for different numbers to allow for people dropping out or joining at the last minute.
- 6 Similarly it is advisable to establish the cost of adding extra days to the tour.
- 7 Specify an English speaking guide to be with you throughout the tour. Note that the guide may be changed by the agency partway through the tour. Also ask for details of the guide such as experience, age, name etc. Female guides may in all conscience have to be treated differently. Accommodation in remote places can be rough – for example the guide might have to share a room with truck drivers.

If the weather is too bad to use the tent you may feel compelled to offer accommodation in your vehicle for either male or female guides..

- 8 The price should include the following costs for the guide
 - a Transport, food and accommodation costs from his / her home to the port of entry and from the port of exit back home
 - b Food and accommodation costs when staying overnight in a populated area.Note that the agency will provide an amount to the guide based on the number of days accommodation that may be needed. This may be around 50% of the total days of the trip. Make sure you think this is adequate.

c The agency should provide the guide with a suitable tent and camping equipment for use when wild camping.

9 The cost should also include the following

- a Travel permits from both local and central governments
- b If you are crossing Tibet the additional costs for the internal visa and other documentation
- c Vehicle technical check fee
- d Number plate (tag)
- e Vehicle travel permits
- f Compulsory traffic insurance
- g Customs declaration
- h Driving permits for all persons (up to 2 per vehicle)
- l Company's service charge
- j Any other permits needed to complete the tour.

10 The agency must provide the required Customs guarantee for the vehicles without cost to the group.

Note that China does not accept the Carnet de Passage but requires a guarantee. The border procedure is as follows. The value of the vehicle is assessed by the border officials. Then the customs duty is calculated usually around 100 – 150% of the assessed value. This amount must then be deposited at the border in Yuan. The amount is refunded on exiting from China but the actual payment may not be processed for 3 months. Some agencies will arrange insurance to cover the guarantee for this but the cost is high and is non refundable. Other agencies may deposit part of the duty and you have to find the balance. China Overland was the only agency I found which undertook to guarantee the whole of the duty liability.

11 The agency has to provide letters of invitation so you can apply for visas. I would recommend these are for separate visas and not a group visa. You can specify that you will apply for the visas at an embassy along your route to China such as in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Bear in mind that Chinese visas only have a validity period of 3 months so allow sufficient time to reach the Chinese border.

12 The cost should include permits for the use of CB radios if appropriate.

13 If you are crossing Tibet the cost should include a supply of oxygen.

14 You will need to agree whether you will reimburse the guide for the cost of his / her own food and drink for those times when camping wild. Reasonable costs might be 50 yuan per day.

15 There is unlikely to be a written contract as such. The closest will be a written statement by email on which I suggest you detail all the points you have agreed and for which you receive an emailed written acceptance. Clearly this is not a legal document and the whole thing is a matter of trust. We were not disappointed with China Overland.

Some costs will not be included in the package. These are likely to include

1 Vehicle running, maintenance and repair costs

2 Road tolls, parking fees, hotel costs for yourselves, sightseeing, and anything of a personal nature.

You will also have to agree to the following

1 You will make the stage payments of the cost in accordance with the agency's request or make payment at an earlier date. The agency will not commence processing until payment is made.

2 You will provide such details as may be required to facilitate the documentation for the tour. These will include photos of the vehicle, vehicle details, passport details and so on. All this will be done by email.

Entry Procedures

All borders have their own quirks so this description may vary a bit in specific cases. I shall use the procedures we endured using the Torugut pass as an example.

Day 1 You will be met by your guide at the border gate. There may or may not be any formalities at this point. The guide will be driven to the border by a local guide when she gets a phone call made by the border guards at the request of your Kyrgyz guide (see Appendix).

The guide will attend to the initial paperwork at the first checkpoint after which its nearly a 100km drive to the customs and immigration office. Everything seems to be a bit of a muddle here but eventually you get your entry stamp in your passport and your vehicle details checked. This means that the VIN number (chassis number) is examined and also the engine number (although in the latter instance this wasn't actually done in our case). However make sure you know where these numbers are located.

It is not permitted to import any food into China so we made up a bag of stuff which was going over a bit. This was accepted without a search of the vehicle.

After a couple of hours, you then drive another 120 kms to Kashgar where we parked up for the night. Bear in mind that the time in China is 2 hours ahead of Kyrgyzstan and its an exhausting day.

Day 2 If you are aged 60 or over you are required to have an ECG test. This takes up most of the morning allowing you to experience the workings of a Chinese hospital. The results were reported to our group and each of us were told we had a strong heart!

In the afternoon we drove 45 kms out of town to the vehicle test centre, the equivalent of an MOT centre. We had the lights, brakes and one or two other items checked on an automated system. I don't know if we passed or not – it didn't seem to matter!

We were then told we had to stick reflective tape every 30 cms on each side of the vehicle and across the back. The agency paid for these but we weren't happy about it. Fortunately we weren't required to paint the vehicle numbers 30 cms high across the back and on the side doors as is the case for most Chinese goods vehicles.

Then another official in another location has to sign off the vehicles as fit for the road. This required some further reflective tape before he would agree.

Days 3 and 4 Since the paperwork wasn't ready we had to wait over the weekend.

Day 5 On Monday it took all day before we were issued with the rest of the paperwork. This was:

- a Small oval sticker with 2012 on it and coloured green. This was to show we had vehicle insurance. The colour is different each year.
- b Driving Licence with photo.
- c Number plate (tag). This is laminated cardboard and only one is issued and is displayed on the inside of the windscreen.

You can keep all these items at the end of the trip.

Day 6 We set off on our trip through China.

Exit Procedures

The agency used a documentation company to prepare everything before we arrived at the border. Otherwise we would have had to wait a day while this was done.

At the border the passports were stamped, Then the drivers took the vehicles through a separate section where no attempt was made to check the VIN or engine numbers although this can happen. However having changed all our yuan we were then asked for a parking fee even though we drove straight to the exit gate without stopping. This was 5 yuan which the guide paid.

This all took about 45 minutes.

Driving in China

Vehicles drive on the right but not always. Driving skills are poor.

Many drivers expect you to get out of their way. This results in a lot of hooting of horns which generally are very loud. The worst offenders are the large mostly black 4x4s (eg Landcruisers), the long distance buses and the police escorted convoys of VIPs. Most vehicles travel too fast.

The other bad driving habit is driving out of side roads, around other vehicles and so on without looking. In cities there are a lot of tuk tuks, motorbikes, electric bicycles all behaving the same way.

There are numerous police checks mainly in the ethnic areas such as Xiniang Province and Tibet. These aren't a problem as the guide sorts the paperwork required.

The main routes have a lot of commercial traffic and there can be many traffic jams in the more populated areas.

You are allowed to filter right at red lights unless the turning is controlled by the lights.

Fuel

Diesel fuel generally is available in 3 grades depending on location and time of year.

- 0# This is suitable for temperatures down to 0 C
- 10# This is suitable for temperatures down to -10 C
- 20# This is suitable for temperatures down to -20 C

I did see – 32# as well once or twice.

Sometimes diesel fuel is identified with Chinese writing only – petrol always has 95, 93 etc for the octane rating.

The normal cost of 0# fuel is around 7.12 – 7.20 yuan per litre (about 70p litre).
The cost is higher in remote places maybe 7.80 yuan per litre or more.
Low temperature fuel is even more expensive with -20# up to 8.60 yuan per litre.

0# is generally available everywhere. However there is an ongoing fuel shortage in southern China from Chengdu southwards. Vehicles often queue until the next tanker arrives which could be 24 hours or more so long queues develop on the Expressways.

Fuel quality is quite good.

Road Tolls

A lot of roads in China are subject to tolls except in Tibet where we did not find any. More and more tolls are being assessed by weight. Each toll booth has a weighbridge although the accuracy of these seemed to vary. Other toll booths work on a set of categories often using nominal weight ranges.

On the reverse of the number plate that is issued when you enter the country is a category and weight statement. To keep costs down at tolls it is important to ensure the number plate defines your vehicle as category 1 and if possible to leave the weight blank. Even so your guide will probably have to argue that the vehicle is not a commercial vehicle. This should be done the first time you come to a toll – then the ticket can be used to reinforce subsequent arguments.

Overall with category 1 you might be looking at tolls in the region of £150 during a 90 day trip. With a 7.5 ton vehicle without the benefit of Category 1 the costs could be 3 times as much.

Wifi

Wifi is widespread in towns and cities but you rarely find an unsecured connection. It is often available in hotels, restaurants and coffee bars for a fee or if you use their services. It is sometimes available in shopping malls.

Wireless Internet (broadband)

3G is available over most of the country although patchy in the more remote areas. There are 2 main companies.

China Mobile
China Unicom

The deals with China Unicom are a bit cheaper. There doesn't seem to be much to choose between them for coverage although China Mobile probably has more sales outlets.

You can buy a USB modem stick or dongle to use in your computer. This will load up a Chinese language version of the Mobile Partner connection software. You will need your guide to help you operate it – at least at first. Alternatively you might use an unlocked dongle – I recommend this company although some dongles can not be unlocked.

<http://www.unlocked-dongle.co.uk>

The company will give you a generic version of Mobile Partner.

With this you can buy some bandwidth – eg 1 Gb or 3 Gb for 30 days and the SIM card is included free. You will probably need your guide's help to get the SIM card registered before you can use it.

Note that you may find some aspects of the internet don't seem to work or cause problems. For example one online bank account we used was blocked in the UK due to security issues. Facebook won't load and Google is from Hong Kong and is slow. Downloads are also blocked in places such as Xingiang Province.

High Altitude Effects

You will find that high altitude (usually regarded as over 2500m) has various effects

Physical Effects

Your body needs to acclimatise to the lack of oxygen. The immediate effect you will notice is that you need to urinate frequently. Because of this it is important to drink lots of water to prevent dehydration. You may get a dull headache as well. Paracetamol is recommended to treat the headache. These effects should wear off after 4 or 5 days as your body adapts more permanently although this secondary phase can take 11 or 12 weeks to complete. A gradual ascent to high altitude makes life easier – 300 to 400m a day is recommended. Generally sleep at a lower altitude than you have reached during the day. Oxygen can help relieve some of the symptoms.

Some people suffer from High Altitude Sickness. It can affect anyone of any age or fitness at any time. It is usually characterised by a severe headache which is not helped by paracetamol together with disorientation. In this situation the best advice is to drink a lot of water, go to a lower altitude as quickly as possible and get medical treatment.

If the person suffers struggling to breath, extreme fatigue, rattling breathing, coughing, blue or grey lips and fingernails, drowsiness, collapse, confusion they are suffering from fluid on the lungs.

If the person is suffering from changes in behaviour, lethargy, and loss of coordination (unable to walk in a straight line) they are suffering from fluid on the brain.

Both these situations are medical emergencies and if not treated can lead to death. A really informative leaflet on the subject with as much detail as you probably need is available from

<http://www.medex.org.uk/v26%20booklet.pdf>

Other effects you will notice are shortness of breath particularly with exercise, stuffy or blocked nose and cracked skin. The later can be effectively treated with New Skin which is a liquid bandage available from most chemists and pharmacies.

Vehicle

The vehicle will suffer from the lack of oxygen resulting in reduced performance. You may well notice a lot of black smoke which is the unburned fuel. Vehicles with sophisticated electronics may well adjust to the reduced oxygen levels but at really high altitudes the available oxygen may be less than the system can cope with. The engine may shut down or go into limp home mode.

A result of the poor combustion of the fuel which is also often of poor quality is a hard carbon deposit on the injectors so the engine may not run well even when you return to low altitudes.

Diesel Heaters

These have sophisticated systems and may well not work at high altitudes. High altitude fuel pumps are available but they are generally not intended to cope with 4500m + which you will reach if crossing Tibet or the Andes. The maximum height at which a unit will work at seems to be variable. Some equipment I have used failed at 3600m while others worked at 4500m. Ideally have a second heat source using a different fuel even if its only the gas cooker.

General living

There numerous little things that don't work quite the same. Here are a few examples we have come across.

Water boils at a lower temperature – at 5000 metres this is about 82 degrees C. You can check the boiling point at various altitudes at

<http://www.csqnetwork.com/h2oboilcalc.html>

Sealed packets will bulge or blow up like balloons

Opening a new jar of coffee granules resulted in a fountain of the stuff going everywhere

Toothpaste keeps coming out when the tube is first opened.

The glass double glazing on all 4 windows of one vehicle cracked.

