

Modern trains offer a fast, comfortable journey



Travelling on business to China

China is now the world's third largest business travel market, after the UK and USA, and the sector is gearing itself up for a dynamic future, writes Michael Allford.

Getting to China has never been as easy as it is today. Almost every major airline flies there, some only to the major hubs of Beijing, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, but an increasing number to other cities around the country. London's Heathrow Airport is the main hub for British Airways who fly to Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, with Virgin Atlantic flying to Shanghai and Hong Kong. Air China flights to Beijing and China Eastern to Shanghai offer convenient onward connections to other Chinese cities and the award winning Cathay Pacific also offers a good array

of onward connections to many major Chinese cities via Hong Kong with its subsidiary Dragonair.

Flights are also available with other European airlines via the respective airlines' hub airports in Europe, including Finnair, KLM, Air France, Lufthansa, and now via the Middle East, with Emirates, Qatar Airways and Etihad. Some of these make it possible to depart from the UK's regional airports rather than having to travel to London.

When you arrive at your destination in China you will find new and spacious airports

which offer state of art facilities that are user friendly and put many European airports to shame.

Domestic air travel in China is a vast sector, with an extensive and ever growing network of routes. Air travel is still the preferred method of travel between Chinese cities. The three main airlines are Air China, China Eastern and China Southern; although there are many smaller airlines, the three main carriers offer the best schedules on most routes. Safety records are good on Chinese domestic flights,

continued on page 10



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Chinese planes now compete with the world's fastest train



continued from page 9

and standards of service reasonable. Domestic tickets are available from Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) offices, travel agents or from hotel ticket offices. Prices are based on the cost of a one-way flight, so a return is the price of two one-way tickets. It is important to remember that most domestic add-on fares can be much cheaper if booked with the international flight tickets in the UK.

Trains challenge planes

Another fast growing method of domestic travel within China is high speed train travel. With a budget of some Yn700bn (£70bn), the authorities plan to expand the rail network by 12,000 miles by 2015, with over 8,000 miles of track for new high-speed trains like the world's fastest long distance passenger train, the 'Harmony,' which now links Guangzhou and Wuhan. Travelling at 220 mph, it is one of the most advanced trains in the world: a journey that used to take 11 hours now only takes three hrs.

These 'super trains' are starting to make the domestic airlines feel uneasy, especially since the opening of the Beijing to Shanghai line, which is the busiest domestic air route within China. High-speed trains will offer a more convenient means of travelling from city centre to city centre. For example, the three-hour train journey from Guangzhou to Wuhan, compares with a journey time of at least four hours using the plane, if you add travel to and from the airport, and a requirement to arrive at the airport one hour before departure to the 1/2-hour flight. One good result is that competition is forcing the airlines to reduce their domestic fares. A train ticket from Guangzhou to Wuhan costs Yn490 whilst a

“Domestic add-on fares can be much cheaper if booked with the international flight tickets in the UK.”

flight with China Southern Airlines can now cost as little as Yn280.

You will probably need a place to stay. Hotels are opening across China with alarming frequency, which means there is no shortage of accommodation, even during peak periods. China offers a good range of hotels from budget to luxury. Throughout China international-standard hotels can be found, many of them are managed by international hotel chains like Days Inn, Holiday Inn, Marriott, Sheraton and Hyatt, all brands that we are more than familiar with. The expansion of high-end Far East groups, like the Shangri-La group has helped raise standards to the point where top hotels more than match the quality of other Asian destinations, offering luxurious rooms, all with the most up to date technology combined with unbeatable service.

Today even the local hotel chains offer a reasonable standard of accommodation, and good value for money, but those in major cities in the east, especially Shanghai have become much more expensive due to the demand from business travellers visiting for major exhibitions like Expo 2010.

In the past it has been the newest, tallest and biggest hotels that have been the preferred option, but now there is a fast-growing number of smaller more intimate boutique hotels. Springing up across China, in cities, tourist towns and rural settings, they range from stylish properties in local architectural styles to luxurious havens of tranquility which offer a unique experience of a country with such a glorious and rich cultural heritage.

Buy before you go

The infrastructure for travel within China is improving fast, and the tools are certainly in place to arrange a comfortable business trip, but the size of the country, the number of travellers, local as well as domestic, moving around the country, and language barriers can make organising your travel on the ground in China difficult and time-consuming, so it is still advisable to make your travel arrangements before you go. To know before you travel that your visas are in place, your

flights confirmed, train tickets issued, and that a private car and English speaking guide, as well as a comfortable hotel room, are awaiting your arrival, will remove the stress of travel, allowing you to prepare for the all-important stresses of business meetings.

Due to the ever growing number of agents who specialise in travel to China, it has never been easier to visit, to see for yourself and meet your potential customers face to face.

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10 top tips for travelling to China

- Apply for your visa in good time allowing at least seven working days.
- Make sure you have medical insurance.
- Have your business cards printed in English on one side and Chinese on the other.
- Meetings should be set up before your arrival, or at least make personal contact before you arrive, and make sure the people you want to see are aware of your business. The Chinese don't like cold calling.
- The majority of flights from the UK are daytime departures and arrive early morning so be sure to get some sleep during your flight: due to the time difference your business day will start as soon as you get there.
- When travelling on domestic flights in China it is worth paying the 20-30 per cent premium to fly first class or business class, as you are looked after a lot better when there are delays and cancellations. You will also have access to airport lounges.
- On arriving at an airport, make sure you have the name and address of your hotel written in Chinese for the taxi driver, as many drivers do not speak English.
- Always keep the address of your accommodation in Chinese with you for the same reason.
- It is a good idea to have an expert translator on standby or with you until you are happy to go it alone.
- Research is key, as China is a vast country and different regions have different customs.

*These tips are provided by Ashley Perez, managing director, ItstheWaytoTravel.com
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