

Chóngqìng 重庆



After years as a kind of understudy to Sichuān, Chóngqìng is getting its moment in China's spotlight.

While more or less ignored by the rest of the country since its glory days as the wartime capital, Chóngqìng's development is now seen by Běijīng as the key to getting China's interior up to speed with the east coast's economic success.

Chóngqìng is being showered with money in the hopes the boom will have a ripple effect, lifting the mega municipality's dozens of towns and hundreds of villages out of poverty.

It's a tall order for a city of five million and Chóngqìng is going through a fascinating awkward stage. Old stilted homes cling to hills in front of gleaming skyscrapers and massive architectural projects. Stick porters loaded with goods trot underneath the soaring new light-rail system.

For travellers, it makes Chóngqìng much more than just a place to kill time before your Three Gorges cruise.

Perched on the steep hills overlooking the confluence of the Yangzi River (Cháng Jiāng) and Jialing River (Jiǎlíng Jiāng), Chóngqìng spends most days blanketed by fog. By night-time, however, the cloak is thrown off to reveal flashing neon and swooping spotlights.

A city ordinance against horns also means things are a lot quieter than in other Chinese cities. And with Chóngqìng's rolling hills you'll notice the absence of bicycles as motorbikes and cars fight for space on the city's crowded streets.

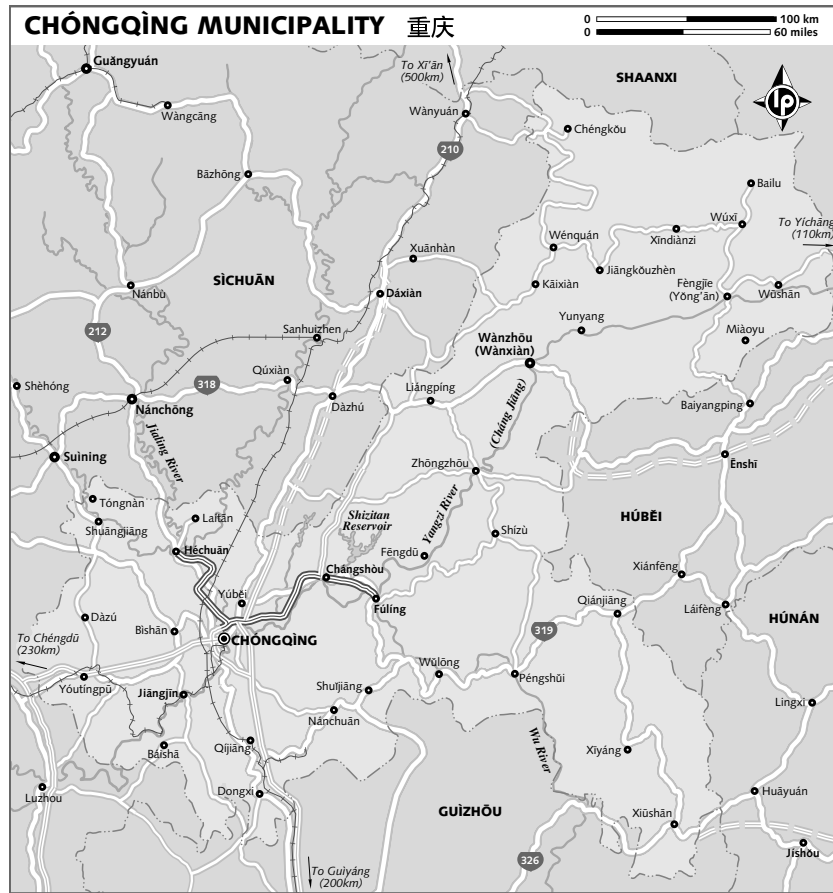
HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore Chóngqìng's ancient towns like **Shuāngjiāng** (p810) and **Láitān** (p810)
- Take on spicy hotpot, **Chóngqìng's** (p806) favourite and most famous dish
- Explore the exquisite Buddhist cave sculptures and grotto paintings in **Dàzú** (p809)



■ AREA CODE: ☎ 023

■ POPULATION: CITY 5 MILLION; MUNICIPALITY 31 MILLION



HISTORY

In 1996 stone tools unearthed along the Yangzi River valleys showed that humans were found in this region two million years ago, a million years earlier than had been thought.

Chongqing (known in pre-pinyin China as 'Chungking') was opened as a treaty port in 1890, but not many foreigners made it up the river to this isolated outpost, and those who did had little impact.

An industrialisation program got underway in 1928, but it was in the wake of the Japanese invasion that Chongqing really took off as a major centre, when it became the Kuomintang's (see p48) wartime capital from 1938 to 1945. Refugees from all over China flooded in, swelling the population to over

two million. The bulk of Chongqing's sights are linked to this history.

In a city overpopulated and overstrained, with its bomb-shattered houses, these wartime residents must have found the name of their new home somewhat ironic: Chongqing means 'double happiness' or 'repeated good luck'. It was originally named Gongzhou but Emperor Zhaodun of the Song dynasty renamed it in 1190 when he ascended the throne. As he had previously been made the prince of the city, he called it Chongqing in celebration of these two happy events.

It was in Chongqing, under the shadow of Kuomintang military leaders, that representatives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), including Zhou Enlai, acted as 'liaisons' be-

tween the Kuomintang and the Communists' headquarters at Yan'an, in Shaanxi province. Repeated efforts to bring the two sides together in a unified front against the Japanese largely failed due to mutual distrust and Chiang Kaishek's obsession with wiping out the Communists, even at the cost of yielding Chinese territory to an invading army.

For a long period the city lobbied for a special status akin to that of Shanghai. In 1997 what it got wasn't quite provincial status, but the three-county area separated from Sichuan and became a 'special' municipality directly under central government control.

Billions of yuan have gone into its development and a major construction boom is on in full force. Just some of the ambitious projects that may be finished by the time you're reading this include a huge gleaming library in the Shapingba district, a Science and Technology Exhibition Hall in Jiangbei district and the 96,000-sq-metre Grand Theatre across from Chaotianmen Sq. The government hopes the theatre will become as much a symbol of Chongqing as the Opera House is of Sydney.

CLIMATE

Chongqing is known for two things throughout China: searingly hot summers and rain pretty much anytime else. Pack an umbrella and be prepared for the heat and humidity once July rolls around. Temperatures can exceed 40°C and this has earned the city a place among the country's 'three furnaces', along with Wuhan and Nanjing.

ORIENTATION

The heart of Chongqing spreads across a hilly peninsula of land wedged between the Jialing River to the north and the Yangzi River to the south. The rivers meet at the tip of the peninsula at the eastern end of the city.

For most visitors, the central focus will be the Jièfàngbēi district, named for the Liberation Monument that stands in the middle of it. Originally a wooden structure built to commemorate Sun Yatsen's death, the monument was rebuilt in 1945 to celebrate the end of China's war with Japan.

This area is easy to explore on foot and has become very tourist-friendly thanks to the Chinese-English signs stuck on every street corner pointing the way to major sights and landmarks.

Maps

Good maps in Chinese and much less detailed ones in English are available on the first floor of the massive Xinhua Bookshop (see following) as well as from street vendors at Chaotianmen Sq.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Xinhua Bookshop (Xinhua Shūdiàn; Zourong Lu; ☎ 9am-9pm) Foreign-language books (including bilingual English-Chinese novels) are on the 4th floor. Classics aside, there's a weird English collection favouring self-help books and National Hockey League (NHL) biographies.

Internet Access 网吧

Readers' Club Internet Café (Dúzhě 'Jùlèbù; 181 Minsheng Lu, 3rd fl; per hr ¥8, deposit ¥20; ☎ 24hr) Has a sea of computers. Probably the most comfortable option.

Media

Go West is a free, Sichuan-based magazine that covers Chengdu and Chongqing's bar, restaurant and entertainment scenes. Unfortunately, only a handful of copies (literally) of the bimonthly publication make their way to Chongqing. If you can't find any at the Marriott Hotel (across from the Flower & Bird Market), consider yourself out of luck.

Medical Services

There is a large pharmacy (yáofāng) next door to the Peace Hotel on Minzu Lu.

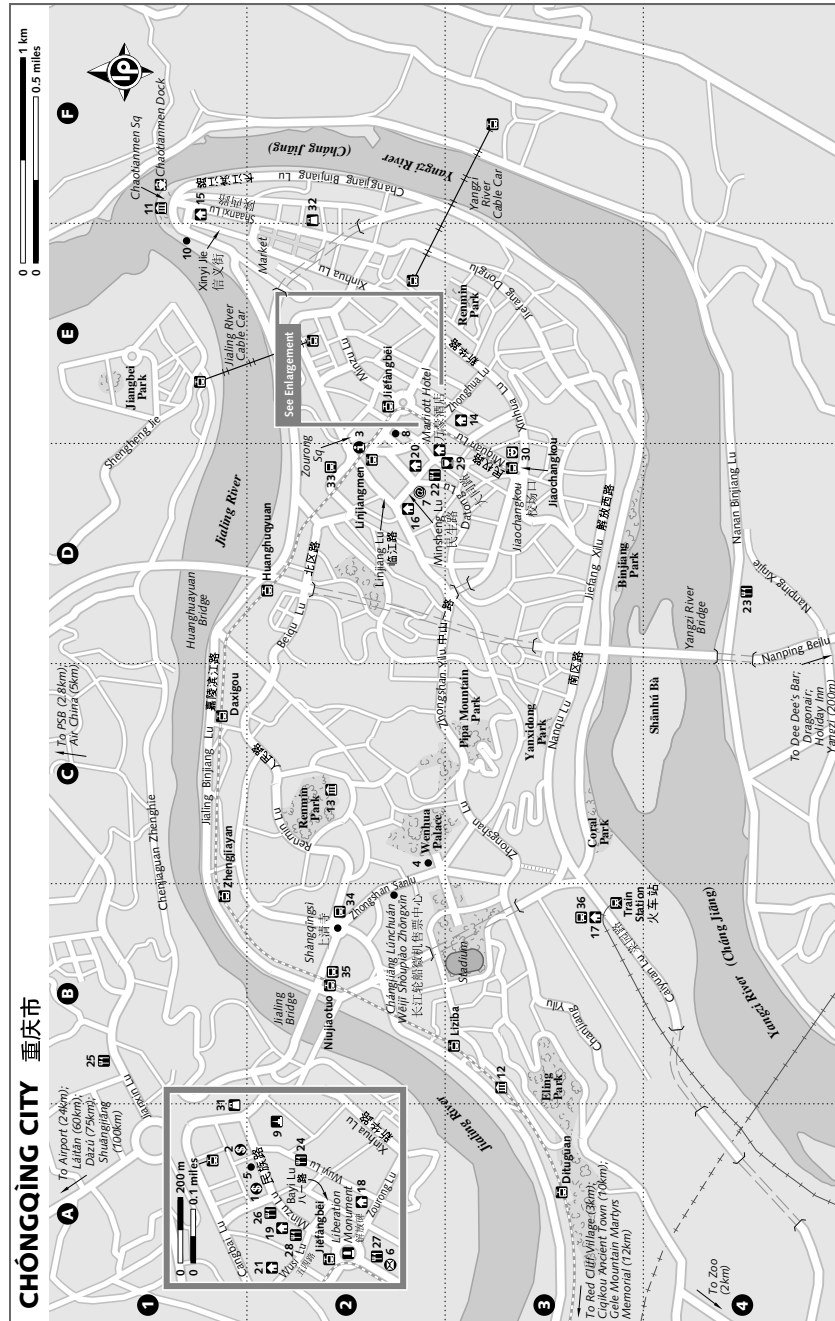
Global Doctor Chongqing Clinic (☎ 8903 8837; 7th fl, suite 701, Hilton Hotel, 139 Zhongshan Sanlu; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, except holidays) For emergencies outside of regular hours, 24-hour on-call services are available by dialling the general clinic number.

Money

Bank of China (Zhōngguó Yínháng; 104 Minzu Lu; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri) Changes money and gives advances on credit cards. You'll need a good book and stiff whiskey if you want to change travellers cheques. Highlights may include, but are by no means limited to: a scolding for trying to cash more than US\$100 at a time and being told your cheque is rejected because your signature is 'obviously not real English'. Thank goodness for their ATM.

Post

Post office (yóujú; Minquan Lu; ☎ 8.30am-9.00pm) Keep an eye out for the blue China Unicorn sign. The post office is tucked away, way in the back. You can make international phone calls here too.

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Public Security Bureau

PSB (公安局; Gōngānjú; ☎ 6396 1996; 555 Huang-long Lu) The Entry-and-Exit Bureau issues visa extensions. To get there, take the 461 bus to the last stop.

Tourist Information

China International Travel Service (CITS; Zhōngguó Guójiā Lǚxíngshì; ☎ 6903 7560; 8f, 151 Zourong Sq) Open daily; not much English is spoken at this office but it offers Chinese-only city tours (Y60) and day trips to Dàzú (Y220) that are generally cheaper than booking at your hotel. If you call ahead, the staff can try to find you an (expensive) English guide.

Harbour Plaza Travel Centre (Hǎiyī Lǚyóu Zhōngxīn; ☎ 6370 0888; 3rd fl, Harbour Plaza, Wuyi Lu; ☎ 7.50am-11pm) Staff here are used to dealing with expats and are near fluent in English. They're also better at ferreting out deals than other places in town. In addition, you can tap them for help with train tickets, Three Gorges tours or English guides.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Chongqing is a relatively safe city, but pickpockets, especially children recruited from other provinces and supervised by nearby adults, are becoming a nuisance. Take care around the bus and train stations and around the dock area and crowded areas like department stores.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Chongqing's sights are scattered all over town. The best place to start is the downtown

Jiěfāngbēi district. It has a gleaming new Planning Exhibition museum at its easternmost tip and the walk there will take you past interesting markets and street life. A few light-rail rides to the west of the centre is the sparkling new Three Gorges Museum as well as many of the most popular parks. The Shapingba district, far west of downtown, is sprinkled with sights relating to Communist history and is worth visiting for Ciqikou Ancient Town.

Arhat Temple 罗汉寺

Built around 1000 years ago, this temple (Luòhàn Sì; admission Y5; ☎ 8am-5pm) has since been sandwiched between the skyscrapers and apartments of the city. At its peak, it was home to 70 monks; there are only around 18 in residence these days.

Luòhàn is the Chinese rendering of the Sanskrit *arhat*, which is a Buddhist term referring to people who have released themselves from the psychological bondage of greed, hate and delusion. Here, you'll find 500 terracotta *arhats* along with a large golden Buddha figure and an Indian-style *jataka* mural depicting Prince Siddhartha in the process of cutting his hair to renounce the world.

The temple's most remarkable feature is its long entrance flanked by rock carvings, many of which have survived the onslaught of time, the Cultural Revolution and the city's pollution amazingly well.

Chongqing Planning Exhibition Gallery 重庆市规划展览馆

Kudos to whoever conceived this fabulous **museum** (Chóngqingshì Guìhuà Zhǎnlǎnguǎn; admission Y20; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun). It may not have the most balanced exhibits when it comes to presenting the Three Gorges Dam project but the rest of the exhibits devoted to Chóngqing's history and future projects are flawless. Even those who find urban planning a bore will be won over by the models, lasers, lights and interactive consoles. Everything is well explained with expert English captions.

Downstairs, you'll find 40 rooms, each devoted to a different Chóngqing county. As upstairs, the rooms and exhibits are beautifully done up, though the lack of English captions will make them impenetrable to most.

Ciqikou Ancient Town 磁器口古镇

Perched on a hill overlooking the Jialing River in the west of the city, Ciqikou Ancient Town (Ciqikou Gǔzhèn) dates back to the late Ming dynasty. The buildings have been restored and preserved for tourists, and the main drag is lined with shops and restaurants; but there is still an air of authenticity about the place. Behind the shop fronts there's still a living, 'real' working village.

At one time there were five temples in town, but only **Bǎolún Sì** (admission Y5; ☎ 7am-6pm) remains today. The temple is in remarkable condition considering that it dates back to the Western Wei dynasty (AD 535-56), more than 1500 years ago.

Opposite the entrance to the temple is a small **museum** (admission Y2; ☎ 8am-6.30pm) dedicated to Chóngqing's trackers, the coolies that used to haul ships up the Yangzi against the current. It's filled with wooden boat models with captions that are slowly being translated into English.

Bus 215 runs out here from Liberation Monument. The ride takes about an hour. A taxi takes 20 to 25 minutes and will cost Y30 to Y35.

Red Cliff Village 红岩村

During the Kuomintang-Communist alliance against the Japanese in WWII, this **village** (Hóngyán Cūn; admission Y18; ☎ 8.30am-5.15pm), outside Chóngqing, was used as the offices and living quarters of the Communist representatives to the Kuomintang.

Among others, Ye Jianying, Zhou Enlai and Zhou's wife, Deng Yingchao, lived in Red Cliff Village. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, Mao Zedong also arrived in Chóngqing – at the instigation of US ambassador Patrick Hurley – to join in the peace negotiations with the Kuomintang. The talks lasted 42 days and resulted in a formal agreement that Mao described as 'words on paper'.

One of China's better revolutionary history museums now stands at this site. There's a large collection of photos and though there are a few captions on the 3rd floor, the rest are in Chinese only.

To get to Red Cliff Village, take bus 104 from the bus stop on Beiqu Lu, just north of the Liberation Monument. The ride takes about an hour. A taxi from downtown will take about 20 minutes and will cost around Y20.

Gele Mountain Martyrs Memorial 歌乐山烈士陵园

In 1943 the USA and Chiang Kaishek signed a secret agreement to set up the Sino-American Cooperation Organisation (SACO), under which the USA helped to train and dispatch secret agents for the Kuomintang. The chief of SACO was Tai Li, the notorious head of the Kuomintang military secret service; its deputy chief was a US Navy officer, Commodore ME Miles.

Meanwhile, though the Kuomintang never recognised the Communist Party as a legal political entity, it in theory recognised the Red Army (which the Kuomintang called the 8th army) as allies in the struggle against the Japanese invaders. Despite this, civilian communists remained subject to repressive laws and hundreds were kept captive as political prisoners by the Kuomintang in SACO and other prisons. According to the communists, many were also executed.

Gele Mountain is now sprinkled with statues, plaques and three major **sites** (☎ 8.30am-7pm) relating to this period.

The Kuomintang once held hundreds of Communist Party members in **Zhāizǐ Dòng** (渣滓洞; admission Y10). Here, pictures and passable English captions line the former holding cells.

The **White House** (白公馆; admission Y10) is a 15- to 20-minute walk from the prison (just follow the signs). It's filled with more pictures and some gory Chinese films depicting the massacre of communist prisoners.

Further along down the road towards the bottom of the hill is the **Martyrs' Memorial** (烈士陵园; Liéshì Lǐngyuán; admission Y5), towering over an enormous square and exhibition hall. The mega-slick hall is only mildly interesting, with still more photos referencing the war but no English captions.

Buses 210, 215 or 217 will get you to Gele Mountain. It's about a 45-minute ride from downtown. Make sure that the driver knows where you want to get off, as the place is not obvious.

Stillwell Museum 史迪威将军旧居

Undergoing renovations at the time of writing, this **museum** (Shǐdīwēi Jiāngjūn Jiùjū) is something of a novelty in China, as it sheds a relatively positive light on the US involvement in WWII. The museum is housed in the former VIP guesthouse of the Kuomintang and residence of General Stillwell, who was Commander of the US forces in the China-Burma-India Theatre and chief of staff to Chiang Kaishek in 1942. The museum should be reopened by the time you read this and may be of interest to American-history buffs. To get there take the light rail to the Liziba stop. The museum is a slow five-minute walk up the hill. You'll see it on your right.

Three Gorges Museum 三峡博物馆

Full of beautifully conceived displays, this recently opened **museum** (Sānxiá Bówúguǎn; adult/child Y40/20; ☎ 9.30am-5pm) definitely warrants setting aside a couple of hours to visit. Set in a gorgeous modern building, halls are devoted to telling the history of settlement in the Three Gorges and Chóngqing region. There isn't much in the way of English captions but artefacts are so thoughtfully presented, it hardly matters. Keep an eye out for exhibits devoted to the ancient Ba kingdom and halls depicting street scenes from old 'Chungking'.

Parks

At 345m, **Pipa Mountain Park** (Pípá Shān Gōngyuán; admission Y5, plus temple Y3; ☎ 6am-10pm) marks the highest point on the Chóngqing peninsula and is great for views of the city's night-time skyline.

Cable Car Trips

A ride on either of the city's two **cable cars** (Yangtze River Cable Car/Jialing River Cable Car Y2/1.5; ☎ 6.45am-9.45pm) spanning both the Jialing and Yangzi

Rivers will carry you over the precipitously stacked housing and polluting industrial estates for a bird's-eye view of the murky waters. Both cable cars are within walking distance of the Liberation Monument.

TOURS

Chóngqing looks better by night when the grey of the city is replaced by the flash of neon. River cruises leave from Chaotianmen Dock, and are one of the best ways to enjoy the view. Most cruises sail around the peninsula and pass both the Jialing Bridge and the Yangzi River Bridge. Tickets can be bought from almost anywhere in town, including most hotels and the Cháotiānmén Booking Hall. Cruise times are: 11.30am to 1pm (Y35, with lunch); 3.30pm to 5pm (Y35, no meal); 7pm to 9pm (Y88 with dinner, Y68 no dinner); 9pm to 11pm (Y68, no dinner).

SLEEPING

If you're thinking of splurging, Chóngqing is the place to do it. There's little in the way of budget accommodation. However, there are several good midrange options in town, most of which offer good discounts. There's no shortage of quality top-end hotels, and numerous five-star hotels are under construction.

Budget

Bāyì Bīnguǎn (☎ 6380 5400; fax 6383 4038; 250 Bayi Lu; 八一路250号; d from 150) Despite the run-down stairs, the peeling wallpaper and gritty-grotty bathrooms, rooms here are actually OK. The hotel is central and has a couple of cheerful English speakers on staff.

Fúyuán Bīnguǎn (☎ 6362 7333; 12 Caiyuan Lu; 菜袁路12号; s/d Y180-260, discounted Y120-148) Rooms here are delightful despite the battered bathrooms and musty halls, and this is the best budget option in town. Right by the bus and train station, it's got a great location for late arrivals/early departures but is out of the way for pretty much everything else. A huge internet café sits just off its lobby (Y2 per hour; Y10 deposit).

Midrange

Square Hotel (Sǎigéer Jiùdiàn; ☎ 6373 3333; fax 6355 8222; 28 Wusi Lu; 五四路28号; d from Y258) Right smack downtown, this is a popular place for locals to send friends and business associates when they come to Chóngqing. Rooms are

weathered but many come with perks like microwaves and fridges and free buffet breakfast. Two horrendously slow elevators serve the entire building so prepare yourself for long waits. Check-in is on the 11th floor.

Chongqing Guesthouse (Chóngqing Bīnguǎn; ☎ 6384 5888; www.cq-hotel.com/en/; 235 Minsheng Lu; 民生路 235号; old s/d Y228/260, VIP d Y435; 📍) It's got bell-boys, a pool and amenities galore, making this midrange option feel more like a top-end choice. Just make sure you eyeball the room before handing over your deposit. Some rooms here, especially some of the business-floor suites, have strong musty smells.

Huixiānlóu Bīnguǎn (☎ 6384 5101, ext 888; fax 6384 4234; 186 Minzu Lu; 民族路186号; s Y240, d Y260-320) There's an overpowering musty smell in the halls but even some of the basic single rooms are set up with TVs, couches and coffee tables. Dorm service occasionally offered during high-season summer months.

Cháotiānmén Dàjiūdiàn (☎ 6310 0370; fax 6371 3035; 18 Xinyi Jie; 信义街18号; s/d/ste Y328/458/768) This 31-storey hotel towers near Chaotianmen Sq and has stunning night views of the river. Besides the odd wall and floor stain, rooms are well kept up. They don't get many foreigners here so prepare yourself for plenty of nervous giggles.

Milky Way Hotel (Yínhé Bīnguǎn; ☎ 6380 8585; fax 6381 2080; 49 Datong Lu; 大同路49号; d Y468) Recently renovated, rooms here are brighter and more comfortable than their counterparts at many of the city's five-star affairs. Bathrooms didn't get the same attention during the spruce up, but if you can nab a discount, this hotel is the best value in town.

Top End

Harbour Plaza (Chóngqīnghāiyi Jiūdiàn; ☎ 6370 0888; www.harbour-plaza.com/hpcq; Wuyi Lu; 五一一路; d Y1330; 📍) Marshmallowlike duvets deck the beds and the hotel has amenities galore. The lobby is attached to the Metropolitan Plaza shopping mall so everything from shopping to video game arcades to bowling lanes are at your doorstep.

EATING Street Food

The drag for a quick bite is Bayi Lu between Zourong Lu and Zhonghua Lu, a stretch known locally as 'tasty eating street'. There are numerous stalls selling all kinds of soups, barbeques and beasties on sticks. On week-

ends, lines to buy them can run up to 25 people deep. If you want to sit down, check out **Xiǎo Dōng Tiān** (☎ 10am-10pm). Downstairs, just off Bayi Lu, this huge cafeteria has seating and is chock full of point-and-choose options and dumplings.

Hotpot

Chóngqing's most famous dish has to be *huǒguō* (火锅; hotpot; see boxed text, opposite). While it's usually cheap, it's a good idea to check prices as you go along. Hotpot can be found wherever there are street vendors or small restaurants. Wuyi Lu has the greatest variety and is locally known as Huǒguō Jiē (Hotpot St). Another good place to look is Minsheng Lu, or if you're looking for somewhere a bit more lively then try any of the hotpot eateries along Nanan Binjiang Lu.

Little Swan (Xiǎotiān'é Huǒguō; ☎ 6785 5328; 78 Jianxin Lu; meals from Y100; ☎ 11am-2pm & 5-9pm) Up near the university district, this is reputedly Chóngqing's best hotpot restaurant. It's usually one of the first hotpot restaurants that will be recommended to you by locals. It's self-service, which means it can get very expensive very quickly, but the hotpot is fantastic and more than lives up to its reputation. Take bus 411 or 902 to the Liberation Monument.

Restaurants

Undoubtedly the best place to look for restaurants is along Nanan Binjiang Lu on the other side of the Yangzi River. This restaurant strip is absolutely heaving with outdoor restaurants, from chaotic hotpot stalls to trendy restaurants where waitstaff serve meals wearing white gloves and surgical masks. It's worth going for the atmosphere alone and there's a boardwalk and some nice park space. On weekends, street musicians add to the carnival feel and you can happily spend several hours here enjoying your food and the crowds. To get there take the Yangzi River cable car (Chángjiāng Suǒdào) to the south side of the river. From there, take a taxi (Y6 to Y8) or bus 338 or 373 (Y1) to the west and get off wherever it seems most interesting. Walking will take around 30 minutes.

There are also some great restaurants sprinkled around downtown.

Lǎo Sīchuān Dàjiūlóu (Old Sichuan Restaurant; ☎ 6382 6644; Minzu Lu; dishes Y38; ☎ 11am-2pm & 5-9.30pm) This restaurant is where Chongqingers bring friends and family when they come to town.

HOT & VERY SPICY

Hotpot (*huǒguō*; literally 'fire pot') is Chóngqing's favourite and most famous dish. It's eaten year-round, even in the summer months when the city itself resembles a furnace.

Born on the banks of the Yangzi River, hotpot was originally eaten by poor boatmen. Enterprising meat vendors would prepare a broth of chillies and Sichuan pepper, and sell skewers of offal to cook in the spicy soup. Today, hotpot is no longer a poor man's dish and ingredients for dunking are not restricted to tripe. You can dip almost anything you like in your pot, from Chinese mushrooms and squid to tofu and lotus root.

Hotpot restaurants can be found all over Chóngqing, not to mention all over China, but no one eats hotpot quite like a Chongqing; the chillies they use are much, much hotter than the ones found in neighbouring Chengdū.

If all this sounds like too much for your taste buds, ask for the '*yuānyāng*' version which is divided like a Yin and Yang symbol into a spicy side and a mild side (soup made of fish or chicken). Just tell the restaurateurs that you are '*pà lǎ*' (scared of chilli spice). Don't be surprised if they laugh, however – you might as well be saying 'I'm a wimp'.

Even old standards like *má là dòu fu* (麻辣豆腐; a spicy tofu dish) and crispy fish manage to stand out here. The décor is unremarkable bright red and gold but the atmosphere comes from the buzz. Order from the black-and-white English menu or the slick, colourful Chinese one loaded with pictures.

Pizza Almalfi (Àmèifēi Bìsā; ☎ 6381 7868; Minzu Lu; pizza from Y45; ☎ 9am-11pm) Pizzas here are missing the great slathering of tomato sauce that would make them slam-dunk authentic, but they have a good choice of toppings from the usual (sausages and olives) to the unique (chicken and cashews). It's a charmingly kitschy place decorated with happy faces and flickering heart lights and manned by an adorable waitstaff.

DRINKING

Chóngqing nightlife revolves around flashy, high-tech karaoke bars, known as KTV bars, and strobe-lit discos that open and close so fast even locals have a hard time keeping track. Ask around when you arrive to see what's popular or (if you can find it) check out *Go West* magazine (see p801) for recommendations.

In the meantime, your first port of call should be **Diyi Shìjiē** (Jiǎochàngǒu), a massive KTV and bar complex right downtown with a huge choice of bars and discos. The truly eccentric **True Love** (Zhēn'ài Bǎoqing; ☎ 7pm-'never') is one of the best of the bunch. Theme nights here include anything from matchmaking (have your mini-bio read on stage along with your cell-phone number) to Arabian nights when staff dress up like sheiks while Chinese belly dancers shimmy next to curtain-draped tables.

To find it, head down the stairs in the middle of the complex. When you hit the snobby but hugely popular **Falling Disco** (☎ 8pm-8am) look around for the weird bear statue. True Love is just past it on your left.

Cotton Club (Mianhua Club; ☎ 8pm-3am) You can also try this place across from the Marriott Hotel. Popular with expats, this bar has live bands playing Top 40 most weekends and one of the most welcoming staff in the city.

Dee Dee's Bar (酒吧; ☎ 6613 5941; 86 Nanping Beilu) Hands down the best choice for pints, pub grub and travel info. It's a hub for the city's tiny community of foreign workers and teachers. Watching grizzled expats hold court as newcomers hang on their every word is itself worth the trip. The bar is down some hard-to-find stone steps next to the Holiday Inn Yangzi.

SHOPPING

Carrefour (Jiālèfú Chāojiēshìchāng; Cangbai Lu; ☎ 8:30am-10pm) Gleaming mega-markets are opening all over town these days but this branch of the French supermarket chain remains the old stalwart/gold standard. You want it they got it: cheese, envelopes, deck chairs, fine jewellery, pots and pans...

Flower & Bird Market (Huāniǎo Shìchāng; ☎ dawn to dusk) You can smell this fragrant lane from across the street. The flowers, herbs and bonsai trees lend a burst of colour to Chóngqing's grey and foggy days. It's across from the Marriott Hotel.

Chaotianmen Comprehensive Trade Market (Cháotiānmén Jiāoyì Shìchāng; Shaanxi Lu) Get here first thing in the morning when vendors clog the streets with motorcycles, trucks and rickshaws

filled with foods, bolts of fabric and pretty much anything else you can think of. Come for the atmosphere, not for the goods.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Chóngqing's Jiangbei airport (重庆江北飞机场) is 25km north of the city centre. You can purchase tickets at **Air China** (中国国际航空; ☎ 6787 8538; 30 Jianxin Beilu, Jiangbei) and **Dragonair** (港龙航空; ☎ 6372 9900; Room 2906, Metropolitan Plaza, 68 Zuorong Lu). You can book flights at most hotels and in the numerous ticket offices around Liberation Monument.

There are daily flights to nearly everywhere in China, including Chéngdū (Y460, 50 minutes), Kūnmíng (Y820, one hour), Guiyáng (Y470, 45 minutes), Guǎngzhōu (Y1290, 1½ hours), Wúhàn (Y840, 1½ hours), Shànghǎi (Y1600, two hours), Běijīng (Y1670, two hours 10 minutes), Shēnzhèn (Y1390, two hours) and Hong Kong (Y2558, 2¼ hours).

Boat

Zillions of boats make the run from Chóngqing down the Yangzi River to Yíchāng. The ride is a popular tourist trip and worth doing before the Chinese government finishes its massive dam project and floods the Three Gorges (see boxed text, p814). For details on Yangzi River trips, see p811.

Travelling upriver by boat from Chóngqing hasn't been a viable option since the government pulled its money out of the ferry business and put it all behind the expressway. You may find private boats selling tickets for Yíbin or Lèshān in the summer; however, it's considered by locals to be a risky ride.

Bus

Buses from Chóngqing depart from the two-storey long-distance bus station next to the train station.

Train

Chóngqing's enormous train station is inconveniently located southwest of the city.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC; Zhōngguó Mínháng) has a free bus service to and from the airport that runs from 6.30am to 5pm from the Shàngqingsí roundabout near the 401 bus stop. A taxi will cost around Y70 to Y100 depending on traffic, hitting umpteen toll booths along the way. No city buses go directly to the airport.

Bus

Buses in Chóngqing can be painfully slow and, since there are no bicycles, they're even more

crowded than in other Chinese cities. Useful routes include: bus 401, which runs between the Chaotianmen Dock and the intersection of Renmin Lu and Zhongshan Sanlu; bus 405, running the length of Zhongshan Lu up to the Liberation Monument; and bus 102, which connects the train station and Chaotianmen Dock.

Light Rail

The city has a terrific new light-rail line open 7am to 10pm and costing Y2 to Y3 depending on how far you're travelling. There are announcements in English and Mandarin. Keep your ticket as you will need it to exit the stations.

Taxi

Taxi fares vary depending on the type of car, but most fares start at Y5, jumping to Y5.9 after 9pm. A plethora of one-way and 'no entrance' streets means drivers will be forced to do some circuitous driving on the way to your destination.

AROUND CHÓNGQÌNG

DAZU COUNTY 大足县

The grotto art of Dazú County, 160km northwest of Chóngqing, is rated alongside China's other great Buddhist cave sculptures at Dūnhuáng, Luòyáng and Dàtóng.

Scattered over 40-odd places across the county, the cliff carvings and statues (with Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian influences) amount to thousands of pieces, large and small. The main groupings are at North Hill (Běi Shān) and the more interesting at Treasured Summit Hill (Bǎodìng Shān). They date from the Tang dynasty (9th century) to the Song dynasty (13th century).

Sights

TREASURED SUMMIT HILL 宝顶山

The sculptures at this **site** (Bǎodìng Shān; admission Y80; ☎ 8.30am-6pm) are definitely more interesting than those at North Hill. It is believed the sculptures were completed over 70 years, between 1179 and 1249.

The centrepiece is a 31m-long, 5m-high reclining Buddha depicted entering nirvana, with the torso sunk into the cliff face. Next to the Buddha, with a temple built around her for protection, is a mesmerising, gold Avalok-

iteshvara (or Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy). Her 1007 individual arms fan out around her, entwined and reaching for the skies. Each hand has an eye, the symbol of wisdom.

Treasured Summit Hill differs from other grottoes in that it was based on a preconceived plan which incorporated some of the area's natural features – a sculpture next to the reclining Buddha, for example, makes use of an underground spring.

The site is about 15km northeast of Dàzú town. Minibuses (Y5, 45 minutes) travel there from 9am to 6pm, departing when full. A motorcycle taxi will take you there for Y20.

As you pass by on the bus, look out for solo sculptures on the cliff faces.

NORTH HILL 北山

According to inscriptions, this **site** (Běi Shān; admission Y60; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) was originally a military camp, with the earliest carvings commissioned by a general. The dark niches hold small statues, many in poor condition; only one or two really stand out. According to the locals it's travellers, and not the Cultural Revolution, that are responsible for the headless state of many statues.

North Hill is about a 30-minute hike from Dàzú town; aim straight for the pagoda visible from the bus station.

Sleeping & Eating

There are plenty of hotels in the area but none of them stand out. Check out your room for mustiness before checking in.

Dàzú Bīnguǎn (大足宾馆; ☎ 4372 1888; d from Y280) Your best bet in the region. Rooms are OK and comfortable, with good service. To find the hotel, turn left from the bus station, cross over the bridge and take the road branching to the right. It's a 30-minute walk from here to North Hill.

Finding a bite to eat in Dàzú is no problem. Shizi Jie (the first right after the roundabout) comes alive at night, with dozens of street stalls serving noodles, dumplings, hotpot and wok-fried dishes.

Getting There & Away BUS

From Chóngqing, buses make the two-hour trip to Dàzú (Y45) every half-hour from 6.30am to 8.30pm. Buses back to Chóngqing follow roughly the same schedule. Buses also leave for Héchuān (Y24, two hours 20 minutes, depart

CHÓNGQÌNG TRAINS

Trains travel daily to the following destinations.

Destination	Price (Y)	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Běijīng	430	33hr	2 daily	12.26pm, 8.31pm
Chéngdū	118	4-5hr	daily	9.08pm
Guǎngzhōu	418	30hr	3 daily	7.35pm, 9pm, 10.33pm
Guiyáng	78	10hr	daily	10.55pm
Kūnmíng	227	22hr	2 daily	12.40pm, 2.42pm
Shànghǎi	490	33hr	2 daily	12pm, 8pm
Xī'ān	175	14hr	daily	9.48am

CHÓNGQÌNG BUSES

Buses from Chóngqing go to the following places.

Destination	Price (Y)	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Chéngdū	112	6hr	every 20min	6.30am-8.30pm
Dàzú	45	3¼hr	every 30min	9.50am-5.50pm
Éméi	106	2hr	twice daily	9.30am, 11.30am
Lèshān	80	2½hr	hourly	7am-6pm

11.20am and 5.20pm), Tóngnán (Y16, one hour 40 minutes, roughly every hour from 7am to 3pm) and Chéngdú (Y88, four hours, depart 6.30am, 7.15am, 8.55am, 9.50am and 2pm).

TRAIN

Travelling to Dàzú by train is impractical and time-consuming. You're much better off taking a bus down the new expressways.

SHUANGJIANG 双江

An awesome day trip from Chóngqing, this sprawling village is packed with terrific sights, but you'll need an adventurous spirit and plenty of patience to find them. No English is spoken here and even a Chinese tourist pulling out a camera can draw a crowd.

The old town's main drag has fascinating nooks and crannies including two **museums** and an old **teahouse**.

On the outskirts, an active **Catholic church** serves the friendly Christian community of about six. A travelling priest calls his congregation every several weeks to tell them when he'll be by for a service. To see inside, go to the mechanic's shop out back and ask for a key.

Further afield, there's an impressive Tang dynasty **Buddha**. Look for the nearby stone stairs, carved to imitate the Chinese tonal scale when stomped on. (Though centuries of pilgrims' footsteps have considerably muffled the effect.) They'll be some boulders to the left of them as you ascend. It's said if you blow on these, you'll hear your whistle inside the stone.

You'll need to negotiate transportation with a villager to get here.

Sleeping

Don't count on finding much in the way of accommodation in Shuāngjiāng. Head to Tóngnán (see right for directions) if you want to stay the night.

Tóngnán Dàjiùdiàn (潼南大酒店; ☎ 4455 0988; fax 4456 0788; 38 Shiyuan Jie; 石院街38号; s/d 318/Y480)

It's worn around the edges but with discounts rooms go for Y150 to Y200.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave regularly between 7am and 5pm from Chóngqing's long-distance bus station for Tóngnán (潼南; Y30, two hours). From there, get a minibus (Y2; 10 to 20 minutes) the rest of the way to Shuāngjiāng. Minibuses should run back to Tóngnán until around 5pm but confirm times with the driver on your way up to avoid getting stranded.

LÁITĀN 涑滩

This ancient village is known for its defensive walls and its 12.5m–Tang dynasty **Buddha** (二佛寺阁; Ěrfó Sìgé; Y20) surrounded by 1700 mini statues. Most of them had their heads snapped off during the Cultural Revolution but, carved into a hillside cliff, this is still a lovely setting.

Keep an eye out for the small **Mófó** (摸佛) statue on the west side of the temple. It's said if you're unwell and touch him, you will then be cured.

The fortune tellers outside the temple also have a good reputation. Mr Liú Bánxiān (刘半仙) is particularly popular and some Chongqingers make the trip up here just to see him. (He charges Y40 and usually sits on the right-hand side of the road leading out of the temple.) He doesn't speak English so just give him your birth date and the time you were born, and record whatever he says in your MP3 player or iPod so someone can translate it for you later.

There are also a couple of stores to browse and several friendly restaurants that serve simple dishes as well as Láitān rice wine (*mǐjiǔ*; 米酒).

To reach Láitān take a bus from Chóngqing's long-distance bus station to Héchuān (合川; Y12, one hour) and grab a minibus the rest of the way (Y10, about 30 minutes). Minibuses run back to Héchuān until around 6pm.

Cruising the Yangzi

THE THREE GORGES

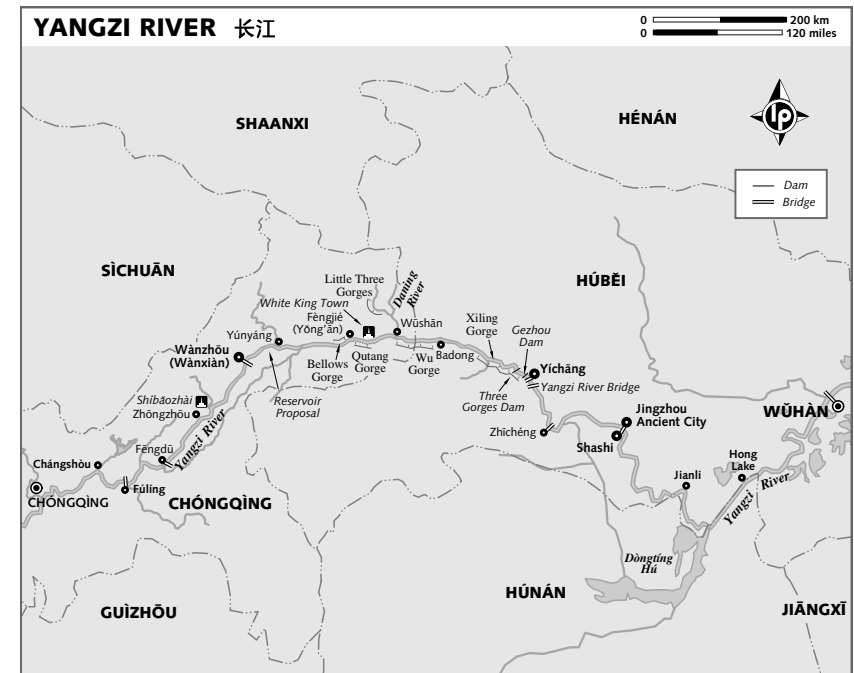
China's mightiest – and the world's third-longest – river, the 6300km Yangzi (Cháng Jiāng), starts life as trickles of snow melt in the Tánggǔlǎ Shān of southwestern Qīnghǎi before spilling from Tibet, swelling through seven Chinese provinces, sucking in water from hundreds of tributaries and powerfully rolling into the East China Sea north of Shànghǎi.

Few riverine panoramas inspire such awe as the Three Gorges (Sānxiá). The vast chasms of rock, sculpted over aeons by the flowing mass of water, are the Yangzi River's most fabled piece of geology. Apocryphally the handiwork of the Great Yu (p327), a legendary architect of the river, the gorges – Qútáng, Wū and Xīlíng – commence just east of Fēngjié in Chóngqīng and level out west of Yíchāng in Húběi province, a journey of around 200km.

The imposing chasms span from 300m at their widest to less than 100m at their narrowest pinch. Their attraction is easily hyped, however, and some travellers register disappointment. The construction of the formidable Three Gorges Dam (see the boxed text, p814) has furthermore cloaked the gorges in as much uncertainty as their famous mists: will the gorges be humbled, vanishing forever beneath a huge lake, or will they shrug off the rising waters?

The truth lies somewhere in between. Experienced boat hands avow to a stunting of their magnificence, but first-timers – the majority of those

The Three Gorges Dam is designed to withstand an earthquake of 7 on the Richter Scale.



on cruises – remain suitably awestruck. The waters have yet to rise to their full stature, but you can gauge the extent of the deluge from the riverside 175m markers, awaiting the water's highest reach. It's also worth noting that the gorges were clipped by 10m or so when the earlier Gezhou Dam in Yíchāng (Húběi province) went up, and seasonal variations in water level can be as much as 50m.

If a consensus emerges from travellers' reports, it is that the temples can be busy with jostling crowds (and overpriced) while the towns and settlements along the Yangzi River are quite modern-looking and uniform. It is the spectacular natural scenery that undoubtedly steals the show, although some find it possible to gorge oneself (excuse the pun) on the canyons. After the shock and awe of their first appearance, the cliffs can become repetitive, especially the overlong Xiling Gorge (Xiling Xiá). But if you don't expect to swoon at every bend in the river, the sheer pleasure of journeying downriver is a stimulating and relaxing adventure, not least because of the change of pace and perspective.

The principle route for those cruising the Yangzi River is between Chóngqìng and Yíchāng. The growth of speedier expressways sees fewer passenger boats nosing all the way down from Chóngqìng to Nánjīng or Shànghǎi, and most cruises focus on the Three Gorges themselves. High-season boats (April to May and October to November) can be a scrum; off-season, however, the trip is serene and a great opportunity to observe life on the river from a sedentary perspective – even better if you bring some binoculars with you.

BOATS & TICKETS

When choosing your boat you have three options. The most luxurious passage is on internationally owned tour cruise ships, where maximum comfort and visibility are accompanied by a leisurely agenda. Boats stop at all the major sights for long visits, giving passengers time to tour the attractions. These boats are ideal for travellers with time, money and negligible Chinese skills. The average number of days for such a cruise is three nights and three to four days.

Hydrofoils are the fastest option, speeding from Chóngqìng (Y370, 11 hours, four boats daily) or Wǎnzhōu (Y270, seven hours; Y390 including the three-hour bus journey from Chóngqìng to Wǎnzhōu) to the hydrofoil terminal west of Yíchāng (a further hour by bus from town).

Hydrofoils are not geared towards tourists so there's no outside seating, but visibility is OK, albeit through Perspex windows. Nonetheless, most passengers use hydrofoils solely for transportation, so while everyone is watching films on TV you can stand at the door, stupefied by the views. For those who find a day of gorge-viewing adequate, hydrofoils are ideal, although tourist sights are skipped. Food and refreshments are served, but it's a good idea to take along your own snacks and drinks. Hydrofoils make regular but very brief stops at towns (but not sights) along the river to take passengers on board and for disembarkation; check when the boat is leaving if disembarking.

The third alternative is to board one of the slow passenger boats or Chinese cruise ships that typically depart Chóngqìng in the evening and take two nights and two days to reach Yíchāng. Chinese cruise ships typically visit all the sights en route, but are less professional than the luxury tour cruises.

Passenger ships can be disappointing as you may end up sailing through the gorges in the dead of night, so check when you buy your ticket. Stops are frequent, but boats tie up for short periods and pass tourist sights by.

Plans for the Three Gorges Dam date from 1919 when Sun Yatsen (Sun Zhongshan) saw its huge potential for power generation.



Boats on the Yangzi River
MARTIN MOOS

Cramped and functional accommodation on passenger ships is as follows. First class (Y1525): two-bed cabins with shower room; second class (upper/lower bunk Y992/1060): two- to four-berth cabins with shower; third class (Y620/1060): six to 12 beds, depending on the boat; fourth class (Y530/553): eight to 12 (or even 24) beds; fifth class: a place (席; *xí*) on the floor. Shared toilets and showers can be grotty and meals on board are average, so take along your own food and drinks.

In theory, it's possible to buy your ticket on the day of travel, but it's probably worth booking one or two days in advance. Fares tend to be similar whether you buy them from an agency or direct from the ticket hall, but it's worth shopping around as there are often some good discounts available. If buying a ticket through an agent, ensure you know exactly what the price includes.

In Chóngqìng, buy tickets from the Chaotianmen Dock Ticket Office (朝天门码头售票处; Cháotiānmén Mǎtóu Shòupiàochù) or the helpful **Chongqing Port International Travel Service** (重庆港国际旅行社; Chóngqìng Gǎng Guójí Lǚxíngshì; ☎ 6618 3683; www.cqpits.com.cn; 18 Xinyi Jie), where staff speak English. If you want a refund on your ticket, there is a cancellation fee of around 20%.

THE ROUTE

Most boats travel from Chóngqìng to Yíchāng or Wǔhàn. The Chóngqìng to Yíchāng route is by far the most travelled section of the Yangzi, threading through the Three Gorges and passing the namesake dam. The route can be travelled in either direction, but most passengers journey downstream from Chóngqìng to Yíchāng, a journey that can take anything from 11 hours (hydrofoil) to two nights and two days (passenger ships) or three nights and three days (cruise ships) to even longer tourist cruises. Some vessels soldier on beyond Yíchāng to Wǔhàn and on to Jiǔjiāng, Nánjīng and Shànghǎi, but boat numbers have dwindled in the face of alternative transport and the riverside scenery becomes distinctly ho-hum beyond Yíchāng.

Vessels stop at many of the towns between Chóngqìng and Yíchāng that can also be reached by road, so taking the bus can speed up your journey. If you buy your ticket from an agency, ensure you're not charged up front for the sights along the way as you may not want to visit them all and some of the entrance fees are steep. The only ticket really worth buying in advance is for the popular Little Three Gorges tour, which is often full (see the Wǎnzhōu to Yíchāng section, p815).

The Yangzi River will deposit over 500 million tons of silt every year into the reservoir behind the dam.

THE DAMNED YANGZI

The Three Gorges Dam is China's biggest engineering project since the construction of the Great Wall. Completed ahead of schedule in May 2006, it will eventually back the Yangzi River up for 550km, flood an area the size of Singapore and wash away the homes of up to two million people. It will rank as the world's largest dam – an epic show of communist might, evidence of man's dominance over capricious nature and the 21st-century symbol of a new superpower.

Located at Sandouping, 38km upstream from the existing Gezhou Dam, the Three Gorges Dam is a cornerstone of government efforts to channel economic growth from the dynamic coastal provinces into the more backward western regions, somehow transforming hinterland into heartland. Measuring 185m high and 2km wide, the dam will have a hydroelectric production capacity equivalent to 18 nuclear power plants.

The dam will improve navigation on the Yangzi River, which already transports 70% of the entire county's shipping, and will be instrumental in flood control, a problem that has claimed more than one million lives in the past 100 years alone.

However, the massive scale of the Three Gorges Dam project has caused disquiet among environmentalists, economists and human-rights activists, arousing some of the most outspoken criticism of government policy since the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.

Construction of the dam was incredibly expensive, the initial estimates of US\$20 to US\$30 billion rising to an eventual US\$75 billion. The social implications of the dam are enormous: an estimated 1.5 million people living in inundated areas will have been relocated and, more importantly, given a new livelihood. Environmentalists are perhaps the most vocal in their concerns, as it's thought that as the river slows, so will its ability to oxygenate. The untreated waste that pours into the river from over 40 towns and 400 factories, as well as the toxic materials and pollutants from industrial sites, could well create another world record for the dam: a 480km-long septic tank – the largest toilet in the world.

In addition, the dam will disrupt the environments of such endangered species as the Yangzi River dolphin and Chinese sturgeon. The rising waters will also cover countless cultural artefacts at more than 8000 important archaeological sites. Despite an ambitious plan of relocation and preservation, only one-tenth of all historic sites and relics will be saved.

In 1999, 100 cracks were discovered running the full height of the up-stream face of the dam. Yet despite this, in June 2003 the reservoir was filled to a depth of 127m. Chinese engineers say such problems are common in large dams and that the cracks have been repaired.

Fears about the project were further heightened when information was released about two dams that collapsed in Hénán province in 1975. After 20 years as a state secret, it is now apparent that as many as 230,000 people died when the Banqiao and Shimantan dams collapsed. If a similar accident was to happen on the Yangzi River, the entire population of nearby Yíchāng (480,000 souls) would be dead within an hour.

Planners insist that the Three Gorges Dam has been constructed according to safety regulations that would make such disasters impossible. Still, the collapse of the walls holding back the world's largest storage reservoir in one of the world's most densely populated pieces of real estate is a scenario that must keep even the most gung-ho supporters of the Three Gorges Dam project awake at night.

CHÓNGQÌNG TO WÀNZHŌU 重庆 - 万州

The initial stretch is slow-going and unremarkable, although the dismal view of factories gradually gives way to attractive terraced countryside and the occasional small town.

Passing Fúlíng, the next significant town and the first disembarkation point is **Fēngdū** (丰都), 170km from Chóngqing. Nicknamed the City of Ghosts (Guǐchéng; 鬼城), the town faces inundation once all the sluice gates are shut on the Three Gorges Dam. This is the stepping-off point for crowds to belt up – or take the cable car up – **Míng Shān** (名山; admission ¥60) and its theme-park crop of ghost-focused temples.

Drifting through the county of Zhōngzhōu, the boat takes around three hours to arrive at **Shībǎozhài** (Stone Treasure Stockade; admission ¥40; ☎ 8am–4pm) on the northern bank of the river. A 12-storey, 56m-high wooden pagoda built on a huge rock bluff, the structure originally dates to the reign of Qing-dynasty emperor Kangxi (1662–1722). Your boat may stop for rapid expeditions up to the tower and for crowded climbs into its interior.

Most morning boats moor for the night at **Wànzhōu** (also called Wànxiàn), a grimy town that rises in steep gradients above the river. Travellers aiming to get from A to B as fast as possible while taking in the gorges can skip the Chóngqing to Wànzhōu section by hopping on a three-hour bus and then taking either the hydrofoil or a passenger ship from the Wànzhōu jetty.

WÀNZHŌU TO YÍCHĀNG 万州 - 宜昌

Boats departing Wànzhōu soon pass the **Zhang Fei Temple** (Zhāngfēi Miào; admission ¥20), where short disembarkations may be made. Yúnyáng, a modern town strung out along the north bank of the river, is typical of many utilitarian settlements. Look out for abandoned fields, houses and factories, deserted in advance of the rising waters. Boats drift on past ragged islets, some carpeted with small patchworks of fields, and alongside riverbanks gorgeously striated with terraced slopes, rising like green ribbons up the inclines.

The ancient town of **Fēngjié** (奉节), capital of the state of Kui during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States, overlooks **Qutang Gorge** (瞿塘峡; Qútáng Xiá), first of the three gorges. The town – where most ships and hydrofoils berth – is also the entrance point to **White King Town** (Báidìchéng), where the King of Shu, Liu Bei, entrusted his son and kingdom to Zhu Geliang, as chronicled in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Qutang Gorge – also known as Kui Gorge (夔峡; Kuí Xiá) – rises dramatically into view, towering into huge vertiginous slabs of rock, its cliffs jutting out in jagged and triangular chunks. The shortest of the three gorges, at 8km in length, Qutang Gorge is over almost as abruptly

The Yangzi River has caused hundreds of catastrophic floods, including the disastrous inundation of 1931, in which an estimated 145,000 died.

Pavilion above Wūshān (p816), overlooking the start of Wu Gorge
MARTIN MOOS



as it starts, but it is reckoned by many to be the most awe-inspiring. Also the narrowest of the three gorges, it constricts to a mere 100m or so at its narrowest point, where the waters flow at their fastest. The gorge offers a dizzying perspective onto huge strata and vast sheets of rock; the final rise of the water level will undoubtedly rob the gorge of some of its power, but for now the cliffs remain imposing. On the northern bank is **Bellows Gorge** (Fēngxiāng Xiá), where nine coffins were discovered, possibly placed here by an ancient tribe.

After Qutang Gorge the terrain folds into a 20km stretch of low-lying land before boats pull in at the riverside town of **Wūshān** (巫山), situated high above the river. Many boats stop at Wūshān for five to six hours so passengers can transfer to smaller tour boats for trips (Y150 to Y200) along the **Little Three Gorges** (小三峡; Xiǎo Sānxiá) on the Daning River (大宁河; Dàníng Hé). The landscape is gorgeous, and some travelers insist that the narrow gorges are more impressive than their larger namesakes.

Back on the Yangzi River, boats pull away from Wūshān to enter the penultimate **Wu Gorge** (巫峡; Wū Xiá), under a curiously bright red bridge that blots the landscape. Observe how some of the cultivated fields on the slopes overhanging the river reach almost illogical angles, and look out for the markers that signpost the water's highest reach.

Wu Gorge – the Gorge of Witches – is simply stunning, cloaked in green and carpeted in a profusion of shrubs, its cliffs frequently disappearing into ethereal layers of mist. About 40km in length, its cliffs rise to just over 900m, topped by sharp, jagged peaks on the northern bank. A total of 12 peaks cluster on either side, including **Goddess Peak** (Shénnǚ Fēng) and **Peak of the Immortals** (Jíxiān Fēng).

Boats continue floating eastwards out of Wu Gorge and into Húběi province, past the mouth of **Shennong Stream** (神农溪; Shénnóng Xi) and the town of Bādōng on the southern bank, along a 45km section before reaching the last of the Three Gorges.

At 80km, **Xiling Gorge** (Xíling Xiá) is the longest and perhaps least impressive of the gorges. Note the slow-moving cargo vessels on the river, including long freight ships loaded with mounds of coal ploughing downriver to Shànghǎi, their captains alerted to the shallows by beacons that glow from the bank at night. This gorge was traditionally the most hazardous, where hidden shoals and reefs routinely holed vessels, but it has long been tamed, even though river traffic slows when the fog reduces visibility.

The monumental **Three Gorges Dam** (Sānxiá Dàbà; admission Y240) looms up and boats stop so passengers can shuttle across to the dam's observation deck for a bird's-eye view of this mammoth project. Hydrofoils from Chóngqìng and Yíchāng pull in here for passengers to disembark. Boats continue and pass through the locks of the Gezhou Dam (Gézhōu Bào) before completing the journey 30km downstream to Yíchāng (p484).