

Passing through:
the Forbidden
City. Opposite,
collectable
Chairman Mao
pins in the old
Liulichang market

Face time

Beijing is a vast, intimidating megalopolis, but regular visitor **Ellen Himelfarb** can get you *inside* the city — up close and personal



Beijing





Right out of the airport the high-rises start flying past, a thousand Jenga towers of hanging laundry, hoisting the horizon up 30 storeys. As you splutter off the highway into morning traffic, lanes multiply, tail-lights pierce the infamous 'fog', and you're part of a giant pixelated red dragon inching towards the centre. The identikit towers yield to glossy skyscrapers, one like an egg, another a funnel. Then the driver fires a command, incomprehensible, ushering you out. You're on your own.

As a bucket-list trip, Beijing lacks the welcome of, say, Venice. Beijingers don't smile, nor move out of the way of your suitcase. But take it on the chin – it means you're being treated like anyone else. And the key to Beijing is to go for it. If a door's open, creep in. If it's on the menu, point. If the lights are on, order another beer. You'll find this big foreboding megalopolis surprisingly inclusive. Give Beijing a few days. You can see the vestiges of imperial China, dine like an old hand *and* have time to explore the hip backstreets.

The imperial

The city's ancient imperial heart, built by the decree of Ming emperors six centuries ago, will test your feet – but you can get to grips with it in a day. First, a taxi – cheap (£3 max), ubiquitous – to today's starting point, up north in Gulou, within the evocatively named 2nd Ring Road. Flag one by sticking out your arm, and flutter your hand as if you're shooing it away.

The Drum and Bell Towers (guloutsx.com; £3.50) are twin 15th-century bastions with ascending patterns of pagoda roof a few storeys apiece. Their role in dynastic Beijing was plain. Before clocks, musicians sounded beats and bells throughout the day, breaking time into two-hour portions. Stand in the surrounding piazzas, edged by trees and residential streets, and you're in the age of silk *hanfu* robes and 'Fu Manchu' moustaches.

Upon a thigh-testing climb, the Bell Tower reveals its seven-metre cloche. But the real spectacle? Views over

the clay rooftops of old Beijing, to the towers of the new. Out west are the bulb and needle of the Radio & TV Tower. East, the three mountainous humps of the surreal Wangjing SOHO complex by the late Zaha Hadid. The sprawl is endless. And the Drum Tower? Just be sure to be here for the top of the hour, when ceremonial drummers attack the drums, propped like oversized wine casks – the urgency is like a call to war.

Thus begins your pilgrimage south. The towers exit into Di'anmen Outer Street, leading to a bridge built during the reign of Kublai Khan, the war-mongering Mongol emperor who ruled China in the 13th century. Continue on to ersatz temples housing department stores and banquet halls, where parties pinch at platters of stir-fry.

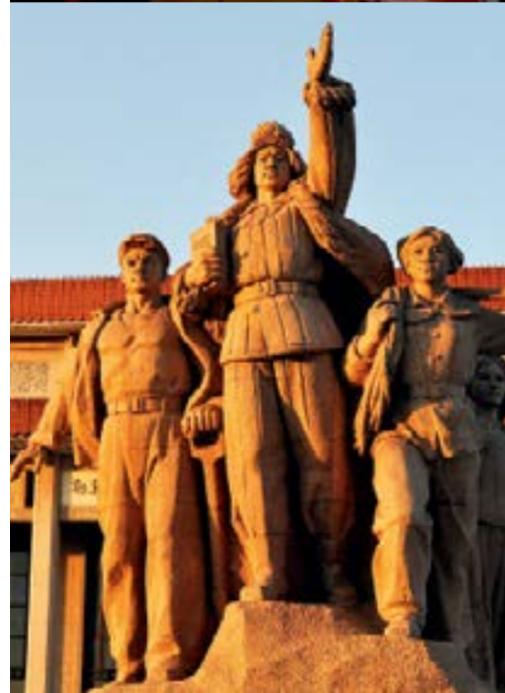
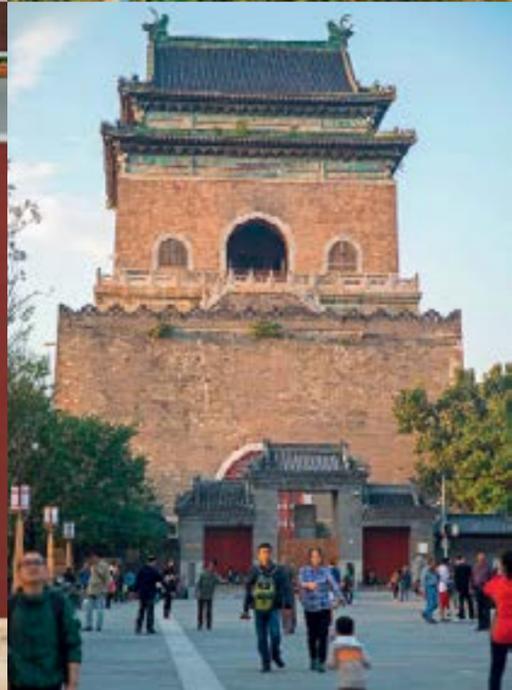
The road splits to embrace imperial Jingshan Park (25p entry), a scenic high ground built of soil excavated while digging the Forbidden City moat. It has leafy sycamores, a soundtrack of birdsong, and a swirl of secluded paths, leading you to the top of Prospect Hill. Here greying men dip giant brushes in water, and paint characters on the pavement that disappear in the breeze. Take in this, the Beijing view, over the Forbidden City, your next stop.

Six centuries ago the Ming emperors were considered God's envoys, and they hired a million labourers to build their heroic HQ. The Forbidden City (dpm.org.cn; £5; photo ID required) has more security checks than an airport. You emerge from the cavernous gates into a forecourt so colossal tour groups merely speckle the brickwork. The largest palaces line up for a kilometre, lacquered red, gargoyles peering down, gilt lions standing sentry. Queues form to climb the marble steps to peek in at dragon reliefs coiled around chandeliers.

Fanning outward are nearly 1,000 lesser villas, roofs upturned at the corners, like smiles. The English headset (£4.60) guides you around the historic avenues to each one, telling tales of burned-down throne rooms; harems of kidnapped women with feet bound to prevent escape; banquets of monkey-brain and camel-hump, tested by underlings for potential poison; eunuchs smuggling out jewels during the Japanese invasion of 1933.

A stream meanders within the walls, reaching the deepest fringes. Follow it to the Palace of Benevolent >

SNAPSHOT MOMENT
As you traverse the courtyard between the Bell and Drum Towers, look out for families playing *jianzi*, a lively game using shuttlecocks kept in the air. Hands are not allowed...



Streetlife: clockwise from top left, serving up skewers of grasshopper, sea horse and snake in Wang Fu Jing Road; classic Peking duck; the Forbidden City; incense burning at a temple; the Radio and TV Tower dominates the skyline; the ancient Bell Tower; '30s-era ads in Liulichang market; the Liberation of the People statue in Tiananmen Square; Ghost Street; guard at the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Tiananmen Square

Tranquillity, where many an emperor spent his wedding night, then continue deeper. The red concubine villas around the western flank were frenetic with beauticians and hairstylists in imperial times; each night a eunuch would fetch the chosen woman and escort her to the emperor's lair. Today, they're the least-visited houses – by afternoon most tourists will have drifted toward the exits, leaving you alone, with the ghosts of the lovers.

The edible

Beijing's nights are almost brighter than its days, thanks to the glare of neon. It signals the shift from work to play – along with clouds of steam from a million pots. In every other window, roasted ducks hang like Christmas decorations. Served to nobility since the 1200s, Peking duck remains a Beijing staple. Yet at the fine-dining halls, the ceremony can be cringe-worthy: dinner begins with a struck gong at Duck de Chine (elite-concepts.com/ddc; mains about £22), in Sanlitun, a quarter of luxury-brand flagships. Slightly more folksy is Da Dong (dadongdadong.com; mains about £23), west towards the centre, where the bird is carved delicately, but without ceremony.

Beyond duck, the city bubbles with complex flavours. New to Beijing, Untour (untourfoodtours.com; £47) summons you to the fringes of Gulou for a three-hour dinner extravaganza with all the unrecognisable meats and condiments you can handle. It begins in Ghost Street, named for the spectre of lanterns said to have lit the old night-market in the last centuries of dynastic Beijing. On balmy nights, seniors in singlets sit outside Qing-era facades sizzling with neon, as frying lamb and steaming *jianbing* (chilli-rubbed *crêpes*) wait to be devoured.

According to Untour, chefs themselves eat in the close lanes of corrugated-roof cottages called *hutongs*. Shoebox restaurants around Beixinqiao Station host beer- and whiskey-fuelled diners. At fluoro-lit Lao Liu Hotpot (73 Beixinqiao), tureens of bubbling broth arrive, with paper-thin lamb, root veg and tofu to pop in. Beijingers claim hotpot as their own – it was here that Mongolian invaders developed the dish as they besieged the city

AFTER-DINNER SNIFTER?

Either restaurant is handy for Janes and Hooch (janesandhooch.com), a smart, late and sexy Prohibition-style bar. Go for a shot of *baijiu*, the Chinese firewater, but beware – it's 40 per cent ABV!

walls. But Beixinqiao belongs to a United Nations of Chinese. At a corner barbecue with a hairdryer to fan the flames, Uighurs from the Muslim Xinjiang province serve Halal mutton skewers dusted with cumin at plastic garden tables – the authenticity is in the chunks of fat interspersed with the meat. On the next block, Fifth Brother (5 Nanbanqiao Hutong) is virtually un-Googleable, yet it's busier than McDonald's as fans (here with their extended families) devour chicken wings rolled in Sichuan peppercorns.

Like England and pubs, every neighbourhood here has a place for no-frills, no-nonsense, no-way-you-could-forget-it meals. Lunch is the perfect time to seek one out. Flutter your hand for a taxi, or dip into the warrens of the Metro (tinyurl.com/hej5l87; 24p) to get closer.

Meanwhile, Chaoyang Park, on the eastern edge of the city, is an almost primeval landscape of lakes and pagodas. And amid a complex of mountain-shaped towers is the best dumpling house for miles. At mealtimes masses migrate to Baoyuan (6 Maizidian Jie; mains about

£2), for platters of steamed dumplings loosely pinched around crunchy *kung-pao* (spicy) chicken, sweet yams and salt-and-pepper shrimp. Heads down, they sit in silence, dipping the dumplings in sweet vinegar and slurping them whole, at 10p a pop.

Behind every monument is a cluster of smaller *hutongs*, and you don't have to abandon the comfort zone of your guidebook to find them. Tourists swarm to Houhai, west of Gulou, formerly the emperor's pleasure gardens – but a few minutes' amble west is Luo'er Hutong, a street market where vendors squat over blankets heaped with spring onions. The market leads to Huguosi, a lane where curly-eaved shops as decorative as pagodas each sell a version of Beijing's classic 'snacks' (just try leaving un-full). Hugu Temple Snack Bar (68 Huguosi Street) is the most overwrought, with a bakery counter stocked to the ceiling, shelves labelled in Chinese, and queues three deep. Distinguish the glossy, sugared desserts from the stuffed savouries, train your eye on a cashier and point at what you want, handing the equivalent of a pound >

THE KEY TO GETTING TO KNOW BEIJING IS TO GO FOR IT. IF A DOOR'S OPEN, CREEP IN. IF IT'S ON THE MENU, POINT. AS THE LIGHTS ARE ON, ORDER ANOTHER LAGER



Still waters: boating on Shichahai Lake. Opposite, the Forbidden City from the viewpoint in Jingshan Park

(more than enough). Then, in the mess hall upstairs, devour your sweet-bean doughnuts, flaky macarons and sesame buns stuffed with coriander and beef shavings: amazingly tender for a culture whose popular pastime really is chewing the fat.

The hip

If the big boulevards are the arteries of Beijing, the *hutongs* are the veins, reaching deep to access its most private moments. Of the 3,000 or so remaining, some are unpaved and unplumbed – and many are in danger of development, which makes them living artefacts. Zeroing in on the coolest corners is a daunting prospect, so eliminate the guesswork and start back up in Gulou, where multi-generational households mix with hipsters.

At breakfast time in Gulou's Cheniandian Hutong, grandmas shuffle in slippers to open-air kitchens for scallion omelettes and *youtiao* – twisted lengths of deep-fried dough. Peddlars make their first rounds under locust-tree canopies. Young professionals grab Brooklyn-style java to go. Quiet descends as you pass the colourful carved arch approaching the Temple of Confucius (15 Guozijian Street; £3.50), a vast sprawl of lacquer-red halls and courtyards serene with scholarly contemplation. You hear the echo of your footsteps as you trace 700 years of history around ancient standing stones.

Savour it – circling back to the centre of Gulou, things hot up. Along Wudaoying Hutong, low, intimate homes function as handbag boutiques and massage spas. As pensioners look on from outdoor fitness machines in a roadside parkette, other generations order pints at the microbrewery, or Beaujolais at tiny wine bars with two tables. Make a mental note to return after dusk, moving on to parallel Fangjia Hutong, a nascent cocktail quarter.

For now, zig-zag through the Gulou *hutongs*, past the Drum and Bell Towers to Houhai. Its serpentine lake has a classic oil-painting allure in the morning, all dozing

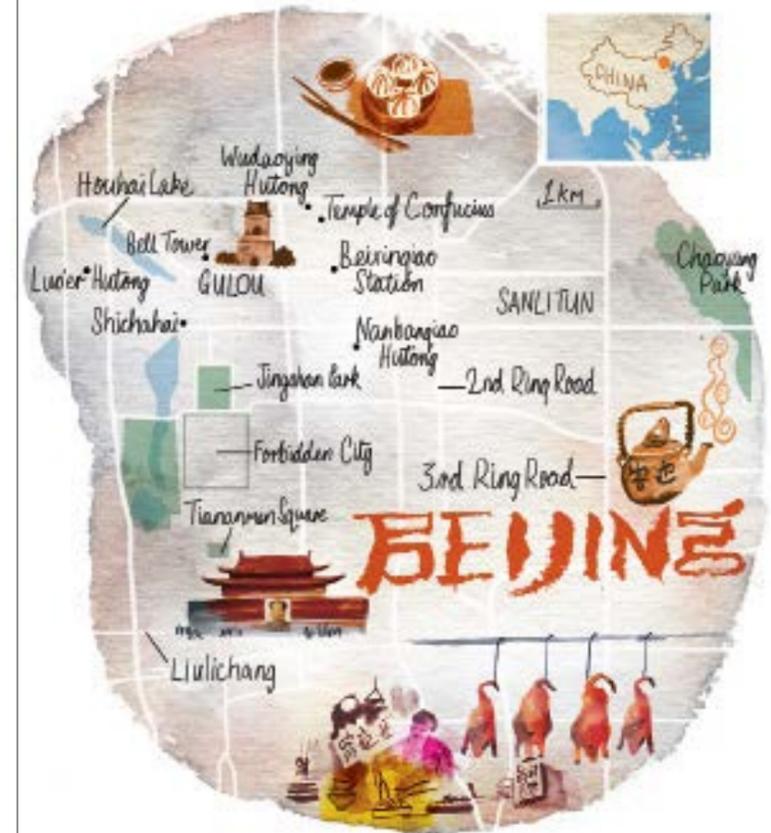
anglers and families pedal-boating under willows. (By lunch, the restaurant terraces at the edge will have filled up, spoiling the mood. By dinner, they'll thump with Euro-pop and blink neon calls to party.)

Still westwards, Shichahai has a window-washing, fence-painting weekend vibe. The taller, wider villas are vestiges from a time when the canals converged here and merchants flourished. Opposite a market of wood-caged birds, secretive Houhai Park is the pensioners' de facto living room. One man dances a disco-calisthenics hybrid around a radio emitting tinny, atonal tunes. Others hover over stone checkerboards tables.

Stick out your fluttering hand, taxi down to Dashilan, a ladder of *hutongs* below Tiananmen Square, and pull over at Liulichang, an old market street colonised by artisans when the emperors collected their now-priceless art. Decorative storefronts are fading and the merchandise, piled up on folding tables, is more mingling than Ming. But root around and you might net a *cloisonné* bracelet, a bronze teapot or a string of glass beads.

Where Liulichang ends, there's a stripped-down modernity to the buildings: bigger windows, more to look at. A sliver-thin art studio, a bookshop propping up design tomes in the window... This is where Beijing's young, creative can-dos ply their craft. In the buzziest streets, Dashilan West and Yangmeizhu, there's a sub-culture of galleries showing delicate ceramics; fashion boutiques with chic wood panelling; enticing stationery – and fewer customers, too.

The upside is that shops – bars, too, and cafes – are as calm as temples, their assistants thrilled to see you. At Meeting Someone (99 Yangmeizhu), tea is served beneath an installation of paper chits seemingly floating in the wind. In the cocktail bar, strands of LED fibres rain from the ceiling. There are eight servers where one would do, flashing teeth, lingering to chat – all practising a new brand of Beijing warmth. You've found it. Now bask in it. ■



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go independent

Air China (airchina.co.uk) flies from Heathrow to Beijing from £530 return. **BA** (ba.com) flies from Heathrow from £701 return.

Go packaged

Asia tour specialist Wendy Wu (0800 144 5621, wendywutours.co.uk) has a 15-day private 'Vibrant China' tour, including four nights in Beijing in a four-star, visits to the Great Wall, Summer Palace and Forbidden City, with all flights and transfers from £3,690pp, B&B. **Scott Dunn** (020 3432 7647, scottdunn.com) has a 13-night 'Classic China' tour, with three nights at the Waldorf Astoria Beijing, from £5,500pp, B&B. **The China Travel Company** (020 8816 8399, thechinatravelcompany.co.uk) features Beijing on its seven-night 'Taste of China' trip, from £1,460pp (as part of a group); flights extra.

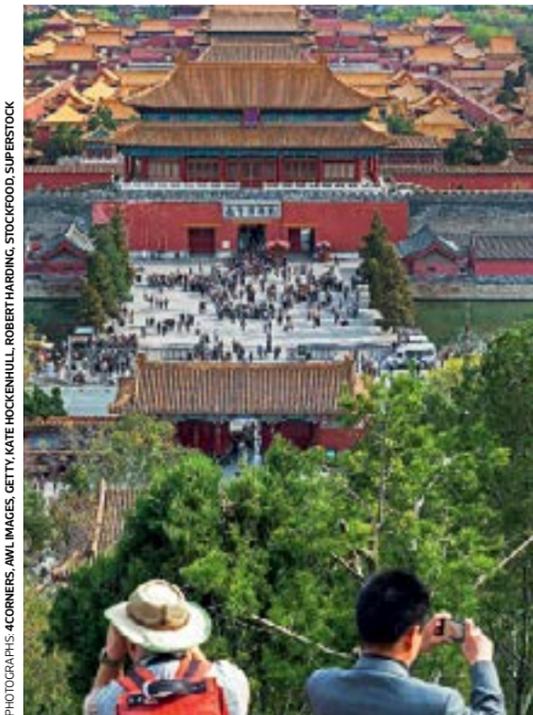
Where to stay

Orchid Hotel (00 86 10 8565 9295, theorchidbeijing.com; doubles from

£85, B&B) is a bargain, with a great setting down a lane in the thick of a bustling *hutong*. For views out over Beijing's bizarre, futuristic architecture, try **Rosewood Beijing** (00 86 10 6597 8888, rosewoodhotels.com/en/beijing; doubles from £300, room only), in the financial district – worth it for its 'world' of breakfasts. For proximity to the Forbidden City, splash out on the **Waldorf Astoria** (00 86 10 8520 8989, waldorfastoria3.hilton.com; doubles from £220, B&B).

Further information

Taxis from the airport take about 40 minutes and cost about £15. **Travel China Guide** (travelchinaguide.com) and **China Highlights** (chinahighlights.com) offer indispensable information about local etiquette, packing and ground transportation. Most nationalities, including UK citizens, need a visa. You can download a visa application at **travelchinaguide.com** and book an appointment with your local Chinese Visa centre a month in advance. It should cost £90.



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