



Local's Guide

Beijing

Australian creative and former managing editor of Time Out Beijing Frank Sweet uncovers the secrets of this enigmatic megalopolis.

Photography LEIGH GRIFFITHS



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PROUDLY MODERN YET steered by a very deep respect for its past, 'The Jing' to me is an endlessly fascinating super-city located in the dead centre of an emerging world order. It is huge, its speed of life breakneck and, to untrained eyes (and untuned ears), the prospect of navigating its 16,000 square kilometres and 23 million inhabitants is daunting; when you're not at peak vitality in the belly of a superpower, you only wither.

But if you like your adventures bold and you are willing to scrap for them, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more compelling destination.

Just like the pollution, opportunity also hangs thick in the air throughout Beijing, attracting a vivacious set from around the nation and across the globe who feed off the capital city's energy — a by-product of China's economic growth spurt. Beijingers can be as much a reason to visit as the Wall, the Square and the duck; and lend it a delightfully unhinged quality that you just don't get with the more sophisticated cities of the south. I was lucky enough to be one for a few years, and this is what's good here.

Let's start in the Gulou area. Despite a jarring spate of closures throughout the youthful area over the past decade or so, the star of Dongcheng District makes for a hotbed of young creatives and their consumption habits, and features a brilliantly gritty collection of pokey cocktail bars, restaurants and galleries.

Perhaps the pokiest of all, Sichuanese restaurant **Zhang Mama** is as good as it gets for homestyle *chuan cai* (Sichuanese cuisine) in Beijing, not to mention one of the cheapest feeds in the district. Even after annexing its next-door neighbour



MEET YOUR GUIDE

Frank Sweet aka 'Honest Frank' is a musician, actor, designer, writer and former managing editor of *Time Out Beijing*. Sweet's creative pursuits are unified under the banner Honest Frank's Quality Global Empire: The Global Empire You Can Trust!™, where quality and attention to detail — from his hip-hop in Mandarin to his Mandarin AFL commentary — are sacrosanct.

and doubling in capacity, wait times at this *hutong* (alleyway) institution remain glacial; its 30-odd seats are some of Beijing's most coveted — especially during summer — but completely worth waiting forever for. The *hui guo rou* (twice-cooked pork belly) here is all kinds of umami-unctuous while the *mala oupian* (mouth-numbing lotus root) is a torching reminder of what the Sichuan peppercorn is capable of. Zhang Mama's menu appears in Chinese only, with patrons required to scribble down their orders in characters. Beijingers are friendly and will no doubt provide a helping hand if they catch you floundering.

In the same district and hailing from a similar part of the country (and school of cooking), **Pangmei Mianzhuang** ('Fat Sister's Noodle House') specialises in Chongqing noodles; again ruinously spicy and oily, again outrageously flavourful. Another *hutong* hit, a meal from Pangmei Mianzhuang is faster than at Zhang Mama, and this restaurant is a tickle more capacious, meaning wait times here are usually sub-10 minutes. The *wanzhamian* (noodles with mince and split cowpeas) and the *xiaomian* ('little' noodles), both are essential — go with a friend and share or go solo twice. Pair that feast with a glass of *suanmeitang* (sour plum juice) or a tinnie from a nearby shop (you can do that in Beijing), and get to slurping away.

Hidden away not far from Fat Sister's Noodle House, and in a traditional *hutong* courtyard, you'll find Floridian transplant David Putney's world-first speciality baijiu bar **Capital Spirits Baijiu Bar and Distillery**. It knocks out some of the city's more cleverly assembled libations, putting the divisive sorghum



OPENER The Lama Temple, a Tibetan Buddhist temple. **1.** Cyclists pedal past the CMG Headquarters building in Beijing's CBD. **2.** Downtown Gulou. **3.** Chef carving duck at Country Kitchen. **4.** Picturesque Houhai Park. **5.** Selection of Country Kitchen dishes. **6.** A trishaw rides through Dashilan. **7.** The Beijing city skyline.

spirit at the centre of a grungy cocktail program. He also has some cool snake-in-a-jar liquor. Over on Gulou Dong Dajie, is **Temple Bar**: spiritual home to Beijing's thriving punk and metal scenes. Booked by a Chicagoan provocateur who calls himself Chairman WOW, shows here are consistently wild and invariably free. Downstairs is **Dada**, far and away the capital's best alternative club. You might be feeling wobblier now, so bedtime in this neck of the woods is a no-brainer. Boutique courtyard hotel **The Orchid** is unbeatable for charm (while featuring one mean East-Mediterranean brunch at in-house restaurant **Toast**) and is one of my favourite hotels in China, as well as being a launching spot for history-laden sites such as the **Bell and Drum Towers**, the **Lama Temple**, **Confucius Temple** and **Houhai Lake**, the latter of which heaves and glows with tourist trappings and lakeside karaoke: it's undeniably fun, in a gross way. For top-shelf atmosphere, though, book one of The Orchid's beguiling satellite properties; all a couple of minutes walk from reception (and the aforementioned brunch).

Just beyond the line of the former city walls, the Sanlitun area offers precisely none of the historical appeal that defines Greater Gulou, operating more as a nouveau playground for the capital city's wealthier set: it is the physical manifestation of China's 21st-century fiscal miracle. The high-fashion ➤



STAY

Rosewood Beijing Jing Guang Centre, Chaoyang District; www.rosewoodhotels.com. **The Opposite House** 11 Sanlitun Rd, Chaoyang District; www.theoppositehouse.com. **The Orchid** 65 Baochao Hutong, Dongcheng District; www.theorchidbeijing.com.





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8. The lobby of **The Opposite House**, designed by acclaimed Japanese architect Kengo Kuma. 9. Diners at popular restaurant Pangmei Mianzhuang. 10. Interior of one of the elegant suites at Rosewood Beijing.



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10

shopping precinct is the yin to Gulou's yang, home to Beijing's boujee bars, clubs, restaurants and hotels, and is decidedly more 'international' in feel. In the thick of it all, boutique hotel **The Opposite House** — designed by Japanese architect Kengo Kuma — is a terrific launching point from which to get luxe downtown. You won't find better dim sum than at the property's broodingly debonair Cantonese restaurant **Jing Yaa Tang**, a sunken former nightclub helmed by chef Li Dong, whose Peking duck is exemplary. For a post-duck drink, Yongli International Service Apartment's **Botany** is the apartment bar to end all apartment bars; Frankie Zou's cocktail skills means a drink here can be the best of the night.

South of here, near the **Forbidden City** (and you should see the Forbidden City, but you can Google that — outside China, that is) and a certain pickled Chairman, lies the labyrinthine neighbourhood of Dashilan, another warren-like network of hutongs, though with a markedly different feel to those found in and around Gulou. There's a good week's worth of exploring to be done here, but as an initial point of call, do make a beeline for the superb museum **Beijing Postcards** and ask after Lars Ulrik Thom, a super-chatty Danish Beijing historian with about 20 years of experience cataloguing the past stories of what is one of Beijing's oldest and quirkiest neighbourhoods. Ask him about the former brothels and the Ming dynasty pharmacy-cum-cafe that used to make dog skin 'Band-Aids'.

For those doing the Forbidden City-Dashilan double in one run, you're most likely going to be weak and primed to spend big on wild accommodation. If that's the case and you're cool with it, haul your fragile posterior to the **Rosewood Beijing** and

enrobe yourself in sheer extravagance and a rare echelon of service (each suite comes with a dedicated butler). **Country Kitchen** is a *Dongbei cai* (Northeastern cuisine) restaurant with superb high-homestyle cooking. Unlike most eateries you'll find in Beijing, it should be booked in advance, while downstairs executive chef Jarrod Verbiak's **Bistrot B** is truly the definitive French offering in the capital, and does an incomparable steak tartare. The Rosewood Beijing can also take good care of your Great Wall of China plans, too — just stay away from the soulless rebuilds at Badaling and Mutianyu. I like the wilder sections.

For prime weather, visit in April or late September — these are what we refer to as the 'mum months' — the time when the city receives the most visiting mums, and mums know best. Beijing is utterly beguiling. Unravelling its numerous social puzzles will consume you, if you let it — and you should. 🍷

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EAT

- Bistrot B** and **Country Kitchen**
Jing Guang Centre, Chaoyang District; +86 10 6597 8888.
- Jing Yaa Tang**
11 Sanlitun Rd, Chaoyang District; www.theoppositehouse.com. **Pangmei Mianzhuang** 6
Xiang'er Hutong, Dongcheng District; +86 10 6022 6706.
- Toast** 65 Baochao Hutong, Dongcheng District; +86 10 8404 4818. **Zhang Mama** 4 Fensiting Hutong, Dongcheng District; +86 137 1785 0992.

DRINK

- Botany** 1209-2 Yongli International Service Apartment, Chaoyang District; +86 10 6463 6091.
- Capital Spirits Baijiu Bar and Distillery** 16 XinSi Hutong, Dongcheng District; www.capitalspiritsbj.com. **Dada** 206 Gulou Dong Dajie, Dongcheng District; +86 183 1108 0818.
- Temple Bar** 206 Gulou Dong Dajie, Dongcheng District; +86 134 2607 0554.

SEE

- Beijing Postcards** 97 Yangmeizhu Xiejie, Xuanwu District; www.bjpostcards.com. **Bell and Drum Towers** 9 Zhong Lou Wan Hu Tong, Dongcheng District.
- Confucius Temple** 15 Guozijian St, Dongcheng District.
- Forbidden City** 4 Jingshan Front St, Dongcheng District.
- Houhai Lake** Xicheng District.
- Lama Temple** 12 Yonghegong St, Dongcheng District; +86 10 8419 1919.