



Gānsù

POPULATION: 26.4 MILLION

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Best Places to Eat

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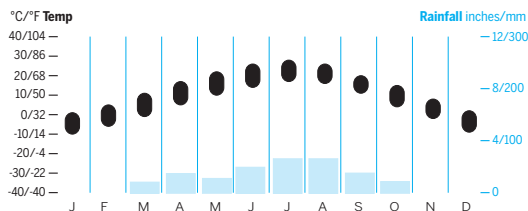
Why Go?

Synonymous with the Silk Road, the slender province of Gānsù flows east to west along the Hexi Corridor, the gap through which all manner of goods once streamed from China to Central Asia. The constant flow of commerce left Buddhist statues, beacon towers, forts, chunks of the Great Wall and ancient trading towns in its wake.

Gānsù (甘肅) offers an entrancingly rich cultural and geographic diversity. Historians immerse themselves in Silk Road lore, art aficionados swoon before the wealth of Buddhist paintings and sculptures, while adventurers hike to glaciers and tread along paths well worn by Tibetan nomads. The ethnic diversity is astonishing: in Línxià, the local Hui Muslims act as though the silk route lives on; in Xiàhé and Lángmùsì, a pronounced Tibetan disposition holds sway, while other minority groups such as the Bao'an and Dongxiang join in the colourful minority patchwork.

When to Go

Lánzhōu



February & March Join the Tibetan pilgrims for the magnificent Monlam Festival in Xiàhé.

April & May Before the full heat of summer switches on.

September & October For crisp north Gānsù autumnal colours, blue skies and cooler climes.

History

Although the Qin dynasty had a foothold on eastern Gānsù, the first significant push west along the Hexi Corridor came with the Han dynasty. An imperial envoy, Chang Ch'ien, was dispatched to seek trading partners and returned with detailed reports of Central Asia and the route that would become known as the Silk Road. The Han extended the Great Wall through the Hexi

Corridor, expanding their empire in the process. As trade along the Silk Road grew, so did the small way stations set up along its route; these grew into towns and cities that form the major population centres of modern Gānsù. The stream of traders from lands east and west also left their mark in the incredible diversity of modern Gānsù. The Buddhist grottoes at Mògāo, Mài jì Shān and elsewhere are testament to the



Gānsù Highlights

- 1 Peruse the astonishing **Mògāo Caves** (p828)
- 2 Get thoroughly spooked climbing Hézuo's **Milarepa Palace** (p817)
- 3 Camp beneath the stars amid the vast dunes of the

Singing Sands Mountain (p830)

- 4 Go with the Tibetan flow around the **Labrang Monastery** (p812) *kora* in Xiàhé

- 5 Hike to your heart's content through the

fantastic scenery around **Lángmùsì** (p818)

- 6 Stand head to head with the vast **Sleeping Buddha** of Zhāngyè (p821)

- 7 Feel the Gobi wind in your hair as you stand on the ramparts of the **Jiāyūguān Fort** (p824)

PRICE INDICATORS

The following price indicators are used in this chapter:

Sleeping

\$	less than Y200
\$\$	Y200 to Y500
\$\$\$	more than Y500

Eating

\$	less than Y40
\$\$	Y40 to Y100
\$\$\$	more than Y100

great flourishing of religious and artistic schools along the Silk Road.

The mixing of cultures in Gānsù eventually led to serious tensions, which culminated in the Muslim rebellions of 1862 to 1877. The conflict left millions dead and virtually wiped out Gānsù's Muslim population. Ethnic tensions have never really left the province; in March 2008, pro-Tibetan demonstrations in Xiàhé led to riots. Lethal mud slides after heavy rain in August 2010 led to the deaths of hundreds of villagers in Zhōuqū (south Gānsù).

Climate

Gānsù rarely sees any rain, and dust storms can whip up, particularly in the spring. Winters are nippy from November to March.

Language

Gānsù has its own group of regional Chinese dialects, loosely known as Gansuhua (part of the northwestern Lanyin Mandarin family). On the borders of Qīnghǎi and Sīchuān there is a significant Tibetan population speaking the Tibetan Amdo dialect.

i Getting There & Around

Lánzhōu has flights around the country; other airports such as Dūnhuáng and Jiáyùguān only have a handful of flights to major cities, with fewer flights in the winter.

Train is the best way to connect the province's Silk Road sights and continue along the popular rail routes to Xīnjiāng or Xī'ān. For southern Gānsù you are largely at the mercy of (sometimes painfully slow) buses.

LÁNZHŌU & SOUTHERN GĀNSÙ

Lánzhōu is a major transportation hub employed by most travellers as a springboard for elsewhere. The Tibetan-inhabited areas around Xiàhé and Lángmùsì are the principal enticements – perfect stopovers for overlanders heading to or from Sīchuān.

Lánzhōu

兰州

📍0931 / POP 3.2 MILLION

Roughly at China's cartographic bullseye, Gānsù's elongated capital marks the half-way point for overlanders trekking across the country. The city sprawls in an inelegant east-west concrete melange for over 20km along the southern banks of the Yellow River (Huáng Hé). Growing up on a strategic stretch of the river, and sitting between competing Chinese and Central Asian empires, Lánzhōu frequently changed hands. Trapped between mountains, Lánzhōu has frequent bad-air days when a grey sun sets anaemically over a hazy city.

👁 Sights

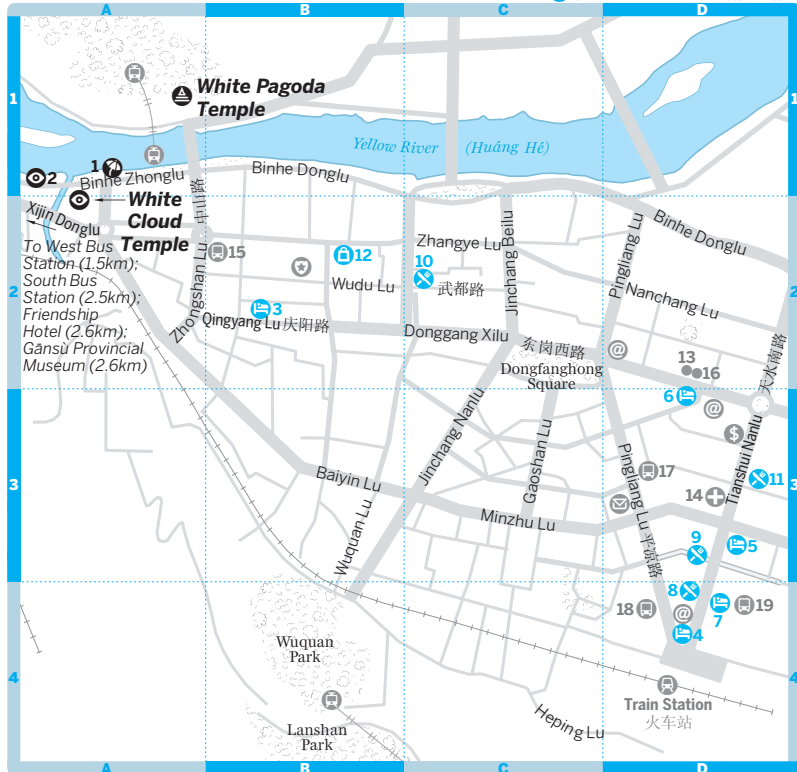
FREE **Gānsù Provincial Museum** MUSEUM

(甘肅省博物館; Gānsù Shěng Bówùguǎn; Xījin Xilu; audio guide for Silk Road exhibition Y10; ☀9am-5pm Tue-Sun) This sparkling museum has an intriguing collection of Silk Road artefacts, including inscribed Han-dynasty **wooden tablets** used to relay messages along the Silk Road and a graceful Eastern Han (25 BC-AD 220) bronze horse galloping upon the back of a swallow. The latter, known as the '**Flying Horse of Wuwei**', was unearthed at Léitái and is much reproduced across northwestern China. Unearthed 120km northeast of Lánzhōu, a 2nd-century-BC **silver plate** depicting Bacchus, the Greco-Roman god of wine, may set your mind pondering. Among other items on view are **Persian coins**, some lovely **Bodhisattva statues** from Tiāntīshān and a collection of dinosaur skeletons upstairs, where you will also find a cafe. Bus 1 goes here.

White Cloud Temple

TAOIST TEMPLE

(白雲觀; Báiyún Guān; Binhe Zhonglu; ☀7am-5.30pm) This largely rebuilt Qing-dynasty Taoist temple is an oasis of reverential calm at the heart of the city. About 20 black-clad bearded **monks** inhabit the place – several of them are qualified to



Lánzhōu

☉ Top Sights

- White Cloud Temple.....A2
White Pagoda Temple.....A1

☉ Sights

- 1 Beach.....A1
2 Water Wheels.....A1

🛏 Sleeping

- 3 Grand Soluxe Hotel Gansu.....B2
4 Huálián BīnguǎnD4
5 Jīnjiāng InnD3
6 JJ Sun Hotel.....D3
7 Zījīnghuā Jiǔdiàn.....D4

🍴 Eating

- 8 Héjiāhé.....D4
9 Hézhèng Lù Night Market
Entrance.....D3

- 10 Jiànjūn Niúròumiàn.....C2
11 NéngrénjùD3

🛒 Shopping

- 12 Foreign Languages
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Information

- 13 Gānsù Airport Booking
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14 Lǎobǎixíng Pharmacy.....D3

Transport

- 15 Bus 111 to South Bus Station.....B2
16 China Eastern AirlinesD2
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18 Main Long-Distance Bus
Station.....D4
19 Tiānshuǐ Bus Station.....D4

read fortunes; other **soothsayers** in eccentric attire and antique glasses muster outside the temple.

White Pagoda Hill

PARK

(白塔山; Báitǎ Shān; admission Y6; ☀️6.30am-8.30pm summer) This park is on the northern bank of the Yellow River. At its zenith is **White Pagoda Temple** (白塔寺; Báitǎ Sì), originally built during the Yuan dynasty (1206-1368), from where there are good views across the city. A **cable car** (incl park ticket up/down/return Y25/15/30) spans the river; the terminal is just to the west of Zhōngshān Bridge. Bus 34 or 137 comes here from in front of the train station on Tianshui Nanlu.

Water wheels

WATER WHEELS

(水车园; Shuǐchē yuán; admission Y4) A short stroll from White Cloud Temple are these two huge copies of irrigation devices that once lined the Yellow River.

Beach

BEACH

East of the water wheels, this beach (河滩; Hétān) area is bursting on weekends with volleyball games, kites, speedboats and coracle raft trips (Y30 to Y40) across the chocolate-coloured river.

Sleeping

The most practical area to base yourself is in the east, home of the train station; always fish for discounts. Most budget hostels near the train station won't accept foreigners.

JJ Sun Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(锦江阳光酒店; Jǐnjiāng Yángguāng Jiūdiàn; ☎️880 5511; www.jjsunhotel.com; 589 Donggang Xilu; 东岗西路589号; tw/s Y800/900, discounts of 30%; 🍷🍷) This good four-star choice has well-groomed, spacious and affordable rooms that are larger than those at the Grand Soluxe and come with very clean bathrooms. Pleasant wood-panelled restaurant on 2nd floor.

Zijīnghuā Jiūdiàn

HOTEL \$\$

(紫荆花酒店; Bauhinia Hotel; ☎️863 8918; 36 Tianshui Nanlu; 天水南路36号; tw & d Y388-400, tr Y380, discounts of up to 70%; 🍷) Once you get beyond the depressing ground-floor bar and dawdling lifts, rooms are good and discounts fab. Aim for a south-facing corner room, which nets you extra space and good mountain views at this colossal tower hotel near the train station.

Grand Soluxe Hotel Gānsù

HOTEL \$\$\$

(甘肃阳光大酒店; Gānsù Yángguāng Dàjiūdiàn; ☎️460 8888; www.sunshineplaza.com.cn; 428 Qingyang Lu; 庆阳路428号; d Y1060-1480, discounts of 40%; 🍷🍷) The gilded lobby is brash, but overall this is a reasonably luxurious 'five-star' option overseen by pleasant staff. Business kings are small with shower (no bath), but well turned out and good value with discounts; elite kings are larger.

Friendship Hotel

HOTEL \$

(友谊宾馆; Yǒuyi Bīnguǎn; ☎️268 9169; 16 Xijin Xilu; 西津西路16号; old wing tw Y60, with bathroom Y108-280, new wing tw Y380; 🍷) The old-fashioned cheapo rooms with wood floorboards but no shower feel like a boarding school – or an asylum – but are decent and good value. The Y108 rooms are vast but crummy. For better rooms, head to the Jiābīn Lóu (Guest Hall), where much more pleasant doubles await. Although there's a tennis court and green grounds to the rear, the architecture is best described as 'Great Wall of Kitsch'.

Huálián Bīnguǎn

HOTEL \$

(华联宾馆; ☎️499 2000; 7-9 Tianshui Nanlu; 天水南路7-9号; d Y189, tr Y319, discounts of 40-50%; 🍷) This 360-room monster has comfortable, slightly scruffy rooms and a big lobby with a travel agency. The staff are friendly and speak English, but you'll have to put up with some traffic noise and slow lifts; discounts are attractive. It's right opposite the train station, with a handy internet cafe located next door. Trips to Bīnglíng Sì arranged (Y198).

Jinjiāng Inn

HOTEL \$

(锦江之星; Jǐnjiāng Zhīxīng; ☎️861 7333; 182 Tianshui Lu; 天水路182号; tw & d Y189; 🍷🍷) Neat and tidy express business-style hotel around 1km north of the train station with unfussy, compact and well-maintained rooms and snappy service. No discounts, but great value.

Eating & Drinking

Lánzhōu enjoys nationwide fame for its *niùròumiàn* (牛肉面), beef noodle soup that's spicy enough to make you snort. Two handy phrases are 'jiā ròu' (加肉; add beef) and 'bùyào làjiāo' (不要辣椒; without chillies).

Hézhèng Lù night market

MARKET \$

(和政路夜市市场入口; Hézhèng Lù Yèshìchǎng Rùkǒu) This bustling market, extending

from Tianshui Lu to Pingliang Lu, is terrific for savouring the flavours of the northwest. The mix of Hui, Han and Uighur stalls offers everything from goat's head soup to steamed snails, *ròujiābǐng* (肉夹饼; mutton served inside a 'pocket' of flat bread), lamb dishes seasoned with cumin, *dàpánjī* (large plate of spicy chicken and potatoes), Sīchuān hole-in-the-wall outfits, dumpings, spare-rib noodles and more.

Nénggrénjù

HOTPOT \$\$

(能仁聚; 216 Tianshui Lu; hotpot for 2 ¥50; ☎11am-10pm; 回) Tasty Běijīng-style traditional lamb hotpot (涮羊肉; *shuān yángròu*) spot where you swiftly scald wafer-thin strips of lamb to bleach out the colour before dunking in sesame sauce; great for group dining with beers but also good solo; ensure you check your bill carefully, though.

Jiànjūn Niúròumiàn

NOODLES \$

(建军牛肉面; 234 Jingning Lu; meals ¥7; ☎6am-5pm) This popular restaurant makes an early start but shuts early. Grab a ticket from the desk at front and exchange it with kitchen staff, who will ladle you out a huge, filling and sweltering bowl of delicious beef noodles (牛肉面; *niúròumiàn*), eye-rollingly spiced up with chilli and coriander.

Héjiāhé

CHINESE FAST FOOD \$

(家和和; Tianshui Nanlu; meals ¥20; ☎6am-11pm) Convenient, bright and unfussy fast-food restaurant with a helpful photo menu and range of quickly delivered dishes, including *hóngshāoròu fàn* (红烧肉饭; braised pork and rice; ¥15) and *nǎichá* (奶茶; bubble tea; ¥4.50).



Shopping

Foreign Languages Bookshop

BOOKS

(外文书店; Wàiwén Shūdiàn; 35 Zhangye Lu; ☎8.30am-6.30pm) In the centre of town.



Information

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; Tianshui Lu; ☎8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri) Has an indoor ATM.

China International Travel Service (CITS; 中国国际旅行社; Zhōngguó Guójí Lúxíngshè; ☎232 3048; www.citsgs.com; Xijin Xilu) Small office next to Gansu Provincial Museum.

China Post (中国邮政; Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; cnr Minzhu Lu & Pingliang Lu; ☎8am-7pm)

Hóngchén Internet Cafe (宏晨网吧; Hóngchén Wǎngbā; per hr ¥2.5; ☎24hr) On the 2nd floor, next to Huálián Bīngguǎn.

Internet cafe (网吧; wǎngbā; 2nd fl, 449 Donggang Xilu; per hr ¥2; ☎24hr)

Internet cafe (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr ¥2; ☎24hr) Next to No 710 Donggang Xilu, in between Kodak Express outlet and Bank of China.

Lǎobǎixīng Pharmacy (老百姓大药房; Lǎobǎixīng Dàyàofáng; Tianshui Lu; ☎24hr) Evening service, knock on door.

Public Security Bureau (PSB; 公安局; Gōng'ānjú; 482 Wudu Lu; ☎8.30-11.30am & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) The foreign-affairs branch is located on the ground floor, next to a giant Orwellian tower. Visa extensions are generally granted on the same day; one photo required. At the time of writing the office was being refurbished and a temporary office was at 52 Huangheyuan Nanbinhe Lu.

Western Travel Service (西部旅行社; Xībù Lúxíngshè; ☎885 0529; 486 Donggang Xilu) Located on the 2nd floor of the west wing of Lánzhōu Fàndiàn. Has English-speaking staff and offers competitively priced tours and ticket bookings.



Getting There & Away

Air

Among other cities, Lánzhōu has flights to Běijīng (Y1340), Dūnhuáng (Y1260), Jiāyuguǎn (Y1080), Kūnmíng (Y1410), Shànghǎi (Y1750) and Xī'ān (Y600). Book tickets from:

China Eastern Airlines (东方航空公司; Zhōngguó Dōngháng Hángkōng; ☎882 1964; 586 Donggang Xilu; ☎office 8.30am-7.30pm, phone line 24hr)

Gānsù Airport Booking Office (甘肃机场售票中心; Gānsù Jīchǎng Shòupiào Zhōngxīn; ☎888 9666; 520 Donggang Xilu; ☎8.30am-9pm) Can book all air tickets at discounted prices.

Bus

Lánzhōu has several bus stations, all with departures for Xining. The **main long-distance bus station** (长途车站; chángtú chēzhàn; Pingliang Lu) and the **south bus station** (汽车南站; qìchē nánzhàn; Langongping Lu) are the most useful.

The following services depart from the main long-distance bus station:

Píngliáng ¥82, five to six hours, hourly (7.30am to 5pm)

Tiānshuǐ ¥71.50, four hours, every 30 minutes (7am to 6pm)

Xīníng ¥58, three hours, every 30 minutes (7.10am to 8.10pm)

Yínchuān ¥120, six hours, every two hours (7.20am to 3.20pm)

GETTING TO GĀNNÁN

At the time of writing, the authorities were still twitchy about individual travellers taking buses southwest to Línxià, Hézuò, Xiàhé and Lángmùsì, so travellers buying tickets to these destinations at the south bus station were required to provide a photocopy of their passport information page and visa page. The ticket office could not provide these, so you had to supply them yourself; a shop left out of the bus station and across the road can photocopy your passport for you, but if you are taking an early bus get this done beforehand somewhere else as the shop may not be open. Be aware that this regulation may have changed by the time you read this.

The following services depart from the south bus station:

Hézuò Y32, four hours, every 30 minutes (7am to 4.30pm)

Lángmùsì Y73, eight hours, two daily (8.30am and 9.30am)

Línxià Y30, three hours, every 30 minutes (7am to 7pm)

Xiàhé Y45.50, six hours, three daily (7.30am, 8.30am and 2pm)

Zhāngyè Y100, 12 hours, one daily (6pm)

The **west bus station** (汽车西站: qìchē xīzhàn; Xijin Xilu) has departures to Liújiāxiá (Y10.50, two hours, every 20 minutes 7am to 6pm); for Bǐnglíng Sì, see p809. The **east bus station** (汽车东站: qìchē dōngzhàn; ☎841 8411; Pingliang Lu) has sleepers to Zhāngyè and Jiāyùguān, Tiānshuǐ (Y71.5) and Píngliáng (Y82 to Y98, regular, five to six hours).

Hidden off the main street, the **Tiānshuǐ bus station** (天水汽车站: Tiānshuǐ Qìchēzhàn; Tianshui Lu) has buses for eastern Gānsù, including Luòmén (Y50, four hours).

Train

Lánzhōu is the major rail link for trains heading to and from western China. Departing from Lánzhōu, the T9205 (Y49, 7.29am) is a handy two-tier train that stops in Wúwēi; it departs Wúwēi at 10.19am to continue to Zhāngyè (Y41, two hours) and Jiāyùguān. There are also overnight trains to:

Dūnhuáng Y263, 12 hours

Jiāyùguān Y178, 10 hours

Turpan Y369, 22 hours

You can continue west to Ürümqi (Y390, 24 hours); east is to Xī'ān (hard sleeper Y175). In summer buy your onward tickets a couple of days in advance to guarantee a sleeper berth.

A soft seat in one of the double-decker express trains is by far the most civilised way to get to Xīníng (hard/soft seat Y33/50, 3½ hours). Trains depart at 10.50am and 7pm.

For details on trains to Lhasa, see p890.

i Getting Around

The airport is 70km north of the city. **Airport buses** (☎896 8555) leave every hour from 8am to 7pm just west of the China Eastern Airlines office three hours before scheduled flight departures. The trip costs Y30 and takes 70 minutes. A taxi costs around Y120, or Y30 per seat. Lánzhōu badly needs a metro system.

Useful bus routes:

Buses 1, 6, 31 and 137 From the train station to the west bus station and the Friendship Hotel via Xiguan Shizi.

Bus 111 From Zhongshan Lu (at the Xiguan Shizi stop; 去汽车南站的111路公交车) to the south bus station.

Buses 7 and 10 From the train station up the length of Tianshui Nanlu before heading west and east, respectively.

Public buses cost Y1; taxis are Y7 for the first 3km. A taxi from the train station to the south bus station costs Y20.

Bǐnglíng Sì

炳灵寺

Due to its relative inaccessibility, **Bǐnglíng Sì** (adult/student Y50/25) is one of the few Buddhist grottoes in China to survive the tumultuous 20th century unscathed. Over a period spanning 1600 years, sculptors dangling from ropes carved 183 niches and sculptures into the porous rock along the dramatic canyon walls. Today the cliffs are isolated by the waters of the Liújiāxiá Reservoir (Liújiāxiá Shuǐkù) on the Yellow River. All considered, come here for a nice day out rather than for the cave art alone, which doesn't compare to somewhere like Dūnhuáng.

As with other Silk Road grottoes, wealthy patrons, often traders along the route west, sponsored the development of Bǐnglíng Sì, which reached its height during the prosperous Tang dynasty. The star of the caves is the 27m-high seated **statue of Maitreya**, the future Buddha, but some of the smaller, sway-hipped Bodhisattvas and guardians, bearing an obvious Indian

influence, are equally exquisite. Photos are allowed. Art buffs can climb the staircase to Tang-dynasty caves 169 and 172 for an extra fee of ¥300.

If you've hired your own boat, and thus have more time at the site, you can take a jeep (¥40) or hike 2.5km further up the impressive canyon to a small **Tibetan monastery**.

Note that from November to March, water levels may be too low to visit the caves, so check before setting off.

Western Travel Service (Xibù Lúxíngshè; ☎0931-885 0529; 486 Donggang Xilu) in Lánzhōu can organise a visit to the caves for two people for ¥340 per person.

You can visit Bingling Sì as a day trip from Lánzhōu or en route to Línxià. Frequent buses from Lánzhōu's west bus station (¥12, two hours) run past the Liújiāxiá Reservoir, and will drop you 500m from the boat ticket office.

The going rates for a covered speedboat (seating up to eight people) are ¥400 for the one-hour journey. The boat ticket office is good at hooking up independent travellers with small groups, which will make the price around ¥65 to ¥80 per person. For this you'll get about 1½ hours at the site, which is really a minimum. Private operators close to the dam will pester you with similar rates, and sometimes even cheaper speedboats (¥200). For those that have the time, the ferry (May to October) is just ¥30 for a return trip, but it is a pretty dreary seven-hour return trip! Make sure you bring snacks, sunscreen, cold drinks and a couple of paperbacks.

If you're heading to Línxià after the caves, you can arrange for a speedboat to drop you off at Liánhuātái (莲花台) on the way back. From there, minibuses will taxi you on to Línxià (¥10, one hour).

Línxià

☎0930 / POP 203,200

The bus from Lánzhōu descends after a while into a highly fertile valley before pulling into this slow-moving and lazy Silk Road town where residents carry on as though the camel caravans are just over the horizon. Han China runs out of steam and hits the buffers here: in this overt stronghold of Chinese Islam, the skyline is dominated by onion-domed mosques. Among the goods for sale you'll spot

临夏

gourds, daggers, saddlery, carpets, textiles and oversized spectacles, as well as Muslim and Buddhist religious paraphernalia. Also noticeable are more Western songs on the radio and far fewer excruciating 'hul-loos' from roadside quipsters. Línxià isn't quite a destination in itself, but many travellers break up the trip to or from Xiàhé here and it's a great place to get fed, watered, rested and recharged.

👁 Sights

Wànshòu Temple

TAOIST TEMPLE

(万寿观; Wànshòu Guàn; admission ¥10; ☀7am-8pm) If you have a bit of time to kill, this cedar-scented temple extends seven levels up the hillside at the northwest fringe of Línxià. Along the cliffs you can visit other surrounding temples overlooking the city. Take bus 6 to the west bus station and head for the nine-storey pagoda on the ridge located opposite.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Shuǐquán Bīnguǎn

HOTEL \$

(水泉宾馆; ☎631 4968; 68 Jiefang Nanlu; 解放南路68号; s/d/tr with shared bathroom ¥20/40/60, d with shower ¥60-80; 🍷) This cheapie in front of the Shuǐquán Mosque is handy for the bus station and has fine, clean and spacious rooms, but beds and pillows are hard. Light sleepers may get jolted by the early-morning call to prayer. Rooms on the street side get the most sunlight. Heading out of the south bus station, turn right and walk 200m.

Línxià Fàndiàn

HOTEL \$

(临夏饭店; ☎623 0081; 9 Hongyuan Lu; 红园路9号; tw from ¥180; 🍷) The new block has the better, pricier rooms, while the cheaper ones are in the old block. It's not in the most exciting part of town, about 800m east of the west bus station.

Shuǐquán Cāntīng

MUSLIM \$

(水泉餐厅; Jiefang Nanlu; meals ¥25-50; ☀7.30am-9.30pm) Handily tucked away by the hotel of the same name, this is a good place for a plate of spicy *dàpánjī* (大盘鸡; chicken with green and red peppers and potato in an oily chilli sauce; medium/large ¥50/60); we recommend going for a medium plate unless you have a horse-like hunger or there are three of you. It can be a bit of a wait, but when it arrives the dish is a real feast.

Beidajie Yèshì

NIGHT MARKET

At this market just west of Zhongxin Guangchang (中心广场; Centre Sq), you can sit down alfresco for lamb kebabs (Y0.70 each) and watch vendors fire up tasty *shā guō* (砂锅; minihotpots; Y8) on sheets of flame from around 7pm.

Come evening, street vendors dole out *shā guō* and hot snacks at other strategically placed main intersections.

i Information

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; Jiefang Lu; ☎8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri) On left-hand side of Jiefang Lu around 100m north of Sāndàoqiáo Guǎngchǎng (三道桥广场); 24hr ATM.

Ránqíng Internet Bar (燃情岁月; Ránqíng Suiyuè; Jiefang Lu; per hr Y3.50; ☎24hr) On the 2nd floor behind the Héngshēng Hotel (Héngshēng Bīnguǎn) just before Zhongxin Guangchang.

i Getting There & Away

Línxià has three long-distance bus stations: **south** (*nán zhàn*), **west** (*xī zhàn*) and **east** (*dōng zhàn*). You may dropped off at the west bus station but it is of little use otherwise. The east station is handy for Dōngxiāng and also has buses to Liújiāxiá (Y16, three hours, every 30 minutes 8am to 4pm). Bus 6 links the south and the west bus stations, or a taxi is Y4.

The following services depart from the **south bus station**:

Hézuò, Y20, two hours, every 30 minutes (6am to 5pm)

Lánzhōu, Y29.50, three hours, every 20 minutes (7.30am to 5.30pm)

Tiānshuǐ, Y80, 10 hours, one daily (6.20am)

Xiàhé, Y19, two hours, every 30 minutes (6.30am to 5pm)

Xīning, Y56, eight hours, one daily (6am)

One interesting route is to the Mèngdá Nature Reserve (p872) in Qīnghǎi. The fastest way to the reserve is to catch transport to Dàhéjiā (p811) and charter a taxi (Y40) for the last 15km.

If you're on the slow road to Qīnghǎi, buses to Xúnhuà (Y30, 3½ hours, 8am to 3pm) leave every hour or two from a courtyard behind the Tiānhé Fàndiàn (天河饭店), reachable by walking 350m northeast from the south bus station to the first intersection, Sāndàoqiáo Guangchang (三道桥广场), then turning right and walking 350m to the hotel. From Xúnhuà you'll find onward transport to Xīning or Tóngren.

Suǒnánbà (Dōngxiāng)
锁南坝 (东乡)

☎0930 / POP 12,000

Spilling over a ridge high above Línxià and home to both Hui and Dongxiang minorities, this little market town's only street is a hive of activity, with locals trading wares and occasional shepherds shooing flocks about. The town is called Suǒnánbà, while the surrounding county is Dōngxiāng, but some people also call the town Dōngxiāng.

The Dongxiang people speak an Altaic language and are believed to be descendants of 13th-century immigrants from Central Asia, moved forcibly to China after Kublai Khan's Middle East conquest.

The local **museum** (东乡博物馆; Dōngxiāng Bówùguǎn; ☎712 3286; ☎8.30am-5pm) has an ethnographic room with traditional clothing, saddles and bronze items, much of it resembling items used by Mongols; you may have to ask staff to unlock the small exhibition halls. The museum is on the 3rd and 4th floors of the enormous pink-and-orange building opposite the bus station. Captions are in Chinese.

Frequent minibuses (Y5, 40 minutes, 6am to 8pm) head up on the pleasant journey past terraced fields from Línxià's east bus station. To continue to Lánzhōu (Y18, two hours), buses leave Suǒnánbà on the hour from the top of the hill (at the T-junction) between 8am and 4pm. The bus only turns up at the last minute, as the driver spends about 30 minutes trawling the main road looking for passengers.

Dàhéjiā 大河家

☎0930 / POP 4500

With sweeping views over the Yellow River, towering red cliffs and (in summer) verdant green terraces, Dàhéjiā is a kaleidoscope of colour. The surrounding area is home to a significant population of Bao'an (保安族), Muslims who speak a Mongolic language. The Bao'an are famed for producing knives and share cultural traits with the Hui and Dongxiang. Their Mongol roots come out during summer festivals, when it is possible to see displays of wrestling and horse riding.

A 12km loop road from Dàhéjiā goes out to the peaceful Bao'an villages of **Gānhétán** (甘和谈), **Méipó** (媒婆) and **Dàdūn** (大敦).

You can walk to the villages in about 40 minutes or hire a taxi (Y30).

Unless you have a special interest in minority culture in China, Dàhèjiā is a bit far for a side trip. However, the town is worth visiting if you're travelling on the road between Línxià and Xīnǐng. The **Sānlíán Bīnguǎn** (三联宾馆; ☎139 9309 7599; dm Y20-30, tw with bathroom Y50-88) is a decent Hui-run hotel in town, near the Yellow River bridge.

Most buses between Línxià and Xīnǐng will stop here. From Línxià you can also catch an hourly minibus (Y18, two hours, 7am to 4.30pm) from the *dàxīqìchēzhàn* (大西汽车站), which is different to the regular west bus station.

Xiàhé

☎0941 / POP 70,000

The alluring monastic town of Xiàhé attracts an astonishing band of visitors, from backpack-laden students, insatiable wanderers, shaven-headed Buddhist nuns, Tibetan nomads in their most colourful finest, camera-toting tour groups and dusty, itinerant beggars. Most visitors are rural Tibetans, whose purpose is to pray, prostrate themselves and seek spiritual fulfilment at holy Labrang monastery (Lābǔléng Sì).

In a beautiful mountain valley at 2920m above sea level, Xiàhé has a certain rhythm about it and visitors quickly tap into its fluid motions. The rising sun sends pilgrims out to circle the 3km *kora* (pilgrim path) that rings the monastery. Crimson-clad monks shuffle into the temples to chant morning prayers. It's easy to get swept up in the action, but some of the best moments come as you relax in a cosy teahouse, hands warmed by a hot bowl of yak tea.

The area was long part of the Tibetan region of Amdo. As a microcosm of south-western Gānsù, the area's three principal ethnic groups are represented in Xiàhé. In rough terms, Xiàhé's population is 50% Tibetan, 40% Han and 10% Hui. Labrang Monastery marks the division between Xiàhé's mainly Han and Hui Chinese eastern quarter and the scruffy Tibetan village to the west.

Despite Xiàhé's ostensible tranquility, these ethnic groups don't necessarily mix peacefully. The Tibetan community

maintains a strong solidarity with their brethren on the plateau, and demonstrations and rioting here in the wake of the 2008 riots in Lhasa led to the region's being closed to individual travellers till early 2010.

👁 Sights

Labrang Monastery

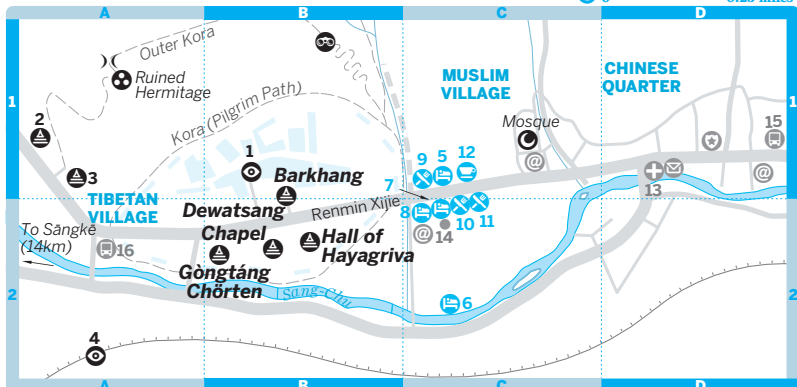
TIBETAN MONASTERY

(拉卜楞寺; Lābǔléng Sì; admission Y40) Even the most illustrious of China's other incense-wreathed temples pale in comparison with the vast magnitude of this astounding complex. The palpable spiritual energy that emanates from this sacred monastery is only matched by the potent veneration brought by its unending flow of Tibetan pilgrims. Even if Tibet is not on your itinerary, the monastery sufficiently conveys the esoteric mystique of its devout persuasions, leaving indelible impressions of a deeply sacred domain.

The monastery is one of the six major Tibetan monasteries of the Gelugpa order (Yellow Hat sect of Tibetan Buddhism). The others are Ganden, Sera and Drepung Monasteries near Lhasa; Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse; and Kumbum (Tā'ěr Sì; p868) near Xīnǐng, Qīnghǎi.

Labrang monastery was founded in 1709 by Ngagong Tsunde (E'angzongzhe in Chinese), the first-generation Jamyang (a line of reincarnated Rinpoches or living Buddhas ranking third in importance after the Dalai and Panchen Lamas), from nearby Gānjiā. At its peak the monastery housed nearly 4000 monks, but their ranks greatly declined during the Cultural Revolution. Numbers are recovering, and are currently restricted to 1200 monks, drawn from Qīnghǎi, Gānsù, Sìchuān and Inner Mongolia.

With its endless squeaking prayer wheels, hawks circling overhead and the deep throb of Tibetan trumpets resonating from the surrounding hills, Labrang is a monastery in the entire sense of the word. In addition to the chapels, residences, golden-roofed temple halls and living quarters for the monks, Labrang is also home to six *tratsang* (monastic colleges or institutes), exploring esoteric Buddhism, theology, medicine, astrology and law. Many of the chapel halls are illuminated in a yellow glow by yak butter lamps, their strong-smelling fuel scooped out from luminous tubs.



Xiàhé

Top Sights

- Barkhang.....B1
 Dewatsang Chapel.....B2
 Gòngtáng Chörten.....B2
 Hall of Hayagriva.....B2

Sights

- 1 Monastery Ticket Office.....B1
 2 Ngakpa Gompa.....A1
 3 Nunnery.....A1
 4 Thangka Display Terrace.....A2

Sleeping

- 5 Labrang Baoma Hotel.....C1
 6 Labrang Red Rock International
 Hostel.....C2
 7 Overseas Tibetan Hotel.....C2
 8 Tara Guesthouse.....C2

Eating

- Everest Café.....(see 7)
 9 Nomad Restaurant.....C1
 10 Snowy Mountain
 Café.....C2
 11 Tsewong's Cafe.....C2

Drinking

- 12 Teahouses.....C1

Information

- 13 Dèshèngtáng
 Pharmacy.....D1
 14 OT Travels & Tours.....C2

Transport

- 15 Bus Station.....D1
 16 Buses to Dájūntān.....A2

The only way to visit the interior of these buildings is with a tour, which generally includes the **Institute of Medicine**, the **Manjushri Temple**, the **Serkung** (Golden Temple) and the main **Prayer Hall** (Grand Sutra Hall), plus a **museum** of relics and yak-butter sculptures. English tours (Y40) of the monastery leave the ticket office (售票处; Shòupiàochù) around 10.15am and 3.15pm; take the morning tour if you can as there's more to see. An alternative is to latch on to a Chinese tour. Even better is to show up at around 6am or 7am to be with the monks. At dusk the hillside resonates with the throaty sound of sutras being chanted behind the wooden doors.

The rest of the monastery can be explored by walking the *kora* (see the boxed text, p814) and although many of the temple halls are padlocked shut, there are a couple of separate smaller chapels you can visit. Over three floors, the **Barkhang** (admission Y10; ☉9am-noon & 2-5pm) is the monastery's traditional printing press (with rows upon rows of over 20,000 wood blocks for printing) and is well worth a visit. Photos are allowed.

Its interior illuminated by a combination of yak-butter lamps and electric light bulbs by the thousand, the 31m-tall **Gòngtáng Chörten** (贡唐宝塔; Gòngtáng Bǎotǎ; admission Y10) is a spectacular stupa with lovely

WALK LIKE A TIBETAN

Following the 3km *kora* (pilgrim path) encircling Labrang monastery is perhaps the best approach to grasping its layout, scale and significance. Lined with long rows of squeaking prayer wheels, white-washed *chörtens* (Tibetan stupas) and chapels, the *kora* passes Gōngtáng Chörtēn and Dewatsang Chapel. Tibetan pilgrims with beads in their hands and sunhats on their heads, old folk, mothers with babies and children, shabby nomads and more walk in meditative fashion clockwise along the path (called *zhuānjīngdào*, 'scripture-turning way' in Chinese), rotating prayer wheels as they go. Look also for the tiny meditation cells on the northern hillside.

For a short hike, the more strenuous outer *kora* path takes about an hour and climbs high above the monastery. From the nunnery in the west of town, make your way up the ridge behind and to the left, winding steeply uphill to a bunch of prayer flags and the ruins of a hermitage. The views of the monastery open up as you go along. At the end of the ridge there's a steep descent into town; alternatively, descend into the small valley to the side, passing a sky-burial site en route.

interior murals and fantastic views from the roof onto a landscape dotted with the port-red figures of monks. At the rear of the stupa is a **Sleeping Buddha** (卧佛; Wòfó) depicting Sakyamuni on the cusp of entering nirvana.

The **Dewatsang Chapel** (德哇仓文殊佛殿; Déwacāng Wénshū Fódìān; admission ¥10), built in 1814, ranges over four floors and houses a vast 12m-statue of Manjushri (Wenshu) and thousands of Buddhas in cabinets around the walls. The **Hall of Hayagriva** (马头明王殿; Mǎtóu Míngwáng Diàn; Hall of Horse-head Buddha), destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, was reopened in 2007. Containing vivid and bright murals, the hall also encapsulates a startlingly fierce 12m-high effigy of Hayagriva – a wrathful manifestation of the usually calm Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin) – with six arms and three faces.

Access to the rest of the monastery area is free, and you can easily spend several hours just walking around and soaking up the atmosphere in the endless maze of mud-packed walls. The Tibetan greeting, in the local Amdo dialect, is '*Cho day mo?*' (How do you do?) – a great icebreaker.

The best morning views of the monastery come from the **Thangka Display Terrace**, a popular picnic spot, or the forested hills south of the main town.

Nunnery

BUDDHIST NUNNERY

This welcoming nunnery (*ani gompa* in Tibetan, 尼姑庵, *nīgū'ān* in Chinese) is on the hill above the Tibetan part of town.

Ngakpa Gompa

BUDDHIST MONASTERY

(红教寺; Hóngjiào Sì; admission ¥5) Next door is the small Nyingmapa (Red Hat) school

monastery, whose lay monks wear striking red and white robes and long, braided hair.



Tours

Lohsang at the OT Travels & Tours is excellent for information and tours of the surrounding area. Tsewong's Cafe is also a great resource for travellers, with a variety of tours and loads of info.



Festivals & Events

Festivals are central to the calendar for both the devotional monks and the nomads who stream into town from the grasslands in multicoloured splendour. Tibetans use a lunar calendar, so dates for individual festivals vary from year to year.

Monlam (Great Prayer) Festival BUDDHIST

This festival starts three days after the Tibetan New Year, which is usually in February or early March. On the morning of the 13th day of the festival, more than 100 monks carry a huge *thangka* (sacred painting on cloth) of the Buddha, measuring more than 30m by 20m, and unfurl it on the hill facing the monastery. This is accompanied by spectacular processions and prayer assemblies.

On the 14th day there is an all-day session of Cham dances performed by 35 masked dancers, with Yama, the lord of death, playing the leading role. On the 15th day there is an evening display of butter lanterns and sculptures. On the 16th day the Maitreya statue is paraded around the monastery.

During the second month (usually starting in March or early April) there are several interesting festivals, with a procession of monastery relics on the seventh day.

Sleeping

Overseas Tibetan Hotel

HOTEL \$

(华侨饭店; Huáqiáo Fàndiàn; ☎712 2642; www.overseastibetanhotel.com; 77 Renmin Xijie; 人民西街77号; dm Y20, d Y160-200; @) Well-run and bustling place, owned by the energetic and bouncy Jesuit-educated Lohsang, a likeable Tibetan with faultless English who runs the *kora* most mornings. Dorms are simple; pricier doubles are well laid out and attractive, coming with a bathroom. Also here are the Everest Cafe, internet access (Y5 per hour), bike hire and a travel agency.

Labrang Red Rock International Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(拉卜楞红石国际青年旅馆; Labüléng Hōngshí Guójī Qíngnián Lúguǎn; ☎712 3698; labranghongshi@yahoo.cn; 253 Yagetang; 雅鹤塘253号; 8/4-bed dm Y30/35, d Y100; @) This Tibetan-themed, very quiet hostel has varnished pine-wood rooms, solar-powered hot showers, a restaurant and bar area and a beautiful display of *thangka*. Doubles are clean and spacious. YHA card holders get a discount; internet is Y5 per hour. Walk past the Tara Guesthouse and turn left before the bridge.

Tara Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(卓玛旅社; Zhuómǎ Lúshè; ☎712 1274; tsering tara@aol.com; 268 Yagetang; 雅鹤塘268号; dm Y10-30, s/tw Y30/50) This long-time budget place is run by monks from Sichuan and has small, comfortable *kang* rooms (shared shower room, no phone) arranged around a courtyard and frugal dorms. There's a terrace with great views over the monastery; hot water is solar powered. English is well spoken at the front desk.

Labrang Baoma Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(拉卜楞宝马宾馆; Labüléng Bǎomǎ Bīnguǎn; ☎712 1078; www.labranghotel.com; 77 Renmin Xijie; 人民西街77号; 4-bed dm Y40, s/d Y290/280, discounts of 45%; @) Pleasant and vibrantly colourful hotel with friendly staff, nice interior courtyard and comfortable ensuite doubles. Bike hire and laundry.

Eating & Drinking

For those of you who can't make it to Tibet, Xiàhé is an opportunity to develop an ap-

petite for the flavours of the Land of Snows, whether it's *momo* (boiled dumplings), *tsampa* (a porridge of roasted barley flour), yak-milk yoghurt, or throat-warming glasses of the local firewater. For Chinese or Hui dishes, try the restaurants around the bus station; cake shops round out the picture.

Nomad Restaurant

TIBETAN \$

(牧民齐全饭庄; Mùmín Qíquán Fànzhǔāng; dishes Y5-25) With its great service and commanding views of the monastery and *kora* route, get into the swing of things with some hot yak milk (Y4), boiled yak meat (Y35), a bowl of *tsampa* (Y8), a plate of *momo* (Y10), vegetable hotpot (Y18) and a volatile shot of Nomad barley alcohol (Y6). It's on the 3rd floor, just before the monastery walls.

Snowy Mountain Cafe

CAFE-RESTAURANT \$

(雪山咖啡馆; Xuěshān Kǎféiguǎn; ☎139 9309 1241; www.snowymtncafe.com; dishes Y4-8) Popular upstairs foreign-owned spot for international dishes with a strong menu ranging from omelettes (cheese omelette Y12) to spag bolognese (Y25), winning pizzas (cheese Y32), Bistec a lo Pobre (steak with fried potatoes, onions and eggs; Y35) and beyond. It's also a good place for hoovering up travel information or organising plane and train tickets.

Tsewong's Cafe

CAFE \$

(泽旺小吃; CáixiàngZéwàng Kǎféiguǎn; ☎138 9397 9763; tsewongscfe@yahoo.com.cn; dishes Y20-50; ☉9am-late) Switched-on traveller cafe with much-loved pizzas (Y38 to Y48) and kebabs (more like a Turkish İskender kebab, with tomatoes, yoghurt and bread), *tsampa* (Y10), a simple Chinese menu plus coffee, internet access and ticketing (Y50 per ticket).

Everest Cafe

CAFE, RESTAURANT \$

(77 Renmin Xijie; 人民西街77号; ☉7am-late) Popular spot for breakfast (Y20), lunch or a late-night beer; attached to the Overseas Tibetan Hotel.

Shopping

Xiàhé is excellent for Tibetan handicrafts, so why not don a cowboy hat or a Tibetan trilby, wrap yourself in a *chuba* (Tibetan cloak), light up some juniper incense, wrap your head in a furry yellow monk's hat, jump into a pair of monk's boots, flap a prayer flag or shell out for brocaded silks, Tibetan cloth, Tibetan-style tents or a

silver teapot? Stacks of handicraft shops line the upper part of the main road, before the monastery walls.

i Information

It's not possible to change travellers cheques in Xiàhé.

China Post (中国邮政; Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; ☎8am-6pm)

Déshèngtáng Pharmacy (德盛堂药店; Déshèngtáng Yàodiàn; ☎8.30am-8pm) Western, Chinese and Tibetan medicine; just west of post office.

Industrial & Commercial Bank of China (ICBC; 工商银行; Gōngshāng Yínháng) Has an ATM and changes US dollars.

Lèlè Wǎngbǎ (乐乐网吧; per hr Y3; ☎24hr) Internet access diagonally across from the bus station, in an off-street courtyard.

OT Travels & Tours (☎712 2642; othotel@public.lz.gs.cn) This reliable travel agency at the Overseas Tibetan Hotel can arrange cars and guides to nearby sights. Contact Losang.

Phoenix Internet Bar (凤凰网络; Fēnghuáng Wǎngluò; per hr Y3; ☎8am-11pm) South of Tara Guesthouse.

Public Security Bureau (PSB; 公安局; Gōng'ānjú; ☎333 8010; ☎9am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Fri) Does not handle visa extensions; you'll need to go to Hézuò, Línxià or Sōngpān.

Xùnjié Wǎngbǎ (迅捷网吧; per hr Y3; ☎24hr) Near the mosque.

i Getting There & Away

There is no airport in Xiàhé, nor do trains run there, but it's regularly serviced by bus. Most travellers head on to either Lánzhōu or Sìchuān; the road less travelled takes you over the mountains to Tóngrén in Qìnghǎi.

The following bus services depart from Xiàhé.

Hézuò Y14, one hour, every 30 minutes (6.30am to 5.30pm)

Lángmùsī Y46.50, four hours, one daily (7.40am)

Lánzhōu Y49.50, 4½ hours, four daily (6.30am, 7.30am, 2.30pm and 8.30pm)

Línxià Y20, three hours, every 30 minutes (6am to 5.30pm)

Tóngrén Y25, five hours, one daily (6.30am)

Xīning Y60, seven hours, one daily (6.10am)

If you can't get a direct ticket to/from Lánzhōu, take a bus to Línxià and change there. Allow time for the journey from Línxià, which can be a real test: the driver may dawdle for an hour for fares, insist on crawling by the side of the road to fill the final seat, stop at an abattoir so an animal

carcass can be flung on board and then stop at checkpoints.

i Getting Around

Most hotels and restaurants hire bikes for Y10 to Y15 per day. Taxis cost Y1 to Y2 per seat for a short trip around town, including to the bus station or monastery.

Around Xiàhé

SĀNGKĒ GRASSLANDS

桑科草原

Expanses of open grassland where Tibetans graze yak herds around the village of Sāngkē (桑科) reward trips along the river 14km up the valley from Xiàhé. Development has turned the area into a small circus, complete with touristy horse rides and fake tourist yurts, but you can keep going to more distant and pristine grasslands in the direction of Amchog. You can cycle up to Sāngkē in about one hour. The twice-daily bus to Dǎjiǔtān (达久滩; Y10) from Xiàhé passes by Sāngkē, but timings mean you have to hitch back. A minivan costs about Y30 return.

GĀNJĪA GRASSLANDS

甘加草原

For more adventure, the Gānjiā Grasslands (Gānjiā Cǎoyuán), 34km from Xiàhé, are far less developed and offer a great day trip from Xiàhé.

The bumpy road crosses the Naren-Ka pass before quickly descending into wide grasslands. Past Gānjiā Xiàn village, a side road climbs 12km to **Trakkar Gompa** (白石崖寺; Báishíyá Sì; admission Y15), a monastery of 90 monks set against a backdrop of vertical rock formations. A 10-minute walk behind the monastery is the **Nekhang** (白石崖溶洞; Báishíyá Róngdòng; admission Y20), a cave complex where pilgrims lower themselves down ropes and ladders into two sacred underground chambers. A Dutch traveller fell to his death here in 2006, and to prevent the same fate we advise avoiding this place; your driver will probably suggest the same.

From Trakkar it's a short drive to the impressive, 2000-year-old, Han-dynasty village of **Bājiǎo** (八角; Karnang in Tibetan; admission Y10), the remarkable 12-sided walls of which now shelter a small village. From here it's a short 5km diversion to the renovated **Tseway Gompa** (佐海寺; Zuǒhǎi Sì; admission Y10), one of the few Bön monasteries in Gānsù. There are great views of Bājiǎo from the ridge behind the monastery.

It is also possible to hike over several days from the grasslands to 4636m-high **Dálǐjiā Shān** (达里加山; Dálǐjiā Mountain), but you will need to be well equipped for the camping trek; Xúnhuà-bound travellers from Línxià can get off the bus from Línxià at the Dálǐjiā mountain pass (达里加山口; Dálǐjiā Shānkǒu), from where you can trek up to the peak. Summer is the best season for such treks as you have more daylight hours, but note that the last Xúnhuà-bound bus will come through the pass at around 4pm, so you will need to hitch on to Xúnhuà if you miss it (or take camping gear). Alternatively, continue walking in the direction of Xúnhuà for around 15km to **Dào wéi Tibetan Village** (道韩藏族乡; Dào wéi Zàngzú Xiāng; also called Guru), where you may find a bed for the night, or take a minibus from Dào wéi to the larger Báizhuāng Village (白庄乡; Báizhuāng Xiāng), which has hotels. Dào wéi itself has a local monastery and is beautifully surrounded by climbable mountains.

OT Travels & Tours and Tsewong's Cafe, both in Xiàhé, can advise on all of these trips and arrange a car for four people and an English-speaking guide for around Y250 for the day; they can also arrange fun camping trips for overnighting on the grasslands.

Hézuò

合作

☎0941 / POP 76,000

The booming regional capital of Gānnán (甘南) prefecture, Hézuò is a transit point for travellers plying the excellent overland route between Gānsù and Sìchuān provinces. The city is also the sight of the incredible Milarepa Palace, a bewitching Tibetan temple ranging spectacularly over nine floors.

👁️ Sights

Milarepa Palace

TIBETAN TEMPLE

(九层佛阁; Sekhar Gutok; Jiǔcéng Fógé; admission Y20; ☀️8.30am-6pm) About 2km from the bus station along the main road towards Xiàhé is this towering temple, ringed by prayer wheels. The port-coloured building is highly unusual in the Tibetan world. It's really worth buying the entrance ticket to investigate the incredible interior (remove your shoes), where a sacred meteorite is also housed. The ground-floor hall is a powerful spectacle, a galaxy of Bodhisattvas, Buddhist statues and celestial figures

gloomily illuminated by yak-butter lamps. Climb upstairs to a further staggering display of lamas and living Buddhas on the 2nd floor; more deities muster on the 4th floor. An unsettling array of fearsome, blue and turquoise tantric effigies awaits on the 6th floor. Make your way to the 8th floor for further effigies of Sakyamuni and Guanyin and views over the hills and town. The town's main monastery, **Tso Gompa** (admission Y20; ☀️9am-6pm), is next door. Bus 1 runs here from the centre of town.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

For not-bad chicken burgers, try Mài difǎo (麦迪堡) just north of the main square.

With Xiàhé just an hour to the north there is little reason to stay here, and cheap hotels are loath to take foreigners. If you get stuck, the **Gānnán Fàndiàn** (甘南饭店; ☎821 4733; Maqu Xilu; 玛曲西路; d Y150-240, tr Y300, discounts of 15%; ☎) has decent, clean and bright doubles with shower; it's located on the southwest corner of the main square.

📍 Information

The post office is north of the square on Renmin Jie.

China Construction Bank (中国建设银行; Zhōngguó Jiànshè Yínháng) On the square south of the bus station; changes money.

Internet cafe (网吧; wǎngbā; Renmin Jie; per hr Y2.50; ☎24hr) North of the square on Renmin Jie.

Public Security Bureau (PSB; 公安局; Gōng'ānjú; ☎8.30am-noon & 2.30-5pm) Turn right out of the bus station onto Sāngqū Xīlù (桑曲西路); the PSB visa office is around 50m along on your left.

📍 Getting There & Away

Hézuò is where buses from Zōigě (Ruò'ěrgài), in Sìchuān, and Xiàhé meet. Most buses to Lángmùsì go from the south bus station. The **central main bus station** has buses to:

Lángmùsì Y32.5, three hours, one daily (9am)

Lánzhōu Y32 to Y60, four hours, regular services (6.30am to 4.30pm)

Línxià Y20, 1½ hours, every 30 minutes

Xiàhé Y14, one hour, every 30 minutes

From the **south bus station** there are buses to:

Lángmùsì Y32.50, three hours, three daily (7am, 10.20am and 12.20pm)

Zōigě Y55, 3½ hours, one daily (7.30am)

A taxi between the two bus stations costs ¥2 per person, or take bus 1 (¥1).

Lángmùsì

郎木寺

☎0941 / POP 3000

Straddling the border between Sichuān and Gānsù is Lángmùsì (Taksang Lhamo in Tibetan), an alpine Amdo Tibetan village nestled among steep grassy meadows, evergreen forests of slender pine trees brushing the sky, crumbling stupas, piles of mani stones and snow-clad peaks. Lovely and moist compared to the lowlands, Lángmùsì is a delightful place, surrounded by countless red and white monastery buildings, flapping prayer flags and the mesmerising sound of monks chanting at twilight.

👁 Sights

The White Dragon River (白龙江; Báilóng Jiāng) divides the town in two.

Kerti Gompa

TIBETAN MONASTERY

(格爾底寺; Géěrdǐ Sì; admission valid 3 days ¥15) Rising up on the Sichuān side of the river is this monastery – otherwise dubbed the Sichuān Monastery – built in 1413, home to around 700 monks and composed of five temples and colleges. A short walk from the monastery stand small pavilions built over a brook whose waters power a round-the-clock revolving of prayer wheels housed inside (the *ne plus ultra* of holiness!)

Serti Gompa

TIBETAN MONASTERY

(賽赤寺; Sàichǐ Sì; admission ¥20) On the Gānsù side, higher up the hill, is this smaller monastery with its golden- and silver-roofed halls. The monastery dates from 1748 and is also simply referred to as Gānsù Monastery. Views are lovely from here. Like its cousin across the border in Sichuān, the monastery is best visited in the morning (7am to 8am and 10.30am to 1pm) and late afternoon (6pm to 8pm).

👤 Activities

Bountiful hiking opportunities radiate in almost every direction. Southwest of Kerti Gompa is **Namo Gorge** (納摩大峽谷; Nàmó Dàxiágǔ), which makes for a superlative 90-minute (return) hike. The gorge contains several sacred grottoes, one dedicated to the Tibetan goddess Palden Lhamo, the other known as the **Fairy Cave** (仙女洞; Xiānnǚ Dòng), which gives the town

its Tibetan name (*lángmù* meaning fairy). Cross rickety bridges flung over the gushing stream, trek past piles of mani stones and prayer flags and hike on into a splendid ravine. After about 30 minutes of clambering over rocks you reach a grassy plain surrounded by towering peaks.

Another popular trek is the hike along the White Dragon River to the **river's source** (白龍江源頭; Báilóng Jiāng Yuántóu) where Chinese hikers go in search of *chóngcǎo* (虫草), a coveted herb used in Chinese medicine.

A lovely walk heads out over the hills from Sertri Gompa to the small village of **Jíkēhé Cūn** (吉科合村); if you can ignore the mountainous backdrop, it's not unlike a jaunt across England's South Downs.

It's also possible to trek up **Red Stone Mountain** (紅石崖; Hóngshí Yá) right next to the village.

Lángmùsì Tibetan Horse Trekking

(☎667 1504; www.langmusi.net), across from the Lángmùsì Bīnguān, runs guided horse treks from one to four days, overnighting at nomads' tents en route, with the option of climbing nearby **Huáguāishén Shān** (華蓋神山). Prices start from around ¥180 per day.

Kelsang at the Lángmùsì Bīnguān can arrange guides (¥150 per day) for hikes up the gorge behind Kerti Gompa, and transport (¥100 to ¥150) for a trip to some **hot springs** (admission ¥5) outside town.

★ Festivals & Events

If you are in the area in late July, head out to Mǎqǔ (瑪曲) to see the **annual horse races**. The dates change each year, so try contacting the Lángmùsì Bīnguān to find out when it is being held. Mǎqǔ is 67km west of Lángmùsì. Travellers cafes and hotels in Lángmùsì can arrange transport to the town.

🛏 Sleeping

Lángmùsì Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎667 1555; d ¥666-699, tr ¥700, discounts of up to 70%) With an over-the-top Tibetan-style lobby, this friendly four-storey place is the best in Lángmùsì, with very pleasant, clean and spacious standard doubles with bathrooms; the Tibetan-style deluxe rooms are virtually identical apart from carpets and ceiling pattern (but have showers). Excellent discounts. It's on the road south towards Kerti Gompa.

Lángmùsī Bīnguǎn

(郎木寺宾馆; ☎667 1086; tibetanyakboy@yahoo.co.uk; dm Y30, tw with shower Y160-180, discounts of 30-50%) English-speaking staff here are very friendly and rooms with shower are fine, making this an OK place. If you prefer something more rustic, owner Kelsang can arrange for a homestay with a Tibetan family in a nearby village for Y70 per night.

Xiùfēng Bīnguǎn

(秀峰宾馆; ☎6671020; dm Y20, d Y100-120) Undergoing renovation and expansion at the time of writing, this pleasant place off the main street is run by a friendly Hui family and should have new doubles added by the time you read this.

Nomads Youth Hostel

(旅朋青年旅社; Lùpéng Qīngnián Lǚshè; ☎667 1460; dm/d Y20/50) Popular with Chinese backpackers, this friendly place on the main street has scruffy and basic dorms, doubles with shared toilet, homely foyer and bar. Can arrange treks.

Sànnà Bīnguǎn

(萨娜宾馆; ☎667 1062; d Y60-160, tr per bed Y30) Another friendly place, accessed through the back of a shop on the main road.

**Eating****Talo Restaurant**

(达老餐厅; Dálǎo Cāntīng; ☎825 5666) Decorated with yak skulls, prayer flags and *tangka*, this friendly upstairs Tibetan restaurant has a great menu embracing pancakes (Y12), apple rings (Y20), a host of Tibetan dishes and other heart-warming food. Overlooking the main street, it's a great place for a beer. There's a smarter restaurant attached for more variety.

Several backpacker cafes offer similar menus, with big burgers, tasty pies and hot coffee; these include **Leshā's Restaurant** (☎6671179) – on the main street – and **Ali's Restaurant** (☎667 1090), just before the bridge on the way to Sertri Gumpa. At the time of research, Lángmùsī Tibetan Horse Trekking was planning to open an internet-equipped restaurant-cafe across the road.

**Information**

There is nowhere to change money, so come with cash. At the time of writing there was no public internet access and the only internet

cafe, on the other side of the road from the Lángmùsī Bīnguǎn, was shut; ask at Lángmùsī Tibetan Horse Trekking for the latest. The PSB (公安局; Gōngānjú) is just down from the Lángmùsī Hotel. You can burn photos onto CDs at **Lángmùsī Tibetan Horse Trekking** (☎9am-9pm) for Y10.

**Getting There & Away**

There's one daily bus to Zōigé (Ruò'ěrgài; Y22, one hour) at 7am and three daily buses to Hézuò (Y32.5, three hours), departing at 6.30am, 7am and noon. For Sōngpān you have to overnight in Zōigé or hire a car (Y800).

If you don't take a direct bus to Lángmùsī, you'll have to get off at the intersection 4km from the town, from where minivans ferry passengers into town for Y2.

HEXI CORRIDOR

Bound by the Qílián Shān range to the south and the Mǎzōng (Horse's Mane) and Lóngshǒu (Dragon's Head) ranges to the north, the narrow strip of land that is Hexi Corridor (河西走廊; Héxī Zōuláng), around which the province is formed, was once the sole western passage in and out of the Middle Kingdom.

Wūwēi

☎0935 / POP 509,000

Wūwēi stands at the strategic eastern end of the Hexi Corridor. It was from here, two millennia prior, that the emperors of China launched their expeditionary forces into the unknown west, eventually leading them to Jiāyùguān and beyond. Temples, tombs and traditional gates hint at Wūwēi's Silk Road past, and the city is rapidly modernising around a glossy central square.

**Sights****Léitái Sì**

TEMPLE

(雷台寺; admission Y50; ☎8am-6pm) The pride and joy of the city, the bronze **Flying Horse of Wūwēi** (飞马) was discovered here in 1969 and has since been adopted as the unofficial symbol of Gānsū. It was found in a secret tomb beneath this temple, built on top of steep earthen ramparts. While it's a thrill to explore a 2000-year-old tomb, there is precious little inside. The Flying Horse is now displayed in the Gānsū Provincial Museum (p805). The site is located 1.2km

武威

north of Wénhuà Guǎngchǎng (文化广场; Culture Sq).

Confucius Temple

CONFUCIAN TEMPLE

(文庙; Wénmiào; admission Y31; ☉7.30am-6pm) This Ming-era temple has quiet gardens and stele-filled pavilions. The most important stele features the extinct Xīxià language carved into one side and a Chinese translation on the other: a sort of Rosetta stone, the stele has allowed researchers to understand the once unintelligible Xīxià texts. The stele is now housed in a small **museum** (☉8.30am-6pm) across the street (shut for renovation at the time of writing); your ticket for the Confucius Temple allows you inside. To reach the temple, walk south from the main square to the reconstructed South Gate (南门), then turn left just before the gate and walk east for 650m to the temple.

Kumarajiva Pagoda

BUDDHIST PAGODA

Located 400m north of Wénhuà Guǎngchǎng, this pagoda (罗什寺塔; Luóshí Sì Tǎ) is a brick structure originally dating to 488. Dedicated to the great translator of Buddhist sutras (whose tongue was buried beneath the pagoda), the pagoda was toppled during the great earthquake in 1927 and rebuilt. Pilgrims circumbulate the pagoda in clockwise fashion.

Ancient Bell Tower

HISTORIC SITE

(古钟楼; Gǔzhōng Lóu; admission Y10) This bell tower is pretty much all that survives of **Dàyún Temple** (大云寺古钟楼; Dà yún sī Gǔzhōnglóu; admission Y5; ☉8am-6pm), which was leveled by the great tremor of 1927. The flattened area around the temple looks like another earthquake has struck. From the square walk 250m north to the first intersection, then turn right (east) and walk 800m to the tower.

Hǎizàng Temple

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(海藏寺; Hǎizàng Sì; admission Y10) A short trip on bus 5 (Y2) outside town, this temple is a fascinating active monastery. The **Three Sages Hall** (Sānshèng Diàn) contains a 'hermaphroditic Guanyin'; dating to the Ming dynasty, the venerably old **Wúliàng Palace** (Wúliàng Diàn) was once used to store sutras but now houses a reclining Buddha in a glass cabinet. An absorbing feature is the minute pavilion to the right of the Wuliang Palace containing a **well** whose 'magic waters' (神水; *shénshuǐ*) are connected by subterranean streams to a Holy Lake (圣湖; Shèng hú) in the Potala

Palace in Lhasa. Drinking the well's waters is said to cure myriad ailments.

Sleeping & Eating

Ziyunge Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(紫云阁酒店; Ziyúngé Jiǔdiàn; ☎225 3888; Mingqing Fanggu Wenhua Jie; 明清仿古文化街; s/d/tr Y198/280/218, discounts of 30%; ☎) Just east of South Gate, this great hotel has excellent, comfortable and spacious rooms with shower (and hairdryer) and new furnishings. You can often net a standard double for around Y120.

Yuánjì Lǎzhī Ròujiāmó

SHǎNXĪ \$

(袁记腊汁肉夹馍; Mingqing Fanggu Wenhua Jie; ☉7.30am-9pm; meals Y12) Not far from the Ziyunge Hotel, this busy little restaurant serves some simply scrumptious *ròujiāmó* (called the 'Chinese hamburger'; Y4) from Shǎnxī province and bowls of tasty *hundun* (Y3). Don't be put off by the plastic seats; the food is excellent.

Information

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng) West end of the pedestrian shopping street (步行商业街; Bùxíng Shāngyè Jiē); can change money.

Internet cafe (网吧; Wǎngbǎ; per hr Y2; ☉24hr) West end of the pedestrian shopping street running west from Wénhuà Guǎngchǎng.

Public Security Bureau (PSB; 公安局; Gōng'ānjú) On Dong Dajie, east of Wénhuà Guǎngchǎng.

Getting There, Away & Around

Bus

From the **west bus station** (汽车西站), located 1.5km southwest of Cultural Sq, express buses run to:

Jiāyùguān Y86, seven hours, one daily (7.30pm)

Lánzhōu Y51, three hours, every 15 minutes (6am to 6pm)

Zhāngyè Y51, 3½ hours, hourly (7.50am to 5pm)

Train

Trains depart hourly to Zhāngyè (Y40). For Lánzhōu (Y45 to Y52) take the T296 express at 8.20am or the K592 at 8.20pm. Departing from Lánzhōu at 7.29am, the T9205 (Y49) is a handy two-tier train that stops in Wūwēi; it departs Wūwēi at 10.19am to continue to Zhāngyè (Y41, two hours) and Jiāyùguān.

The N857 and K591 are overnight trains to Dūnhuáng (Y118). The 7520 departs for

Zhōngwèi (Y22) at 8.44am. A train ticket booking office (火车票代售点; Huǒchēpiào Dàishòudiǎn) is located at 26 Nanguan Xilu, west of the South Gate.

The station is located 3.5km south of Wénhuà Guǎngchǎng; the two are connected by buses 1 and 2 (Y1). Taxis start at Y3.

Zhāngyè

张掖

☎0936 / POP 260,000

Colourful Zhāngyè, with its colossal Buddha, pagodas, traditional Chinese-style pedestrian streets and unique cliff temples at nearby Mǎtǐ Sì, makes for an absorbing Silk Road stopover. Marco Polo certainly enjoyed it – the great traveller stayed here for a year on his way to the court of Kublai Khan. Local authorities have honoured Polo's legacy by erecting a statue of the man; it stands near a quirky street lined with mock-Venetian architecture.

👁️ Sights

The sad remnants of Zhāngyè's earthen **city walls** can be seen on Beihuan Lu.

Great Buddha Temple BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(大佛寺; Dàfó Sì; ☎821 9671; adult/student Y41/21; ☀8am-6pm) Originally dating to 1098 (Western Xia dynasty), this excellent temple contains an astonishing 35m-long sleeping Buddha – China's largest of this variety (see p955) – surrounded by mouldering clay arhats and Qing-dynasty murals. Take a good look at the main hall and the woodwork, including the doors – it's one of the few wooden structures from this era still standing in China. A colony of bats squeaks high up in its rafters along with flitting flocks of swallows. Until the 1960s, small children would clamber into the huge Buddha and play around inside his tummy. The stairs to the floor above are, sadly, inaccessible. Out the back is the impressive white **earth stupa** (土塔; *tǔ tǎ*) dating from the Ming dynasty, when this vast temple complex was called Hóng rén Temple (弘仁寺; Hóng rén Sì).

Wooden Pagoda BUDDHIST PAGODA

(木塔; Mùtǎ; admission Y5; ☀7.30am-6.30pm) In the main square one block north of the Great Buddha Temple, this pagoda is a brick and wooden structure that was first built in AD 528. Note that this pagoda represents wood as the earth stupa represents earth in the Chinese theory of the five elements (wood, earth, water, fire and metal).

🍽️ Sleeping & Eating

To eat, head 300m west of the drum tower and look for Mingqing Jie (明清街), an alley of faux-Qing architecture lined with dozens of clean, friendly restaurants.

Liángmào Bīnguǎn HOTEL \$

(粮贸宾馆; ☎825 2398; Dong Jie Shizi; 东街什字; dm Y18, s Y88, tw Y68-88, tr Y158, business d Y158; ☎) This seven-storey hotel has a wide range of clean, airy rooms strung out along curved corridors. It's 900m east of the drum tower.

Xīnyuán Bīnguǎn HOTEL \$

(馨园宾馆; ☎825 1766; Beishuiqiao Jie; 北水桥街; tw with shared shower Y90, s Y140, d Y120-140, discounts of 40%; ☎) This place has OK rooms and a good location in the western half of town near the Marco Polo statue, although the staff is rather slack.

📍 Information

Several internet cafes can be found on Jinmài Pedestrian St (金脉步行街; Jinmài Bùxíng Jiē) just east of the drum tower.

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng) At Dong Jie and 168 Xianfu Jie. Both branches have ATM and can change travellers cheques.

Shèngdá Internet Cafe (盛达网吧; Shèngdá Wǎngbǎ; Xijie; per hr Y2.50; ☀8am-midnight) East of junction between Mingqing Jie and Xijie.

📍 Getting There & Around

Bus

The town has three bus stations, in the south, east and west. The **west bus station** (西站; ☎821 0597) has the most frequent departures:

Dūnhuáng Y108, 12 hours, two in the morning (7.50am and 11.30am), then two sleepers

Golmud 5.30pm

Jiǎyùguǎn Y50.50, 3½ hours, hourly (9.30am to 5.10pm)

Lánzhōu Y98.50, eight hours, hourly (7am to 1.30pm, sleepers after that)

Wúwēi Y51, 3½ hours, every 30 minutes (7.20am to 5pm)

Xīning Y60.50, seven hours, two daily (7am and 6pm)

Train

Departing from Lánzhōu at 7.29am, the two-tier T9205 arrives in Zhāngyè at 12.29pm before proceeding to Jiǎyùguǎn; another fast train departs for Jiǎyùguǎn at 8pm. While arriving by train is no problem, departures are limited. The **train ticket office** (12 Oushi Jie; 欧式街12

号; ☉8am-4pm) near the Marco Polo statue can book sleepers on the N857 to Dūnhuáng (hard sleeper Y160, 6¼ hours, 12.20am) and train N852 to Lánzhōu (hard sleeper Y94, 11 hours, 11.18pm). From Lánzhōu it's best to take the train as only night buses run.

A taxi to/from the train station is Y10, or take bus 1 (Y1). The station is 7km northeast of the city centre. Buses 4 and 13 run past the west bus station. Taxis start at Y4.

Mǎtí Sì

马蹄寺

The temples at **Mǎtí Sì** (Horse Hoof Monastery; admission Y45), built miraculously into the sandstone cliff (between the 5th and 14th centuries), are reached via twisting staircases, balconies, narrow passages and platforms that will leave your head spinning. Tibetan monks administer the place and locals will offer you horses for riding in the surrounding hills.

There are several good day hikes around here, including the five-hour loop through pine forest and talus fields to the **Línsōng Waterfall** (临松瀑布; Línsōng Pùbù) and back down past '**Sword Split Stone**' (剑劈石; Jiànpīshí). For unrivalled panoramas, take the elevatorlike ascent of the ridge behind the **white chörten** at Sānshísāntiān Shíkū (三十三天石窟).

The **Wàilóng Shānzhūang** (卧龙山庄; dm/tw Y20/100) at Mǎtí Sì is a good place to stay. If you're adequately prepared for camping, some overnight trips are also possible.

Buses leave every 30 minutes from Zhāngyè's south bus station for the cross-roads village of Mǎtí Hé (马蹄河, Y11, 1½ hours, 6.40am to 5.40pm), from where you can catch a minibus or taxi (Y20) for the final 7km or so. Direct buses to Mǎtí Sì depart at 3.40pm, and you might find a direct bus on weekend mornings. The last bus back from Mǎtí Hé leaves at 4.30pm.

Jiāyùguān

嘉峪关

☎0937 / POP 170,000

You approach Jiāyùguān through the forbidding lunar landscape of north Gānsù. It's a fitting setting, as Jiāyùguān marks the symbolic end of the Great Wall, the western gateway of China proper and, for imperial Chinese, the beginning of the back of beyond. One of the defining points of the Silk Road, a Ming-dynasty fort was erected here in 1372 and Jiāyùguān came to be colloqui-

ally known as the 'mouth' of China, while the narrow Hexi Corridor, leading back towards the *nèidì* (inner lands), was dubbed the 'throat'.

You'll need plenty of imagination to conjure up visions of the Silk Road, as modern Jiāyùguān is a city of straight roads and identikit blocks, almost as if airlifted into position from North Korea. But the Jiāyùguān Fort is an essential part of Silk Road lore and most certainly worth a visit.

Sleeping

It's possible to spend the night at the fort at the **Taihe Country Villa** (☎639 6622).

Yíngbīn Hotel

HOTEL \$

(迎宾宾馆; Yíngbīn Bīnguǎn; ☎620 1751; tw/tr without shower Y60/70, s/d/tw Y100/100/120) Bright inside with fine rooms (although the bathrooms look like they belong in an asylum), this place is good value and well located for restaurants and transport.

Jiāyùguān Bīnguǎn

HOTEL \$\$\$

(嘉峪关宾馆; ☎620 1588; 1 Xinhua Beilu; 新华北路1号; s Y668-780, d Y768, ste Y1880, discounts of 30-40%; ☎) Rooms are pleasant and reasonably modern with bathroom and computer; there are also a sauna, small gym, ticket agent and good service.

Liángshíjù Zhāodàisuǒ

GUESTHOUSE \$

(粮食局招待所; ☎622 6293; 2nd fl, 24 Xinhua Zhonglu; s/tw without shower Y40/58, tw Y68) Just by the hospital, this clean and well-run guesthouse is central and good value.

Jīnyè Bīnguǎn

HOTEL \$

(金叶宾馆; ☎620 1333; 12 Lanxin Xilu; 兰新西路12号; d Y100-180, tr Y120, discounts of 40%; ☎) The ensuite rooms are good value at this clean and quiet hotel with a useful location by the bus station.

Eating

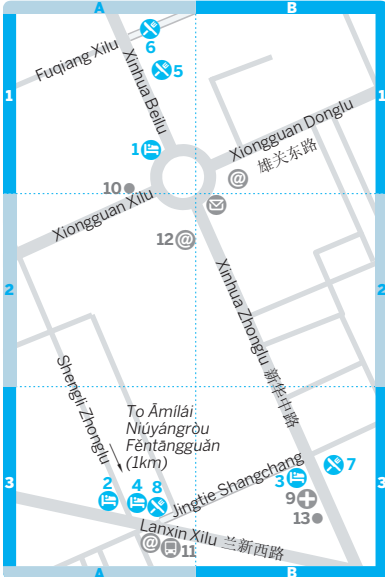
For cake, croissant and coffee, try branches of the bakery Aili.

Āmílái Niúyáng ròu Fěntāngguǎn

LAMB NOODLES \$

(阿迷来牛羊肉粉汤馆; Shengli Nanlu; 胜利南路; ☉7am-2.30pm & 4-9pm) Excellent and filling bowls of *jiāgōng yáng ròu fěntāng* (加工羊肉粉汤; lamb and vermicelli soup; Y14) - chuck in a *bǐng* (饼; flat bread; Y0.50) and you've a meal. There's no English sign, but hunt out the red and green sign around 200m south of the intersection with Hekou Xilu.

Jiāyùguān



Jiāyùguān

Sleeping

- 1 Jiāyùguān Bīnguǎn A1
- 2 Jīnyè Bīnguǎn A3
- 3 Liángshíjù Zhāodàisuǒ B3
- 4 Yǐngbīn Hotel A3

Eating

- 5 Aílǐ A1
- 6 Fùqiáng Market Entrance A1
- 7 Jìngtiě Xiǎochīchéng B3
- 8 Liuyuan Restaurant A3

Information

- 9 People's No 1 Hospital B3

Transport

- 10 Bicycle Hire A1
- 11 Bus Station A3
- 12 Jiāyùguān Airport Ticket Office A2
- 13 Train Booking Office B3

Liuyuan Restaurant

(宛中苑酒店; Yuǎnzhōngyuàn Jiǔdiàn; Xinhua Xilu; dishes from Y15; 🍷) Directly across from the bus station is this classy Sichuan restaurant.

SICHUAN \$

Fùqiáng Market

MARKET \$

For a fast, hot meal, try the food stalls at this market (富强市场; Fùqiáng Shìchǎng), north of the traffic circle.

Jìngtiě Xiǎochīchéng

MARKET \$

(镜铁小吃城; Jìngtiě Market; 🕒10am-10pm) Also try this busy place, off Xinhua Zhonglu, where you can load up on lamb kebabs (Y10), lamb ribs (Y10), beer (Y3), *ròujiāmó*, wonton soup, dumplings, roast duck and more.

Information

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; Xinhua Zhonglu; 🕒9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) Has an ATM and can change money. It's south of Lanxin Xilu intersection.

China Post (中国邮政; Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; cnr Xinhua Zhonglu & Xiongguan Donglu; 🕒8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) At the traffic circle in the centre of town.

Jiāxiáng Internet Cafe (嘉祥网吧; Jiāxiáng Wǎngbā; Xiongguan Donglu; per hr Y4; 🕒24hr) Pricey.

People's No 1 Hospital (第一人民医院; Dìyī Rénmín Yīyuàn; Xinhua Zhonglu)

Public Security Bureau (PSB; 公安局; Gōng'ānjú; ☎631 6927, ext 2039; 312 Guodao; 🕒8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri) At the southern edge of town, diagonally opposite the stadium. Visa extensions available.

Xīnjùdiǎn Internet Cafe (新聚典网吧; Xīnjùdiǎn Wǎnglù; per hr Y2; 🕒24hr)

Getting There & Away

Air

Book air tickets at the **Jiāyùguān Airport Ticket Office** (嘉峪关机场售票处; Jiāyùguān Jīchǎng Shòupiàochù; Minhang Dasha, Xinhua Zhonglu; 🕒8am-7.10pm). Jiāyùguān's airport is 13km from town, offering flights to Běijīng (Y1880), Lánzhōu (Y1080), Shànghǎi (Y2190) and Xī'an (Y1210).

Bus

Jiāyùguān's bus station (汽车站; Qìchēzhàn) is by a busy four-way junction on Lanxin Xilu, next to the main budget hotels. Doubling as a billiards hall, the station has buses to:

Dūnhuáng Y70, five hours, four daily (9am to 2.30pm)

Lánzhōu Y150.50, 12 hours, three daily (2.30pm, 4.30pm and 6.30pm), all sleepers

Wūwēi Y96, seven hours, five daily (2.30pm to 8.30pm)

Zhāngyè Y44 to Y50.50, 3½ hours, every 30 minutes (7am to 3pm)

Train

Departing from Lánzhōu at 7.29am, the two-tier T9205 arrives in Jiāyùguān at 2.43pm. From Jiāyùguān there are daytime trains to:

Dūnhuáng Y28, four hours

Zhāngyè Y22, three hours

There are a couple of sleeper trains to:

Lánzhōu Y180, nine hours

Ūrūmqi Y220, 15 hours

Purchase tickets at the **train booking office** (火车站售票处; huóchēzhàn shòupiàochù; 28 Xinhua Zhonglu; ☎8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) near the hospital, next to the China Construction Bank.

Jiāyùguān's Luhua train station is 5km south of the town centre. Bus 1 runs here from Xinhua Zhonglu (Y1). A taxi costs Y10.

i Getting Around

Bikes are good for reaching some surrounding attractions. The gatekeeper at the Jiǔgāng Bīnguān (出租自行车; Chūzū Zìxíngchē) hires them for Y20 per day (Y400 deposit).

One airport bus (Y10) runs daily at 11am from the Jiāyùguān Airport Ticket Office to the airport; a taxi will cost around Y40.

Bus 2 (Y1) runs from the train station to the bus station.

Around Jiāyùguān

A taxi to the Wei Jin Tombs, Jiāyùguān Fort and the Overhanging Great Wall should cost you no more than Y100 for a half-day; if you just go to the fort and Overhanging Great Wall, figure on Y50.

JIĀYÙGUĀN FORT

嘉峪关城楼

One of the classic images of western China, the **Jiāyùguān Fort** (Jiāyùguān Chénglóu; May-Oct/Nov-Apr Y100/80; ☎8.30am-7.30pm) guards the pass between the snowcapped Qīlián Shān peaks and Hēi Shān (Black Mountains) of the Mǎzōng Shān range. The admission ticket also grants you access to the First Beacon Platform of the Great Wall and the Overhanging Great Wall.

Built in 1372, the fort was christened the 'Impregnable Defile Under Heaven'. Although the Chinese often controlled territory far beyond the Jiāyùguān area, this was the last major stronghold of imperial China – the end of the 'civilised world', beyond which lay only desert demons and the barbarian armies of Central Asia.

Towards the eastern end of the fort is the **Gate of Enlightenment** (光化楼; Guānghuá Lóu) and in the west is the **Gate of Conciliation** (柔远楼; Róuyuǎn Lóu), from where exiled poets, ministers, criminals and soldiers would have ridden off into oblivion. Each gate dates from 1506 and has 17m-high towers with upturned flying eaves and double gates that would have been used to trap invading armies. On the inside are horse lanes leading up to the top of the inner wall. On the west-facing side of the Gate of Enlightenment are the shadowy remains of **slogans** praising Chairman Mao, blasted by the desert winds. A further prolix quote from Mao stands out in yellow paint on the south wall of **Wenchang Pavilion** (文昌阁; Wénchāng Gé). Outside the fort, camel rides can be had for Y10.

Admission also includes an excellent **Jiāyùguān Museum of the Great Wall** (☎8.30am-7.30pm), with photos, artefacts, maps and Silk Road exhibits.

Only 5km west of town, it's possible to cycle here in about half an hour. A one-way taxi trip to the fort costs about Y10.

OVERHANGING GREAT WALL 悬壁长城
Running north from Jiāyùguān, this section of **wall** (Xuánbì Chángchéng; adult/student Y21/11; ☎8.30am-dusk) is believed to have been first constructed in 1539, though this reconstruction dates from 1987. It's quite an energetic hike up to excellent views of the desert and the glittering snow-capped peaks in the distance. A **smaller section of wall** (admission Y25) is next door, but this one is included in the Jiāyùguān Fort ticket. Both sections of wall are 9km from the fort. A taxi is around Y50 return from town.

FIRST BEACON PLATFORM OF THE GREAT WALL

长城第一墩

Atop a 82m-high cliff overlooking the Taolai River, the remains of this **beacon platform** (Chángchéng Dìyī Dūn; admission Y21; ☎9am-5pm) are not much to look at (they resemble a shaped pile of dirt), but the views over the river in their dramatic gorge are impressive and you can walk alongside attached vestiges of the Great Wall. Descend to the subterranean viewing platform above the river or sweep across it on a pulley for Y31. Admission is included in the Jiāyùguān Fort ticket. A taxi from town is around Y35 return.

WEI JIN TOMBS

新城魏晋墓

These **tombs** (Xinchéng Wèijīnmù; admission Y35; ☀sunrise-sunset) date from approximately AD 220–420 (the Wei and Western Jin periods) and contain extraordinarily fresh brick wall paintings depicting scenes from everyday life, from making tea to picking mulberries for silk production. There are literally thousands of tombs in the desert 20km east of Jiāyùguān, but only one is currently open to visitors, that of a husband and wife. The small **museum** is also worth a look. You can preview some of the painted bricks at the Jiāyùguān Fort museum. A taxi will cost around Y50.

JULY 1ST GLACIER

七一冰川

About 90km southwest of Jiāyùguān, the **July 1st Glacier** (Qīyī Bīngchuān; admission Y51) sits high in the Qilián Shān range at 4300m. It is reached via the train to the iron-ore town of Jìngtiěshān (镜铁山; Y10), departing from Jiāyùguān's Luhua train station at 8am. It's a scenic three-hour train trip to Jìngtiěshān, where you can hire a taxi to the glacier (return Y120, 20km). Hikers can walk a 5km trail alongside the glacier. Icy winter weather grinds transport to a halt from November to March. In summer it's a great place to come to escape the heat of the desert below, but if you come in the spring or autumn it can be a cold and forbidding place – the glacier fills the rocky valley and there is little life up here. Global warming is having an effect on the glacier, which has retreated 50m in recent years.

You could theoretically do this in one day, but it's better to stay the night in Jìngtiěshān, where there is a cheap and basic hostel (*zhāodàisuǒ*). This will leave you with enough time the next morning to hire a taxi up to **Tiān'é Hú** (return Y50) and the Tibetan village of **Qiqīng**. Return trains depart around 1.46pm from Jìngtiěshān. A return taxi to the glacier from Jiāyùguān costs around Y400 (nine hours).

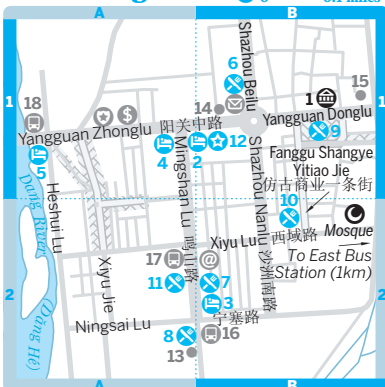
Dūnhuáng

敦煌

☎0937 / POP 156,000

The fertile Dūnhuáng oasis has long been a refuge for weary Silk Road travellers. Most visitors only stayed long enough to swap a camel and have a feed; others settled down and built the forts, towers and magnificent cave temples that are now scattered over

Dūnhuáng



825

Dūnhuáng

📍 Sights

- 1 Dūnhuáng Museum..... B1

🏨 Sleeping

- 2 Dūnhuáng Legend Hotel B1
3 Fèitiān Bīngguān..... B2
4 Gōngyì Měishù Zhāodàisuǒ A1
5 Grand Soluxe Hotel Dūnhuáng..... A1

🍴 Eating

- 6 Bǎilèjī B1
7 Charley Johng's Café B2
John's Information Cafe (see 3)
8 Làzhī Ròujiāmó A2
9 Night Market B1
10 Oasis B2
11 Shirley's Café A2
Zhèngzōng Lánzhōu Niúròumiàn (see 7)

🎭 Entertainment

- 12 Dūnhuáng Theatre B1

Information

- Fèitiān Travel Service..... (see 3)
13 Train Booking Office..... A2

Transport

- 14 Air Ticket Office B1
15 CAAC B1
16 Long-Distance Bus Station..... B2
17 Minibus Stand A2
18 Minibuses to Nánhú A1

the surrounding area. These sites, along with some dwarfing sand dunes and desert-scapes, make Dūnhuáng a magnificent place, despite its remoteness. The low-rise

city itself is clean and well-endowed with budget hotels, travellers' cafes and souvenir shops. Look out for the vast Běidàqiáo wind farm on the approach to Dūnhuáng.

Sights

FREE **Dūnhuáng Museum** MUSEUM
(敦煌博物馆; Dūnhuáng Bówùguǎn;

☎882 2981; Yangguan Donglu; ☀8am-6.30pm Apr-Oct) The Dūnhuáng Museum is largely unchanged since opening in 1984; there's little here you can't see at the Mògāo Caves or the Jade Gate Pass museum.

Sleeping

Competition among Dūnhuáng's hotels is fierce, and you should get significant discounts (50% or more) outside of summer. Unless stated otherwise, the following are open year-round. At the time of writing, Charley Johng's Cafe was about to open its own hotel near the mosque; dorms were to be in the Y35 to Y40 price range, with doubles at around Y150. Ask at the cafe.

Dune Guesthouse GUESTHOUSE \$
(敦煌月泉山庄; Dūnhuáng Yuèquán Shānzhūāng; ☎388 2411; dm Y30, tents Y40, d Y100, huts Y100-250) This excellent chilled-out backpacker retreat is right by Singing Sands Mountain (p830); it's run by the folks at Charley Johng's Cafe, so make enquiries there first. Cabins are out the back among the fruit trees. Tents and sleeping bags (Y20) are also for rent; sunhats and parasols are free. From the minibus 3 terminus walk north a short way, take the first turning left on the other side of the road past the vines and follow the signs.

Silk Road Dūnhuáng Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(敦煌山庄; Dūnhuáng Shānzhūāng; ☎888 2088; www.dunhuangresort.com; Dunyue Lu; 敦月路; dm Y80, d Y350-1200, discounts of 20%; ☎) Around 2km from Singing Sands Mountain, this four-star resort-style outfit is tastefully designed with Central Asian rugs, a cool stone floor and Chinese antiques. Four-bed dorms are in the student building way round the back, and the cheaper doubles (with bathrooms) are in the 'Professional Quarters'; both come with views of the dunes. Pricier accommodation is in the main building; there are also courtyard villa suites. A taxi from town costs Y10, or take minibus 3 (Y1).

Dūnhuáng Legend Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$
(敦煌飞天大酒店; Dūnhuáng Fēitiān Dàjiǔdiàn; ☎8885 3999; www.dhlegendhotel.com; 2 Ming-

shan Lu; 鸣山路2号; d Y698-888, discounts of 40%; ☎) Rooms at this four-star Chinese-oriented hotel are well furnished and good value with discount, but standard doubles only come with shower. No Western breakfasts.

Grand Soluxe Hotel Dūnhuáng HOTEL \$\$\$
(敦煌阳光沙州大酒店; Dūnhuáng Yángguāng Shāzhōu Dàjiǔdiàn; ☎886 2888; 31 Yangguan Zhonglu; 阳关中路31号; tw & d Y860, ste Y1600, discounts of 40%; ☎) Opened in 2008, this pleasant hotel has comfortable and elegant rooms decorated with Chinese motifs and looking out over the river in a striking and modern building. Broadband included.

Fēitiān Bīngǔǎn HOTEL \$\$
(飞天宾馆; ☎882 2337; 22 Mingshan Lu; 鸣山路22号; dm Y40, s/d/tr/ste Y320/320/388/788, discounts of 50%; ☎) This longstanding two-star hotel has a good location and decent rooms with dark wood furnishings. Hot water only from 7am to 10am and evenings. It's closed in winter.

Gōngyì Měishù Zhāodàisùǒ GUESTHOUSE \$
(工艺美术招待所; ☎884 0919; 14 Yangguan Zhonglu; 阳关中路14号; d without shower Y40) On 3rd floor in courtyard opposite China Construction Bank off Yangguan Zhonglu. Friendly place with simple but cheap doubles.

Eating & Drinking

Several Western travellers' cafes can be found in town with dishes in the Y10 to Y20 mark. In addition to providing internet access and bike hire, these are good spots to exchange information with other travellers.

Oasis CAFE \$
(☎150 0937 6021; Fanggu Shangye Yitiao Jie; ☀3pm-11pm Tue-Sun) Surely the best milk shakes (Y12; blueberry, peach, kiwifruit and more) in northwest China and some of the finest coffee too, including the endless coffee (Y18), perfect for an everlasting caffeine rush. There're good smoothies (Y10) as well at this relaxing, chilled-out spot run by an Oklahoman. Pristine luo too.

Night Market STREET MARKET \$\$
(夜市; Yèshì; ☎till 2am) Lively spot off Yangguan Donglu with singing, music bands and roast lamb by the platter (Y40 per *jīn*). There are loads of Sichuān, Korean noodles,

claypot, barbecue and Lánzhōu noodles outfits here, so just take your pick. Look out for cooling cups of *xìngpíshuǐ* (杏皮水; Y5, apricot juice).

Làzhī Ròujiāmó

RÒUJIÁMÓ \$ (腊汁肉夹馍; Mingshan Lu; ☺10am-10pm) The plastic flowers and tacky furniture won't win any awards, but this place does some very tasty *ròujiāmó* (肉夹馍; Y5 to Y6) – the famous 'Chinese hamburger' from Shaanxi province.

Zhèngzōng Lánzhōu Niúròumiàn

NOODLES \$ (正宗兰州牛肉面; Mingshan Lu; meals Y15; ☺7am-10pm) One of several places you can hoover up a bowl of tasty and filling *hóngshāo niúròumiàn* (红烧牛肉面; noodles with braised beef; Y12); it's a short walk north of the Fēitiān Bīnguǎn.

Zhāixīng Gé

BAR (摘星阁; Silk Road Dunhuang Hotel; Dunyue Lu; ☺6.30am-2pm & 4.30pm-midnight) Tremendous spot for a rooftop sundowner gazing out over the golden sand dunes; although at Y30 for a small bottle of beer, it may be worth tanking up first at the far, far cheaper (but viewless) Silk Road Alehouse (丝路酒坊) bar outside.

Charley Johng's Cafe

CAFE \$ (查理约翰咖啡馆; Chǎlǐ Yuèhàn Kǎféiting; ☎388 2411; dhzhzh@public.lz.gs.cn; 21 Mingshan Lu) Western snacks and dishes.

John's Information Cafe

CAFE \$ (约翰旅游信息咖啡厅; Yuehàn Lúyóu Xīnxī Kǎféiting; ☎882 7000; johncafe@hotmail.com; Fēitiān Bīnguǎn, 22 Mingshan Lu) All fresco seating, Western dishes, English-speaking staff.

Shirley's Cafe

CAFE \$ (谢里斯咖啡馆; Xièlǐsī Kǎféiguǎn) Simple cafe with Western dishes.

Bǎilèjī

FAST FOOD \$ (百乐基; Shazhou Beilu; ☺10am-11pm) Fast food.



Entertainment

Dunhuang Goddess (敦煌神女; Dūnhuáng Shénnǚ; tickets Y180; ☺8.30pm) is an 80-minute acrobatic dramatisation of stories on the walls of the Mògāo Caves. It's held at the **Dūnhuáng Theatre** (敦煌大剧院; Dūnhuáng Dàjùyuàn); English subtitles are provided.



Information

Ask at any of the Western cafes in town for tourist info; they can also help with tours from camel

rides to overnight camping excursions. Internet access at Shirley's Cafe is Y6 per hour.

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; Yangguan Zhonglu; ☺8am-noon & 3-6.30pm) Has an ATM and changes travellers cheques.

China Post (中国邮政; Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; cnr Yangguan Zhonglu & Shazhou Beilu; ☺8am-7pm) Located in the China Telecom building on the main traffic circle.

Fēitiān Travel Service (飞天旅行社; Fēitiān Lúxíngshè; ☎882 2726, ext 8619; Fēitiān Bīnguǎn, 22 Mingshan Lu) Can arrange buses to Mògāo, local tours and car hire.

Liányǒu Wǎngbā (连友网吧; cnr Mingshan Lu & Xinjiang Lu; per hr Y4; ☺8am-midnight) Internet access.

Public Security Bureau (PSB; 公安局; Gōng'ānjú; ☎886 2071; Yangguan Zhonglu; ☺8am-noon & 3-6.30pm Mon-Fri) Two days needed for visa extension.

Getting There & Away

Apart from November to March, when there are only flights to/from Lánzhōu and Xī'an, there are regular flights to/from Běijīng (Y1880), Lánzhōu (Y1150), Shànghǎi (Y2550), Ürümqi (Y710) and Xī'an (Y1680).

Seats can be booked at the **Civil Aviation Administration of China** (CAAC; 民航售票处; Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎882 2389; 12 Yangguan Donglu; ☺8am-noon & 2-8pm) or at the **air ticket office** (☎883 0008) in the lobby of the Yóuzhèng Bīnguǎn (邮政宾馆), west of China Post.

Bus

Arriving in Dūnhuáng you may be dropped off at a station just south of Yóuhǎo Bīnguǎn. The bus to Ürümqi may stop in Turpan (Y150); otherwise, you'll need to take a bus to Hāmì (Y70, 8am and 2pm) from the **east bus station** on Sanwei Lu and change; buses to Liǔyuán (柳园; Y20, eight per day 8am to 6.30pm) also go from here. Dūnhuáng's main **long-distance bus station** (长途汽车站; Zhǎngtú Qìchēzhàn; ☎885 3746) has buses to:

Golmud Y90, nine hours, two daily (9am and 7.30pm)

Jiāyùguān Y60, five hours, two daily (8.30am and 9.30am), plus a sleeper for Y80 at 10.30am

Lánzhōu Y214, 17 hours, three daily (8am, 10.30am and 2pm), all sleepers

Urumqi Y185, 14 hours, one daily (6pm). Sleeper

Wūwēi Y160, three daily (8am, 10.30am and 2pm), all sleepers

Zhāngyè Y120, three daily (8am, 10.30am and 2pm), all sleepers

Train

For Lánzhōu (Y268, 14 hours), take the K592 departing at 9.39am or the N858 departing at 9.25pm. For Úrúmqi (Y249, 14 hours) take train T216 departing at 8.16pm. The same train also stops in Turpan (Y180, 12 hours). For Běijīng West, you'll have to take the bus to Liǔyuán first.

The station is 10km east of town. You can purchase tickets at the **train booking office** (铁路售票处; tiělù shòupiàochù; ☎595 9592; 31 Mingshan Lu; ☀8am-4pm summer, to 3.30pm winter), south of Ningsai Lu, for a commission of ¥5.

i Getting Around

You can hire bikes from the travellers cafes for ¥1 per hour. Getting to some of the outlying sights by bike is possible, but hard work at the height of summer.

To charter a ride for the sights around town, the minibus stand (小公共汽车站; Xiǎogōnggòng Qìchēzhàn) across from the Jiàri Dàjiūdiàn on Mingshan Lu is one place to start negotiations.

Dūnhuáng's airport is 13km east of town; taxis cost ¥20. The train station is on the same road as the airport. Taxis start at ¥5.

Around Dūnhuáng

Most people visit the Mògāo Caves in the morning, followed by the Míngshā Shān sand dunes in the late afternoon.

MÒGĀO CAVES

莫高窟

The Mògāo Caves (Mògāo Kū) are, simply put, one of the greatest repositories of Buddhist art in the world. At its peak, the site housed 18 monasteries, over 1400 monks and nuns, and countless artists, translators and calligraphers. Wealthy traders and important officials were the primary donors responsible for creating new caves, as caravans made the long detour past Mògāo to pray or give thanks for a safe journey through the treacherous wastelands to the west. The traditional date ascribed to the founding of the first cave is AD 366.

The caves fell into disuse after the collapse of the Yuan dynasty and were largely forgotten until the early 20th century, when they were 'rediscovered' by a string of foreign explorers (see p829).

Entrance to the **caves** (☎886 9060; low/high season ¥80/160; ☀8.30am-6pm May-Oct, 9am-5.30pm Nov-Apr, tickets sold till 1hr before closing) is strictly controlled – it's impossible

to visit them on your own. The general admission ticket grants you a two-hour tour of 10 caves, including the infamous Library Cave (No 17; see the boxed text, p829) and a related exhibit containing rare fragments of manuscripts in classical Uighur and Manichean. Excellent English-speaking guides (¥20) are always available, and you can generally arrange tours in many other languages as well.

Of the 492 caves, 20 'open' caves are rotated fairly regularly, so recommendations are useless, but tours always include the two **big Buddhas**, 34.5m and 26m tall respectively. It's also possible to visit 12 of the more unusual caves for an additional fee; prices range from ¥100 (No 217, early Tang) to ¥500 (No 465, tantric art). Note that in some of the caves later frescoes may cover earlier wall paintings.

A torch (flashlight) is imperative – those used by the guides are weak, so bring your own if possible. Photography is strictly prohibited everywhere within the fenced-off caves area. Note that if it's raining, snowing or sand storming, the caves will be closed.

After the tour it's well worth visiting the **Dūnhuáng Research Centre**, where eight more caves, each representative of a different period, have been flawlessly reproduced, along with selected murals.

If you have a special interest in the site, check out the **International Dūnhuáng Project** (<http://idp.bl.uk>), an online database of digitalised manuscripts from the Library Cave at Mògāo.

👁 Sights

Northern Wei, Western Wei & Northern Zhou Caves

BUDDHIST CAVES

The earliest caves are distinctly Indian in style and iconography. All contain a central pillar, representing a stupa (symbolically containing the ashes of the Buddha), which the devout would circle in prayer. Paint was derived from malachite (green), cinnabar (red) and lapis lazuli (blue), expensive minerals imported from Central Asia.

The art of this period is characterised by its attempt to depict the spirituality of those who had transcended the material world through their asceticism. The Wei statues are slim, ethereal figures with finely chiselled features and comparatively large heads. The Northern Zhou figures have ghostly white eyes. Don't be fooled by the thick, black modernist strokes – it's the

SILK ROAD RAIDERS

In 1900, the self-appointed guardian of the Mògāo Caves, Wang Yuanlu, discovered a hidden library filled with tens of thousands of immaculately preserved manuscripts and paintings, dating as far back as AD 406.

It's hard to describe the exact magnitude of the discovery, but stuffed into the tiny room were texts in rare Central Asian languages, military reports, music scores, medical prescriptions, Confucian and Taoist classics, and Buddhist sutras copied by some of the greatest names in Chinese calligraphy – not to mention the oldest printed book in existence, the *Diamond Sutra* (AD 868). In short, it was an incalculable amount of original source material regarding Chinese, Central Asian and Buddhist history.

Word of the discovery quickly spread and Wang Yuanlu, suddenly the most popular bloke in town, was courted by rival archaeologists Auriel Stein and Paul Pelliot, among others. Following much pressure to sell the cache, Wang Yuanlu finally relented and parted with an enormous horde of treasure. During his watch close to 20,000 of the cave's priceless manuscripts were whisked off to Europe for the paltry sum of UK£220.

Still today, Chinese intellectuals bitter at the sacking of the caves deride Stein, Pelliot and other 'foreign devils' for making off with a national treasure. Defenders of the explorers point out that had the items been left alone they may have been lost during the ensuing civil war or the Cultural Revolution.

oxidisation of lead in the paint, not some forerunner of Picasso.

Sui Caves

BUDDHIST CAVES

The Sui dynasty (AD 581–618) began when a general of Chinese or mixed Chinese-Tuoba origin usurped the throne of the Northern Zhou dynasty and reunited northern and southern China for the first time in 360 years.

The Sui dynasty was short-lived and very much a transition between the Wei and Tang periods. This can be seen in the Sui caves: the graceful Indian curves in the Buddha and Bodhisattva figures start to give way to the more rigid style of Chinese sculpture.

Tang Caves

BUDDHIST CAVES

During the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907), China pushed its borders westward as far as Lake Balkash in today's Kazakhstan. Trade expanded and foreign merchants and people of diverse religions streamed into Cháng'ān, the Tang capital.

This was Mògāo's high point. Painting and sculpture techniques became much more refined, and some important aesthetic developments, notably the sex change (from male to female) of Guanyin and the flying apsaras, took place. The beautiful murals depicting the Buddhist Western Paradise offer rare insights into the court life, music, dress and architecture of Tang China.

Some 230 caves were carved during the Tang dynasty, including two impressive grottoes containing enormous, seated Buddha figures. Originally open to the elements, the statue of Maitreya in cave 96 (believed to represent Empress Wu Zetian, who used Buddhism to consolidate her power) is a towering 34.5m tall, making it the world's third-largest Buddha. The Buddhas were carved from the top down using scaffolding, the anchor holes of which are still visible.

Post-Tang Caves

BUDDHIST CAVES

Following the Tang dynasty, the economy around Dūnhuáng went into decline, and the luxury and vigour typical of Tang painting began to be replaced by simpler drawing techniques and flatter figures. The mysterious Western Xia kingdom, which controlled most of Gānsū from 983 to 1227, made a number of additions to the caves at Mògāo and began to introduce Tibetan influences.

i Getting There & Away

The Mògāo Caves are 25km (30 minutes) southeast from Dūnhuáng. A green bus (one way Y8) starts waiting at around 8am and leaves at 8.30am from the intersection across from the Dūnhuáng Hotel; it returns at noon, which isn't really enough time at the caves. A return taxi costs from Y100 to Y150 for a day.

Some people ride out to the caves on a bicycle, but be warned that half the ride is through total desert – hot work in summer.

WESTERN THOUSAND BUDDHA CAVES

西千佛洞

These little-visited **caves** (Xī Qiānfó Dòng; admission Y40; ☉7am-5.30pm), 35km west of Dūnhuáng, range from the Northern Wei to the Tang dynasties. There are 16 caves hidden in the cliff face of the Dǎng Hé gorge, of which six are open to the public. The art may not compare to Mògāo, but the lack of crowds is more restful – although some (eg cave 15) may require an additional fee. Afterwards, wander off on a walk through the desert canyon.

The caves are best reached by taxi (Y60 return) or minibus. Alternatively, catch a bus to Nánhú (南湖; 40 minutes) from the intersection of Heshui Lu and Yangguan Zhonglu in Dūnhuáng, and ask the driver to drop you off at the turn-off to the caves, from where it's a 10-minute walk across the desert.

SINGING SANDS MOUNTAIN & CRESCENT MOON LAKE

鸣沙山、月牙泉

Six kilometres south of Dūnhuáng at **Singing Sands Mountain** (Míngshā Shān; low/high season Y80/120; ☉6am-10pm), the desert meets the oasis in most spectacular fashion. From here it's easy to see how Dūnhuáng gained its moniker 'Shāzhōu' (Town of Sand). The climb to the top of the dunes – the highest peak swells to 1715m – is sweaty work, but the view across the undulating desert sands and green poplar trees below is awesome. Hire a pair of bright orange shoe protectors (防沙靴; fángshāxiūē; Y10) or just shake your shoes out later.

At the base of the colossal dunes is a famous yet underwhelming pond, **Crescent Moon Lake** (Yuèyáquán). The dunes are a no-holds-barred tourist playpen, with **camel rides** (Y80 for a one-hour ride), **dune buggies** (Y150), **'dune surfing'** (sand sliding; Y15 to Y20), **paragliding** (jumping off the dunes with a chute on your back; Y60), **archery** (Y1 per arrow) and even **microlighting**. But if your sole interest is in appreciating the dunes in peace, it's not hard to hike away from the action.

You can ride a bike to the dunes in around 20 minutes. Minibus 3 (Y1) shuttles between Dūnhuáng and the dunes

from 7.30am to 10pm, departing from opposite the Yōuhào Bīnguān. A taxi costs Y10 one way. Most people head out here at about 6pm when the weather starts to cool down.

Western cafes in town offer overnight camel trips to the dunes; Charley Johng's, for example, charges Y300 per person for an overnight stay in a tent and camel rides (with the ever-popular Mr Li); there are also five- to eight-day expeditions out to the Jade Gate Pass, Liuyuan and even as far as Lop Nor in the deserts of Xīnjiāng.

YĀDĀN NATIONAL PARK & JADE GATE PASS

雅丹国家地质公园、玉门关

The weird, eroded desert landscape of **Yādān National Park** (Yādān Guójiā Dìzhì Gōngyuán; incl tour Y60) is 180km northwest of Dūnhuáng, in the middle of the Gobi Desert's awesome nothingness. A former lake bed that eroded in spectacular fashion some 12,000 years ago, the strange rock formations provided the backdrop to the last scenes of Zhang Yimou's film *Hero*. The desert landscape is dramatic, but you can only tour the site on a group minibus, so there's little scope to explore on your own.

To get to Yādān you have to pass by (and buy a ticket to) the **Jade Gate Pass** (Yùmén Guān; admission Y45), 102km from Dūnhuáng. Both this and the **South Pass** (阳关; Yáng Guān), 78km west of Dūnhuáng, were originally military stations, part of the Han-dynasty series of beacon towers that extended to the garrison town of Loulan in Xīnjiāng. For caravans travelling westward, the Jade Gate marked the beginning of the northern route to Turpan, while the South Pass was the start of the southern route through Miran. The Jade Gate derived its name from the important traffic in Khotanese jade.

The entry fee includes a small **museum** (with scraps of real Silk Road silk); a nearby section of **Han-dynasty Great Wall**, built in 101 BC and impressive for its antiquity and refreshing lack of restoration; and the ruined city walls of **Hécāng Chéng**, 15km away on a side road.

The only way to get out here is to hire a car for a long day trip to take in Yādān, the Jade Gate and the Western Thousand Buddha Caves. Fēitiān Travel Service (see p827) organises air-conditioned cars for about Y450; you might get a minivan for around Y350.

EASTERN GĀNSŪ

Most travellers speed through eastern Gānsū, catching mere glimpses from the train window as they shuttle between Lánzhōu and Xī'ān. This is a shame because the area contains some spectacular Silk Road remnants at Màijī Shān and the Water Curtain Caves, as well as a handsome regional hub in Tiānshuǐ. Moon Canyon, in the far southern part of the province, is the hidden gem of the region.

Tiānshuǐ

天水

☎0938 / POP 450,000

Tiānshuǐ's splendid Buddhist caves at Màijī Shān entice a consistent flow of visitors to one of Gānsū's more attractive and laid-back cities. Industrial growth has sent the place on an outwards sprawl, but the old downtown of Tiānshuǐ (known as Qínchéng) has remained pleasantly low-rise and locals pass the time playing a lot of pool.

Tiānshuǐ is actually two separate towns 15km apart – the gritty railhead sprawl, known as Běidào (北道), and the central commercial area to the west, known as Qínchéng (秦城) – lashed together by a long freeway. Màijī Shān is 35km south of Běidào.

👁️ Sights

Tiānshuǐ's main draw is the grottoes at Màijī Shān, but if you have time to kill you could explore the other sights.

Fúxī Temple

TEMPLE

(伏羲庙; Fúxī Miào; off Jiefang Lu, Qincheng; admission Y30; ☀8am-6pm) Cracked during the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, this Ming-dynasty temple was begun in 1483. The main hall is one of the most elaborate structures in Gānsū, with intricate wooden door panels and original paintings of the 64 hexagrams (varying combinations of the eight trigrams used in the I Ching) on the ceiling.

One of the mythic progenitors of the Chinese people, leaf-clad Fúxī was reputedly a local of Chenji (present-day Tiānshuǐ) who introduced the domestication of animals, hunting and the eight trigrams (used for divination) to early Chinese civilisation. A pleasant pedestrian area filled with itinerant musicians, wood carvers and souvenir stalls has been built at the front of the temple.

Yùquán Temple

TAOIST TEMPLE

(玉泉观; Yùquán Guàn; Renmin Xilu, Qincheng; adult/student Y20/10; ☀7.30am-6.30pm) Ascending in layers up the hillside above Qínchéng, this Taoist temple is a pleasant, green and rambling shrine. Of note are the ancient cypress trees, some more than 1000 years old.

🛏 Sleeping

Tiānshuǐ has plenty of accommodation, with discounts of up to 40% pretty standard. Cheap guesthouses (*zhāodàisù*) can be found on Yima Lu in Běidào. A good alternative is to spend the night by Màijī Shān, a far more rural experience.

QINCHENG

Tiānshuǐ Dàjiùdiàn

HOTEL \$

(天水大酒店; ☎828 9999; 1 Qincheng Dazhong Nanlu; 秦城大众南路1号; d without bathroom Y90, with bathroom Y146-190, tr Y97, discounts of 40%; 🍷) The bargain but battle-scarred *pūtōng* (economy) rooms with shared bathroom are great for budget seekers, with hot showers down the hall. It's right at the commercial heart of town, next to KFC.

BEIDAO

Dōng'ān Fàndiàn

HOTEL \$

(东安饭店; ☎261 3333; Yima Lu; 一马路; tw Y168, discounts of 40%; 🍷) Very comfortable, with double-glazed windows, quality furnishings and good bathrooms with phone and hairdryer, this is a great three-star option 50m east of the train station. Excellent value.

Wànhuì Zhāodàisù

GUESTHOUSE \$

(万汇招待所; ☎492 7976; Yima Lu; 一马路; tw Y35-80) This serviceable Běidào guesthouse four shops west of the post office has frugal cheapies and better standard rooms. Reception's on the 3rd floor.

🍴 Eating

Tiānshuǐ is famed for its *miànpí* (面皮) noodles, which can be found everywhere. In Qínchéng, good claypot, Sichuan and noodle snack stalls stuff Xiaochi Jie (小吃街; Snack St), while fruit and walnut sellers cram Guangning Xiang, east and south of the Tiānshuǐ Dàjiùdiàn.

Tasty *ròujiāmó* and other fine snack food in Běidào fills Erma Lu, the pedestrian alley south of the train station. For

chicken burgers, a branch of the fast-food chain Dico's can be found on Erma Lu.

Běidào Qīngzhēn Lǎozihào Niúròu Miànguǎn

NOODLES \$

(北道清真老字号牛肉面馆; Erma Lu, Beidao; meals Y8; ☺24hr) Get a ticket from the kiosk out front and collect your beef noodles (*niúròumiàn*; Y4) and flatbread (*shāobǐng*; Y0.50) from the kitchen window at this place with a 30-year history. The noodles are excellent, infused with dollops of scarlet-red chilli oil. For extra meat, ask for *jiā ròu niúròumiàn* (加肉牛肉面; Y7). There's no English sign, but it's obliquely opposite a branch of ICBC bank.

i Information

Perhaps it's the bad air, but chemists (药房; *yàofáng*) are simply everywhere.

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng) Běidào (☺8.30am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm); Qínchéng (Minzhu Donglu) The Běidào branch is opposite the train station and has Forex and ATM.

China Post (中国邮政; Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; ☺8am-6pm) Qínchéng (Ziyou Lu); Běidào (Yima Lu)

Huāxīng Internet Cafe (华兴网吧; Huāxīng Wǎngbǎ; Yima Lu, Běidào; per hr Y2; ☺24hr)

Industrial & Commercial Bank of China (工商银行; Gōngshāng Yínháng; Lantian City Plaza; Qínchéng) Has 24-hour ATM.

Tiānlè Internet Cafe (天乐网吧; Tiānlè Wǎngbǎ; Xiaoqi Jie; Qínchéng; per hr Y1.50; ☺24hr) Up steps west off Xiaoqi Jie.

i Getting There & Away

Bus

Buses from the **long-distance bus station** in Qínchéng run to:

Baoji Y48, two hours, regular services

Gāngǔ Y12, 90 minutes, every 20 minutes

Hanzhong Y88, seven to eight hours, one daily (6am)

Huixian Y30, three hours, hourly

Lánzhōu Y55 to Y67, four hours, every 20 minutes

Línxià Y80, seven hours, one daily (6.30am)

Luómén Y18, two hours, two daily (6.30am and 2.30pm)

Píngliáng Y70, five hours, four daily (6am, 7am, 8am and 9.30am)

Xī'ān Y100, 4½ hours, hourly

Yínchuān Y148, 12 hours, two daily (6am and 2.30pm)

Buses to Lánzhōu also depart throughout the day from the forecourt of the train station in Běidào. There are also two morning departures a day from here to Huixian.

Train

Tiānshuǐ is on the Xī'ān–Lánzhōu railway line; there are dozens of daily trains in either direction. If you arrive early, you can visit Mǎijī Shān as a day trip, avoiding the need to stay overnight in Tiānshuǐ.

From Tiānshuǐ it's four to six hours to either Lánzhōu (hard seat Y62) or Xī'ān (Y61).

i Getting Around

Taxis shuttle passengers between Qínchéng (from the Tiānshuǐ Dàjiùdiàn and long-distance bus station) and the train station in Běidào for Y10. Alternatively, take the much slower bus 1 or 6 (Y3, 40 minutes) from Dazhong Lu.

Around Tiānshuǐ

MǎIJǐ SHĀN

麦积山

Set among wild and lush green hills south-east of Tiānshuǐ, the riveting grottoes of Mǎijī Shān (Haystack Mountain) are some of China's most famous Buddhist rock carvings. The solitary, tree-capped rock sticks up from the verdant, rolling landscape like a vast Chinese haystack, hence the name.

👁 Sights

Mǎijī Shān

CAVES

(adult/student Y70/35; ☺8am-6pm) The cliff sides are riddled with niches and statues carved principally during the Northern Wei and Zhou dynasties (AD 386–581), with later additions. Vertigo-inducing catwalks and steep spiral stairways cling to the cliff face, affording close-ups of the art.

It's not certain just how the artists managed to clamber so high; one theory is that they created piles from blocks of wood reaching to the top of the mountain before moving down, gradually removing them as they descended. A number of the statues were slightly damaged by the Sìchuān earthquake of 2008 but have been repaired.

A considerable amount of pigment still clings to many of the statues – a lot of which are actually made of clay rather than hewn from rock – although you frequently have to climb up steps to peer at them through tight mesh grills. Also in many caves there is no natural illumina-

tion, so the figures of the Bodhisattvas sit hunched in the gloom or the frescoes are indiscernible. Much, though, is clearly visible and most of the more impressive sculptures decorate the upper walkways, especially at cave 4.

The entire undertaking is rounded off with a crescent of hawker stalls.

An English-speaking guide charges Y150 for the day. It's possible to view normally closed caves (eg Cave 133 and Cave 1) for an extra fee of Y500 per group.

Cave 13

Within the hard-to-miss Sui-dynasty trinity of **Buddha and Bodhisattvas** is the largest statue on the mountain: the cave's central effigy of Buddha tops out at 15.7m. When the statue was restored three decades ago, a handwritten copy of the *Sutra of Golden Light* was discovered within the Buddha's fan.

Cave 4

This cave's marvellous seven niches are large grottoes originally dating from the Northern Wei, with later additions from the Sui, Tang and Song. Note the powerful guardian figures, typical of torsional, muscular and fierce Tang-dynasty examples. The radiant-looking Bodhisattvas are simply exquisite, while swallows flit out from the overhanging rock above.

Cave 3

Also called the 1000-Buddha Corridor, this cave features an impressive hall past twin rows of solemn-faced Buddhas (actually 297 carvings all told). Note the lower row is far more weathered and damaged.

Cave 155

The oldest statues can be found here.

Cave 148

The figures here are among those displaying the influence of the Gandhara style, which arrived in China from India along the Silk Road.

Cave 144

The statues here are almost completely weathered away.

Cave 54

A quantity of the graffiti defacing some statues is also reasonably old – the characters daubed here are full form.

Cave 59

The largely indistinct 1200-character testament on the wall of this cave dates from

1035, recording the monies collected for restoring the statues.

The admission ticket includes entry to a small **botanic garden** (*zhīwùyuán*). You only need around an hour or so for the grottoes and afterwards a hike up nearby **Xiāngjí Shān** (香积山) is lovely, with opportunities to break off into the woods which are full of birds and wildlife. At the base of the mountain is **Ruiying Monastery** (瑞应寺; Ruiying Si; Y10).

Sleeping

There are several places where you can spend the night, including the **Arboretum Hotel** within the botanic garden.

Zhōuyú Nóngjiālè

FARMSTEAD \$

(周于农家乐; ☎139 1963 5896; beds Y20, d Y40) Tucked away in the woods, this place has simple but very cheap rooms in a farmstead environment; it also has heated *kàng* beds for winter and can cook up meals. To find the farmstead, take the path up to Xiāngjí Shān for around 600m; it's on the right.

Getting There & Away

Minibus 34 (Y5, 40 minutes) leaves every seven minutes from in front of the Tiānshuǐ train station. It may drop you at the crossroads, 5km before the site, from where a taxi van will cost Y5 per seat to the ticket office. You can walk the last 2km to 3km from the ticket office to the caves or take the tour buggy (*guāngguān chē*; Y10). Horses can also be hired for Y20. A taxi from Tiānshuǐ costs around Y100 return. On the way back you may find the occasional minibus 34 waiting to fill up for the return trip (Y6).

Moon Canyon

月亮峡

Tucked in a hidden corner of southeastern Gānsù is the pristine wilderness of **Moon Canyon** (Yuèliàng Xiá; admission Y20), with its rushing rivers and towering rock walls, and the surrounding Three Beaches National Park (三滩自然保护区; Sāntān Zírán Bǎohùqū).

At the entrance to the valley is **Moon Canyon Retreat** (月亮峡度假村; Yuèliàng Xiá Dūjiàcūn; ☎755 7888; www.threebeaches.com; dm/tents/cabins Y50/100/120, tw Y220; ☺Apr-Oct), with four spartan but low-impact lodges.

A new road leads 15km up to the village of Yǎnpíng (严坪), where there are half a dozen **homestays** (农家乐; nóngjiālè; dm Y10),

marked by tourism signs. Accommodation is basic but friendly, and local dishes are available. There is one shop in the village, so bring some snacks.

For those with camping equipment, it's a five-hour hike up to the Sāntān (Three Beaches); one possible three-day trek is to the purported **old-growth forest** (原始森林; *yuánshǐ sēnlín*) upstream. Jeeps ferry (mainly Chinese) tourists up to the first pool (Y250 return) but not beyond.

Moon Canyon is on the Chéngdū-Xi'ān rail line near the village of Jiǎlíng (嘉陵). There is only one stop per day in either direction (both at around 1pm) – the closest major rail links are Guǎngyuán (Sichuān) and Bǎojī (Shaanxi). Frequent buses run between Tiānshuǐ and Huīxiàn (徽县; Y30, three hours), from where you can hire a minivan (Y60) for the final 26km. Alternatively, take a minibus from Huīxiàn on to Jiǎlíng and then hire a minivan (Y20) or walk the 6km from there.

Gāngǔ

甘谷

☑0938

If you're Buddha-hopping across Gānsù, stop off at this village and make the one-hour hike up the hillside to an impressive carved image of **Sakyamuni** (complete with moustache). The path along the ridge is easy to follow and there are numerous little shrines along the way. The Buddha is easily visible from the road that runs past the town. Gāngǔ is 65km west of Tiānshuǐ and 30km east of Luòmén; local buses and trains between the two will stop here.

Water Curtain Caves 水帘洞

☑0938

The **Water Curtain Caves** (Shuilián Dòng; admission Y25; ☀7am-7pm) are an embodiment of that classic image of China – Taoist and Buddhist temples sheltered by steep cliffs and the majestic image of a carved Buddha guarding the vacant canyons below. The caves are 17km north of **Luòmén** (洛门), a town on the main road between Lánzhōu and Tiānshuǐ.

The main sight is **Lāshāo Sì** (拉稍寺), an overhanging cliff sheltering an amazingly vibrant 31m-high painted figure of Sakyamuni seated cross-legged upon a throne of lotus petals, lions, deer and elephants. The bas-relief carving and accompanying mint-green and salmon coloured frescoes were

completed in the Northern Wei dynasty (AD 386–534). The secondary sights here are the eponymous Taoist temple of **Shuilián Dòng**, a short walk uphill, and the faded remnants of the **Thousand Buddha Cave** (千佛洞; Qiānfó Dòng), a 10-minute walk up a side valley.

Minibuses in Luòmén will take you the 17km to the Water Curtain Caves for Y60 return; a motor tricycle is cheaper at around Y35. Half the road was washed out a few years back, so any vehicle you take needs to be sturdy enough for the rough journey (and getting here may well be impossible after heavy rain).

Luòmén is on the Lánzhōu-Xi'ān rail line, but only a couple of trains per day stop here. Two direct buses leave from Tiānshuǐ's long-distance bus station (in Qínchéng; two hours, Y18) at 6.30am and 2.30pm; otherwise change buses in Gāngǔ (甘谷). From Luòmén it's a 20-minute minibus ride (Y2) on to Wúshān (武山) and then a short bus ride to Lǒngxī (陇西), from where there are frequent trains to/from Lánzhōu.

The only place to stay is the decent **Luòmén Bīnguǎn** (洛门宾馆; ☑322 7668; tw Y80).

Píngliáng

平凉

☑0933 / POP 106,800

A booming Chinese midsized town, Píngliáng is a logical base for visits to the nearby holy mountain of Kōngtóng Shān. The train station is in the northeastern part of town and the main bus station in the far western part. They are connected by Xi Dajie and Dong Dajie, home to the town's major hotels, restaurants and shops.

The **Píngliáng Bīnguǎn** (平凉宾馆; ☑825 3988; 86 Xi Dajie; 西大街86号; tw Y200-268) is a large midrange place in the town centre. Next door, the **Qīnghuá Bīnguǎn** (清华宾馆; ☑823 4241; 90 Xi Dajie; 西大街90号; dm Y25-35, d Y90) is a friendly budget option.

About 200m west of the Píngliáng Bīnguǎn is the Sīzhōng Alley market (Sīzhōng Xiàng shìchǎng), with numerous restaurants and stalls.

The following services depart from Píngliáng's main bus station, in the western part of town:

Gūyuán Y7 to Y18, 1½ hours, hourly (8.20am to 5pm)

Lánzhōu Y90, five hours, hourly (7am to 4.50pm)

Tiānshuǐ Y54, seven hours, two daily (6.40am and 8.50am).

Xī'ān Y70, six hours, five daily (7.40am to 3pm)

Yán'ān Y106, nine hours, one daily (6am)

For Tiānshuǐ there are more frequent departures from the east bus station (*qìchē dōngzhàn*).

Getting to Píngliáng is easiest by train. There are overnight trains to Lánzhōu (train N855; Y103, 11 hours), Xī'ān (train 2586; Y66, seven hours) and Yínchuān (train K361; Y122, 8½ hours).

Around Píngliáng

KŌNGTÓNG SHĀN

崆峒山

On the border of Níngxià in the Liùpán Shān (六盘山) range, **Kōngtóng Shān** (winter/summer Y60/120; ☀8am-6.30pm) is one of the 12 principal peaks in the Taoist universe. It was first mentioned by the philosopher Zhuangzi (399–295 BC), and illustrious visi-

tors have included none other than the Yellow Emperor. Numerous paths lead over the hilltop past dozens of picturesque temples to the summit at over 2100m.

The main entrance is on the north side of the mountain. You can make a nice loop trip by descending via the steps on the mountain's south side and taking a taxi from the base. If you'd rather not walk, a **cable car** (suǒdào; return Y30) spans the reservoir on the south side to the top of the cliffs.

There is accommodation and food on the mountain at the **Kōngtóng Shānzhūāng** (崆峒山庄; dm Y40-60, tw Y240; ☹closed Nov-Apr).

Kōngtóng Shān is 11km west of Píngliáng. You might find a minibus (Y5) situated on the opposite side of the park across from the main bus station, or you can hire a minivan for Y20/40 one way/return. Both will drop you close to the ticket office, where you need to pay for a separate vehicle to take you the 3.5km up to the mountain (per person/car Y10/50).