

# Chengdu & Chill

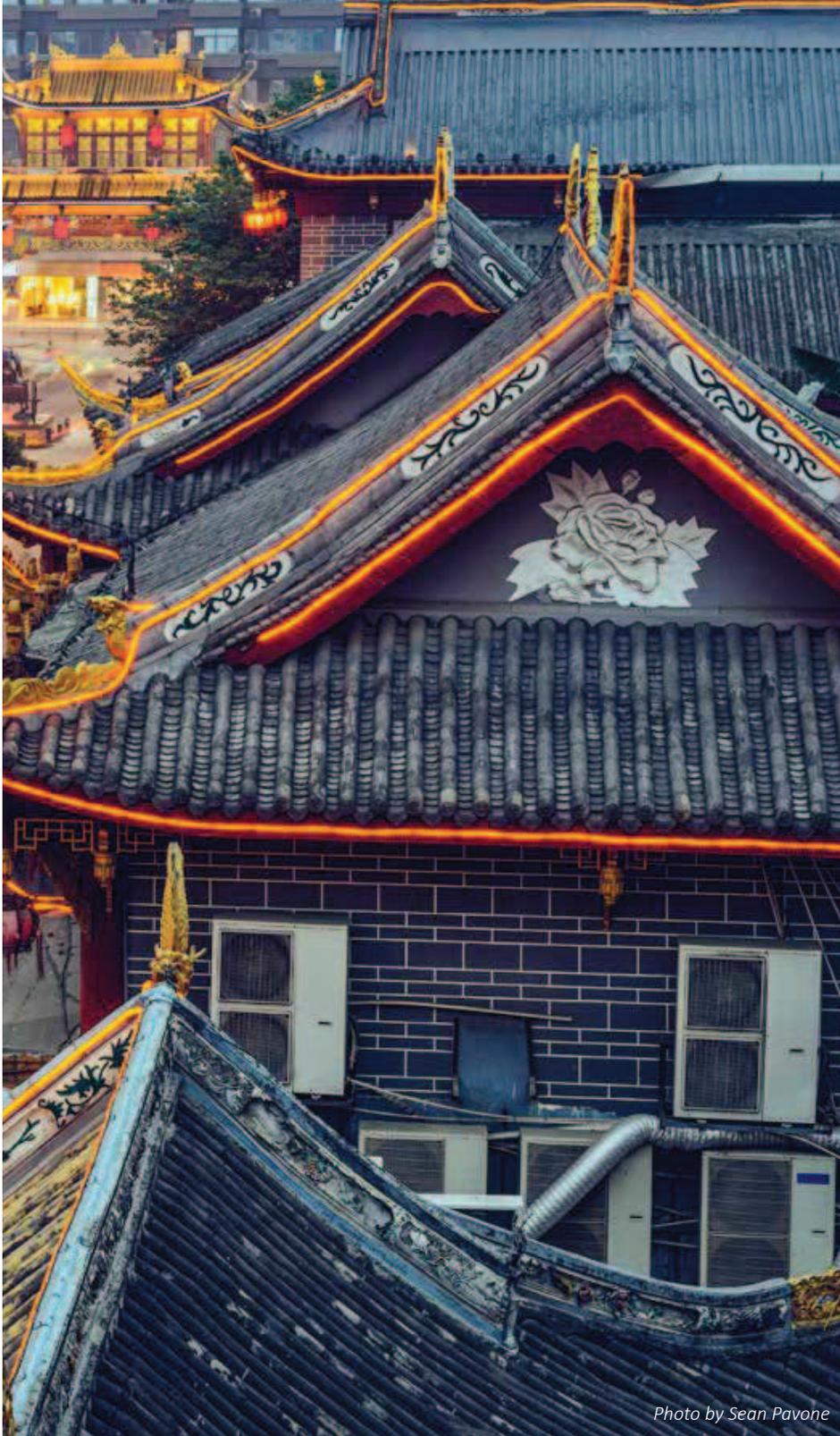
Why the capital of Sichuan is China's happiest city

Text and Images by James Pham

**THERE'S AN ANCIENT CHINESE** proverb that says “the young shouldn't go to Chengdu, and the old shouldn't leave,” speaking to the laid-back lifestyle of this city of 10 million. The gateway to Western China and the capital of Sichuan Province, Chengdu is known for many things, including adorable Giant Pandas, mouth-numbing spicy Sichuan cuisine including fiery hotpot (served up by some 20,000 hot pot restaurants), and for being China's only major city to have remained in the same location with the same name for more than 2,000 years.

More recently, though, it's garnered the accolade of being China's happiest city, a title it's maintained for five years running.

“The magic of Chengdu has nothing to do with the places you go to,” says Jordan Porter, a Chinese-speaking Canadian who moved to Chengdu in 2010. “Chengdu is more of a feeling than it is a site. In Beijing, you go to the Great Wall. It's great. It's literally got 'great' in the name. In Chengdu, you'll miss out on what's special if you go look at stuff. The beauty of Chengdu is in its slowness, in random encounters, and its subtle charms. You



*Photo by Sean Pavone*

have to let it sort of wash over you.”

I decide to do just that, letting the happiness of Chengdu wash over me. Instead of long day trips to see some of Chengdu’s more famous sights, like the 71m-high Leshan Giant Buddha, I instead spend my days hanging out in the park, checking out street art and eating my way through copious amounts of spicy Sichuanese food.

Admittedly, my sum prior experience of Sichuan (sometimes spelled “Szechuan”) cuisine had been limited to dishes on take-out menus which

always seemed to have an inordinate amount of chili pepper icons next to them. “Sichuanese cuisine is known to be spicy, but in reality, it’s more about strong flavors, either spicy, sweet or sour,” says Bo Liu of Lost Plate Food Tours as we tuck into a meal of rabbit with dried chilies and spicy tiger skin peppers named after the mottled markings they acquire from being seared in a superheated wok. “The cuisine is also recognized for its numbing sensation because it’s the birthplace of Sichuan peppercorns,” he adds about the ingredient half responsible



*Rabbit with chilies*



*Sweet water noodles*



*Sichuan noodles*

for Sichuan cuisine’s distinctive combination of searing heat from dried chilies (only recently introduced to China a few hundred years ago by Western European explorers) and the citrusy peppercorns which contribute a longer-lasting tingling effect. That dynamic duo of tingling and spicy is known as “mala” and is found in a wide range of Sichuan specialties, from spicy cookies and thick sweet water noodles doused in chili oil to doubanjiang, a fermented bean paste that forms the “soul of Sichuan cuisine”, flavoring everything from mapo tofu to hot pot broth.

To find out more about these potent seeds, I head to the Wukuaishi Wholesale Spice Market awash in the browns and reds of chilies and peppercorns. A man next to me grabs a handful of peppercorns and inhales deeply, testing their potency. Recent research has found that the active ingredient in Sichuan peppercorns interact differently with our cell’s receptors than regular chilies. Instead of a burning heat, they trigger a sensation of touch and vibration which test subjects put at 50 hertz, the same



*Wukuaishi Wholesale Spice Market*



*Qi Ba Gong She*

helping cities in the country's southwest catch up with coastal giants like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Colloquially known as the "Go West" program, the central government provided funds to invest in more infrastructure to lure businesses inland. One of the first to benefit was Chengdu with its flat, spacious land, thereby marking its rise as one of China's fastest growing second-tier cities.

One afternoon, I taxi to the northern part of town, once home to the city's more upscale neighborhoods. Now, many buildings stand empty and abandoned, waiting to be demolished and replaced with modern high-rises. The locals joke that a 30m-tall statue of Mao Zedong in central Tianfu Square had already predicted the shift to the city's south, as it depicts Chairman Mao with an outstretched arm pointed to the south, his back to the north.

Wanting a glimpse into the future of Chengdu, I hop on the subway and take it almost to the very end, emerging in a metropolis of gleaming, new buildings and immaculately landscaped streets. I walk slack-jawed through Global Center, the world's largest building and the crown jewel of "new" Chengdu, home to a 14-screen cinema, Olympic-sized ice rink, 400m-long indoor beach and wave pool, and a 990-room luxury hotel.

In a modern fulfillment of the Chinese proverb "Heaven is high and the emperor is far away", Chengdu authorities have parlayed access to funds and relative freedom from the central government into a futuristic business hub, home to



*Wukuaishi Tea Market*



*A streetside game of mahjong*



*Feeding the fish in People's Park*

vibration that courses through most Asian power grids.

We walk over to the tea section of the market, also a product native to Sichuan, as is oriental persimmons and even red kiwis. In fact, Sichuan was once known as the "Storehouse of Heaven" for its rich agricultural heritage, including that of the fertile Chengdu Plain watered by an ancient irrigation system tapping into the Min River. In ancient times, Chengdu was on the Tea Horse Road, a trade route through the mountains ferrying Sichuan tea and spices to Tibet in return for sturdy ponies.

Modern-day Chengdu remains a gateway for many Tibet-bound travelers, the closest city from which to fly or travel by train to Lhasa and a good place to wait for travel permits. For a taste of Tibet, I head to Little Lhasa, Chengdu's Tibetan quarter and spend the morning alongside sunglasses-wearing Tibetan monks with bright sneakers peeking out from under their robes. Together, we browse the

stores filled with dzi beads, handwoven carpets, and brightly colored paintings.

Later that evening, I find myself at Qi Ba Gong She, a vintage café that translates to "70s and 80s Commune". Up a set of creaky wooden stairs, hip Chenduers lounge about amidst stacks of old books, vintage paraphernalia, and throwback movie posters. Over glasses of 100-proof baijiu, a clear liquor made from distilling sorghum, Bo talks about the importance of the 70s and 80s when China first opened up to foreign businesses under Deng Xiaoping's Open Door policy. "It was a significant time in modern Chinese history as it marked the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of an open economy," he says. "The music we're hearing now is from either Hong Kong or Taiwan, the first breeze of freedom to reach mainland Chinese people."

More reforms came in 2000 which saw the beginning of China's Great Western Development Strategy aimed at



*A monk shops in Little Lhasa*

upwards of 300 of the Fortune Global 500 companies. Things are going so well that city officials have recently announced plans to launch an artificial moon in two years, as if conquering the world is not enough.

Could all this be the secret to China's happiest city? Great food, cheap rent, and good jobs?

"Chengdu isn't beautiful but it has a great work-life balance," says Jordan. "It's got a lot of young, artsy people who are very liberal socially, and there are lots of tech jobs where people can make money but still enjoy themselves. People here prioritize an enjoyment of life beyond money and work hours."

I tell Jordan about my taxi driver who asked me to get out and walk the rest of the way to my destination instead of dealing with the morning traffic. "That's so Chengdu," he laughs. "He could make more money just waiting in the car but didn't want to."

I notice more of Chengdu's unruffled approach to life as I walk around town, watching people play mah-jong on the sidewalk on a weekday afternoon, lazily feeding fish from baby bottles in People's Park, or just taking in street art at Taikoo

## AN INSIDER'S VIEW OF THE CHENGDU FOOD SCENE

As told by Jordan Porter, self-proclaimed "food dork" and founder of Chengdu Food Tours

*There's an intense focus on food in Chengdu. Every part of the culture manifests itself at the table. There's an Epicurean relaxed approach to living, and the celebration of food and fun. This is best experienced at tea houses, at markets, at incidental meetings on the street and most of all at restaurants or in kitchens. Everything in Chengdu takes place around food and the magic of the people and the city shine best through meals.*

*Chengdu is also self-sufficient, food-wise. In three hours, you can be 3,000 m above sea level in what looks like a Tibetan village. Or drive*

*to a farm, enjoy the fresh air and eat foraged vegetables and free-range rabbits and chickens which the farmers will cook up. If it's peach season, everyone will go out there and take advantage of the side industries.*

*People here are also tied to their food sources because they go to the market every day. In North America, so much of the food is processed. Here, it's not a bunch of hipster words like "farmer's market", "farm-to-table", or "locavore", it's just fresh, local, seasonal food all year round. There's no pretention. Every grandma makes her own pickles. There's just an amazing connection to food woven into the fabric of Chengdu society. Food is never just food.*

Li, a hip, open-air shopping area where the young and beautiful come to see and be seen, strolling by the likes of Roberto Cavalli and Givenchy.

On my final day, I visit the original "Chengdu & Chill" resident, the Giant Panda. The lushly forested mountains surrounding Chengdu are home to nature reserves and scenic parks housing more than 30% of the world's highly endangered pandas. Within two hours of Chengdu are three places to see the pandas: the Giant Panda Breeding Center just on the outskirts of the city; the Wolong Panda Center, a UNESCO-recognized sanctuary; and Dujiangyan Panda Base, the newest of the three. I've chosen to go to Dujiangyan, not only to avoid the crowds, but because it's the only center currently offering a volunteer program.

There are a few dozen of us and we all don work suits and split into small groups to look after the panda enclosures. I've never been so happy sweeping up panda poop (mainly blobs of fibrous bamboo,

not unlike chewed up sugarcane), hosing down floors and carting around bundles of bamboo, all within feet of the beautiful creatures. There's an option for visitors to pay around USD 300 to sit next to a juvenile panda for 20 seconds for pictures and a quick back rub, but I'm happy spending my breaks just watching them roll around and act cuddly. The best part of the day comes when we get to hand feed them snacks through a fence, getting lost in those large, liquid brown eyes.

There's just something about pandas that make people happy. When I tell a friend about my plans, she responds that whenever she's down, she locks herself in the bathroom and watches panda videos. In person, they're even more adorable, climbing and tumbling off things, lumbering around, or laying on their backs, both hands stuffing bamboo into their faces. Watching them go about their lives, without a care in the world, I wonder whether these original Chengdu residents have known the secret to happiness all along. ■



Dujiangyan Panda Center

## IF YOU GO

*The Sofitel Chengdu Taihe luxury hotel makes a wonderful base from which to explore the city. Centrally located just a 25-minute drive from Chengdu International Airport, Tianfu Square and the city center is only a 15-minute walk away. The Sofitel Chengdu Taihe's 262 rooms and suites boast a contemporary-chic aesthetic, marrying the French elegance for which Sofitel hotels are known with subtle Chinese touches. Set on the banks of the Funan River, the riverwalk directly in front of the hotel is an excellent place for a morning run or to watch the locals practicing Tai Chi. For more, visit [www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com)*

*I took two food tours while in Chengdu, and both were very good for different reasons. Lost Plate's founder ([www.lostplate.com](http://www.lostplate.com)) is from Chengdu which means the places we stopped at*

*were very local and pretty well hidden, including a residential apartment that served some excellent spicy dumplings and a hole-in-the-wall joint that made yummy little cakes (the place where you entered was literally a break in the wall). We traveled by tuk-tuk between stops which turned out to be a good thing as an unlimited amount of beer is included in the tour. Overall, it felt like you were with a hip friend who had great anecdotes to tell and who also knew all the best, quirky spots to eat.*

*On the other hand, the walking tour by Chengdu Food Tours ([www.chengdufoodtours.com](http://www.chengdufoodtours.com)) was a little grittier, appealing to the "fly restaurant" foodie crowd who don't mind a more local experience as long as good food is involved. I loved walking through the market and gaining insights on local products while*

*interacting with the friendly sellers. Our guide also had an "in" at many of the places we visited, helping us bypass the very long lines. I also appreciated the in-depth commentary which went into the stories behind the food.*

*I visited the Dujiangyan Panda Base with the help of Windhorse Tour ([www.windhorsetour.com](http://www.windhorsetour.com)) who were absolutely brilliant at logistics. I tried emailing the base directly for information about the volunteer program, but got no response, so was very glad to have someone on the ground to help arrange everything from completing a medical clearance form to securing a car and driver for the day and dropping me off at the airport afterwards. E-mail communication was quick and easy and the information provided was very detailed and accurate.*