

NEW YORK

Chengdu Instead of Beijing

By Justin Bergman Published Oct 25, 2013



A century-old teahouse near the outskirts of Chengdu.

(Photo: Liu Guoxing/Image China/AP Images)



Beijing may be the political center of China—as well as a cultural and culinary hub—but the most dynamic Chinese city at the moment is more than a thousand miles south, in the mountains of Sichuan province. Chengdu has one of the fastest-growing economies in China—roughly half the world’s iPads are reportedly made here, and there are high-rises

as far as the eye can see—but **B** the way of life is much more laid-back than in other large Chinese cities (Chengduites are known for taking long, leisurely meals). In recent years, the contemporary-art scene has exploded

—Chengdu hosted its sixth **Biennale** in 2013—and the city’s live-music venues are the most rocking outside Beijing, showcasing everything from punk to Grateful Dead–style **xipishi** jam sessions. The **Buddha Zen** (*rooms start at \$75; buddhazehotel.com*), built in an ancient-Sichuan-style complex, is just one of the snazzy boutique hotels that have opened in recent years, while rooms at Chengdu’s branch of the luxe **Shangri-La hotel chain** (*shangri-la.com*) start at just \$295. And those looking for a quick day trip can head to the idyllic nearby countryside: **Qingcheng Mountain**, the birthplace of Taoism, is dotted with temples and pavilions, and the village of **Shangli** hasn’t changed much since its Silk Road days, with ancient wooden houses serving fruit wines and rosewood tea. Oh, and Chengdu has something else the capital doesn’t: **a panda refuge**, with more than 100 free-roaming pandas and a new brood of fourteen cubs born over the summer.

Population: 14 million

Distance from Beijing: Two-and-a-half-hour flight.

Plus, the Food Is Spicier

Thanks to its famous, fiery cuisine, Chengdu was named a UNESCO City of Gastronomy in 2010. Local food blogger Jenny Gao ranks her top dishes from

kinda to insanely spicy.

Mildly spicy:

Salt and Sichuan peppercorn cookies

“**Gong Ting Bakery** (58 *Wuyuangong Jie*; 8694-2646) is an institution—every grandmother goes there. You can see people lined up from a mile away. (Don’t worry, the line moves fast.) They use ingredients you won’t see anywhere else in China and have a cookie called *jiaoyan taosu* that’s seasoned with salt and Sichuan peppercorns—it’s such a complex flavor combination.”

Medium spicy:

Tianshuimian (sweet water noodles)

“This is a classic Sichuan street dish. **Zhang Liangfen** (39 *Wenshuyuan Jie*; no phone) does it amazingly. They are traditionally served cold and are really thick—imagine twice the size of an udon noodle and super-chewy, like gnocchi. They ladle a mixture of sauces on top and then sprinkle it with sesame seeds. The combination is divine.”

Very spicy:

Pig-brain mapo tofu

“Sichuan food is defined by ‘fly restaurants’—basically tiny, hole-in-the-walls known for the most flavorful food. One of the most famous is **Ming Ting** (30 *Yijiefang, Waicaojia Xiang*; 8331-5978), and their best dish is an unusual take on mapo tofu. The pig brain adds a really interesting texture to it, and the dish is super-spicy. The thing about Sichuan food is that it’s well balanced, so all the sweetness and savoriness balance out the spice.”