
On The GreatWall

5 Minute Chinese

Do You Need a VPN for China Travel?



PandaWu: Hello, this is 5 Minute Chinese from On The GreatWall. I'm PandaWu.

Emma: And I'm Emma.

Emma: PandaWu, I need to ask you something very practical today. I'm going to Guangzhou next week, and I keep getting mixed advice about the internet in China. One friend told me, "Just get a VPN." Another friend said, "Be careful, VPNs are illegal there." And now I'm not sure what to believe.

PandaWu: That is exactly the kind of confusion many travelers have before their first China trip.

Emma: Right. I'm not trying to do anything complicated. I just want to message my family, check Gmail, use Google Maps, maybe open Instagram or WhatsApp. Normal travel stuff.

PandaWu: You should prepare before you arrive. On mainland China's regular local internet, some of the apps and websites you use back home may not open normally. That includes Google, Gmail, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and some other services people use every day outside China.

Emma: So if I land in Guangzhou and connect to local Wi-Fi, those apps may just stop working.

PandaWu: Yes, that can happen. Not because your phone is broken, and not because your account has a problem. It is just the local internet environment.

Emma: Okay. That already removes one fear. It is not me doing something wrong.

PandaWu: Exactly. For travelers, there are usually two practical ways to handle it. One is international roaming or a travel eSIM that routes your data outside mainland China. The other is using a VPN that you set up before the trip.

Emma: Let's start with roaming. That sounds easier.

PandaWu: It usually is. If your home carrier has an international roaming plan, or if your travel eSIM works in that way, many of your usual apps may continue to work as they do at home. You land, turn on data, and your phone feels more familiar.

Emma: That sounds like the least stressful option.

PandaWu: It is simple, but it can be expensive. Some roaming plans charge a lot per day. Some give you only a small amount of data. So it is great as a backup, but not always the best main plan for a longer trip.

Emma: So roaming is the easy button, but it might not be the cheap button.

PandaWu: Exactly.

Emma: And VPNs? This is where people seem to get nervous.

PandaWu: Yes, because online advice often sounds more dramatic than real travel. In practice, many travelers use VPNs in China so they can keep using the apps they already rely on. People also use them for work, especially if they need tools, email, social platforms, or e-commerce sites from back home.

Emma: So the idea that a tourist using a VPN to message family is doing something shocking is not really accurate.

PandaWu: No. For many travelers, it is a normal part of preparing for China. The important thing is not to wait until you are already in China to figure it out.

Emma: Because I might not be able to download the VPN app after I arrive.

PandaWu: Exactly. If the VPN website or app store page does not open easily, you have created a problem for yourself. So install it before you fly. Log in before you fly. Test it before you fly.

Emma: That sounds obvious, but I can imagine a lot of people only thinking about it after they land.

PandaWu: It happens. Picture this. You arrive at Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport. You want to tell your family you landed safely. Then you need your hotel address from Gmail. Then you want to message a friend on WhatsApp. If everything is already set up, the first hour feels easy.

Emma: And if not, that first hour becomes a tiny panic.

PandaWu: Exactly. You are tired, you are carrying luggage, the airport is busy, and now your familiar apps are not loading. That is not the moment to start researching VPN options.

Emma: So the real advice is: do the boring setup at home, so China feels easier when you arrive.

PandaWu: That is a good way to say it. A reliable VPN can be your main option. Roaming or an eSIM can be your backup. You do not need five plans. You just need one main plan and one fallback.

Emma: I like that. One main plan, one fallback.

PandaWu: Also, do not rely too much on free VPNs. Some work badly, some are slow, and some disappear just when you need them. If your trip depends on staying connected, choose something you trust before you leave.

Emma: That sounds much more practical than just asking, "Is a VPN allowed or not?"

PandaWu: Right. That question is usually too simple. A better question for travelers is: how will I keep my important apps working during the trip?

Emma: And the answer is: prepare roaming, an eSIM, or a VPN before arriving.

PandaWu: Exactly. Now, there is one Mandarin phrase you may see when people talk about this online.

PandaWu: 翻墙

Emma: 翻墙

PandaWu: Literally, it means to climb over a wall. Online, people often use it to mean getting around internet restrictions.

Emma: So it is not a formal travel phrase.

PandaWu: No. You probably would not say it at a hotel desk or an airport counter. But if you read Chinese online discussions about VPNs, apps, or blocked websites, you may see this word.

Emma: That is useful. So 翻墙 is the phrase to recognize, not necessarily the phrase to walk around saying.

PandaWu: Exactly. Recognize it, understand it, and then focus on the practical part of your trip.

Emma: Let me check if I have this right. If I use local Wi-Fi or a normal local SIM in mainland China, some apps like Google, Gmail, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp may not work normally.

PandaWu: Correct.

Emma: If I use international roaming or the right travel eSIM, those apps may work more like they do at home, but it may cost more.

PandaWu: Yes.

Emma: And if I want to use a VPN, I should install it, log in, and test it before I fly.

PandaWu: Exactly. Do not make your first test happen at the airport.

Emma: So the answer to "Do I need a VPN for China travel?" is not always yes. But if I rely on the apps I use back home, I do need a plan.

PandaWu: That is the clean answer. You may use roaming. You may use an eSIM. You may use a VPN. But do not arrive with no plan and hope everything works.

Emma: And the useful phrase is 翻墙, to climb over the wall.

PandaWu: Yes. A very visual phrase for a very practical travel problem.

Emma: I feel much better about Guangzhou now.

PandaWu: Good. Prepare your connection before you travel, and the rest of the trip will feel much smoother.

PandaWu: Once again, our five minutes are up, but if you'd like to hear more authentic stories about Chinese food, history and culture, you can head to our topic page on our website, onthegreatwall.com. See you again soon. But for now, it's goodbye.

Useful Examples

翻墙

Fān qiáng

Literally, to climb over a wall. Online, it often means getting around internet restrictions.

漫游

Màn yóu

Roaming, especially mobile data roaming while traveling.

网络

Wǎng luò

Internet or network.