

Zhangjiajie

Five days, four nights

I'd been seeing Zhangjiajie's mountains on my feed for years before I finally stood among them. Real-life Pandora felt about right. It was also where I first tried flying a drone. I stayed three nights; the route below adds a fourth so the forest park, Grand Canyon and Tianmen each get their own day, with arrival and departure around them.

The route at a glance

Day 1	Arrive in Wulingyuan
Day 2	Forest park and Yuanjiajie
Day 3	Grand Canyon Glass Bridge
Day 4	Tianmen Mountain
Day 5	Onward journey

[Full guide, photographs and latest updates](#)

A printable companion to the online guide. Prices retain their original check date; confirm access, fares and bookings for your own travel dates.

Before you go

Set up Alipay before departure: register your mobile number, add an eligible overseas card under Me → Bank Cards and follow identity-verification prompts. Keep access to SMS codes.

WeChat Pay is the alternative: Me → Services → Wallet → Bank Cards. Foreign-card support depends on the issuer; check the final payment screen for fees, especially above RMB 200.

Keep RMB cash in smaller notes and a second card. Mobile QR payments are common; international cards are more useful in larger hotels and shops than at small food stalls. Ask before ordering if you need to pay by card.

In metro cities, activate the local transport QR service separately from the shopping payment code, or buy a station ticket. For road journeys, use DiDi with the exact pickup point and destination saved.

Save hotel and attraction names in Chinese, plus offline screenshots. A translation app helps with menus; 'xièxie' means thank you and 'zhège' means this one.

Install a compatible China eSIM or arrange a local SIM before relying on data. Check coverage and whether the plan includes a local number; keep your home SIM available for verification messages.

Your route

Day 1 - arrive in Wulingyuan

The train from Chongqing took up much of the arrival day in my planner. Continue to your accommodation, have a meal nearby and settle the next morning's entry arrangements. Check the exact station on your ticket and the transfer to Wulingyuan; arriving in Zhangjiajie doesn't mean you're already at the forest-park entrance.

Keep this evening simple. Ask which gate suits your route, what transport is included in your ticket and where you'll finish. Those answers matter more than finding another attraction to squeeze in before dinner.

Day 2 - give the sandstone pillars a full park day

Use Yuanjiajie as the main focus. The East Gate and Bailong Elevator appear in my planning notes, so they're a useful starting point for discussing a route with your accommodation or guide. Confirm the current shuttle sequence and whether the elevator is included in the ticket you buy.

Wulingyuan's sandstone pillars are the result of weathering and erosion, with forest filling the gaps between the towers. I would leave time to watch how the layers appear through cloud instead of looking for just one famous viewpoint.

The Bailong Elevator is modern engineering built against the cliff, making the sudden change from valley to high viewpoints part of the experience. I would still keep the landscape, rather than the lift itself, as the reason for this park day.

On the upper paths, allow time around the pillar viewpoints and First Bridge Under Heaven. Look between the closest pillars and the layers behind them; the view changes as you move along the upper paths.

Reserve the full sightseeing day for this outing. As a planning estimate, keep roughly six to eight hours available for entry, shuttles, walking, lunch and the return, rather than treating that as six to eight hours of continuous hiking. Queues or a slower walking pace can use the spare time quickly.

Have a proper pause before the return journey. If your energy has gone into the upper paths, leave Golden Whip Stream for another day rather than adding a long descent or lower-level walk just because it appears on the same park map. Head back to Wulingyuan for dinner.

Dinner in Wulingyuan: Fuzhengyi Sanxiaguo - Wulingyuan

Day 3 - the Glass Bridge, or another kind of park day

I visited the Grand Canyon Glass Bridge. If that's part of what you've come for, make the canyon today's main outing and check whether your chosen admission covers the bridge alone or a wider canyon route.

The Grand Canyon Glass Bridge places a transparent deck above the gorge, so the exposure is the attraction as much as the view. I visited it on this trip; I would choose it for that particular experience, rather than treat it as another forest-park entrance.

Allow a half to full day including the return transfer, depending on the programme you book. Choose the ticket according to how much of the canyon you want to walk. Don't reserve the afternoon for a substantial forest-park route until you know what your canyon visit actually

involves.

If the bridge doesn't appeal, swap this day for Golden Whip Stream in the forest park. A shorter out-and-back section gives you a lower-level walking focus after yesterday's elevated views. Agree a turnaround point based on your energy and the return transport; "along the stream" shouldn't accidentally become a much longer one-way walk.

Golden Whip Stream gives a valley-level view of the pillars and forest, contrasting with the higher lookout routes. I would keep it as a separate option rather than add a long walk after an already full upper-park day.

For this five-day version, consider moving to Zhangjiajie city after the outing. Arrange luggage storage or collection before setting off so your bags don't become another stop midway through the day. Staying in Wulingyuan is also reasonable if you'd rather avoid changing rooms, but account for the extra journeys tomorrow.

Dinner if staying in Wulingyuan: Tangshifu Xiangxi Specialty Restaurant - Wulingyuan

Day 4 - Tianmen gets its own day

I went to Tianmen Mountain as well. Treat it separately from the forest park: the mountain, natural arch and cliffside routes make a different outing from Yuanjiajie's pillars.

Tianmen's natural arch and cliffside setting make it a different landscape from Wulingyuan's slender sandstone pillars. I went to both, and I would keep separate days so neither mountain becomes a rushed extra.

Start from the meeting point for the ticketed route you've booked. Confirm the current order, included transport, stairs and any optional sections before paying. Don't choose a ticket by a route letter alone or assume a cableway described in an older guide is operating in the same way now.

Keep the whole day available, including access queues and getting back down. Choose the walking sections that suit your comfort with heights and the conditions that day. Eat before or during the outing and keep the evening for a local dinner.

The Hunan government's Zhangjiajie pages help distinguish the attractions when planning the route. Confirm mountain access and the transport included for your travel date through the attraction's current booking channel.

[Hunan government's Zhangjiajie pages](#)

Day 5 - checkout and onward travel

My journey continued to Shanghai. For your own departure, allow for luggage collection and the transfer to the correct station or airport. This route leaves the major attractions behind you, so you're not deciding whether to leave a mountain early to make a flight.

Keeping it to three nights

Three nights worked comfortably for me. To make a shorter plan work for you, start with the actual arrival and departure times. If those leave only two clear sightseeing days, choose the forest park plus either Tianmen or the canyon. To include all three, you'll need usable time on arrival or departure day, or another night.

With another day beyond the five-day route, keep both the canyon and Golden Whip Stream, each with its own space. The stream walk gives you a different perspective from the upper paths.

Weather and energy can change the order

Swap the mountain days if conditions and your bookings allow. If visibility is poor but paths remain open, a shorter permitted walk may suit you; if access is suspended, stay out and rework the day. Don't treat lower-level walking as automatically suitable in heavy rain.

Carry water, a snack and a layer appropriate to the forecast, and wear shoes suited to prolonged walking. Check current local and attraction drone rules before planning a flight.

Food and photographs

I've eaten at both of these and loved the food. They're two places I'd happily recommend for this trip.

Fuzhengyi Sanxiaguo - Wulingyuan

A good place to try sanxiaguo, the local mixed-meat pot. I'd keep this for dinner after the forest park; select the Wulingyuan branch when planning the journey.

Tangshifu Xiangxi Specialty Restaurant - Wulingyuan

Regional dishes including Tujia cured pork and sanxiaguo, with more variety for a shared meal. Another dinner option while staying in Wulingyuan, before moving to the city for Tianmen Mountain.

A few photo tips

At Yuanjiajie, photograph successive rows of pillars from the designated railings; a longer lens can isolate layers when the sky is flat.

Choose the earliest practical park entry for more room at viewpoints. Broken cloud can add depth, but wait only where the path has space for others to pass.

At Tianmen, include part of the permitted walkway to show the cliff's scale. Keep the camera secure and follow current photography restrictions at glass sections.

Budget and backup plans

What to budget

Prices checked September 2026. Published examples below are for the named ticket or service; check your travel date and inclusions before paying.

Forest park adult admission reference: RMB 227 - Hunan government reference, also listed by TravelChinaGuide with eco-bus and insurance. Confirm your dated package: cableways, Bailong Elevator, Tianmen Mountain and the glass bridge are separate products. Price source

[Price source](#)

For a simple meal, I'd allow RMB 30-80 per person. This is a planning allowance, not a checked restaurant quote; drinks, tasting menus and resort dining can cost more. Price the actual transfers separately, especially private drivers, boats and airport journeys.

If the weather changes

If the peaks disappear in cloud, use a shorter permitted lower-level route only while it is open and conditions are suitable. For sustained rain or suspended access, keep the day in town for food and rest and move the mountain booking where its terms allow.

The final day and your flight

Morning flight: spend the previous night where the airport transfer works comfortably; leave the last day for checkout and the journey, especially from Wulingyuan.

Afternoon flight: breakfast and a short walk near the hotel are enough. Collect bags before leaving for Zhangjiajie Hehua Airport; a forest-park or Tianmen visit introduces too many queues and transport stages.

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