



Inner Mongolia

内蒙古

Inner Mongolia (Nèi Měnggǔ) covers an enormous expanse of land, its intriguing and often desolate landscapes stretching some 2150km, as the hawk flies, from the Gobi Desert in the west to the Argun River (Ē'ěrgūnà Hé) along the Russian border in the northeast.

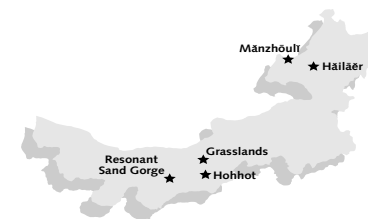
For most people, Inner Mongolia's big attractions are the rolling steppes and the chance to glimpse the Mongolian way of life, where herders traditionally moved with the seasons in search of pastures for their animals, living in transportable circular tents known as yurts. Some travellers are disappointed that 'Mongolian life' here has been packaged for tourists, with visits to 'yurt camps' and folkloric dance shows, rather than encounters with genuine nomads on the grasslands. Still, it's possible to learn something of Mongolian ways, particularly for adventurous travellers who seek out more authentic experiences. And the wide open spaces of Inner Mongolia's 'big sky country' are a welcome relief from China's urban centres.

In Inner Mongolia's far north, the culture is influenced by the proximity of Russia, as Russian traders cross the border to wheel and deal in towns such as Mǎnzhōulǐ. Minority peoples, including the Ewenki and the Daur, still live in remote northern territories as well.

The region is also home to the mausoleum of the legendary Genghis Khan, the controversial conqueror who led the Mongols to build a vast empire that stretched from Asia into Europe. And not far from the mausoleum, you can begin exploring the region's expansive deserts.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sleep in a yurt and explore Mongolian culture on the grasslands near **Hāilǎěr** (p896)
- Hang out with Russian traders or sample Russian food in the border town of **Mǎnzhōulǐ** (p897)
- Gallop across the **grasslands** (p891) at Xilamuren, Gegental or Huitengxile
- Watch the Naadam festivities – horse racing, archery and wrestling – in **Hohhot** (p890)
- Take a quick trip to the desert at **Resonant Sand Gorge** (p894)



■ POPULATION: 42.1 MILLION

■ www.nmgnews.com.cn

History

The nomadic tribes of the northern steppes have always been at odds with the agrarian Chinese. Seeking a solution to the constant skirmishes with the numerous Xiongnu clans, the first emperor of the Qin dynasty (221–207 BC), Qin Shi Huang, began building the Great Wall to keep them out. It was only under the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) that much of the Mongolian homeland came under Chinese rule for good, divided into the 'Inner' and 'Outer' regions.

THE MONGOL EMPIRE

United by Genghis Khan and later led by his grandson Kublai Khan, the Mongols went on to conquer not only China but most of the Eurasian continent, founding an empire that stretched from Vietnam to Hungary. Begun in 1211, it was a conquest won on horseback: the entire Mongol army was cavalry, allowing rapid movement and deployment of the armies.

Even after Genghis Khan's death in 1227, successful campaigns thundered across Central Asia, Tibet, Persia and Russia, eventually reaching Europe's threshold. The subjugation of the West was only called off when Genghis Khan's successor, Ögödei, died in 1241.

The Mongols eventually moved their capital from Karakoram in Mongolia to Běijīng, and after conquering southern China in 1279, Kublai Khan became the first emperor of the Yuan dynasty. His empire was the largest nation the world has ever known. The Mongols improved the road system linking China with Russia, promoted trade throughout the empire and with Europe, instituted a famine relief scheme and expanded the canal system, which brought food from the countryside to the cities.

By the end of the 14th century, however, a series of incompetent rulers led to the disintegration of the Mongol Empire. The Mongols again become a collection of disorganised

roaming tribes, warring among themselves and occasionally raiding China, until the Qing emperors finally gained control in the 18th century.

RELIGION

Early Mongols based their religion on the forces of nature, revering the moon, sun, stars and rivers. Mongol shamans could speak to the gods and communicate their orders to the tribal chief, the khan.

With the establishment of the Yuan dynasty, the Mongols, particularly Kublai, began to express a growing interest in Tibetan Buddhism. It wasn't until after the collapse of the empire, though, that the doctrine of the Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) school would radically alter Mongolian culture.

Critical in the conversion of his people was Altan Khan, who invited the Gelugpa Lama, Sonam Gyatso, to Qīnghǎi Hú (Lake Kokonor) in 1578. Altan conferred upon the Tibetan leader the new title of 'Dalai Lama' (*dalai* being the Mongolian translation of *gyatso*, or ocean), rekindling a powerful relationship between the two cultures. Lamaism swept Mongolia, influencing all aspects of society – up to 40% of the male population would enter the monastic life.

INNER MONGOLIA TODAY

The Chinese government established the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 1947 and has tried hard to assimilate the Mongolians, who make up about 15% of Inner Mongolia's total population. (Most of the other 85% are Han Chinese with a smattering of Hui, Manchu, Daur and Ewenki.) The traditional nomadic lifestyle is fading fast, as is the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. The population is concentrated in the heavily industrial southern part of the province, in cities such as Hohhot and Bāotóu.

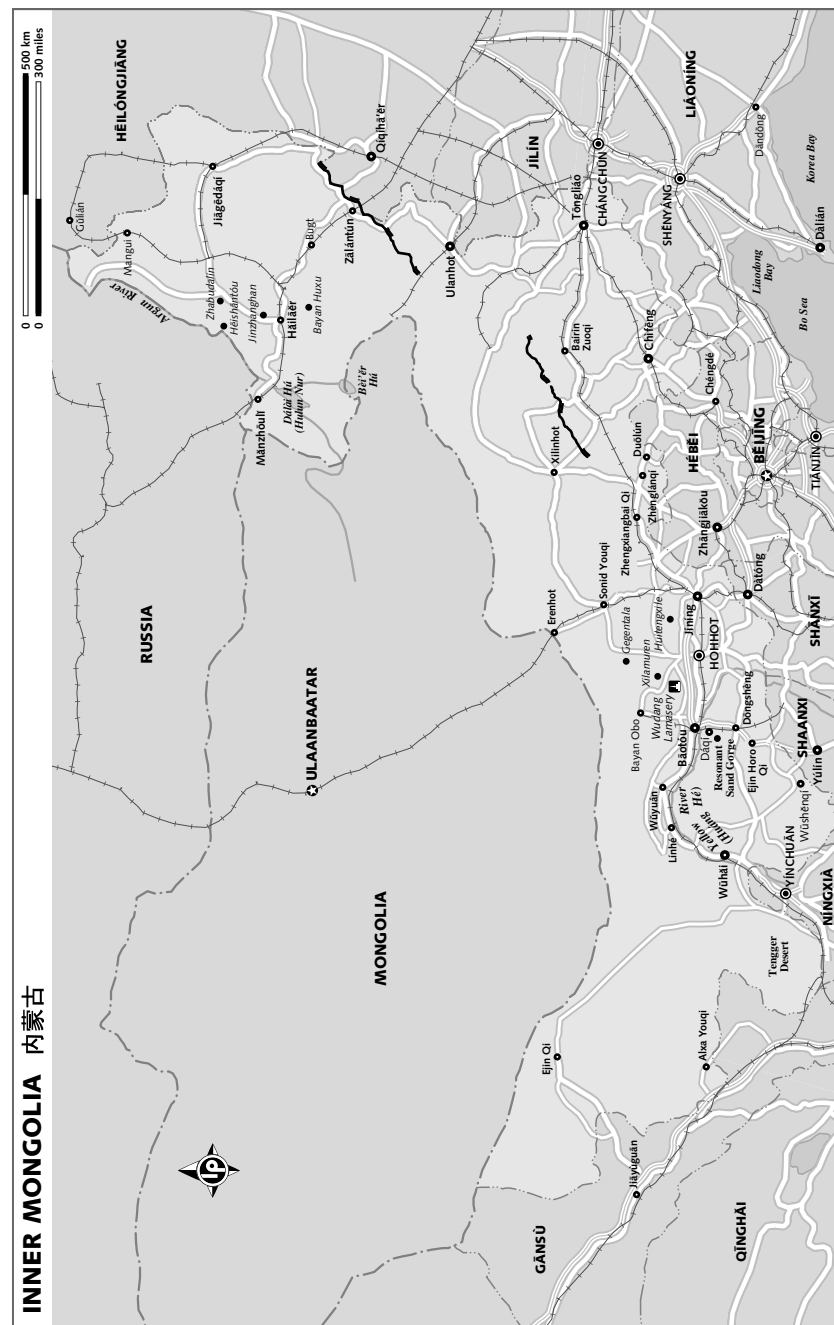
Climate

Siberian blizzards and cold air currents rake the Mongolian plains from December to March; in winter you'll even witness snow on desert sand dunes. June to August brings pleasant temperatures, but in the west it gets scorchingly hot during the day. Pack warm clothing for spring (March to May) and autumn (September to November).

The best time to visit is between June and September, particularly to see the grasslands,

A YURT BY ANY OTHER NAME...

'Yurt,' the common name for traditional Mongolian tents, is a Russian word. The Mongolian word is *ger*, and the Chinese call them 'Měnggǔ bāo,' – literally 'Mongolian buns' – perhaps because the white structures with their conical tops resemble puffy steamed breads.



TOURING THE GRASSLANDS

The *cǎoyuán* (grasslands) – kilometre after kilometre of wide open prairie – are what most travellers come to see in Inner Mongolia.

Two major starting points for grasslands tours are Hohhot in the south and Hāilǎiěr in the far north. From either city, you can visit a yurt 'camp' where you go horseback riding, sip tangy milk tea and nibble homemade cheese, take in a performance of traditional Mongolian song and dance, sup on roast lamb and drink plenty of *bāijiǔ* (white spirit). You can also stay the night in yurts that range from traditional tents with primitive facilities to brick-walled structures with private bathrooms.

You may not learn a tremendous amount about Mongolian culture, but the remote settings are undeniably beautiful and you'll glimpse modern life on the grasslands. You may see herders using motorcycles, rather than the traditional small Mongolian horses, to round up their grazing herds!

Because Hohhot is less remote, tours originating there tend to be more packaged affairs with busloads of tourists having a scripted adventure. But in Hāilǎiěr the grasslands begin right on the edge of town, so it's easy to hop on a bus or hire a taxi and go exploring on your own. In fact, in Hāilǎiěr you may find yourself alone on the prairies.

For more off-the-beaten-path grasslands adventures, head for the cities of Xilinhot or Ulanhot and set off onto the steppes from there. Or if you're truly interested in learning more about the Mongols and their culture, visit the country of Mongolia – see Lonely Planet's *Mongolia* guide for details.

which are green only in summer. Make sure you bring warm, windproof clothing, as even in mid-summer, it's often windy and evening temperatures can dip to 10 degrees Celsius or below.

Language

The Mongolian language is part of the Altaic linguistic family, which includes the Central Asian Turkic languages and the now defunct Manchurian. Although the vertical Mongolian script (written left to right) adorns street signs, almost everyone speaks standard Mandarin.

Getting There & Away

Inner Mongolia borders Mongolia and Russia. There are border crossings at Erenhot (Mongolia) and Mǎnzhōulǐ (Russia), which are stopovers on the Trans-Mongolian and Trans-Manchurian Railways, respectively. To Mongolia, you can also catch a local train to Erenhot, cross the border and take another local train to Ulaanbaatar (with the appropriate visa).

HOHHOT 呼和浩特

☎ 0471 / pop 1.14 million

Altan Khan founded Hohhot (Hūhèhàotè or Hūshì) in the 16th century. Today, the capital of Inner Mongolia is a relatively prosperous and cosmopolitan industrial city.

Hohhot is a main starting point for tours of the grasslands and is a good place to watch the summer Naadam festivities (p890).

Orientation

Centrally located Xinhua Guangchang (Xinhua Sq) fills with people on summer evenings – strolling, playing ball and just hanging out. The train and bus stations are about one kilometre north of the square. Southwest of the square is the city's main shopping district, on Zhongshan Xilu. The old town is in the southwestern corner of the city.

Information

Bank of China (Zhōngguó Yínháng; Xinhua Dajie; ☎ 8am-noon & 2.30-5pm) You can change travellers cheques here and there's a 24-hour ATM.

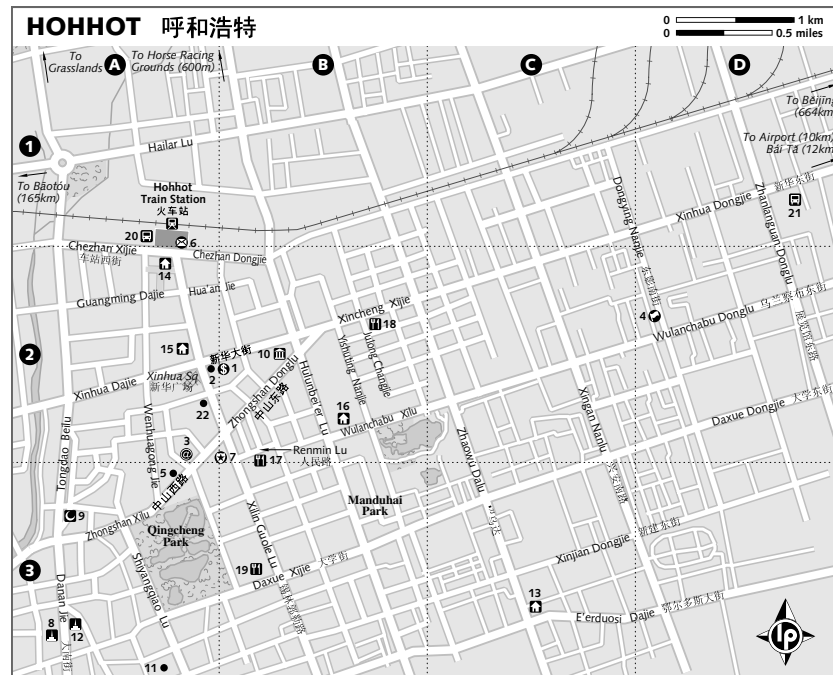
China International Travel Service (CITS; Zhōngguó Guójí Lǚxíngshì; ☎ 230 8056; fax 695 2288; Nèi Měnggǔ Fàndiàn) This helpful office offers grasslands tours.

Foreign Languages Bookshop (Wàiwén Shūdiàn; 58 Xinhua Dajie)

Internet café (wǎngbā; off Zhongshan Xilu; per hr Y3; ☎ 24hr) Go up the stairs to the Mǎndǎ Měishì Guǎngchǎng food court, then take the stairs up again to find plenty of fast, modern computers.

Photo shop (108 Zhongshan Xilu; CD burning Y15) The entrance is in the lane off Zhongshan Xilu.

Post office (yóujú; Chezhan Xijie) To the left as you exit the train station.



INFORMATION

Bank of China 中国银行 1 B2
CITS 中国国际旅行社 (see 16)
Foreign Languages Bookshop
外文书店 2 A2
Internet Café 网吧 3 A2

Mongolian Consulate
蒙古领事馆 4 D2
Photo Shop 5 A3
Post Office 邮局 6 A1
PSB 公安局 7 B2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Dà Zhào 大召 8 A3

Great Mosque 清真大寺 9 A3
Inner Mongolia Museum
内蒙古博物馆 10 B2
Wuta Pagoda 五塔寺 11 A3
Xilitú Zhào 席力图召 12 A3

SLEEPING

Binyue International Hostel
宾悦国际青年旅舍 13 C3
Bèiyuǎn Fàndiàn 北原饭店 14 A2
Hūhèhàotè Tiělù Bīnguǎn
呼和浩特铁路宾馆 15 A2
Nèi Měnggǔ Fàndiàn
内蒙古饭店 16 B2

EATING

Bātǎijiǎo Jiāchángcài
八抬轿家常菜 17 B2
Mǎlāqīn Fàndiàn
马拉沁饭店 18 B2
Xiǎoféiyáng Hùoguōchéng
小肥羊火锅城 19 B3

TRANSPORT

Aero Mongolian Airlines (see 4)
Bus Station 汽车站 20 A1
Buses to Hexi & Bǎi Tǎ 21 D1
CAAC Office
中国民航公司 22 A2

Public Security Bureau (PSB; Gōngǎnjú; 30 Zhongshan Xilu; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-5pm Mon-Fri) For visa extensions and other inquiries, the foreign affairs bureau is to the left of the main building, outside the gated compound.

Sights

WUTA PAGODA 五塔寺

This striking Indian-influenced five-tiered pagoda (Wūtǎ Sì; Wutasi Houjie; admission Y15; ☎ 8am-6pm) was completed in 1732. Its main claim to fame is the Mongolian star chart around the back,

though the engraving of the Diamond Sutra, in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Mongolian, extending around the entire base of the structure, has weathered the years in much better condition. Bus 1 runs by the pagoda.

DÀ ZHÀO & XILITÚ ZHÀO 大召、席力图召

Dà Zhào (Danan Jie; admission Y20; ☎ 8am-6.30pm) is a large, well-maintained lamasery that is still used as a temple. In the sacred main prayer hall, you may come upon groups of monks chanting and praying.

Across the main boulevard is the simpler **Xilitú Zhào** (Danan Jie; admission Y10; ☎ 8am-6.30pm), the purported stomping ground of Hohhot's 11th Living Buddha (he actually works elsewhere).

GREAT MOSQUE 清真大寺

North of the old town is the **Great Mosque** (Qingzhèn Dàsi; 28 Tongdao Beilu). Built in the Chinese style, it dates from the Qing dynasty with later expansions. You can look around as long as you don't enter the prayer hall.

INNER MONGOLIA MUSEUM 内蒙古博物馆

The most interesting exhibits at this provincial **museum** (Nèi Měnggǔ Bówùguǎn; 2 Xinhua Dajie, at Hulunbeier Lu; admission Y10; ☎ 9am-5pm) are the excellent array of Mongolian dress, archery equipment and saddles, and the detailed introductions to the province's other ethnic groups. There are limited English captions.

Festivals & Events

The week-long summer festival known as **Naadam** features traditional Mongolian sports such as archery, wrestling and horse racing. In Hohhot it takes place at the horse racing grounds (*sàimǎchǎng*; 赛马场) on the city's north side (bus route 13). Mongolian clans get to the fair on any form of transport they can muster and create an impromptu yurt city.

The exact date of Naadam varies in China but is usually between mid-July and mid-August.

Sleeping

Bèiyuán Fàndiàn (☎ 226 4222; fax 696 4629; 28 Chezhan Xijie; 车站西街28号; dm Y20-40, d without/with bath-room Y75-100/120-160) Opposite the bus and train stations, this basic budget hotel has decent if aging dorms and doubles. Some of the rooms without bathrooms are dreary, so be sure to look first.

Binyue International Hostel (Binyue Guóji Qīngnián Lùshè; ☎ 660 5666; fax 431 0808; 52 Zhaowu Dalu; 昭乌达路52号; dm/d Y50/180; ☎) Perhaps because Hohhot's **Hostelling International** affiliate is run by the posh Binyue International Hotel, it feels more deluxe than a typical hostel. The small doubles seem pricey, but the four-bed dorms are good value. From the train station, take bus 34 southeast to Normal University (师范大学; Shīfàn Dàxué); the hotel tower is a half-block further south. The hostel is behind the main hotel. If you want to splurge

on breakfast, the hotel serves a wonderful buffet (Y30).

Hùhéhàotè Tiělù Bīnguǎn (Hohhot Railway Hotel; ☎ 225 4001; fax 695 4746; 131 Xilin Guole Beilu; 锡林郭勒北路131号; d without/with bathroom Y100/198-240, tr 270, incl breakfast; ☎) More peaceful than the lodgings right at the stations, this simple hotel has small sunny rooms with Arctic air-conditioners (a blessing in Hohhot's summer heat).

Nèi Měnggǔ Fàndiàn (Inner Mongolia Hotel; ☎ 693 8888; www.nmghotel.com; Wulanchabu Xilu; 乌兰察布西路; d Y660-960; ☎) This 14-storey high-rise is one of the nicest hotels in Hohhot, with a pool, health centre and several restaurants. Some staff speak English.

Eating

Mongolia's notable culinary contribution is *huǒguō* (火锅; hotpot), a refined version, so the story goes, of the stew originally cooked in soldiers' helmets. People generally add mutton (羊肉; *yángrou*), noodles (面; *miàn*), tofu (豆腐; *dòufu*) and mushrooms (蘑菇; *mógú*) to the bubbling cauldron.

Mǎlǎqīn Fàndiàn (☎ 691 7738; Julong Changjiejie; dishes Y10-30; ☎ lunch & dinner) At this Hohhot institution, the staff is helpful and there's a (sort of) English menu, which includes Chinese and vegetarian dishes, plus hotpot (at dinner). Cool off with refreshing buckwheat noodles topped with pickled radishes or with a plate of cold greens.

Xiǎoféiyáng Huǒguōchéng (Little Fat Sheep Hotpot City; ☎ 668 7799; Xilin Guole Lu; for 2 people from Y40; ☎ lunch & dinner) Part of a large chain based in Inner Mongolia, this sophisticated hotpot restaurant makes some of the best – with a rich garlicky broth, high-quality lamb and other fresh ingredients.

Renmin Lu, south of Xinhua Sq, is lined with local restaurants, including **Bātáijào Jiāchángcài** (☎ 692 2233; dishes from Y8), which serves tasty Mongolian-Chinese fare. Wenhua Gong Jie, between Guangming Dajie and Xinhua Dajie south of the train station, is a market street and cheap-eats district. Tempting street stalls are located around the Great Mosque and at the horse racing grounds.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The **Civil Aviation Administration of China** (CAAC; Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎ 696 4103; Xilin Guole Beilu) office is on the south side of Xinhua Sq. There are daily flights to Beijing (Y500, one hour),

ON TO MONGOLIA

Hohhot is a reasonable departure point for trips northward into Mongolia. Two direct trains a week run between Hohhot and Ulaanbaatar, the Mongolian capital. There is also a daily train to Erenhot (二连浩特; Ērliánhàotè; seat/sleeper Y36/80, nine hours) at the Mongolian border, leaving at 10.30pm. Erenhot is listed on Chinese train timetables as Ērlián (二连).

Aero Mongolian Airlines (☎ 687 4770; www.aeromongolia.mn; 5 Dongying Nanjie) flies to Ulaanbaatar (Y1440/Y2235 one way/return, 2¼ hours) on Monday and Thursday. Its office is in the same building as the **Mongolian consulate** (Měnggǔ Lǐngshìguǎn; ☎ 430 3254; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm Mon, Tue & Thu), where you can arrange for a Mongolian visa.

Xī'ān (Y830, 1½ hours), Hǎilǎer (Y1310, 2½ hours) and Xilinhò (Y560, 1¼ hours), as well as several flights a week to Guǎngzhōu (Y1880, three hours) and Shànghǎi (Y1350, 2½ hours). Service to several of these cities is reduced in winter.

BUS

See the box below for bus details.

TRAIN

From Hohhot, express trains go to Běijīng (seat/sleeper Y92/170, 10 hours), Dàtóng (Y44, four hours), Bāotóu (Y25, two hours) and Yīnchūān (seat/sleeper Y95/175, nine hours).

Sleeper tickets, especially to Běijīng, can be hard to come by in July and August; CITS or hotel travel desks can book sleepers for a Y30 commission.

Getting Around

Useful bus routes include bus 1, which runs from the train station to the old part of the city, via Zhongshan Xilu; bus 33, which runs east on Xinhua Dajie from the train station; bus 5, which plies the length of Xilin Guole Lu; and bus 13 to the horse racing grounds. Tickets for local buses are Y1.

Hohhot's airport is located 15km east of the city. The airport bus (Y5) leaves from the CAAC office; a taxi (flag fall Y6) will cost about Y25.

AROUND HOHHOT

In the middle of the fields just past the airport, about 18km east of Hohhot, is **Bái Tǎ** (白塔; White Pagoda; admission Y35), a striking seven-storey octagonal tower built during the Liao dynasty. After a steep climb to the top, you're rewarded with views of the countryside. The easiest way to get here is by taxi (Y60 to Y70 return); have the driver wait as not many cabs cruise the area. Alternatively, minibuses to 'Hexi' (Y5, about 40 minutes), which depart regularly from a parking lot on Xinhua Dajie one block east of Zhanlanguan Donglu, will drop you in front of the pagoda. Buses 2, 3 or 33 travel from the train station to the stop for the Hexi buses.

THE GRASSLANDS 草原 Tours

Organized tours to the grasslands (*cǎoyuán*) from Hohhot generally go to three areas: Xilamuren (1½ to two hours from Hohhot), Gegental and Huitengxile (both two to 2½ hours from Hohhot). Xilamuren, the closest one, is predictably the most developed. If you want to spend the night, aim for one of the latter two. The area around Huitengxile is lined with wind-power generators, scattered across the grasslands like oversized pinwheels, but they are surprisingly quiet.

Travel agents lie in wait at the Hohhot train station, bus station and hotel lobbies, and depending on where you stay, they may be

HOHHOT BUS TIMETABLES

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Bāotóu	Y20-30	2hr	half-hourly	6.40am-7.30pm
Běijīng	Y100	7-10hr	10 daily	7.30am-7.30pm
Dàtóng	Y40	4hr	hourly	7.20am-5.40pm
Dōngshèng	Y56	3hr	every 30min	7.20am-6pm

FIDDLER ON THE GRASSLANDS

With horses such an important part of traditional Mongolian life, it's no surprise that a classic Mongolian instrument takes its inspiration from the noble steed. It's a two-stringed instrument called the *mātóuqín* or horsehead fiddle. Played with a bow, the *mātóuqín's* music can be slow and haunting or exuberant and lively.

According to legend, a dead horse came to his former owner in a dream and implored him to make an instrument with his body. That way, the animal's spirit could accompany its owner across the grasslands. Early instruments were made from horse's hide and bones, but today, only the strings are made from horsehair. The top of the instrument is carved in the shape of a horse's head, in honour of Mongolians' essential animal companion.

calling your room before the massage girls even know you've checked in. While annoying, this abundance of tour options puts you in a stronger bargaining position. A day trip to Xilamuren will cost around Y150 to Y180 (after bargaining), including transport and lunch; horse riding is an extra Y50 to Y60 per hour. Be clear about what your tour includes; if possible, get it in writing before you leave.

CITS in Hohhot runs tours that are a bit more expensive, but they've gotten good reviews from travellers. Xilamuren day tours cost about Y180, and overnighters start at Y230; trips to Gegental and Huitengxile are about Y200 (a day trip) or Y260 (overnight). If you have a small group, CITS can put together a private tour for only slightly more than the large-group rates. A group of four can go to Huitengxile by van, take in an evening music and dance show, stay the night at a basic family-run yurt camp and return to Hohhot the following day for about Y320 per person. Three meals (lunch, dinner and breakfast) are included, but horseback riding is extra. If your party includes vegetarians who don't fancy a lamb banquet, CITS may be able to arrange for meat-free dishes.

To get to Xilamuren independently, take a morning bus to Zhaohé (召河; Y15, two hours). From here you can arrange tours including lunch and horseback riding for a good deal cheaper than in Hohhot.

Another alternative is to negotiate with a taxi driver around the stations for a self-styled grassland tour. The starting price is Y300 (extra if you stay overnight), but again, exert your bargaining skills to the utmost. Be aware that these unofficial tours get mixed reviews. Also, sanitation in the hinterlands is not a strong point, so watch what you eat and drink.

BĀOTÓU 包头

☎ 0472 / pop 2.08 million

The largest city in Inner Mongolia, Bāotóu is a rather grim industrial centre. The only reason to stop here is for its convenience as a transit point.

Orientation

Sprawling across roughly 20km, Bāotóu is divided into eastern and western sections. Most travellers stay in the eastern district (Dōnghé), because it's a useful transit hub, although the western districts (Kūndúlún and Qingshān) have more services.

The train station in the western area is Bāotóu Zhàn; in the eastern area it's Bāotóu Dōngzhàn.

Information

Bank of China (Zhōngguó Yínháng; Nanmenwai Dajie; ☎ 8am-5.30pm) This branch near the East Bāotóu train station has a 24-hour ATM.

CITS (Zhōngguó Guójì Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 511 6824; cnr Shaonian Lu & Shifu Donglu, West Bāotóu; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 2.30-5pm Mon-Fri)

Internet Plaza (Liántóng Wǎngyuàn; cnr Gangtie Dajie & Minzu Xilu, West Bāotóu; per hr Y2; ☎ 8am-midnight)

Post office (yóujú; off Nanmenwai Dajie near the East Bāotóu station; ☎ 8am-5.30pm)

Public Security Bureau (PSB; Gōngānjú; Gangtie Dajie; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 2.30-5pm Mon-Fri) In a futuristic tower east of the Bank of China in West Bāotóu.

Sleeping

Xīhú Fāndiàn (West Lake Hotel; ☎ 418 7101; 10 Nanmenwai Dajie; 南门外大街 10 号; dm Y31, d Y158-188, ste Y418 incl breakfast; 🍽️) A five-minute walk from the East Bāotóu bus and train stations, this convenient hotel has a range of choices, from three-bed dorms, to standard doubles, to more upmarket suites.

Bīnlǐ Jiùdiàn (☎ 696 0000; 19 Nanmenwai Dajie; 南门外大街 19 号; d Y150-200 incl breakfast; 🍽️) This newish hotel in a funky mirrored building may be East Bāotóu's most stylish lodging. The great-value rooms are done in chrome,



glass and warm woods; the beds are comfy; and the affable staff may even welcome you with a fruit plate.

Eating

Tièxī Páigǔguǎn (☎ 416 7001; 8 Nanmenwai Dajie; dishes Y6-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) Indulge your inner Fred Flintstone with mastodon-sized ribs of meltingly tender beef at this cacophonous East Bāotóu eatery. Do as the locals do, and order noodle soup, too; the noodles are handmade, and you can dip your meat into the rich gravy-like broth.

Hóngfúdà Fāndiàn (☎ 414 4157; 19 Nanmenwai Dajie; dishes Y16-32; ☎ 24 hr) The best deal among the tasty Chinese dishes on offer at this restaurant

next to Binli Jiùdiàn may be the hearty bowl of noodle soup brimming with veggies, pork and shrimp (Y15). Other yummy choices include stir-fried cabbage or crisp salty green beans with dried shrimp. The photo-filled menu makes ordering simple.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The **CAAC** (Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎ 513 0941; 26 Gangtie Dajie) ticket office is next to the Bank of China in West Bāotóu. There are flights connecting Bāotóu with Běijīng (Y590, one hour) and Shànghǎi (Y1350, 2¼ hours).

BUS

See the box below for bus times.

The latter two destinations are in Shaanxi province. From West Bāotóu, buses leave from the intersection of Tuanjie Dajie and Baiyun E'bo Lu.

TRAIN

Frequent trains between Hohhot and Bāotóu stop at both the east and west stations (Y25, two hours). There are also trains running to Běijīng (seat/sleeper Y106/197, 13 hours), Yínchuān (seat/sleeper Y70/133, seven hours), Tàiyuán (seat/sleeper Y53/117, 14 hours) and Lánzhōu (seat/sleeper Y121/223, 15 hours).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is 2km south of the East Bāotóu train station. In spite of the short distance, taxis will ask around Y30 for the one-way journey.

BUS

Bus 5 (Y2) takes 45 minutes to shuttle between Bāotóu's two districts. In East Bāotóu, you can catch this bus on Nanmenwai Dajie near the train station. Some bus 5 services run express between the east and west sides in 30 to 35 minutes; board these at regular bus stops.

EAST BĀOTÓU BUS TIMETABLES

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Hohhot	Y20-30	2-3hr	every 20-30 min	6.30am-7.30pm
Dōngshèng	Y25	1½hr	every 20-30 min	7.30am-6pm
Yúlín	Y40	5hr	3 daily	6.30am, 8.40am, 1pm
Yán'ān	Y100	12hr	1 daily	4pm

Bus 101 runs between the bus station and main (west) train station.

A taxi between the east and west districts costs Y30 to Y40 and isn't much faster than the express buses.

AROUND BĀOTÓU Resonant Sand Gorge 响沙湾

Imagine a slice of the Sahara dropped into the Inner Mongolian grasslands. That's the setting for this dramatic **gorge** (Xiāngshāwān; ☎ 0477-396 3366; admission Y60), a section of the Kubuqi desert with sand dunes up to 110m high. The gorge itself, 60km south of Bāotóu en route to Dōngshèng, has a carnival atmosphere, with camel rides (Y40 for 30 minutes) and a don't-miss sand slide (Y10), but you can hike away from the crowds and simply enjoy the desert. The admission price includes a ride on Inner Mongolia's oldest cable car to and from the entrance.

Bring plenty of water, and slather on the sunscreen. You can rent brightly coloured booties (Y10) to protect your feet and legs from the hot sand – worth it for the fashion statement alone!

Buses from East Bāotóu's long-distance bus station leave about every 20 minutes for Dáqí (达旗, Y9, one hour, 8am to 5.30pm), the town nearest to the gorge. From there, you'll have to take a taxi (Y40 to Y50, 20 to 30 minutes). Alternatively, you can hire a taxi for the day from Bāotóu (about Y300 return). Some travellers have reported that the Bāotóu–Dōngshèng buses will drop you at the road to the gorge, but from there, it's a dusty walk of several kilometres to the entrance, unless you can flag down a passing vehicle.

CITS in Hohhot runs two-day tours that include an overnight at the Xilamuren grasslands paired with a visit to the desert; prices start at Y230 per person.

Wudang Lamasery 五当召

Built in 1749, this was once one of the largest **lamaseries** (Wúdāng Zhào; admission Y30; ☎ 8am–6.30pm) in Inner Mongolia, housing 1200 monks belonging to the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Today, it's a bit forlorn, but its attractions are the beautiful Qing murals in the main prayer hall and the unusual arid landscape.

The monastery is 67km northeast of Bāotóu. A direct air-con bus (Y10, 1½ hours) departs from in front of East Bāotóu's long-distance bus station around 9.30am and leaves the

monastery around 1pm. Other direct buses leave the East Bāotóu depot throughout the morning, whenever they are full, returning in the early afternoon.

Alternatively, bus 7 (Y5, one hour) from the East Bāotóu station parking lot goes to Shíguāi (石拐), 40km from Bāotóu. From Shíguāi you can hire a taxi to the monastery (Y50 return).

DŌNGSHÈNG 东胜

☎ 0477 / pop 102,000

The main reason to come to Dōngshèng, south of Bāotóu, is to reach Genghis Khan's Mausoleum further south. If you get an early start, it's possible to come here from Hohhot or Bāotóu, visit the mausoleum and then move on that afternoon. The bus station is on Hangjin Beilu; you can choose from several inexpensive hotels nearby if you do decide to stay overnight.

Hóngyè Bīnguǎn (宏业宾馆; ☎ 834 1518; 6 Hangjin Beilu; 杭锦北路6号; s Y80, d Y218–248) If you're looking for a place to lay your head for the night, this basic hotel will fit the bill. Turn right as you exit the bus station and walk south for about five minutes.

Dōngshèng Dàjiǔdiàn (东胜大酒店; ☎ 399 6688; fax 399 6111; 1 Hangjin Beilu; 杭锦北路1号; s Y350, d Y298–580, tr Y380 incl breakfast; 🍴) The rooms may not be as lavish as the chandelier-bedecked lobby at this midrange tower, but they're a great deal. After bargaining, standard doubles go for Y170 to Y180, and more deluxe 'A' building rooms cost Y270 to Y280. It's a 10-minute walk south of the bus station.

Restaurants are clustered near the intersection of Hangjin Beilu and Yijinhuluo Jie. Try **Lǐshì Měishí Dàtuányuán** (刘氏美食大团圆; ☎ 832 8858; Yijinhuluo Dongjie; hotpot for 2 people from Y25; 🍴 lunch & dinner), a sociable spot serving flavourful hotpot; it's one block east of Hangjin Beilu.

AROUND DŌNGSHÈNG Genghis Khan's Mausoleum 成吉思汗陵

The tribute to the Mongol Empire's greatest leader is a bus ride from Dōngshèng, in the middle of nowhere. Unless you have a special predilection for Genghis Khan, however, consider that a visit to this **mausoleum** (Chéngjǐ Sīhán Língyuán; admission Y80; ☎ 7am–7pm) is a long way to come to see very little.

The reason why this site is believed to be the final resting place of the Great Khan is unclear,

DŌNGSHÈNG BUS TIMETABLES

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Bāotóu	Y25	1½hr	every 20-30 min	6.20am–8pm
Hohhot	Y56	3hr	every 30 min	7.10am–5pm
Xī'ān	Y130	18hr	1 daily	2.20pm
Yúlín	Y36–40	3–4hr	hourly	6.30am–4pm

as it contains no actual remains. Although there is little inside – a few historical artefacts and some weaponry – the mausoleum is an important sacred place for Mongolians. Ceremonies are held several times a year to honour Genghis Khan's memory. Butter lamps are lit, *khata* (ritual scarves) presented and roast sheep are piled high before the Khan's stone statue, while chanting is performed by Mongolian monks and specially chosen Daur elders.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses (Y25, one to 1½ hours, hourly) from Dōngshèng to Wūshènjī (乌审旗) drop you at a rather forlorn tourist village just off the highway about 5km from the mausoleum. Buses heading to Yúlín (榆林; p438) in Shaanxi province may also let you off; in the Dōngshèng depot, ask for buses to Chénglǐng (成陵) to confirm which bus will take you. From the tourist village, you'll need to take a taxi (Y10) to the mausoleum entrance. To return, take a cab back to the main highway and flag down any Dōngshèng-bound bus. Buses should pass by regularly till about 5pm, but don't linger here too late into the afternoon.

HĀILǎĒR 海拉尔

☎ 0470 / pop 216,000

The northernmost major town in Inner Mongolia, Hāilǎěr is a base for visiting the surrounding Hulunbeier Grasslands, a vast expanse of prairie that begins just outside the city.

In the grasslands around Hāilǎěr are several tourist 'yurt camps' where you can eat, listen to traditional music and sometimes stay the night. Although they're not places where Mongolians actually live, you can still learn a bit about Mongolian culture, and the settings on the wide-open prairies are striking. More authentic (if more rustic), you can stay with local families in the grasslands, although this is easiest to organise if you speak a bit of Mandarin (or Mongolian).

Orientation & Information

The main square is on Zhongyang Dajie, near Xingan Lu. Hotels and services are conveniently located near the main square, but sights are scattered around town and beyond.

Bank of China (Zhōngguó Yínháng; Xingan Donglu at Zhongyang Dajie; ☎ 8am–5.30pm summer, 8.30am–5pm winter) Next door to Bièr Dàjiǔdiàn in the centre of town, this office has a 24-hour ATM.

CITS (Zhōngguó Guójī Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 822 4017; fax 822 1728; 22 Alihe Lu) In Hédōng ('east of the river'), on the 2nd floor of Bèiyuán Bīnguǎn.

Internet café (wǎngbā; nr Zhongyang Dajie & Xingan Xilu, lower level; per hr Y2) Opposite Bièr Dàjiǔdiàn.

Post & Telephone Office (Yóudiàn Dàlòu; Zhongyang Dajie at Yueju Xilu; ☎ 8.30am–5.30pm)

Public Security Bureau (PSB; Gōngānjú; Alihe Lu) Opposite CITS in Hédōng.

Sights

EWENKI MUSEUM 鄂温克博物馆

Roughly 20,000 Ewenki people live in northern Inner Mongolia, most in the Hulunbeier grasslands surrounding Hāilǎěr. At this modern **museum** (Èwēnkè Bówùguǎn; ☎ 881 7866; admission Y10; ☎ 8.30am–noon & 2.30–5.30pm), you can glimpse their history and culture. The Ewenki have traditionally been herders, hunters and farmers; they're one of the few peoples in China to raise reindeer. The museum has Ewenki household artefacts, clothing and artwork, as well as photos of present-day Ewenki life. Although captions are only in Chinese and

BLOWN' IN THE WIND

The Ewenki people of northern Inner Mongolia traditionally practised 'wind burials.' Rather than burying their dead in the ground, they would hang the body in a cradle between two trees and let the remains dry in the breeze. They believed that the spirit would reach heaven more quickly this way, carried by the wind.

Mongolian, you can easily spend an hour looking around.

The museum is on the southeastern edge of town. Bus 3 runs here from the main square; a taxi will cost Y25 to Y30 (return).

UNDERGROUND FORTRESS 海拉尔要塞遗址

In the mid-1930s, during the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, this **network of tunnels** (Hāilǎer Yàosài Yǐzhǐ; admission Y20) was constructed in the grasslands north of Hāilǎer. Today you can wander underground and peek into 'rooms' where soldiers bunked. The grasslands setting is pretty, too.

A taxi between the tunnels and the town centre costs about Y30 (return). The tunnels are on the road to Jinzhanghan (right), so you might negotiate a stop here en route.

Sleeping & Eating

Beier Dàjiùdiàn (Bei'er Hotel; ☎ 835 8388; fax 833 4960; 36 Zhongyang Dajie; 中央大街36号; d without bathroom Y80, s/d with bath Y480, incl breakfast; 🍴) The enthusiastic staff at this central, midrange hotel even push the elevator call button for you when they see you coming. Except during Hāilǎer's summer Naadam festival, standard doubles go for Y200 or less.

Guófù Shāngwù Jiùdiàn (Guofu Business Hotel; ☎ 835 9999; fax 835 9900; 35 Zhongyang Dajie; 中央大街35号; s/d/tr Y580/560/680 incl breakfast; 🍴) With bright, cheery rooms and high-speed internet access, this 10-storey tower is slightly spiffier (and a bit more expensive) than Beier Dàjiùdiàn across the street. Upper-floor rooms look out over the city.

Xiǎoféiyáng Huóguóuchéng (Little Fat Sheep Hotpot City; Xing'an Xilu; hotpot for 2 from Y40; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This branch of the Inner Mongolia-based hotpot chain is one block west of Beier Dàjiùdiàn.

On Xinfengbuxing Jie, a pedestrian street off Zhongyang Dajie, a **food market** houses vendors selling dumplings, fruit and other snacks.

Getting There & Away

CAAC (Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎ 833 7490; Dong Dajie, off Qiaotou Dajie; 🕒 8am-5pm) is near the bridge. There are direct daily flights from Hāilǎer to Běijīng (Y1150, two hours) and Hohhot (Y1310, 2½ hours). CITS and hotel ticket agencies also book flights.

From the **long-distance bus station** (Chángtú Qīchēzhàn; Jinxinzi Lu, off Chezhan Jie), there are regu-

lar buses to Mǎnzhōulǐ (Y31). At the time of writing, however, the road between Hāilǎer and Mǎnzhōulǐ was being rebuilt, making the trip a bone-jarring five-and-a-half-hour slog. When construction is completed, the ride should take about three hours; until then, the train is the faster, more comfortable option to take.

Several daily trains go to Mǎnzhōulǐ (Y22 to Y29, three to 3½ hours). There are also daily trains between Hāilǎer and Hāěrbin (seat/sleeper 93/191, 11 hours), Qíqǐhǎ'ěr (seat/sleeper Y72/141, eight to nine hours) and Běijīng (seat/sleeper Y181/317, 28 hours).

The train station is in the northwestern part of town. If you arrive by train, cross the tracks using the footbridge to the left of the station as you exit and get a bus or taxi from there. Taxi fare from this side of the tracks to the city centre hotels is Y5.

Getting Around

The airport bus (Y3) leaves from the CAAC office. A taxi costs about Y20.

Bus 1 runs from Hédōng to the train station. Taxi fares start at Y5.

AROUND HĀILĀĒR Jinzhanghan Grasslands 金帐汗草原

Set along a winding river about 40km north of Hāilǎer, this **grasslands camp** (Jinzhanghàn; ☎ 133 2700 0919; admission Y20; 🕒 Jun-early Oct) may be designed for tourists, but it still has a spectacular setting. You can occupy an hour or so looking around and sipping milk tea, spend the day horseback riding or hiking, or come for an evening of dinner, singing and dancing.

If you want to stay the night, you can sleep in one of the yurts (Y60 per person), though they're made of brick (not the traditional portable variety). There's no indoor plumbing but there is a toilet hut.

To get here, you'll have to hire a taxi from Hāilǎer (about Y120 return, 40 minutes).

Bayan Huxu Grasslands 白音呼硕草原

On these grasslands (Báiyīn Hūshuò Cǎoyuán) 40km southeast of Hāilǎer, there's a more 'upscale' **yurt camp** (per person Y300, meals about Y25; 🕒 late Jun-early Oct). The two-person yurts have twin beds and even attached bathrooms. There's a restaurant onsite with evening entertainment. The setting isn't quite as gorgeous as Jinzhanghan, but it's still remote and attractive.

In the village along the Bayan Huxu road, a local family houses guests in their **yurts** (☎ 131-3497 7479; per person Y50-60); rates include meals. The yurts are cosy, although there are no washroom facilities.

Buses to Bayan Huxu leave hourly from Hāilǎer's long-distance bus station (Y10, one hour). The bus drops you at the Bayan Huxu road, about a 2km walk from the yurt camp. The last bus back to Hāilǎer stops at the Bayan Huxu road at 5.30pm.

Heishāntóu 黑山头

This outpost on the Russian border, 150km northwest of Hāilǎer, was the site of a fortress built during the Liao dynasty. Although all that remains of the fortress are grass-covered mounds out in the steppes, an excursion here provides an excuse for a day-trip across the grasslands.

The actual border crossing is south of the fortress site. You can pull up to the gate, but the guards aren't enthusiastic about foreigners wandering around and the crossing isn't open to foreigners.

To get to Heishāntóu, take a bus from Hāilǎer's long-distance bus station to the town of Zhabudalin (拉布达林; Lābùdālín; Y23, two hours); buses leave every 40 minutes from 7.30am to 5pm. If you have time, it's worth going for a wander around Zhabudalin; the village has a small Russian population, visible in the Cyrillic signs and in the hearty breads for sale in the public market near the bus station.

From Zhabudalin, the only way to Heishāntóu is by taxi (Y90 to Y120 return, one hour). The last bus back to Hāilǎer leaves Zhabudalin at 5.25pm.

Mǎnzhōulǐ 满洲里

☎ 0470 / pop 55,400

This laissez-faire border town, where the Trans-Siberian Railway crosses from China to Russia, feels far more Russian than Chinese. A steady stream of Russians crosses the border from Siberia to purchase Chinese goods in Mǎnzhōulǐ's many markets, and Russian-built log houses still dot the town. Unless you look Asian, expect shopkeepers to greet you in Russian.

Orientation & Information

Mǎnzhōulǐ is small enough to get around on foot. The town centre sits between the

train station in the south and Beihu Park in the north.

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; ☎ 622 3707; cnr Sandao Jie & Xinhua Lu; 🕒 8am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm summer, 8am-noon & 2-5pm winter)

CITS (中国国际旅行社; Zhōngguó Guójí Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 622 4241; 35 Erdao Jie; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 2.30-5pm Mon-Fri) On the 1st floor of Guójí Fāndiàn (International Hotel). Sells tickets for the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Internet café (网吧; wǎngbà; 2nd fl, Xinhua Lu, btwn Erdao Jie & Sandao Jie; per hr Y3; 🕒 24hr)

Post & Telephone Office (邮电大楼; Yóudiàn Dàlóu; cnr Haiguan Jie & Sidao Jie)

Public Security Bureau (公安局; PSB; Gōngānjū; cnr Sandao Jie & Shulin Lu) East of the centre.

Xinhua Bookshop (新华书店; Xīnhuá Shūdiàn; cnr Sidao Jie & Xinhua Lu) Sells maps of Mǎnzhōulǐ (Y4).

Sights

DÁLÀI HÚ 达赉湖

Besides the Russian traders, Mǎnzhōulǐ's main attraction is **Dàlài Hú** (admission per person/vehicle Y7/10), one of the largest lakes in China. Called Hulun Nur in Mongolian, it unexpectedly pops out of the grasslands like an enormous inland sea. You can go fishing here or simply stroll along the rocky lakeshore.

The easiest way to get to Dàlài Hú, 39km southeast of Mǎnzhōulǐ, is to hire a taxi (about Y150 return).

Sleeping & Eating

At the time of writing, the top-end Shangri-La chain was building a hotel in the centre of town (scheduled to open in 2008).

Diànli Shāngwù Dàjiùdiàn (电力商务大酒店; ☎ 398 8888; 1 Sandao Jie; 三道街1号; d Y100 incl breakfast) At this decent-value place east of the centre, the rooms have high ceilings, but some have peeling paint and weary bathrooms, so look at more than one.

Míngzhū Fāndiàn (明珠饭店; ☎ 624 8977; fax 622 3261; 4 Xinhua Lu; 新华路4号; s/d/tr Y498/428/468 incl breakfast) Many Russians stay at this lively hotel at the corner of Yidao Jie.

Yóuyi Bīnguǎn (友谊宾馆; Friendship Hotel; ☎ 624 8881; fax 622 3828; 26 Yidao Jie; 一道街26号; s/d/tr Y468/458/428 incl breakfast) Also popular with Russian visitors, these comfortable rooms with fridges usually go for Y200 or less. The rooms facing the rear of the building are sunny, but they get noise from the nearby rail yards.

Míngdiǎn Měishí (名点美食; ☎ 622 8885; cnr Sidao Jie & Shizheng Lu; dishes Y8-20; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Unwind in a wicker swing by the window

at this laid-back café, where the speciality is handmade noodles.

Russian restaurants (dishes ¥10-30) line Erdao Jie, near Xinhua Lu and Zhongsu Lu. A Chinese **bakery-café** (nr Sidao Lu & Xinhua Lu; dishes ¥8-15) serves bowls of tasty noodles, rice plates and gooey desserts; order at the counter before you sit down.

Getting There & Away

Mǎnzhōulǐ has a small airport on the edge of town; a taxi to the airport will take about 15 minutes. There are flights to Běijīng (Y1410, 2¼ hours) Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday, and in summer to Hohhot (Y1310, 2½ hours) daily.

You can reach Mǎnzhōulǐ by train from Hāilǎěr (Y22 to Y29, three to 3½ hours), Hāěrbīn (seat/sleeper Y92/181, 13 hours) or Qíqíhǎ'ěr (seat/sleeper Y61/125, 11 hours).

From the train station to the town centre, it's a 10- to 15-minute walk. Turn right immediately as you exit the station, then right

again to cross the footbridge. You'll come off the bridge near the corner of Yidao Jie and Zhongsu Lu, a block west of Míngzhū Fàndiàn and Yōuyì Bīnguǎn.

Taxis charge ¥15 from the station to the centre. Otherwise, most trips around town are ¥7.

Many Russians drive over the border (9km from town) in private vehicles, and you might be able to organise a lift across. A taxi to the checkpoint costs ¥20. Naturally, you'll need a Russian visa.

The Trans-Siberian to Moscow from Běijīng passes through town early Monday morning. CITS sells tickets for Moscow; if you want to stopover here, confirm it when you buy your ticket in Běijīng.

Buses leave all day for Hāilǎěr (Y31, 3½ hours) from the long-distance bus station on Yidao Jie, west of Míngzhū Fàndiàn. Check the status of the Hāilǎěr-Mǎnzhōulǐ road, since major construction work was causing significant delays at the time of research.