

## The Forbidden City — Citadel of China's Last 24 Emperors

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The Forbidden City is the palatial heart of China. Constructed in 1420, during the early Ming Dynasty, it is China's best-preserved imperial palace, and **the largest ancient palatial structure** in the world.

As one of the five most important palaces in the world, the grand halls and walls proudly display **the essence and culmination of traditional Chinese architecture**, fitting for the capital city of the world's largest nation.

### Fast Facts about the Forbidden City



*The Forbidden City*

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**Most outstanding feature:** It's the largest imperial palace in the world.

**Things to see:** imperial living and governing quarters, valuable artworks, and traditional gardens

**Time needed:** at least 2-3 hours

**Location:** the center of Beijing, north of Tian'anmen Square

**Open:** 8:30am-5:30pm or 8:30am-5pm off-peak; closed on Mondays

**Entry:** 60 yuan April-October; 40 yuan November-March

# 10 Numbers to Describe the Forbidden City

1. The Forbidden City took **14 years** to build (from 1406 to 1420).
2. It was built by over **1,000,000 workers**, including more than 100,000 craftsmen.



3. It was the imperial palace of China for **492 years** (1420–1912).
4. It was the home of **24 emperors** — 14 of the Ming dynasty and 10 of the Qing dynasty
5. It covers **0.72 sq km** (0.28 sq mi), of which 15 hectares (38 acres) are floor area.
6. It has **980 buildings** in over 70 palace compounds, with over 8,700 rooms.
7. It is **961 meters long** from south to north and 753 meters wide.
8. It is surrounded by a **10-meter-high wall**, which is 3.4 km (2 miles) long.
9. It has a **52-meter wide moat** round it.
10. It hosts **14 million visitors** per year, a maximum of 80,000 visitors per day.

For more facts, see [10 Facts You Should Know Before Visiting the Forbidden City](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/forbidden-city-facts.htm) (<https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/forbidden-city-facts.htm>).



*The Forbidden City*

In ancient times, the emperor was said to be a son of Heaven, and therefore Heaven's supreme power was bestowed upon him. The emperors' residence was built leading north, as an earthly foil to the heavenly Purple Palace, i.e. the North Star, though to be home to the Celestial Emperor.

Considered a divine place, it was certainly **forbidden to ordinary people** and that is why the Forbidden City is so named.

Originally it was called 'Purple Forbidden City' (紫禁城 Zijincheng /dzrr-jin-chng/).

Now, in China, it is usually called the 'Former Palace' (故宫 Gugong /goo-gong/).

## History

**The construction** of the grand palace started in the fourth year of Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty (1406), and ended in 1420.

From 1420 to 1644, the Forbidden City was the home of 14 emperors of **the Ming Dynasty**.

From October 1644, the Forbidden City served as the imperial palace of **the Qing Dynasty**.

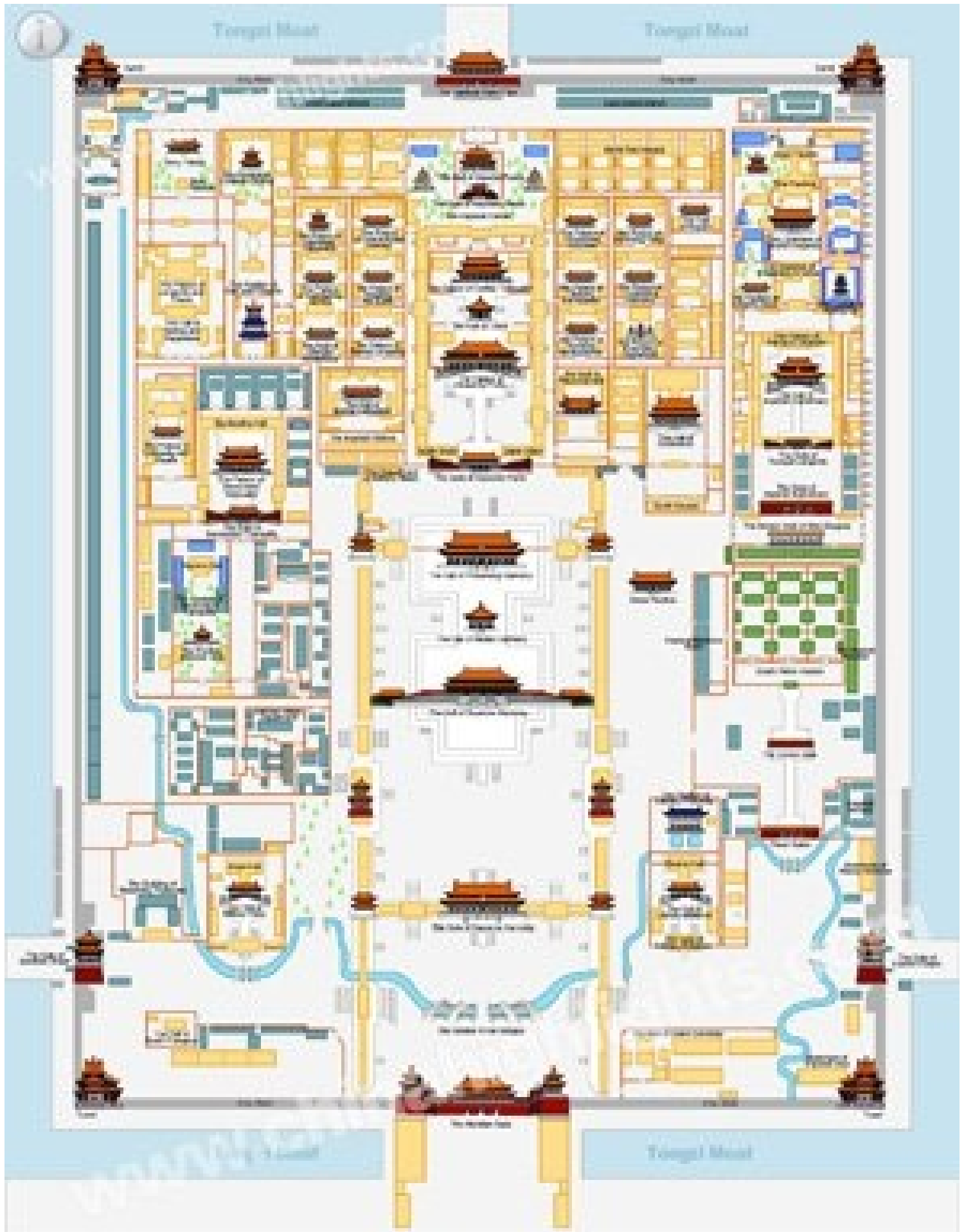
In 1860, during the Second Opium War, the Forbidden City was controlled by **Anglo-French forces** and occupied until the end of the war.

From 1912, the Forbidden City was **no longer home to the emperor** with the abdication of Puyi, the last Emperor of China.

In 1925, the Forbidden City became **the Palace Museum**.

It was named a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** in 1987.

## The Layout of the Imperial Palace



*Forbidden City plan view: [click to enlarge \(//images.chinahighlights.com/allpicture/2014/08/the-forbidden-city-map42f1546b8013.jpg\)](http://images.chinahighlights.com/allpicture/2014/08/the-forbidden-city-map42f1546b8013.jpg)*

The Forbidden City covers an area of about 72 hectares (180 acres) with a total floor space of approximately 150,000 square meters (1,600,000 square feet).

It consists of more than **90 palaces and courtyards**, 980 buildings and over 8,728 rooms. (A common myth states that there are 9,999.5 rooms, but it is not supported by survey evidence.)

The Forbidden City falls into **three parts**: the defenses (moat and wall), the Outer Court and the Inner Court.

## 1. The Defenses

Around the city there is a **52-meter wide moat** as the first line of defense.

For security the Forbidden City is enclosed by a **10-meter-high defensive wall**, which has a circumference of 3,430 meters. At each corner of the Forbidden City, there stands a magnificent watchtower, which was heavily guarded.

There are **four gates** in each direction of the Forbidden City: the Meridian Gate on the south, the Gate of Divine Might on the north, East Glorious Gate on the east and West Glorious Gate on the west.

Most visitors enter the Forbidden City through Tian'anmen, '**Gate of Heavenly Peace**'. Through the gate, across an expansive brick-paved square, you will reach the main entrance to the palace, the Meridian Gate (<https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/meridian-gate.htm>) (Wumen in Chinese). The main exit gate of the Forbidden City is the Gate of Divine Might.

## 2. The Outer Court



*Hall of Supreme Harmony*

The outer court has **three main buildings**, where emperors attended grand ceremonies and conducted state affairs.

**The first hall** waiting for you is the [Hall of Supreme Harmony](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/hall-of-supreme-harmony.htm) (Taihedian), the most important and largest structure in the Forbidden City. The emperors' Dragon Throne (Longyi) is in this hall.

**The second hall**, behind the Hall of Supreme Harmony is the [Hall of Central Harmony](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/hall-of-central-harmony.htm) (Zhonghedian), the resting place of the emperor before presiding over grand events held in the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Emperors would rehearse their speeches and presentations here before departing to the Temple of Heaven for the sacrifice rites.

**The last hall** is the [Hall of Preserving Harmony](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/hall-of-preserving-harmony.htm) (Baohedian), used for banquets and later for imperial examinations.

There are a couple of **side gardens** with interesting halls to explore. Please consult with your local guide if you want to visit them and have more time to explore the palace.

### 3. The Inner Court



*The Palace of Heavenly Purity*

Out from the Hall of the Preserving Harmony, you will notice a huge block of marble carved with cloud and dragon designs. Go straight, and you will see another gate, called the [Gate of Heavenly Purity](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/gate-of-heavenly-peace.htm) (Qianqingmen). This is the main gateway to the inner living court.

The inner court has **three main structures** at the northern rear of the Forbidden City:

**The first structure** inside the inner court is the [Palace of Heavenly Purity \(https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/palace-of-heavenly-peace.htm\)](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/palace-of-heavenly-peace.htm) (Qianqinggong), the emperors' sleeping quarters.

**The second structure**, behind it is the [Palace of Union and Peace \(https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/palace-of-union-and-peace.htm\)](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/palace-of-union-and-peace.htm) (Jiaotaidian), where the imperial seals were stored.

**The third hall** is the [Hall of Terrestrial Tranquility \(https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/hall-of-terrestrial-tranquility.htm\)](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/hall-of-terrestrial-tranquility.htm) (Kunninggong), the emperors' wedding room.

On the left side of the inner court, travelers will find **the [Mental Cultivation Hall \(https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/hall-of-mental-cultivation.htm\)](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/hall-of-mental-cultivation.htm)** (Yangxindian), the most important building except for the Hall of Supreme Harmony. From the time of the third emperor, Yongzheng, all the Qing emperors, 8 in total, resided in this hall.

Besides the three main buildings there are the **six eastern palaces and six western palaces**, where the emperor used to handle everyday affairs, and which was the living quarters of the emperor, expresses, and concubines. Converted into exhibition halls, they now display a spectacular set of imperial treasures.

Exiting and going further north, travelers will find **the [Imperial Garden \(https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/imperial-garden.htm\)](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/imperial-garden.htm)**. The garden offers an aesthetic change — from the crimson and gray building complex to a colorful and luxuriant atmosphere.

## The Architecture of the Forbidden City

The Forbidden City is outstanding not only because of its magnitude, but also for its unique architectural design. Here are five key features.

### 1. Axial Symmetry



*The important gates and halls of the Forbidden City were arranged symmetrically.*

To represent the supreme power of the emperor, given from Heaven, and the place where he lived being the center of the world, all the important gates and halls of the Forbidden City were arranged symmetrically on **the north-south central axis** of old Beijing.

Heaven was thought to be Polaris (the North Star), the only seemingly stationary star in the northern sky, and the Forbidden City's layout **points its visitors straight at "Heaven"**.

## 2. Supreme Carpentry

The Forbidden City is the largest and most complete complex of ancient wooden structures in the world.

**The main frames** of all buildings were built with high-quality wooden beams and columns, including whole trunks of precious Phoebe zhennan wood from the jungles of southwest China.

Forbidden City carpenters used **interlocking mortise and tenon joints** to build its great palace buildings "harmoniously", without nails. Nails were considered violent and inharmonious.

See [The 4 Reasons Why Most Traditional Chinese Architecture Was Wooden](https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/architecture/why-most-traditional-chinese-architecture-was-wooden.htm)

(<https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/architecture/why-most-traditional-chinese-architecture-was-wooden.htm>).

## 3. Imperial Colors





*Red and yellow: the main Forbidden City colors.*

The main colors of the Forbidden City are **yellow and red**. The walls, pillars, doors, and windows were mostly painted in red, which is regarded as a symbol of good fortune, and happiness in Chinese culture.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, yellow was a symbol of supreme power and only used by the imperial family. If you climb up to the top of 'Scenery Hill' in Jingshan Park (<https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/attraction/jingshan-park.htm>) and overlook the Forbidden City, you will see an expanse of yellow glazed tile roofs.

#### 4. Roof Decorations



*The Hall of Supreme Harmony has 12 roof ridge statuettes — left to right: an ordinary dragon head decoration, 'Series Ten' (行什, unique to this roof, an anti-thunder monkey god), then the nine animals, and a fairy decoration.*

There is **a row of mystical animal statuettes** placed along the ridge line of halls that were only for official use.

The animals, like [dragons](https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/article-chinese-dragons.htm) (<https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/article-chinese-dragons.htm>), phoenixes, and lions, have powerful meanings in Chinese culture.

**The number of animals** is different based on the importance of the buildings. You can see nine animals on the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the most important structure in the Forbidden City, and seven on the Palace of Earthly Tranquility, the residence of the Empress.

## 5. Stone/Bronze Lions

In Chinese culture, the lion is the king of the animals, and is regarded as a symbol of power and strength.



*Stone lions can be seen beside the gates of many palace compounds.*

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Stone and bronze lions are popular as **symbolic guardians**, and can be seen beside the gates of many Forbidden City palace compounds.

The lions are always in pairs, with the female lion on the left and the male on the right. See more on [China's Stone Lions — the Lowdown and Many Photos \(https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/article-stone-lions.htm\)](https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/article-stone-lions.htm).

## The Treasures of the Palace Museum

The Palace Museum holds more than **a million rare and valuable works of art**, a sixth of the total number of cultural relics in China.

The collection includes ceramics, paintings, calligraphy, bronzes, timepieces, jade pieces, ancient books, and historical documents. The main exhibitions are:



*Two of the exquisite clocks in the Clock Gallery*

**The Clocks Gallery** in the Hall of Ancestral Offerings (Fengxian Dian)

**The Treasures Gallery** in the Palace of Tranquil Longevity (Ningshou Gong)

**The Paintings and Calligraphy Gallery** in the Hall of Military Eminence (Wuying Dian)

**The Porcelain and Ceramics Gallery** in the Hall of Literary Glory (Wenhua Dian)

**The Bronzeware Gallery** in the Palace of Celestial Favor (Chengqian Dian)

For more, see [The Top 10 Treasures in the Forbidden City \(https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/article-top-treasures-in-palace-museum.htm\)](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/article-top-treasures-in-palace-museum.htm).

## Explore the Forbidden City with Local Experts

The Forbidden City is a must-see attraction for visitors to Beijing. Visitors are limited to 80,000 a day. It is advisable to book well in advance. For more expert advice, see [How to Visit the Forbidden City — for Discerning Travelers \(https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/how-to-visit.htm\)](https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/how-to-visit.htm).



*Visit the Forbidden City with a local expert.*

If you want to go deep into the history and culture of the Forbidden City, we recommend that you take an in-depth tour guided by an expert like our [In-Depth Forbidden City Heritage Tour](https://www.chinahighlights.com/tour/beijingtour/forbidden-city-heritage-walk.htm&t=78002) (<https://www.chinahighlights.com/redirect.asp?url=https://www.chinahighlights.com/tour/beijingtour/forbidden-city-heritage-walk.htm&t=78002>).

More sample itineraries for your inspiration:

[4-Day Emperor's Tour of Beijing](https://www.chinahighlights.com/redirect.asp?url=https://www.chinahighlights.com/tour/beijingtour/bj-1/&t=78002) (<https://www.chinahighlights.com/redirect.asp?url=https://www.chinahighlights.com/tour/beijingtour/bj-1/&t=78002>): Discover Chinese culture and history with a knowledgeable guide.

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[History of the Forbidden City — 1406 to the Present \(/beijing/forbidden-city/history.htm\)](/beijing/forbidden-city/history.htm)

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