

# Mount Emei

Éméi Shān 峨眉山

**Mount Emei (Emei Shan) is considered to be the birthplace of Buddhism in China, with temples and monasteries dating from the late Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Twenty are still in operation today, helping to make the mountain one of China's most popular tourist attractions. The area became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996.**

**M**ount Emei is the highest and most important of the four sacred Buddhist mountains of China and has attracted pilgrims and visitors for the last two thousand years. Located in Sichuan Province about 135 kilometers south of the provincial capital Chengdu, Mount Emei covers an area of more than 300 square kilometers and incorporates three mountains, the highest of which is Wanfoding (Peak of Ten Thousand Buddhas), reaching 3,099 meters.

The word *Emei* means “high eyebrows” and alludes to the resemblance between two facing peaks and the refined features of a traditional Chinese beauty. To the north and east the mountains rise steeply from the Sichuan basin and cover four climatic zones, from subtropical to subalpine, with snow-covered peaks in winter. The craggy southern cliffs are crossed by narrow canyons in all directions. Mount Emei has an impressive diversity of flora and fauna. More than three thousand species of plants have been identified, of which more than one hundred are rare herbs and medical plants endemic to the mountains. Birds and other wildlife are

almost as abundant; scores of bird species are found only at Mount Emei, while the most visible representatives of animal life are the ubiquitous monkeys, which have grown accustomed to the crowds of people visiting the area.

Experts believe that the first Buddhist temples in China were located at Mount Emei. The earliest temples and monasteries were built during the later Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) in honor of the bodhisattva (a being that refrains from entering nirvana in order to save others and is worshipped as a deity) Samantabhadra (*Puxian* in Chinese), who is usually depicted riding on a white elephant with six tusks. Of the more than 150 temples and monasteries constructed over the centuries, about twenty are operating today. Set on a slope at the foot of the mountains are the recently renovated four main halls of the Baoguo (preserve the country) temple, built between 1573 and 1619. The temple houses a 3.5-meter-high Buddha made of porcelain and dating to 1415 as well as seven 20-meter-high gilded Buddhas. About 1 kilometer farther west lies the Fuhu (hidden tiger) temple, which has a 7-meter-high red copper pagoda containing more than 4,700 images of Buddha.

Closer to the peak at 1,020 meters above sea level is the Wannian (ten thousand years) temple, which is the largest on Mount Emei and traces its history back to the fourth century. All wooden structures were destroyed in a fire in 1946, but the temple was rebuilt in 1953. An Indian-style brick hall constructed during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) contains a 7.35-meter-high gilded statue of Samantabhadra sitting on a white elephant. The statue was cast during the Song dynasty (960–1279) and weighs 56 metric



**The city of Leshan boasts a several-hundred-foot-high statue of Buddha carved out of rock. A boat ride that passes the statue is popular with tourists who hike and climb in the area, as much for the imposing view of the Buddha as for the chance to rest. PHOTO BY PAUL AND BERNICE NOLL, [WWW.PAULNOLL.COM](http://WWW.PAULNOLL.COM).**

tons. Both the Wannian temple and the Golden Peak at 3,077 meters above sea level can be reached by cable car. The Bright Hall at the Golden Peak, which was destroyed in a fire in 1972, was replaced by a new structure in 1990, and recently a new statue of a four-faced Samantabhadra sitting on four elephants has been erected in front of the hall. This 48-meter-high gilded bronze figure is situated at the top of a long staircase flanked by white elephants carrying gilded Buddhist symbols. In 1996 Mount Emei and the neighboring 71-meter-high Buddha at Leshan were added to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) list of World Heritage Sites, and Mount Emei is one of China's main tourist attractions.

Fortunately, both sites escaped severe damage from the earthquake that struck Sichuan Province on 12 May, 2008.

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## Further Reading

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United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2007). Mount Emei Scenic Area, including Leshan Giant Buddha Scenic Area. Retrieved January 6, 2009 from <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/779>