

## Visiting the Temple of Heaven in Beijing

When deciding what sites to see while visiting Beijing, the colorful Temple of Heaven is a must-see on your list. The literal translation from the traditional Chinese for this unique site is “Altar of Heaven.” Regardless of what you call it, you will certainly feel like you have found your own slice of heaven when you visit this unique site.

The Temple of Heaven is comprised of several buildings in the southeast section of Beijing, in the Xuanwu District. In addition, the buildings are based on Taoist beliefs which refers to a set of philosophical and religious traditions that have existed in Asia for more than two thousand years. It's such an impressive and important structure that it was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1998.

### History of the Temple of Heaven

The Temple of Heaven site was built in the early 1400s while the Yongle Emperor ruled the land. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, emperors visited the complex for prayer ceremonies. The ceremonies, which took place each year, were meant to bring a good harvest. The Yongle Emperor also built the Forbidden City in Beijing, which is another site that should certainly be added to your list of places to visit.

### Change of Name

The temple complex was originally named the Temple of Heaven and Earth, but was renamed the Temple of Heaven during the 16th century while China was under the reign of the Jiajing Emperor between 1522 and 1567.

The temple was renovated during the 18th century and, in 2005, the complex underwent a \$6 million renovation to prepare for the upcoming Olympic games and the visitors due to arrive in the city. The project was completed in 2006.

There are three main parts to the complex, including the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, the Imperial Vault of Heaven and the Circular Mound Altar.

### The Temple of Heaven's Hall of Prayer

The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests is a triple-gabled building that was constructed on layers of marble. This is where emperors prayed during the annual ceremonies. It is a wooden building and was rebuilt in 1889 after a fire. Amazingly, the building was constructed without using a nail. Inside the Hall of Prayer, there are 28 pillars, each of which was carved from single tree trunks.

### The Temple of Heaven's Imperial Vault

The Imperial Vault of Heaven is a single-gabled building built on marble situated in the center of the complex. In previous years, it held memorial tablets of ancestors to the emperors. It is smaller than the Hall of Prayer and is surrounded by a wall, called the Echo Wall. The wall, just four meters high but with a 193-meter circumference, has amazing acoustical properties. If one person whispers a sentence from one end of the wall, a second person will clearly hear the sentence from the other end of the wall.

Also, there are Triple Echo Stones in the courtyard. Each produces its own number of echoes from a word spoken by a person facing the Imperial Vault. A 360-meter long walkway, which is raised, connects the Hall of Prayer to the Imperial Vault. The walkway is called the Vermillion Steps Bridge.

### The Temple of Heaven's Circular Altar

The Circular Mound Altar is a round platform built on marble and is where the praying occurred. It was significant for the emperor to be seen in prayer, which mostly occurred to gain good harvests. The emperor, in ancient times, was viewed as the Son of Heaven. So, it was vital that he be seen showing respect and making sacrifices. This is why the ceremonies at the Temple of Heaven were important. The ceremony took place twice a year.

### The Symbolism of the Temple of Heaven

Symbolically, the temple demonstrates connections between heaven and earth – earth by a square and heaven a circle. The temple is surrounded by walls. Most elements of the temple's design have meaning, either symbolically or through numerology. For example, the stones in the tiers of the Altar of Heaven are either in threes or nines, which is a primary numerological theme. The number nine, which holds the highest value, symbolized the emperor. Ancient Chinese religious beliefs viewed heaven as round and earth as square.

## About the Author

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