



The Great Wall

Mùtiányù 慕田峪 p172

Well set up for families, and long enough for a good walk.

Gǔběikǒu 古北口 p173

Ancient fortified town, numerous unrestored stretches of the Wall. Excellent hiking opportunities.

Jiànkòu 箭扣 p177

Rough, rugged and unrestored. For hardcore Wall walkers only.

Huánghuā Chéng 黄花城 p178

Part restored, but steep in places. Good 'wild Wall' hiking nearby.

Zhuàngdàokǒu 撞道口 p178

Two options: a short restored stretch with fabulous views, or a highly challenging off-the-beaten-track hike.

Jīnshānlǐng 金山岭 p179

Picture-perfect restoration of a very remote part of the Wall.

Bādǎlǐng 八达岭 p180

The most famous and crowded, but picturesque, stretch of the Wall.

Hiking the Great Wall p181

Five of our favourite hikes along the Great Wall.

History

The Great Wall (长城; Chángchéng), one of the most iconic monuments on earth, stands as an awe-inspiring symbol of the grandeur of China's ancient history. Dating back 2000-odd years, the Wall – or to be more accurate, Walls, for it has never been one continuous structure – snakes its way through 17 provinces, principalities and autonomous regions. But nowhere is better than Běijīng for mounting your assault of this most famous of bastions.

Official Chinese history likes to stress the unity of the Wall through the ages. In fact, there are at least four distinct Walls. Work on the 'original' was begun during the Qin dynasty (221–207 BC), when China was unified for the first time under Emperor Qin Shihuang. Hundreds of thousands of workers, many political prisoners, laboured for 10 years to construct it. An estimated 180 million cu metres of rammed earth was used to form the core of this Wall, and legend has it that the bones of dead workers were used as building materials, too.

After the Qin fell, work on the Wall continued during the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220). Little more was done until almost 1000 years later, during the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), when the impending threat of Genghis Khan spurred further construction. The Wall's final incarnation, and the one most visitors see today, came during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when it was reinforced with stone, brick and battlements over a period of 100 years and at great human cost to the two to three million people who toiled on it. During this period it was home to around one million soldiers.

The great irony of the Wall is that it rarely stopped China's enemies from invading. It was never one continuous structure; there were inevitable gaps and it was through those that Genghis Khan rode in to take Běijīng in 1215.

While the Wall was less than effective militarily, it was very useful as a kind of elevated highway for transporting people and equipment across mountainous terrain. Its beacon tower system, using smoke signals generated by burning wolves' dung, quickly transmitted news of enemy movements back to the capital. But with the Manchus installed in Běijīng as the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and the Mongol threat

long gone, there was little need to maintain the Wall, and it fell into disrepair.

Ruin & Restoration

The Wall's degeneration accelerated during the war with Japan and then the civil war that preceded the founding of the new China in 1949. Compounding the problem, the communists didn't initially have much interest in the Wall. In fact, Mao Zedong encouraged people living near it to use it as a source of free building materials, something that still goes on unofficially today. It wasn't until 1984 that Mao's successor Deng Xiaoping ordered that the Wall be restored in places and placed under government protection.

But classic postcard images of the Wall – flawlessly clad in bricks and stoutly undulating over hills into the distance – do not reflect the truth of the bastion today. While the sections closest to Běijīng and a few elsewhere have been restored to something approaching their former glory, huge parts of the Wall are either rubble or, especially in the west, simply mounds of earth that could be anything.

Visiting the Wall

The heavily reconstructed section at Bādáling is the most touristy part of the Wall. Mùtiányù and Jīnshānlíng are also restored sections. These can feel less than authentic, but have the advantage of being much more accessible (with cable cars, handrails etc). Huánguā Chéng and Zhuàngdàokǒu are part-restored, part-'wild' and offer some short but challenging hikes. Unrestored sections of 'wild Wall' include Gūbèikǒu and Jiànkǒu, but there are many others. All of these can be reached using public transport (you can even get to Bādáling by train!), although some people choose to hire a car to speed things up. Staying overnight by the Wall is recommended.

Tours run by hostels, or by specialist tour companies, are far preferable to those run by ordinary hotels or general travel companies, as they tend to cater more to the needs of adventurous Western travellers and don't come with any hidden extras, such as a side trip to the Ming Tombs (a common add-on) or a tiresome diversion to a gem factory or traditional Chinese medicine centre. The following reputable companies and associations run trips to the Wall that we like: