



# The Great Wall

## Mùtiányù 慕田峪 p164

Tobogganing down this elegantly restored strip of the Wall that is also short enough to walk.

## Gǔběikǒu 古北口 p165

Basing yourself in this historic village, which offers two great hikes along a less dangerous stretch of Wild Wall.

## Jiànkǒu 箭扣 p166

Watching your step as you hike the Wild Wall at its most raw and untamed, with fantastic views of the ramparts hugging the mountain ridges.

## Huánguā Chéng 黄花城 p167

Hiking in either direction along one of the least-visited, but very steep sections of the Wall.

## Zhuàngdàokǒu 撞道口 p167

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

## Jīnshānlǐng 金山岭 p168

Walking the most remote part of the Wall from Běijīng, free from the crowds.

## Bādálǐng 八达岭 p169

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

## Hiking the Great Wall p170

Seven 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 snakes its way through 17 provinces, principalities and autonomous regions. But nowhere is better than Běijīng for mounting your assault on 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 of them 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 moun-

tainous 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 decline 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 Jīnshānlǐng are also restored sections. These can feel less than authentic, but have the advantage of being much more accessible (with cable cars, handrails etc). Huángguā Chéng and Zhuàngdàokǒu are part-restored, part-'wild' and offer some short but challenging hikes. Unrestored sections of 'Wild Wall' include Gǔbēikǒu and Jiànkǒu, but there are many others. All of these can be reached using public transport (you can even get to

### JUST HOW GREAT IS IT?

The Chinese call the Great Wall the '10,000 Lǐ Wall' (万里长城; Wànlǐ Chángchéng). With one 'Lǐ' equivalent to around 500m, this makes the Wall around 5000km long. More modern calculations, though, reveal the Wall to be much longer. A report by China's State Administration of Cultural Heritage in April 2009 estimated the noncontinuous length of the Ming dynasty wall at 8851km. But the Ming dynasty was just one of 13 dynasties to have contributed to the Wall over the course of history. A 2012 Chinese government survey calculated the total length of all fragments of the Great Wall that have ever stood, including sections that run parallel with others to be 21,196km.