

The Great Wall

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He who has not climbed the Great Wall is not a true man.

Mao Zedong

China's greatest engineering triumph and must-see sight, the Great Wall (万里长城; Wànlǐ Chángchéng) wriggles haphazardly from its scattered Manchurian remains in Liáoníng province to wind-scoured rubble in the Gobi desert and faint traces in the unforgiving sands of Xinjiāng.

The most renowned and robust examples undulate majestically over the peaks and hills of Běijīng municipality – what we focus on here – but the Great Wall can be realistically visited in many other north China provinces.

Great Wall History

The 'original' wall was begun more than 2000 years ago during the Qin dynasty (221–207 BC), when China was unified under Emperor Qín Shǐ Huáng. Separate walls that had been constructed by independent kingdoms to keep out marauding nomads were linked together. The effort required hundreds of thousands of workers – many of whom were political prisoners.

Ming engineers made determined efforts to revamp the eroding bastion, facing it with some 60 million cubic metres of bricks and stone slabs. This project took more than a century, and the cost in human effort and resources was phenomenal. The picture-postcard brick-clad modern-day manifestations of the Great Wall date from Ming times.

The wall occasionally served its impractical purpose but ultimately failed as an impenetrable line of defence. Genghis Khan dryly noted, 'The strength of a wall depends on the courage of those who defend it'. Sentries could be bribed. Despite the wall, the Mongol armies managed to impose foreign rule on China from 1279 to 1368, and again the bastion failed to prevent the Manchu armies from establishing two and a half centuries of non-Chinese rule over the Middle Kingdom. The wall did not even register with the 19th-century European 'barbarians' who simply arrived by sea, and by the time the Japanese invaded, it had been outflanked by new technologies (such as the aeroplane).

The wall was largely forgotten after that. Mao Zedong encouraged the use of the wall as a source of free building material, a habit that continues unofficially today. Without its cladding, lengthy sections have dissolved to dust and the barricade might have vanished entirely without the tourist industry.

Visiting the Wall

The heavily reconstructed section at **Bādǎling** is the most touristy part of the Wall. **Mùtiányù** and **Jinshānlíng** 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 **Gǔběikǒu** and **Jiànkǒu**, but there are many others. All of the above can be reached using public transport (you can even get to Bādǎling 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 (¥250 to ¥300 per person), or by specialist tour companies (up to ¥1000 per person), are far preferable to those run by ordinary hotels or general travel companies, which often come with hidden extras,

such as a side trip to the Ming Tombs or a gem factory. Most of the Běijīng hostels we’ve reviewed run decent Great Wall trips. The following reputable companies and associations run recommended trips to the Wall:

Bespoke Běijīng (www.bespokebeijing.com)

Great Wall Hiking (www.greatwallhiking.com)

China Hiking (www.chinahiking.cn)

Běijīng Hikers (www.beijinghikers.com)

Bike Běijīng (www.bikebeijing.com) For cycling trips.

Běijīng Sideways (www.beijingsideways.com) For trips in a motorbike sidecar.

Mùtiányù

慕田峪

Mùtiányù (慕田峪长城; Mùtiányù Chángchéng; adult/student ¥45/25; ☀ 7am-6.30pm summer, 7.30am-5.30pm, winter) is a recently renovated stretch of wall, which sees a lot of tourists but is fairly easy to reach. It’s also well set up for families.

Famed for its Ming-era guard towers and excellent views, this 3km-long section of wall is largely a recently restored Ming-dynasty structure that was built upon an earlier Northern Qi-dynasty edifice. With 26 watchtowers, the wall is impressive and manageable, and

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