

1 THE TURPAN BASIN
This enormous hole, twice the size of Wales, is 155m (508ft) below sea level. It's the fourth-lowest place on Earth that's not underwater.

2 FLAMING MOUNTAINS
It's so hot in this desert that the very mountains seem to have caught fire! Actually, the 'flames' are an optical illusion caused by the heat.

FOLLOWING THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA
Come on a journey of mystery and majesty! We'll explore the longest structure ever made by man, from the dusty desert of Gansu province to the rolling waves of the Yellow Sea.

4 THE CAVE OF A THOUSAND BUDDHAS
Welcome to the art gallery of the desert! The 492 caves near Dunhuang contain over 2,000 sculptures and 45,000 sq m (484,000 sq ft) of wall paintings.

3 FINE VINES
Time to stop for a healthy snack: the city of Turpan on the western edge of the Turpan Basin produces the best raisins in the world.

5 JADE GATE
Through these ancient gates on the Silk Road passed all caravans heading west with jade for the markets of India, Persia, Turkey and Europe.

7 DESERT PLANTS
Plants as well as people have to be tough to survive in the Gobi Desert. This saxaul tree is one of the toughest.

8 JIAYUGUAN FORTRESS
Before us stands one of China's best-known fortresses, a stout brick castle that guarded the 'First and Greatest Pass Under Heaven'.

6 TAOLAI RIVER
Before the Great Wall was built, the gorge cut by the Taolai River marked the western border of the Chinese empire.

9 FIRST BEACON PLATFORM
Hey, look! Our first sight of the Great Wall! It's part of the Ming wall, built in 1539 under the command of General Li Han.

10 BARCHAN SAND DUNES
Like the ocean, the face of the desert is always moving as waves of sand are formed and reformed by the restless wind.

11 Gobi DESERT
We've got plenty of water with us - just in case! Our train is travelling for hundreds of miles along the edge of the Gobi Desert.

12 WEI-JIN BRICK TOMBS
These painted tombs are really an art gallery - in fact, the biggest underground art gallery in the world.

15 GLACIERS IN THE QILIAN MOUNTAINS
The gleaming peaks and glaciers of the Qilian Mountains are so beautiful that the ancient Xiongnu people of this region believed they were sacred.

13 WINE FOR THE WORLD
The Chinese certainly know how to make wine - they've been doing it for over 4,600 years!

14 THE TERRACOTTA WARRIORS OF XI'AN
At Yinchuan we leave the Great Wall for a while and go south-east to see the extraordinary Army of Terracotta Warriors.

16 JIUQUAN, THE SPRING OF WINE
We've taken the bus a few kilometres east to Jiuquan, the Spring of Wine!

17 SHANDAN HORSE RANCH
We've taken a break in Shandan, an old Silk Road town, in order to visit the famous horse ranch nearby.

18 ZHANGYE DANXIA NATIONAL PARK
Stop the bus! This is something we must see - a thousand rainbows made of rock.

19 THE CITY OF XI'AN
We've come a fair distance from the wall to visit the Eternal City of Xi'an (or Chang'an), once one of the largest cities in the world.

24 YELLOW RIVER
As we follow the Great Wall out of Gansu province and into Ningxia, we meet 'the Cradle of Chinese Civilisation', the mighty Yellow River!

20 JIUQUAN SPACE CENTER
We're now in Jiuquan. It's an interesting place, but not that interesting. So why all the Chinese tourists? They're on their way to the Jiuquan Space Center!

21 KHARA KHOTO
Another trip away from the wall, this time by jeep to the ruined city of Khara Khoto.

22 RECUMBENT BUDDHA OF ZHANGYE
The gigantic wooden statue in Zhangye's Giant Buddha Temple is the largest recumbent (lying down) Buddha in all China.

23 FLYING HORSE OF WUWEI
This bronze statue, one of the best-known images in the world, is a symbol of all Chinese art.

25 TOMBS OF THE TANGUT KINGS
Beneath these giant beehives (23m / 75.4ft tall), the bodies of the rulers of the long-lost Tangut Empire were laid to rest.

26 MUSLIMS IN NINGXIA
Along the Silk Road from the west came goods, culture, diseases - and religion. So it was, about 1,400 years ago, that Islam arrived in China.

29 SHEEPSKIN RAFTS
Sheep provide us with wool and meat - and, in Ningxia, inflatable rafts!

27 DESERT FOREST OF EUPHRATES POPLARS
These Euphrates poplar trees in Ejina are tough enough to create a forest in the desert.

28 BADAIN JARAN DESERT
What's that creepy noise in the middle of nowhere? It's the singing sand dunes of the Badain Jaran Desert!

30 THE HUANGTU YELLOW-EARTH PLATEAU
This enormous area (around 640,000 sq km / 247 sq miles) of blonde-brown soil is the same colour as the Yellow River that runs through it.

31 INNER MONGOLIA
The Yellow River has looped off to the left, and we're following the wall as it continues eastwards along the border with Inner Mongolia.

★★
25. TOMBS OF THE TANGUT KINGS

Crushed first by the Mongols and then by the Ming, the Tangut Empire is shrouded in mystery. But as this 50 sq km (19.3 sq mile) burial ground suggests, it must have been a spectacular civilisation. For reasons unknown, the tombs are lined up with the sun, moon and stars.

So far, archaeologists have uncovered the tombs of nine rulers and 253 lesser people. Together they are popularly known as the Western Xia Imperial Tombs. Unfortunately the area has often flooded, causing a great deal of damage. The beehive shapes, for example, were once five- or seven-storeyed pagodas.

Some extraordinary statues have recently been uncovered showing kneeling people with angry faces. Gods? Emperors? Who knows!



★★
26. MUSLIMS IN NINGXIA

China, like Europe and the USA, is a vast mix of peoples. The government recognises 56 different nationalities. It also recognises a number of religions. Two are ancient Chinese philosophies: Confucianism and Taoism. The others - Buddhism, Islam and Christianity - have all come from elsewhere.

The Hui people of Ningxia and Gansu, the region we're now passing through, are descended from Arab and Persian Silk Road traders. The majority of Hui people are Muslim. We hear calls to prayer, and notice women with headscarves, and ornate, pagoda-style mosques.

The town of Linxia is sometimes called the 'Mecca of China' because it is home to more Muslims than anywhere else in China. There are more than 80 mosques and shrines dotted all over town.



★★
27. DESERT FOREST OF EUPHRATES POPLARS

The poplar forests in Ejina deserve our respect and admiration. We really shouldn't expect trees to survive in this desert region. But the super-hardy Euphrates poplar, known here as the Huayang poplar or 'desert hero', somehow manages. Its survival technique is nothing new, either: ancestors of these trees were around when dinosaurs roamed the Earth.

The trees in the forest are extremely old. They refuse to die: the trunks of some have rotted away inside, leaving them hollow, but the branches and leaves above still flourish. Their canopy is pale green in the summer before becoming a blaze of fiery bronze in the autumn.

★★
28. BADAIN JARAN DESERT

We've left the Great Wall to our south and come by jeep to explore the extraordinary Badain Jaran Desert. The third-largest desert in China (49,000 sq km / 19,000 sq miles) is the oddest place. For instance, despite being a desert, it harbours over 100 little lakes. These are fed by springs, each bubbling up at the heart of a little oasis where herdsman rest and feed their wandering flocks. The unusual Ruo Shui river actually flows across the desert to feed two of the lakes.

Some of the world's tallest sand dunes tower above the water, soaring to a height of 500m (1,600ft). If we're lucky, we can hear them singing to us. 'Singing' might be an exaggeration; the mysterious dune-sound is more like whistling or booming. Scientists are not sure, but they believe the noise is produced by electricity generated by falling sand. Whatever its cause, the haunting noise occurs only in the summer on dunes where the side away from the wind slopes at 30° or more.

★★
29. SHEEPSKIN RAFTS

Whoever first came up with the idea was a genius: to make a sheepskin raft, all you need are some sheepskins, a few bits of wood for a frame, and lots of puff.

Shave the sheepskins and soften them with rapeseed oil. Sew the edges of each skin tightly together. Don't forget to leave a small hole. Blow into the hole to inflate the sheepskin like a balloon. When the skin is fully blown up, seal the hole. Do the same with all your skins and tie them to the frame - and you have a light, cheap and seaworthy raft!

Sheepskin rafts have been sailing the Yellow River for centuries. They were used by traders, farmers and even by the military when it needed to get its army across a stream. A normal raft is made from 10-12 sheepskins, but they can be lashed together to make what the locals call a 'Sheepskin Raft Warship' 22m x 7m (72ft x 22ft). These 600-sheepers can carry a cargo of 20-30 tons!

★★
30. THE HUANGTU YELLOW-EARTH PLATEAU

The Huangtu Plateau was created over millennia by wind storms dumping millions and millions of tonnes of light yellow soil (loess). The fertile land is excellent for farming, and is easily hollowed out to make cave homes. Some of the locals still live in these caves, though the crumbly walls are not very safe. In 1556, over three-quarters of a million people were killed when an earthquake caused their caves to collapse.

Very light soil is easily eroded (worn away) by wind and rain. Together with poor farming methods, this was destroying life on the plateau. It was saved by a World Bank rescue project. Sustainable farming was introduced, and desert-stopping trees and grasses were planted. Gradually, life returned. Farms produced more, incomes doubled and over 2.5 million people were lifted out of poverty.

★★
31. INNER MONGOLIA

Much of Inner Mongolia is a plateau, like the flat top of a mountain about 1,000m (3,280ft) high. Genghis Khan, the fierce Mongol leader, is said to be buried here, and there are plenty of charming historical sites to visit, as well as fascinating wildlife.

Unfortunately for the environment, the plateau is a rich source of coal, oil, gas and precious minerals. Mining and other human activities have caused terrible damage. Lakes are shrivelling, rivers are polluted and the desert is taking over the grassland. Action is being taken to halt the environmental disaster - let's hope it's not too late.

★★
32. ZHENBEITAI TERRACE

The Zhenbeitai watchtower is the Great Wall's largest fortress. It sits high up on Mount Hong, dominating the surrounding countryside. Its message is clear: if you are thinking of attacking China, you'll have to capture me first - and it won't be easy. Stay away!

The terrace was built in 1607, one of the Ming dynasty's many ambitious projects. The foundations are said to date back to Qin times. The four-storey building is 30m (100ft) high, with many parapets and loopholes for shooting out of.

★★
33. COMMUNIST BASE, YAN'AN

To understand the importance of Yan'an, we need to go back to 1911. In that year a group of revolutionaries rose up, removed the emperor and declared China a republic. There followed a long civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists for control of the country. When the Nationalists appeared to be winning, Mao Zedong led the Red (communist) Army on a famous Long March from the south of China to reach Yan'an. Here they set up his headquarters.

During World War II, when Yan'an was badly bombed, Mao and the other communist leaders lived in the city's ancient caves. When the war ended, the Red Army went on the attack. By the end of 1949, they had declared China a communist country.

★★
34. GIANT PANDA

Just about everyone in China loves the giant panda. Actually, pretty much the whole world feels the same about these cuddly-looking creatures. A word of warning, however: the black-and-white cuties may look sweet and innocent, but if you get on the wrong side of them they can be just as dangerous as any other 100kg (220lb) bear.

Not only do pandas look loveable, they also behave in a pretty appealing way. Like Pooh Bear, all they seem interested in is eating. Their diet is 99% bamboo. When they have found a tasty clump, they sit and happily munch their way through it. They stop only to take a drink, look for another clump, and, very occasionally, seek out a mate.

Sadly, the high-altitude bamboo forests that are the panda's habitat shrank considerably after World War II. This drove pandas to the point of extinction. The danger was realised just in time, and the number living in the wild (currently about 1,800) is gradually increasing.



Yellow, the colour of earth, is the number one colour in China. It represents gold, valour, freedom from care, the centre of everything. No wonder the emperors insisted it was their colour.

★★
37. BACK WITH THE YELLOW RIVER

We're now getting close (500km / 310 miles) to Beijing, China's sprawling capital city. But out here in the beautiful hills of north Shanxi, the smog and noise seem a million miles away. In Laoni Bay, one of the country's loveliest canyons, the Yellow River changes to a peaceful green. Around us are fruitful valleys striped with terraced fields. Many locals live in cave houses hollowed out of the soft loess cliffs.



★★
36. WESTERN QING TOMBS

The Qing dynasty (1644-1912) - also known as the Manchu - were the last of China's imperial rulers. For mysterious reasons, the Qing emperors chose to be buried in alternate places. One emperor was buried in the Eastern Tombs, the next in the Western Tombs, the next in the Eastern and so on.

78 members of the royal family (plus a few hangers-on) are buried in the Western Qing Tombs: emperors, empresses, princes, princesses, servants, etc. And how do we spot the tombs of the emperors? Easy. Not only are they the biggest, but they have yellow tiles on their roofs.

★★
38. HUKOU WATERFALL

China is big on just about everything - except waterfalls. Strangely for such a large country with so many rivers, the 30m (65.5ft) descent of the Yellow River at Hukou is its second highest. And, to be honest, it's more like rapids than a true waterfall.

But what the falls lack in size, they make up for in peculiarity. They almost double in width when the river floods, and in winter the surface freezes over to create a fantastic, many-layered wedding cake of ice. In summer the water carries so much mud and silt that it pours over the rocks like molten chocolate. The Chinese say it's more like a stream of tea, which is what Hukou means - mouth of a teapot!

★★
39. THE HANGING MONASTERY

Of all the sacred mountains in China, the Five Great Mountains (which include Mount Heng) are the oldest and most respected. Before they could feel really safe on the throne, Chinese emperors made pilgrimages to all five peaks.

The Five Mountains originally marked the boundaries of the empire. Mount Heng is furthest north and therefore closest to the Great Wall. As far as mountains go, it's impressive but not particularly special. What draws tourists by the bus-load is a monastery clinging to a cliff face on the side of the mountain. It has been there - perched on wooden poles high above floods and all other worldly disturbance - since a monk named Liao Ran started building it at the time of the Northern Wei dynasty.

The prayer hall of this unusually-positioned monastery is open to Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian worshippers.

★★
40. DATONG AND YUNGANG BUDDHIST STATUES

Buddhism came to China from India during the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220). Scholars are not sure whether the religion arrived by sea or overland along the Silk Road. An ancient legend gives the story a more interesting twist. Emperor Ming dreamed of a flying god whose body shone like the sun. When his courtiers told him he had seen a vision of the Indian Buddha, the emperor sent explorers to that country to know more about the mystical religion.

The emperor and Buddhism were closely linked from the beginning. Typically, emperors were not too keen on anyone - even the Buddha (called Shakyamuni in China) - being more important than them. That's why, when 252 grottoes were carved out of the Wuzhou Mountain in the 5th and 6th centuries AD and filled with 51,000 Buddha statues, the five most impressive carvings were of emperors - as Buddhas!

★★
41. BEIJING

Beijing wears two faces. One is the city of history, founded over 3,000 years ago, the capital of five dynasties and home to 34 emperors. The jewel of old Beijing is the Forbidden City, a vast palace surrounded by delightful gardens. The city also boasts the Temples of Heaven and Earth, the 17th-century Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, the Nijie Mosque, towering pagodas and other stunning monuments. This is the city the Great Wall was built to defend.

The other Beijing is about now and the future. It's the beating political and cultural heart of the People's Republic of China. Think 2008 Summer Olympics and 2022 Winter Olympics (the only city to host both events), fast food and slow traffic, one of the world's busiest airports, and a massive subway system with helpful signs in English as well as Chinese script.

We might be only a short distance from the Great Wall, but the streets of modern Beijing feel like a different planet.

★★
42. ZHOUKOUDIAN CAVES

In the early 1920s, Swede Johan Gunnar Andersson found two strange teeth in the Zhoukoudian caves 50km (31 miles) south-west of Beijing. More finds followed, including bits of fossilised jaw and skull. They were of *Homo erectus*, a previously unknown species of very early human. The media called him Peking Man ('Peking' was the way westerners used to spell Beijing).

Can we see these fascinating bits of fossilised early ape-man? Sadly not. In 1941, in the middle of World War II, they were loaded into a crate for shipment to the USA for safe keeping - and were never seen again. Fortunately, excellent copies had been made, so we've got something to look at as we go around Zhoukoudian's Dragon Bone Hill exhibition hall.



★★
43. MING TOMBS

The remains of 13 Ming emperors lie in a huge (40 sq km / 15.4 sq miles) burial ground 42km (26 miles) north of Beijing. The giant tombs are impressive, but what make the site really interesting are its statues.

The emperors were thought to have come from heaven and returned there when they died. That explains the 7km (4 mile) Sacred Way leading into the site - a sort of road to heaven. It is lined with huge carvings of people and creatures. These were hauled into place when the temperature was below freezing: water was poured onto the roadway and, when it froze, the statues slid into position over the ice.

Inside one of the pavilions is a 50-tonne stone statue of Bixi, a son of the Dragon King. He's an odd mix - half-dragon, half-turtle - and touching a Bixi statue is supposed to bring good luck.

★★
44. CHINESE JUMPING MOUSE

The Chinese jumping mouse is a strange little creature. It lives largely by itself high up in the mountains, feeding off grass and other juicy greenery. While its body is no more than 10cm (3.9in) long, its tail, used for balancing, can add another 14.4cm (5.7in).

To get away from danger, the mouse doesn't hide - it stretches its long back legs and leaps like a frog! One bound can take it an amazing 3m (10ft). A human long jumper with that sort of spring could clear 55m (180ft) - over half the length of the sprint track. No wonder the Chinese jumping mouse is not an endangered species - no one can catch it!



★★
45. TANGSHAN EARTHQUAKE

In early July 1976, water in a village well near the city of Tangshan began mysteriously rising and falling. From another well, gas seeped into the air. Fish in a local aquarium leaped about wildly as if trying to escape. Deep down in the earth, something sinister was brewing.

The unusual happenings were early warnings of a massive, murderous earthquake. It struck at 4am on 28 July, violently shaking the ground around Tangshan for 14-16 seconds. Tragically, hundreds of thousands of people died instantly or were trapped within collapsed buildings.

The final death toll is unknown. The official figure was over 200,000; unofficial estimates reckon it was half a million or more.

★★
46. THE SHANHAI PASS

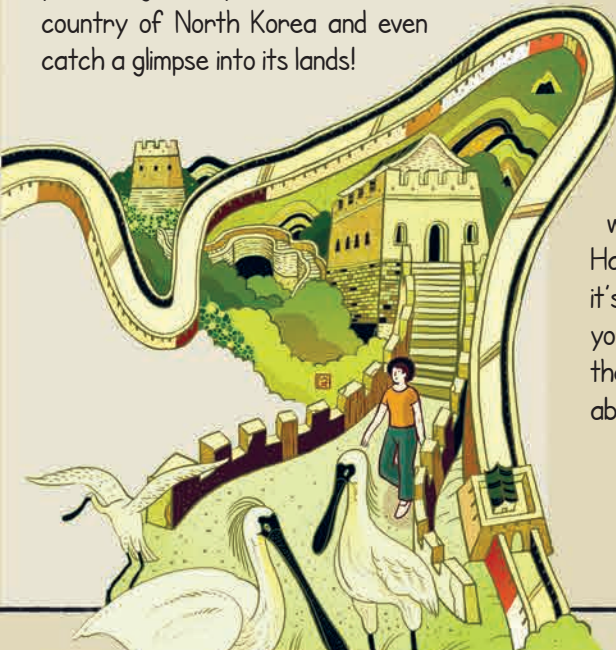
Ming commanders certainly knew what they were doing when they built a massive fortress in the Shanhai Pass, blocking the road to Beijing from the north. The 'First Pass under Heaven' had been fought over for centuries, and went on being a place of conflict into World War II.

The fort is known as Shanhaiguan, meaning 'between the mountains and the sea'. Now in the middle of a town, the huge square fort has 7.1km (4.5 miles) of walls up to 14m (46ft) high and 7m (23ft) thick. The five towers on the eastern side were known as the Five Tigers. If we follow the wall south, we come to the Old Dragon's Head where the Great Wall meets its eastern end at the ocean.

★★
47. TIGER MOUNTAIN GREAT WALL

The border between China and North Korea runs along the Yalu River, including a 400km section of the Great Wall. For several centuries, the Hushan (Tiger Mountain) Great Wall was lost. But in 1989, they found a section of the Ming wall that had run along the same China-North Korea border.

The Chinese quickly rebuilt 1.25km (1,367yds) of the wall at Hushan, overlooking the fast-flowing Yalu. Above it looms Tiger Mountain, so named because it resembles a crouching tiger. It's almost as if the giant animal and the Great Wall are both guarding China's frontier. If you walk along this section of the Great Wall, you can get very close to the secretive country of North Korea and even catch a glimpse into its lands!



★★
48. THE YOUNG LADY'S GATE

The Niangziguan fort in Shanxi is part of the Ming wall, built about 1542, and is associated with Princess Pingyang, one of the legendary heroes of Chinese history.

We are back in AD 618. The Sui dynasty, headed by the vile Emperor Yang, is on its last legs. A rebellion is under way, led by the northern nobleman Li Yuan. He needs all the support he can get. Enter Pingyang. Yuan's strong-willed and able 20-year-old daughter. She sells all her possessions and uses the money to raise a 70,000-strong army - commanded by herself.

Backed by this new force, the rebellion triumphs. Emperor Yang is killed. Li Yuan becomes the first emperor of the new Tang dynasty - and the gallant Pingyang is made a princess.

The fort at Niangziguan is named the Young Lady's Gate in her honour.

★★
49. BLACK-FACED SPOONBILL

Spoonbills get their name from their beaks, which are a rather inefficient fishing instrument. They stand in the shallows, open their spoon-shaped bill (beak), and sweep it backwards and forwards through the water. The instant a tiny fish or other creature touches the inside of the bill, it snaps shut. After a quick swallow, the bird carries on fishing. Hour after hour, day after day. There's not much variety in a spoonbill's life.

The birds here come from the 7,000 ha (27 sq miles) Important Bird Area at the mouth of the Yalu River. Of the five species of spoonbill, the black-faced is the most endangered - a few years ago there were less than 1,000 in the whole world. Happily, numbers are now increasing. But it's a slow process as adult birds produce young only every other year. Perhaps they're too busy spooning for food to think about a family?