



# A WALK ON

Dispense with all the myths and take the hike  
of a lifetime along China's mightiest monument.  
We reveal the real story behind the Great Wall.

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# THE WILD SIDE



**N**EAR THE VILLAGE of Xizhazi in China's Yan Mountains is an unremarkable path that winds between corn fields and farmhouses. Little more than a shepherd's track, it climbs steeply, away from the village and into the woods, where tree roots become steps and branches become handholds.

After about 40 minutes of hiking, you'll come to a clearing in the leaves and catch a glimpse of a watchtower over the tree line. Then, at last, the path emerges into cool air and finishes abruptly at a mighty, inward-sloping wall of brick and quarried stone. This is the Zhengbei Tower, the western-most battlement of a short stretch of the Great Wall of China known as Jiankou, about two hours north of Beijing. Ascending the tower and looking east, the mountains plummet downwards, then rise majestically again, the Great Wall flowing serpent-like across the highest ridge line into the hazy distance.

The Zhengbei Tower affords one of the definitive Great Wall vistas. In the warmer months, it attracts a number of amateur photographers, but for much of the year, Jiankou — a section that is not officially open to the public — is quiet and free

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE** A watchtower in the wall's Jiankou section; a local dressed as warrior guard; William Lindsey. **PREVIOUS PAGE** Local riders; a close-up of the Great Wall.

from tourists. Jiankou is often called the 'wild wall' — a phrase British scholar and guide William Lindsey coined after walking along thousands of kilometres of the wall's unrestored battlements in some of China's most remote wilderness.

It's on quiet days in places such as Jiankou that the romance of the Great Wall is conjured. Here, derelict towers are crumbling and overgrown with vegetation, yet epic beyond the imagination. It's also forlorn and functionless, and it's hard not to reflect on the suffering and effort it took to build — it has been estimated that almost one in every three men was conscripted to work on the Wall during the height of construction in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) — all for something which time and technology in the age of modern mobilised warfare have rendered redundant.

That, however, has only been the case for the past couple of centuries (notwithstanding brief skirmishes along the wall against the Japanese during World War II). For some two millennia before that, across more than a dozen Chinese dynasties and the reign of countless emperors, the Great Wall

has witnessed remarkable innovations — beginning with the horse. It was the domestication and mastery of the horse that turned herdsman, pastoral people on China's northern borders, into riders. The invention of the stirrup and the composite bow followed, turning those riders into mounted archers, the most deadly and versatile instrument of war the world had ever seen.

Lindesay, the first westerner to walk the length of the Ming Dynasty Great Wall, highlights these technological innovations and more in his book, *The Great Wall in 50 Objects*. Some are groundbreaking, while others seem more prosaic, such as the advancements in metallurgy that allowed the Chinese to mass-produce high-quality iron tools such as chisels, which were needed to quarry and work stone for wall building.

For the Chinese, building walls was their way to counter the terrifying mounted attacks from nomadic groups of the Eurasian Steppe, an area that stretches from Moldavia through Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan, Xinjiang and Mongolia to Manchuria.

When in the year 221, Qin Shi Huang unified China and became the first emperor of the Qin dynasty, he ordered the walls of earlier warring states to be joined and reinforced into what was known as Wan Li Chang Cheng — China's first incarnation of what would become the Great Wall — a barrier designed to keep the new nation safe from the northern barbarians.

This raises the first of many myths associated with the Great Wall — the notion of a single stone wall stretching across China. It is more accurate to think of it as an intermittent patchwork; various walls and forts have been joined, extended and demolished by successive dynasties. Branch lines taper away to defend long-vanished settlements, and newer walls have been built adjacent to the ruins of older ones.

For logistical reasons, the Great Wall was fashioned, chameleon-like, from whatever materials were at hand. Along China's arid northern plains, through Inner Mongolia and Gansu Province, this equated mostly to tamped earth, but much of the wall around Beijing was built with granite and bricks, and its sturdy watchtowers follow the high ridge lines of the mountains.

The greatest of all the wall builders were the Ming emperors, who were responsible for the better preserved battlements in this area, including Jiankou, building and rebuilding atop older stretches to form an overlapping defensive barrier stretching more than 6000 kilometres from ocean in the east

## ON THE WALL

**Bespoke Travel Company**  
This company offers small group walking tours with historian William Lindsey as the guide. Tours run across stretches of wild wall close to Lindsey's rural home in the mountains north of Beijing. [www.bespoketravelcompany.com](http://www.bespoketravelcompany.com).

**Beijing Hikers**  
A casual hiking group, Beijing Hikers embarks on regular trips to the Great Wall around Beijing and beyond, grading their walks according to difficulty and location. [www.beijinghikers.com](http://www.beijinghikers.com).

**The Great Wall Adventure Club**  
This is a partly American-run company that organises multi-day trekking adventures with the chance to camp in watchtowers. [www.greatwalladventure.com](http://www.greatwalladventure.com).



to desert in the west. In the Yan Mountains, the wall often traverses the highest ridge lines, stopping when the cliffs are so sheer that no extra defence was needed, and starting again at more vulnerable points. The Baiyangyu Great Wall, about a 1.5-hour drive from the northern city of Tangshan, is a good place for tourists to take it all in.

The substantial Great Wall of the Ming Dynasty has fuelled another longstanding myth: that the Great Wall is the only man-made structure visible from space. It's not true; it's not even as visible as modern desert roads from a low-earth orbit, according to *Scientific American*. The idea it is visible from space was a point of pride for an emerging China, and was even stated in school books.

Following formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, parts of the wall have undergone major restoration. North-west of Beijing, Badaling was earmarked as a site for repair. It covers a ➤





**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE**  
 Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip share a private moment on the wall at Badaling in 1986; an aerial view of Badaling, bustling with tourists; the wall winds its way over mountains.

strategic pass through a high gorge in the Jundu Mountains that separate the fertile lands of the capital from the more arid plains beyond. The wall was given another makeover in the 1980s when about 20 of its watchtowers were renovated.

Badaling has become the most visited section of the Great Wall. Numerous foreign heads of state including Thatcher, Nixon, Gorbachev and Obama have smiled for the cameras on its battlements and millions of tourists — both Chinese and foreign — have huffed and puffed up its steep steps.

Including Badaling, tourists can only officially access a tiny fraction of the Great Wall — probably less than 70 kilometres. This includes sections of the wild wall; to visit these parts you need your own transport, maps or GPS and all the essentials for a wilderness hike, knowing that there's no reliable rescue or medical assistance if you get into trouble. It's a world away from the elbow-to-elbow crowds at Badaling.

A national survey completed in 2012 put the total length of the Great Wall at more than 20,000 kilometres. The reality is that vast tracts have been lost to the ravages of time, weather and development. There's a reason that the most intact stretches of the wall endure in the mountains — over a certain altitude, it becomes too difficult to steal the bricks.

Though World Heritage-listed in 1987 and officially protected since 2006, the Great Wall is simply too 'great' for the

State Cultural Relics Bureau to effectively oversee. Enforcement is rare, with illegal mining a persistent threat. It's a bitter irony today that those captivated most by the Great Wall, the tourists, are most likely to damage it by hiking on wild sections.

Since the late 1990s, clean-up hikes on the Wall (where you collect discarded litter) and fundraising for environmental protection have become more commonplace. Sun Huijie and her husband, Hayden Opie, have been guiding walkers along the wild wall since 2003 with their company Beijing Hikers.

As well as clean-up hikes, more drastic measures are sometimes taken, explains Opie. "In some areas we'll take out the shears and machetes and cut a side trail around fragile sections of the wall — places where a clumsily-placed hiking boot might knock a brick out of place."

A greater threat than a misplaced hiking boot, though, is apathy. Lack of public awareness of the Great Wall's intrinsic value — both historically and as a wilderness area — is the biggest barrier to its protection. So tourism to the wall has a vital but delicate role to play. It's the next chapter in this fascinatingly turbulent story of mankind's greatest monument. One can only hope it comes to a happy conclusion. 

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