

Trekking

It's a far cry from East Maitland to the Great Wall of China, but Hunter writer and photographer Bruce Holmes experiences a sense of achievement as he treks along some very wild sections of this World Heritage icon.

The Great Wall

story & images Bruce Holmes

There are no marauding hordes here, neither tourists nor trinket-sellers nor, thankfully, Mongolian horsemen intent upon our demise. And yet history's ghosts seem ever-present as we trek slowly up the ridges toward the Simatai section of China's Great Wall, in northern Hebei Province.

Having driven all morning north-east from Beijing to begin our Great Wall Trek with World Expeditions, we have only a couple of hours this afternoon for reconnaissance. Our Australian

guide, Ken Collins, points to the highest tower on the ridgeline and says nonchalantly, "That's where we'll be having lunch tomorrow." We look at each other, incredulous.

Then it's down the mountain to our campsite to ready ourselves for the five challenging days ahead. We track through fields of corn; pass thatched-roofed houses, goats and donkeys tended by an old man and are reminded that it's all a long way from the bustle of the capital. Ken introduces our Chinese host family who'll look after us for our six nights camping, attending to tents and cooking our food. >



Walkers on the reconstructed Mutianyu section of the Great Wall.



above Bruce crossing a suspension bridge over a reservoir. Great Wall at Simatai.



The old man is amazed at the beard. Houchuan village, China.

After a restful night it's time to tie the bootlaces. Hiking up from the valley floor, we wonder how invading forces ever managed to breach the famous wall.

"Treachery," is the answer. Pausing for breath, we listen as Ken begins the history lesson. This Simatai section, like much of the wall, was built by the Ming Dynasty. Constructed by a military garrison, it was designed to keep out hostile tribes from the north. The wall itself did that but the dynasty's collapse in 1644 came about when a disaffected general was bribed to open the gates at the First Pass Under Heaven, allowing the Manchu army to march on Beijing.

We then set out along a section that is sound enough but more of a climb than a walk. After making good progress, we leave the wall to visit a local family. Ken knows them, so we get to see how they live. We're invited into their house, which though humble has a colourfully decorated interior. Outside, new bricks are replacing the old barn and harvested maize lies drying in the sun. Small children entertain themselves with flying cicadas tied to pieces of cotton and though some of us wince a bit, we're reminded that there are no Playstations here. Jane, one of the Australians with small children back home, is the centre of attention as the little ones share their stories with her.

Leaving the village behind, we tackle a steep path through sun-dappled forest, a challenging climb up a 45-degree slope with loose leaves making traction difficult. The moist dirt is slippery and most shrubs offer unreliable branches to grab hold of. I'm glad I've brought my hiking stick, which I adjust short like a pick to lever myself up. I recall Ken's comment over breakfast, his cheery explanation of where we'd be going being: "And then we'll pick up the wall again." That word "up" is the only one I can think about at this moment. >



Meeting the local children at a village in Hebei Province, northern China.



Long-haired goats in the village of Houchuan, Hebei Province, China.



Wanjinglou Tower at the summit of Mount Simatai - the best view for our lunch stop. Great Wall of China.



above Walking the Simatai section of the Great Wall of China.
right Wildflowers now cover some of the destruction wrought by zealous Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution.
Great Wall, Simatai.



Part of the reconstructed section of the Great Wall at Jinshanling.



The window of a ruined Song Dynasty tower frames a view of northern China's mountainous Gubeikou region.

Emerging from the wooded hillside we reach the wall and after a short walk along a narrow, degraded section, and after something of a climb, we finally hold onto a railing around the side and are there. It's time for lunch, with a view from Wanjinglou Tower at the summit of Mount Simatai, and we have the best seats in the house.

After a well-earned break we make our way down the ridges as 35-degree summer heat starts to sap our energy. Reaching camp, we're exhausted and it's time for a cold drink, the Chinese beer being very popular. There are eleven in our group; two English, four Australians and five Americans, and we're perhaps surprised at how quickly we've become friends.

Next morning, we continue along the Simatai section, where the wall follows the ridges of the Yanshan Mountains, making for spectacular views.

Ken points out a brick with the Chinese inscription 'Wan Li', a later Ming ruler under whom the empire declined. He also explains that much of the destruction along the top of the wall was wrought by zealous Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution, from 1966. How times have changed. As I walk further in this peaceful area, I reflect on the fact that the Mings' imperial might has turned to rubble and the excesses of the 1960s have been replaced by wildflowers.

Next we reach the Jinshanling wall, which includes a reconstructed section where watchtowers and turrets make an impressive sight along the mountain ridges. It's interesting to note the difference between the original parts, which are still in a very passable state, and the neat paving of the reconstructed area.

I suppose this shows how the wall would have looked in its heyday, and thus provides something of a history lesson at this World Heritage site. But personally, I'd be disappointed if the whole wall was rebuilt, considering how the more challenging parts have a lot less tourists. For as the afternoon draws on, we realise we've seen only sixty westerners in the whole day.

Heading for camp having walked for seven or eight hours, I turn to Colin, the Englishman, as I scribble in my notebook and ask, "Should I mention the sweat?"

"Too right mate," is the reply.

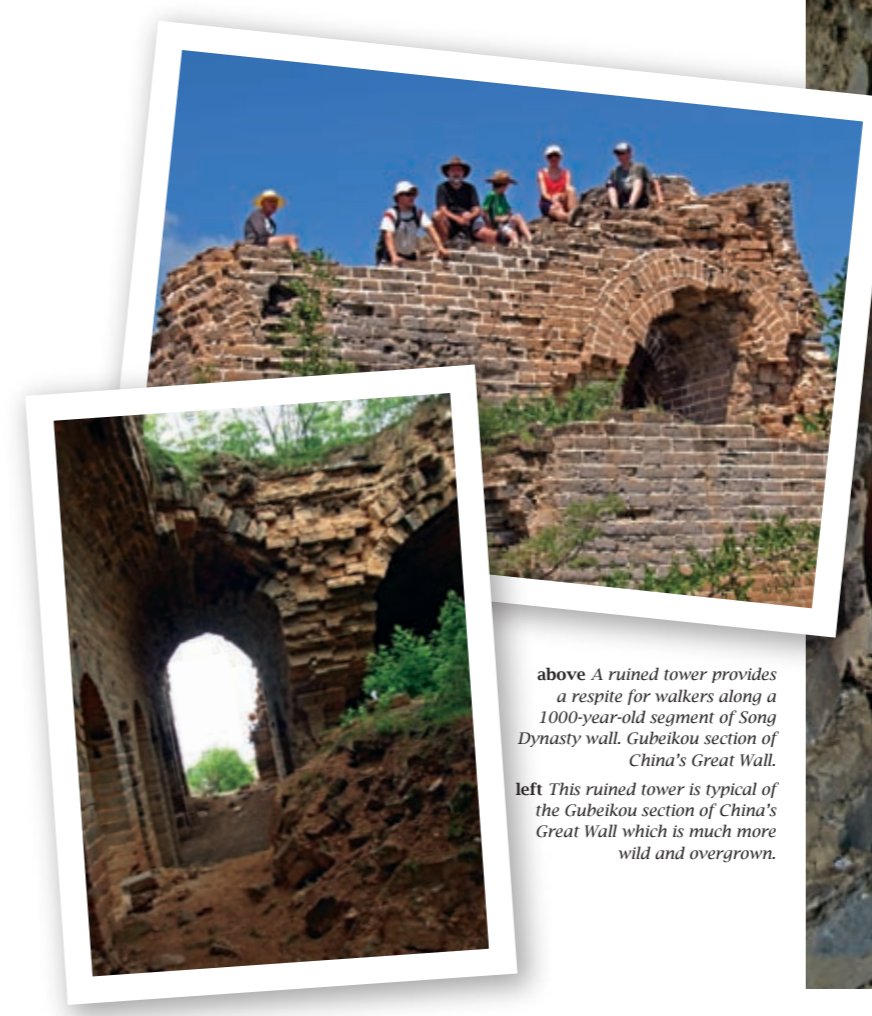
So yes, despite the trek being graded moderate, there is still considerable exertion required and a couple of our number find the going difficult.

We stay that night near Jinshanling village, before next morning trekking along the Gubeikou section, a much wilder wall with overgrown paths, crumbling stone and decaying watchtowers. We stop for lunch at one of these towers, which was built in the 16th century, like the Simatai part, but having been plundered for stone by the Japanese during the war it's in a ruined state. Farmers' crops grow beneath the tower – history is what it is, but everyday life goes on.

In the next part there's time for solitary reflection as our group spreads out. While the wall here may not be the fine spectacle that it is at Jinshanling, this mountainous and green area of China has a beauty of its own and the crumbling ruins create a sense of time passing.

Our base for the next two nights is Gubeikou, in Miyun County, 120 kilometres north-east of Beijing. The word Gubeikou means 'old north pass' and this has always been a strategically significant area leading into northern China. >

Traversing a part of the ruined and overgrown Great Wall along the Gubeikou section.



above A ruined tower provides a respite for walkers along a 1000-year-old segment of Song Dynasty wall. Gubeikou section of China's Great Wall.
left This ruined tower is typical of the Gubeikou section of China's Great Wall which is much more wild and overgrown.



Hikers pause in the shade of a ruined tower which was plundered for stone by the Japanese during the war. Gubeikou section of China's Great Wall.

We come to understand this more clearly next morning when, after scrambling up a thousand-year-old Song Dynasty wall that's now little more than an overgrown pile of stones, we stop at the oldest tower and look out over the green valley. The whole strategic pass is visible and we wonder what guard duty must have been like up here.

Next we join the Gubeikou section of the main Ming wall and the towers along the ridgeline beckon. We are eager for the challenge but it becomes a little scary on a 45-degree steep section, where only one in five steps remains solidly in place and others slip as we move upward. A narrow bush path then takes us to the tower.

Having decided to push on, we are disappointed some distance later when our bush track vanishes in the prickly undergrowth. For safety reasons our attempt upon the ridge-top towers is abandoned and we take a trail down the mountainside to our camp.

That night, there are dishes of chicken and pork, along with vegetable courses, the eggplant being my favourite, and there's no way anyone goes hungry. Some stay with the Chinese beer, while the English couple, Ruth and Colin, and I sample the Great Wall Red, a very drinkable Chinese wine in a softer style, somewhat like Merlot or Pinot Noir.


After the excitement of a big thunderstorm that night we pack the gear again in the morning before travelling by bus to Mutianyu.

The Great Wall at Mutianyu has historically served as the northern barrier defending the capital. Its reconstruction was completed in 1989, two years after the wall was inscribed on the World Heritage register, and it's now a popular destination for day-trippers from Beijing. Here, the metaphorical snake makes its way across a landscape of green forest, providing quite a contrast with the watchtowers and crenellated battlements catching the sunlight.

For us, Mutianyu is like holiday camp. There's a cable car up to the top, instead of steep forest paths and we ride the toboggan all the way down.

It's then I recall the Powerhouse Museum's Great Wall exhibit in Sydney early in 2007, which had fed my obsession with tackling the wall, and its TV news footage of Gough Whitlam, Queen Elizabeth, Mikhail Gorbachev and Bill Clinton all waving for the cameras at the most touristy and totally reconstructed part, at Badaling.

That is the part of the wall we will not visit, no queens and presidents for us. Instead we have trekked through the wild and faraway countryside, along original sections of wall that give some sense of history and time passing.

Someone recalls Chairman Mao's statement: "He who has not climbed the Great Wall is not a true man", and we, man and woman alike, feel a considerable sense of achievement. 

Visit www.worldexpeditions.com and check out Great Wall Trek. Qantas flies three times a week from Sydney, direct to Beijing. Tourist information visit www.cnto.org.au