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Walking China's Great Wall

China's greatest monument stretches for thousands of miles, and traverses some of the country's most majestic landscapes. But as Bruce Holmes discovers, it only takes a few days to get its measure.

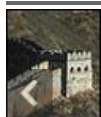
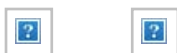


Image 1 of 2

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How did an invading army breach this extraordinary barrier, we wonder, as we march in single file through the cornfields of northern China and cast our eyes upward towards our first goal. Treachery, is the answer. As we stand upon the Great Wall of China and pause for breath, Ken Collins, our Australian guide, begins the history lesson.

This so-called Simatai section of the Great Wall was built during the Ming



Dynasty period to keep out hostile tribes from the north. The wall did its job, but the dynasty's fall in 1644 came about when a disaffected general was bribed to open the gates at the First Pass Under Heaven, thus allowing the Manchu army to enter the kingdom and march on Beijing.

A bus ride of several hours the previous day had brought us north-east from Beijing to Hebei Province, the starting point for our six-day Great Wall Trek. For much of the hike we will be traversing a more or less continuous part of the wall from east to west, beginning at Simatai then moving through the Jinshanling and Gubeikou sections, covering 25 miles in all. Each night we'll be camping near the wall with a host family.

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Stepping out at Simatai on our first day, we soon find it more of a climb than a walk and the surface underfoot varies greatly. But that doesn't stop 11-year-old Mitchell, from the US, the youngest member of our group, from being up with the leaders. His grandmother Ellie, keeping up easily herself, tells us the trip was Mitchell's idea. "He'll be giving a presentation on the wall when he gets back to school," she says.

After making good progress we leave the wall to visit some local villagers, friends of our guide. The mother of one family invites us into her house, which, though humble, is neat, new bricks replacing the old wood. Maize dries in the sun and small children show us how they entertain themselves with flying cicadas tied to pieces of cotton. Though we wince, we're reminded that there are no PlayStations here.

Leaving the village, we tackle a steep path up through the sun-dappled forest. This is a challenging climb and I wonder how men in full battle gear climbed such slopes and still had energy to fight. Eventually we emerge from the wooded hillside, and it's time for lunch at Wanjinglou Tower on the summit of Mount Simatai, the highest point of the wall.

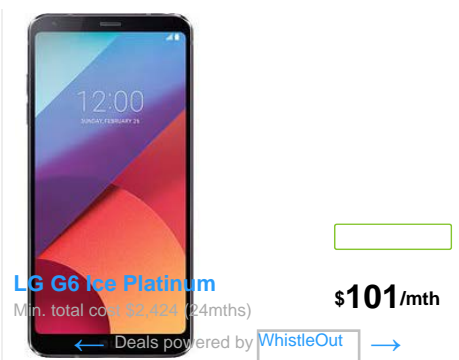
After a well-earned break, we trek down the ridges as the summer heat starts to take its toll. Reaching camp, we're exhausted and enjoy a cold Chinese beer. There are 11 in our group, two English, four Australians and five Americans, with four of us aged over 45. I realise that it hasn't taken long to make new friends.

Next night, camping near Houchuan village, we sense something of rural China. Donkeys graze lazily, an old farmer shepherds his long-haired white goats, and there are old stone dwellings with roofs of thatch and shingle and fields full of corn. It's a world away from Beijing.

Our Chinese host family looks after us, pitching tents, providing washing water and setting out drinks and nibbles before cooking some wonderful food. We quickly develop a sense of camaraderie, Ken smoothing any communication difficulties. Ellie suggests that the height of the cornfields makes for a perfect shower curtain. From that point each of us follows her lead, taking the bowl of warm water behind the tallest ears we can find, before re-joining the group as refreshed as if we'd had hot running water. Okay, maybe not quite.

After a peaceful night we continue our walk, following the ridges of the Yanshan Mountains, which make for spectacular views, but also some memorable ascents. After a while the trail levels out and Ken explains that the destruction evident along parts of the wall was wrought by zealous Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution from 1966, raging against all things imperial. Now the excesses of the 1960s have been replaced by wild flowers.

Next we reach the Jinshanling wall, which includes a reconstructed section where watchtowers and neat turrets show how the wall would have looked in its heyday. It's impressive, but it'll be a shame if too much of the wall is rebuilt and the wilder, more remote stretches lose their genuine, ramshackle charm. In the course of the day, we have seen only 60 Western tourists - very different to the heaving, popular parts of the wall.



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We camp near Jinshanling village, a little way from our hosts' house, the family from the first two nights having transported the gear while we hiked, set up the tents and begun to prepare a delicious meal. While we meet the villagers whose land we camp on, it's our travelling family who look after us. They prepare dishes of chicken and pork, along with noodles and vegetable options, and while some of us stick with Chinese beer, I and the English couple, Ruth and Colin, sample the Great Wall Red, a very drinkable Chinese wine.

The following morning we load our bags onto a motor-bike trailer - it's great carrying only a day pack - and head out along the Gubeikou section, a wilder wall with overgrown paths, crumbling stone and decaying watchtowers. We stop for lunch, resting from the heat inside the coolness of one such tower that was plundered for stone by the Japanese during World War II.

Moving on, we follow the leader in single file along a narrow stretch with a drop on either side. Here our group spreads out a little and there's time for solitary reflection. While the wall here may not be a fine spectacle like at Jinshanling, the crumbling ruins give a sense of time passing and one can't help but wonder about the isolation and hardship faced by 14th-century Chinese soldiers guarding the wall.

Next day we tackle part of the 1,000-year-old Song Dynasty wall before joining the Gubeikou section of the main Ming Dynasty defences. Towers beckon along the ridges and announce our greatest challenge, a crazily steep section where only one in five steps remains solidly in place and others slip as we make our way upward. Someone recalls Chairman Mao's statement that "He who has not climbed the Great Wall is not a true man" and we push on.

But a mile farther along, the wall becomes impassable and we take another bush track in our attempt to access the next tower. When that trail vanishes in thick undergrowth, we've no choice but to head for camp, where that night a tremendous storm shatters the quiet. Some time after it has passed we hear raised voices and car doors and realise our visitors are the local police. Once they're gone Ken reassures us that they had simply wanted to check that "the foreigners" had not been harmed by the violent weather.

Next morning we visit a small Gubeikou temple built to honour Yang Ye, a famous 10th-century Song Dynasty general who fought off attacks by nomads from the north and was revered as a god of battle. We then travel by bus south-west, halfway back toward Beijing, where we reach the Great Wall at Mutianyu, which has historically served as the northern barrier defending the capital. Its reconstruction was completed in 1989 and it's a popular destination for crowds of day-trippers from Beijing who don't want to battle the even larger crowds at Badaling.

A cable car takes us up, instead of us hiking steep forest paths, and we find more people than we've become accustomed to. The walking, while still up and down, is much easier here. Snaking its way across the landscape, the wall here is characterised by crenellated battlements and watchtowers on overlapping mountain ridges. With green pines and cypresses covering the area it is all picture-perfect.

But for our group, who have climbed the wild parts of the wall and trekked through faraway countryside, Mutianyu is like holiday camp. So do we take the cable-car down? Of course not. Too easy. We walk.

Essentials

Getting there

World Expeditions (020 8545 9030; www.worldexpeditions.co.uk) offers the Great Wall Trek, including six nights' camping, four nights in a hotel in

Beijing, sightseeing in Beijing and the trek along the Great Wall. The cost is £795, excluding flights, which can be organised independently or through World Expeditions. The next departure is May 15, 2008.

Further information

China National Tourist Office (020 7373 0888; www.cnto.org.uk). Other companies offering walking trips on the Great Wall include China Travel Service (020 7388 8838; www.chinatravel.co.uk). British passport-holders need a visa for China. Details at www.chinese-embassy.org.uk. This trek is graded moderate and you only carry a day pack but reasonably good fitness is needed to enjoy the experience, so don't leave it till the last minute to start walking.

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