

A Year and A World

Avoiding the crush at the Great Wall

By Larissa and Michael Milne
FOR THE INQUIRER

Chinese emperors built the Great Wall to keep out rampaging hordes of Mongolian soldiers mounted on horseback streaming down from the north, but no amount of stone and mortar can repel hordes of tourists riding luxury motor coaches. These groups, armed with digital cameras, arrive by the thousands each day. You can avoid them, though, by veering slightly off the beaten path to tour a part of the wall that is less visited. Hiring your own driver will also vastly improve your Great Wall experience.

According to urban legend, the Great Wall is visible from outer space. Like many tales that get passed around from modem to modem, it is wrong. The structure, which follows the undulating contours of the hills and is in some areas no more than an earth-colored pile of dirt and rubble, is barely visible from an airplane flying at 40,000 feet, let alone by an astronaut in low earth orbit.

What may be visible from outer space, though, are the numerous shiny trinkets and tchotchkes sold at the unending souvenir stands at Badaling, the most popular choice for tourists to view the wall. The place should rename itself Bada-bling.

Badaling suffers from its close proximity to Beijing. From the capital it is easy to sign up for a bus tour or hire a taxi that will take you there. Since Badaling is conveniently located right off a multi-lane interstate highway, it is easily accessible to tour buses.

A much less visited section of the wall is 55 miles north of central Beijing at Mutianyu. The last 10 miles are by local roads, which makes it less accessible for tour buses. The ride from Beijing took us about an hour and 10 min-

Information

■ The Great Wall at Mutianyu is 55 miles north of Beijing.

Hours

Open 365 days a year. April to October, 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.; November to March, 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Admission

The Great Wall at Mutianyu is a Chinese national park. Admission to the park is 40 CNY (\$6.25) for adults, 20 CNY (\$3.15) for children 12 and under.

The cable car costs 65 CNY (\$10.15) for a round-trip for adults, 35 CNY (\$5.50) for children 12 and under.

Personal Driver/Guide

www.cometobeijing.com. Ask for Joe.

utes. Badaling often has more than 100 tour buses in its parking lot; when we went to Mutianyu there were two — and only enough parking spaces for about 10 total.

Visitors do walk through a row of souvenir vendors to get to the entry gate (they can't be avoided wherever tourists congregate), but they are less intrusive here.

The Mutianyu section of the Great Wall dates from 1368 and was built upon the foundation of an earlier wall from about 550 A.D. Visitors can amble anywhere over a 1.5-mile stretch. The structure is about 14 feet tall and is accessed via a steep hike or a short cable-car ride. Naturally, we opted for the ride.

The view from the peak is superb. During our weekday visit, there were moments when we had entire sections to ourselves. There are 22



A bride poses for photos at the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall — which would be impossible at the heavily visited section nearest Beijing. Mutianyu is less accessible to tour buses.

MICHAEL MILNE

watchtowers along the ridge-line, spaced approximately 100 yards apart, dividing a hike into easily manageable portions. As we strolled along the granite walkways from

one watchtower to the next, we could imagine what it was like more than 600 years ago to be a solitary guard on the lookout for invaders.

We brought along a few

sandwiches from, believe it or not, a Subway shop located near the tram entrance, and enjoyed an impromptu picnic. From our vantage point we took in the view of the

wall undulating over the hills in the distance. At this angle it looks like a large gray snake sunning itself in the crisp mountain air.

The day was also perfect for a young couple who were taking pictures before their wedding. We were treated to a modeling session by the bride and groom as the photographer artfully worked them through various poses. That alone demonstrates the solitude here; can you imagine a bride fanning out her wedding gown amid a flock of tourists tromping around?

Instead of signing up for a tour bus, we had hired a driver whom we found by checking recommendations on TripAdvisor. The cost of \$150 is not that much more than a bus tour, and the benefits are many. Our guide, Joe, was fluent in English and gave us a personalized history lesson along the way. Joe's greatest value, though, was that we went only to the wall and wherever else that we wanted to go.

A hired driver also offers greater flexibility with timing. Most tour groups leave at first light so they can arrive early and avoid the crowds. Unfortunately, they arrive along with dozens of other tour groups all trying to do the same thing. We asked Joe to pick us up at 10 a.m. We left at a reasonable time and quite often had the place practically to ourselves.

The Great Wall of China is arguably one of the "must see" places in the world. It deserves time for quiet contemplation of its sheer mass and grandeur, as well as the scenic beauty that surrounds it. Unfortunately, the majority of visitors do not get to experience the magical silence of the wall. To do so, go a bit farther afield and travel independently. You'll probably only see the wall once in your life; make it a truly memorable experience.



MICHAEL MILNE

The Shanghai skyline at night. The explosive growth of the city has occurred in a relatively brief period, especially in the Pudong district east of the Huangpu River. Twenty years ago, it was mostly farmland; today it boasts more than 35 skyscrapers.

Shanghai grows up, up, and out

SHANGHAI from N1 Shanghai street scene from 1930, including old streetlights, trams, and sepia-toned photos of the period. From here visitors ride the escalator to the Exhibition Center and are instantly launched into the 21st century.

A contemporary structure with an abundance of natural light, the center consists of five floors of both permanent and rotating exhibits. They all relate to Shanghai's development and are presented in both passive and interactive formats to interest all ages. On our recent visit, there was a 360-degree film that was prepared for the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, whose theme was "Better City, Better Life."

The center's crowning glory is its three-dimensional scale model of the city of Shanghai. It is officially listed by the Guinness Book of World Records as the largest model of its kind. At more than 6,400 square feet, it is the size of three singles tennis courts. It displays the entire

urban region, including both of the city's massive airports. Toss away the guidebooks and maps, none can compare to feeling like a modern-day Gulliver with the city laid out at your feet.

Visitors can view this Shanghai in miniature from multiple perspectives by wandering around a raised walkway that circumnavigates the model. For a bird's-eye view, take the escalator up one floor and peer down from a balcony onto this "mini Shanghai." Handsets can be rented in English that highlight the city's development.

The model is a "living document" that is still used by urban planners and constantly updated with new building projects. Included are those that are still under construction — they are represented here in clear plastic to indicate their "work in progress" status. Thus the Shanghai of the future is also evident.

With this new perspective on the city, we set out to see the skyline firsthand in the city's Pudong district, two sub-

way stops from the exhibit. Just 20 years ago Pudong was mostly farmland and a few warehouses along the Huangpu River. Today it is the site of one of the most distinctive skylines in the world, boasting more than 35 skyscrapers including the two tallest buildings in China. The growth has been so remarkable that the district is even getting its own Disneyland, due to open in 2016.

A visitor to Shanghai only five years ago would have explored the observation deck atop the 88-story Jin Mao Tower, then the big game in town. Today the Jin Mao is passé as the 101-story Shanghai World Financial Center (SWFC) has risen across the street. In modern Shanghai, one-upmanship is the order of the day.

We bought tickets to the SWFC's 100th-floor observation deck, the tallest in the world. Within about 90 seconds we were smoothly whisked to the viewing area in an elevator that for some reason featured 1970s-era dis-

co flashing lights.

After our brief trip back in time we reentered the modern era as we strolled around the observation deck. Angled floor-to-ceiling windows, along with a few cleverly placed glass cutouts in the floor, give the impression that you are floating above the growing city. Having come so recently from the Urban Planning Center, we felt there was a surreal aspect to the whole experience. Laid out below us in every direction was the city, exactly as we had viewed it earlier in the day — only this was the real thing.

Using the Huangpu River as a landmark, it is easy to spot the Bund, the cluster of early-20th-century buildings that front the river and give Shanghai its signature blend of Asian and art deco architecture. We could even look down at the peak of the Jin Mao Tower.

A parade of high-rise apartment complexes stretched to the horizon, distinguishable from this height only by their color-coordinated rooftops



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Information

Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition Center

100 Renmin Ave., Shanghai

Located on the north side of People's Square Park, adjacent to the People's Square Metro Station. Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday through Sunday. Closed Monday. Admission: 30 CNY (\$4.70). The English audio guide is available for 40 CNY (\$6.25).

Shanghai World Financial Center

100 Century Ave., Pudong New Area, Shanghai

Take the Metro to the Lujiazui Station. Open daily 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Admission: 120 CNY (\$18.75).

Shanghai Metro

Operates daily from 5:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Final train times are clearly marked, but vary by station so it is important to take note if you are out late. A single-journey ticket is 3 CNY (\$0.50); a one-day unlimited pass (good for a full 24 hours after first use) is 18 CNY (\$2.80). Purchase tickets at automated machines at all stations; one-day passes must be purchased at customer service desk at the station.

that give it the appearance of a giant Lego set. From this perspective it is not hard to believe that more than 23 million people live in Shanghai.

The view was mesmerizing, but the observation deck was crowded, so after a half hour we left in search of a quieter vantage point. We walked across the street to the Jin Mao Tower. But instead of going to the observation deck, we opted for the 54th-floor lobby lounge of the Grand Hyatt nestled within the structure.

There we enjoyed a drink and took in the view at our own pace. Down below us,

bright yellow construction cranes swung over the site of yet another future skyscraper, the Shanghai Tower. It had loomed large in the scale model at the Urban Planning Center. When it is completed in 2014, this new kid on the block will top out at 128 floors, surpassing both the Jin Mao Tower and the SWFC. In modern Shanghai, "bigger, faster, more" is an unending refrain.

Larissa and Michael Milne are living around the world for a year. Follow their journey at www.ChangesInLongitude.com.