

▪ Getaway

I can just about make out a pale brown brick 'dragon' winding its way across the top of the mountain range. There's no mistaking it: This is the Great Wall of China, one of the original Seven Wonders of the World and as astronauts tell it, the only manmade structure visible from space. Even from a distance, the Wall inspires awe. It looks far yet I feel so near to it; in fact, from where I am standing, the nearest watch tower is just a short hike away. It's well below -10°C that frosty winter morning, but I am warmed by that realisation.

I am in the courtyard of The Schoolhouse Homes, a cluster of holiday villas in the villages of Mutianyu and Yingbeigou, about 70km from Beijing. American businessman Jim Spear and his Chinese wife Liang Tang have created what has been

touted as the perfect sustainable tourism project in China. The Schoolhouse hires and works with villagers in the vicinity to create economic opportunities for them, while providing unique experiences for visitors – a walking tour around the working farming village, learning to make dumplings from the local ladies, or tea with a local family. If you're looking for a taste of the 'real' China, this is the place to visit.

Home on the range

The 11 villas that make up The Schoolhouse Homes are all houses leased from villagers that have been expanded, rebuilt and furnished with contemporary luxury, but retain their original country-style feel and look. I put up at the Stone Forest house in Yingbeigou village. This was once an abandoned three-room hut, a sorry sight with grass growing ▶

Keeping it *real*

The Mutianyu Pass is considered the best preserved section of the Great Wall of China and those who find their way here will also find authentic experiences of the 'real' China, as well as a unique getaway that's been hailed as the perfect example of sustainable tourism.

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(Previous page) The Mutianyu section of the Great Wall undulates across the mountains; (clockwise from left) prosperous Chinese sayings frame the front door of a house in Mutianyu village; murals and wall reliefs in Yingbeigou; modern rustic charm inside the Stone Forest; there are hardly any cars on Mutianyu's roads



in between the broken tiles on its roof, but what a transformation it has undergone! Under Jim's direction, it is now a showcase of rustic modernity: Exposed bricks walls, stained-glass panels, Chinese-style wood panelling and a raised outdoor terrace where I sip my morning coffee while looking out over the village, rows of mountains in the far background and an almost 360-degree view of the Great Wall.

Inside, it's all snug and warm with a central radiator, floor heating and a huge centrepiece fireplace – all surrounded by rustic furniture pieces, wood panelling and soft furnishings. What joy it is to be free of my thermal socks and boots, and pad barefoot across the living room to the plush traditional Chinese day bed. It sits invitingly under a slanted window through which sunlight streams in softly in the morning and on a clear night, you can lie under a blanket of stars. An outdoor shower in a private courtyard outside my bedroom completes the romance.

I head out to explore Yingbeigou. Just outside Stone Forest, a group of young boys have taken over the basketball court and a lively game is in progress. My attention is drawn by a stretch of walls around the main square, with embossed reliefs and Chinese characters depicting bits of the area's history and capturing meaningful sayings. The only sound is that of a group of elderly folk chattering near a circular lookout point – it's their daily ritual to meet here and catch up while enjoying the morning sunshine. An aura of serenity envelops the village; life is simple and things move at a leisurely pace. There really is no rush. After all, the Wall isn't going anywhere and the villagers are definitely here to stay.

Schoolhouse is helping them do so; by turning their homes into what are now coveted yet affordable holiday villas and sharing their lives with visitors, these villagers don't have to



pander to the usual demands of commercial development or mass tourism. Here, the visitor's experience is not created but rather, culled from and assimilated into what has already existed for centuries. More than just offering a unique getaway, Schoolhouse is letting the villagers keep their lifestyles, history and heritage.

Follow the dragon

The air is nippy even though the sun is high up in the spotless sky as I leave the Schoolhouse on a 15-minute walk to the base of the Mutianyu Pass. Along the way, I am happily distracted by the quaint village's easy tranquillity and soothing scenery – steep hills, brown and barren in winter but otherwise covered with apricots, pears and chestnuts orchards; neatly-tarred roads that are as clean as the air, with few vehicles on it; traditional stone houses; a thousand-year-old phoenix tree that's considered sacred.

The mountain range looms ahead, the brick dragon ▶



“Schoolhouse is letting the villagers keep their lifestyles, history and heritage.”

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(Clockwise from left) A young guest trying his hands at making dumplings; a crisp winter morning in Mutianyu; villagers here live in rustic stone houses; (facing page from top) The Schoolhouse has changed the lives of villagers while retaining their heritage; a part of the Wall with rows of mountains in the background

becoming more and more defined. I stop to chat with a couple of friendly *ah yi* (elderly ladies). "Aren't you cold?" I ask, observing their thin sweaters and light jackets; in contrast, I am swathed in no less than five layers of clothing and waddling rather than walking. "We're fine," they answer with smiles, the picture of health with twinkling eyes and pink, though heavily lined, cheeks. Theirs is a simple, idyllic lifestyle that involves working on orchards, consuming food that comes straight from their own gardens, and still today, using traditional millstones to make their flour.

Which is probably not that different from how their ancestors lived; Mutianyu's villagers are descendants of labourers who built this section of the Wall during the Ming dynasty. This Pass was constructed on the largest scale and is considered to be the best in quality (and best preserved) among all the sections. So it's part of their inheritance, and one that they have every right to be proud of.



Travellers' information

Hitting the Wall The Mutianyu Pass is located in Huairou County about 70km from Beijing but with the city's notoriously unrelenting traffic, it can take at least two hours to get there. Bus 936 runs between Dongzhimen Outer in Beijing and Mutianyu hourly between 7am-5.30pm. The Schoolhouse Homes also runs a shuttle on weekends. If you plan to spend some time at the villages as well, it is best to hire a private taxi. www.mutianyugreatwall.net

Schoolhouse rocks All of the 11 villas that make up Schoolhouse Homes are open for rental; prices differ depending on the size and features of each villa as well as the season you're visiting. www.schoolhouseatmutianyu.com

Best time to visit The weather is at its finest in October, with a fair amount of sunshine, cooling breezes and blue skies. Winter can be pretty harsh but if it snows over the Wall, you're in for an amazing sight. Summer is the most popular time for tourists, and for activities like hiking and camping on the Wall.



If this Wall could talk

It used to be that if you wanted to get on the Great Wall, you would have to hike up to it, energy-consuming treks on steep slopes and slippery paths. Now visitors to Mutianyu can take an easy five-minute cable car ride from the base to the viewing complex, and head back down the same way. When descending, there's also the option of sliding down the last few metres in a toboggan. In warm weather, adventure companies organise hikes and overnight camping on the Wall.


As my bright orange gondola lift approaches the station near Tower 14, I am surrounded by a sepia-toned vista: Barren trees, browned grass, mountain ranges juxtaposed against more mountains...and of course, that brick dragon I have been admiring from afar. This nearly 2.5km stretch of the Wall looks like a castle that's separated into many parts (it is punctuated by 22 watch towers) and stretched out over a winding path that moves with the hills while conquering them.

The construction of the Wall may look simple enough – blocks of rectangular bricks stacked upon each other, straightforward in its fort design and with little architectural detail – but the scale of it is astounding, and this is just one of many sections that form the estimated 8,800km-long structure. It's a question everyone asks: How did they achieve this gargantuan architectural feat centuries ago, with nary a machine or motorised vehicle? Standing on the Wall and looking at the picturesque panorama around me, I realise I don't want to know the answer. I want to marvel, to occasionally wonder but stay curious, and always have a reason to come back and be mesmerised by its grandioseness.



Here to stay

The sun starts setting at 4.30pm in winter, and the Mutianyu Pass closes an hour later. I head back to Schoolhouse, in time to join the dumpling-making class led by several *ah yi*. In between laughter, some wine and bits of flour flying about, tiny packages of meat and vegetables are taking shape on trays while a sense of festive merriment hangs in the air. Looking around, I see smiling faces among the tourists, happy at the chance to get hands-on experience in some local culture and glowing with the success of their efforts. This sense of belonging and familial camaraderie is really what a getaway at the Schoolhouse Homes is all about – that, and the majestic Mutianyu Pass, is what will keep the local communities going and visitors coming. 🇨🇳

 Malaysia Airlines flies nonstop from Kuala Lumpur (KUL) to Beijing (PEK)

