

# RETREAT YOURSELF

A boutique hotel offers guests views of China's most famous landmark, writes Mark Graham.

IF YOU fancy uninterrupted views of the Great Wall, then a new spa-style boutique hotel in a former brick factory fits the bill perfectly.

The Brickyard Eco-Retreat Spa ([brickyardatmutianyu.com](http://brickyardatmutianyu.com)) is the latest project by Jim Spear, who has converted more than 20 traditional courtyard homes at the Great Wall village of Mutianyu into luxury dwellings. The American entrepreneur's wife, Tang Liang, saw the factory's potential as a boutique hotel, mainly because of its views overlooking a Wonder of the World. There was only one big problem: the factory was still making tiles for roofs of temples and palaces.

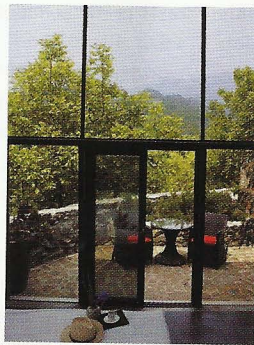
"They were burning coal and wood and sending thick black smoke around the village, which was not helpful in our plan to help Mutianyu become a special destination," says Spear.

"My wife realised that such a large piece of land with unobstructed Great Wall views zoned for development would be a wonderful acquisition. So without a firm plan for how to use the land, we paid the factory operator to vacate and negotiated a 50-year lease with the local government. Later, we decided to develop it into a hotel to complement our existing restaurant and rental home operations."

Spear, who has no formal training as an architect or designer, earned a reputation for meticulous attention to detail when converting Mutianyu village homes into modern dwellings. That same aesthetically gifted eye was trained on the brick factory, ensuring that the resulting boutique hotel combined the original Chinese characteristics with contemporary Western features, such as state-of-the-art bathroom fixtures, wi-fi internet connections and iPod docking stations.

Each room has unobstructed views of the Great Wall through deep window walls, open bathrooms which look out over the same landscape, and skylights above the beds allow for stargazing. Every room features a mural pieced together from discarded refractory tiles and an antique carpet, desk and chair.

"When I designed the Brickyard my aim was to retain the original structures wherever possible," says Spear. "It means there is a real and interesting story for our guests to discover, but the main reason for keeping the old buildings was to be ecologically sound. When you tear down and rebuild, it typically takes 30 to 50 years to obtain net energy savings. Of course, it costs more to restore and upgrade old buildings, which is why it's not done more frequently."



The Brickyard Eco-Retreat Spa (above) is the ideal spot for treks to the Great Wall (top).

The spa has various Chinese-style treatments, and the option of booking the gold suite. All treatment rooms have antique ethnic fabrics and carpets, murals made from broken glazed tiles originally made at the factory and fresh flowers picked from the garden.

"We have tried mightily for a simplicity that looks effortless; we're

the antithesis of a big, fancy, soulless resort," says Spear.

Weekends at the spa are proving popular with Beijingers - it is less than 90 minutes from downtown along new highways - and visitors from other parts of China and Hong Kong, who can make it to Mutianyu from the capital city's airport in just an hour. **S**

## GREEN LIGHTS

The Brickyard is a lush and private eco-retreat that incorporates the kilns and other buildings of a traditional glazed tile factory in a design which is "green" from the ground up. Amenities include:

- 16 queen bedrooms with private terraces
- Cigar lounge with mahjong
- Massage therapy
- Martial arts, yoga and meditation
- Hiking and biking
- Cooking classes and noodle making

Yunnan province, a mountain region that starts in the Tibet Plateau and heads to Mount Everest, and an off-road motorbike through Sichuan.

Travel options are there - in part thanks to these pioneering entrepreneurs. Ironically, Zhang of Wild did not intend to run a soft-adventure business; it came about through demand, rather than vision.

Initially it was to become an online platform for travel adventures, but that didn't take off with the people in places like Beijing were not online, so we were forced to become a tour operator,"

"I wanted it to be high-end, we were going to do a backpacker style. We wanted to make sure people go to the adventure when the sheets are white and a proper cup of coffee. Over the years it's morphed and grown." **S**