

Astride
the
Dragon's
Back

Trekking foot-first along
a remote stretch of
China's Great Wall,
author Matthew Power
digs into the landmark's
past—and catches a
glimpse of its future

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANGUS McDONALD





ADVENTURE

TIME PORTAL: From the archway of an ancient Ming sentry tower, the Great Wall seems to run to infinity.

Scaling and dropping, at times nearly closing back on itself to maintain the high ground, it runs a relentless serpentine over the horizon. Coursing through a dozen ranges of sharp limestone peaks, it is a perspectival ink drawing in which we are the lone figures, providing human scale. The wall is nothing like a trail, although there is a clearly worn path along it.

There are no switchbacks, no contours, no respite. The ribbon of stone stretches out more than 1,500 miles before us, from the Yellow Sea to the Gobi. In some spots it thrusts up crags at 60 degrees, so close to vertical that it's practically a ladder of stone. The wall seizes the absolute highest points along its route, in many places pre-dating Sun Tzu's *Art of War* observation that "all armies prefer high ground to low ground."

Even with heavy packs we walk carefully, applying even pressure on the fragile brick steps, as though we are walking on ice. Blooming lilac bushes cover the top of the wall like a hanging garden, and wild peach trees, the fruit still green and hard in late May, split the clay tiles with their roots. China's Great Wall has been called the world's largest outdoor museum, and my partner, Australian photographer Angus McDonald, and I have come for a tour. Ours is a deeply improvised mission: We will spend ten days trekking the wilderness sections of the Great Wall that snake through the forested limestone and granite ranges to the north of Beijing. Wherever possible, we will walk atop the wall, beside it everywhere else, and use the guard towers for shelter each night, making as much distance as we can, and exploring the wall as we go. Away from the fray of the cities, I want to see how the greatest building project in history is faring in the brave new world of modern China.

Angus and I walk the wall with a sort of reverence. We duck through a crumbling archway of ancient guard towers, the 50-pound keystones dangling like rotten teeth. Looking back along the miles of wall we have covered since sunrise, Angus says, "What an absolutely insane enterprise." I'm not sure if he means the building of the wall or our idea of walking along it.

My first view of the Great Wall, appropriate for a 21st-century invader of the Middle Kingdom, had been a week earlier, out an economy-class window in the 14th hour of a direct flight from New York City over the North Pole. My seatmate, a 23-year-old Chinese deportee, kindly offered to switch places so I could stare out the window at the landscape that he



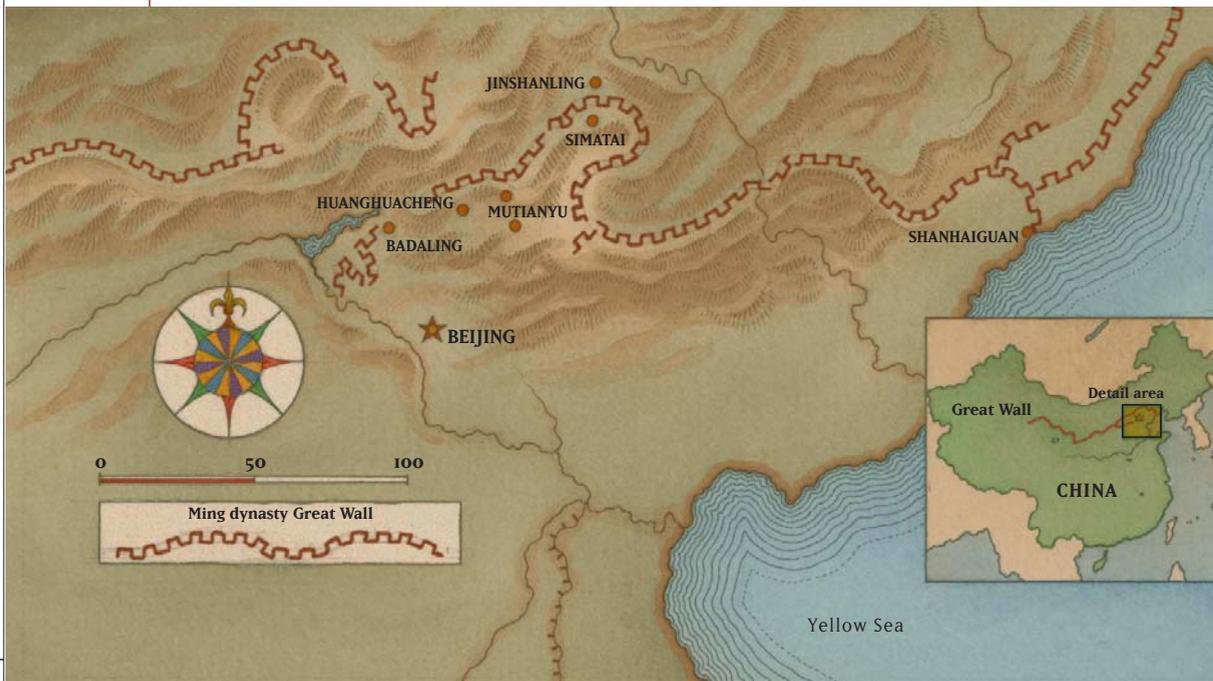
MEET THE LOCALS: The author (above, left) enters the village of Dazhangzi. Left: William Lindesay has made a life of preserving the wall.

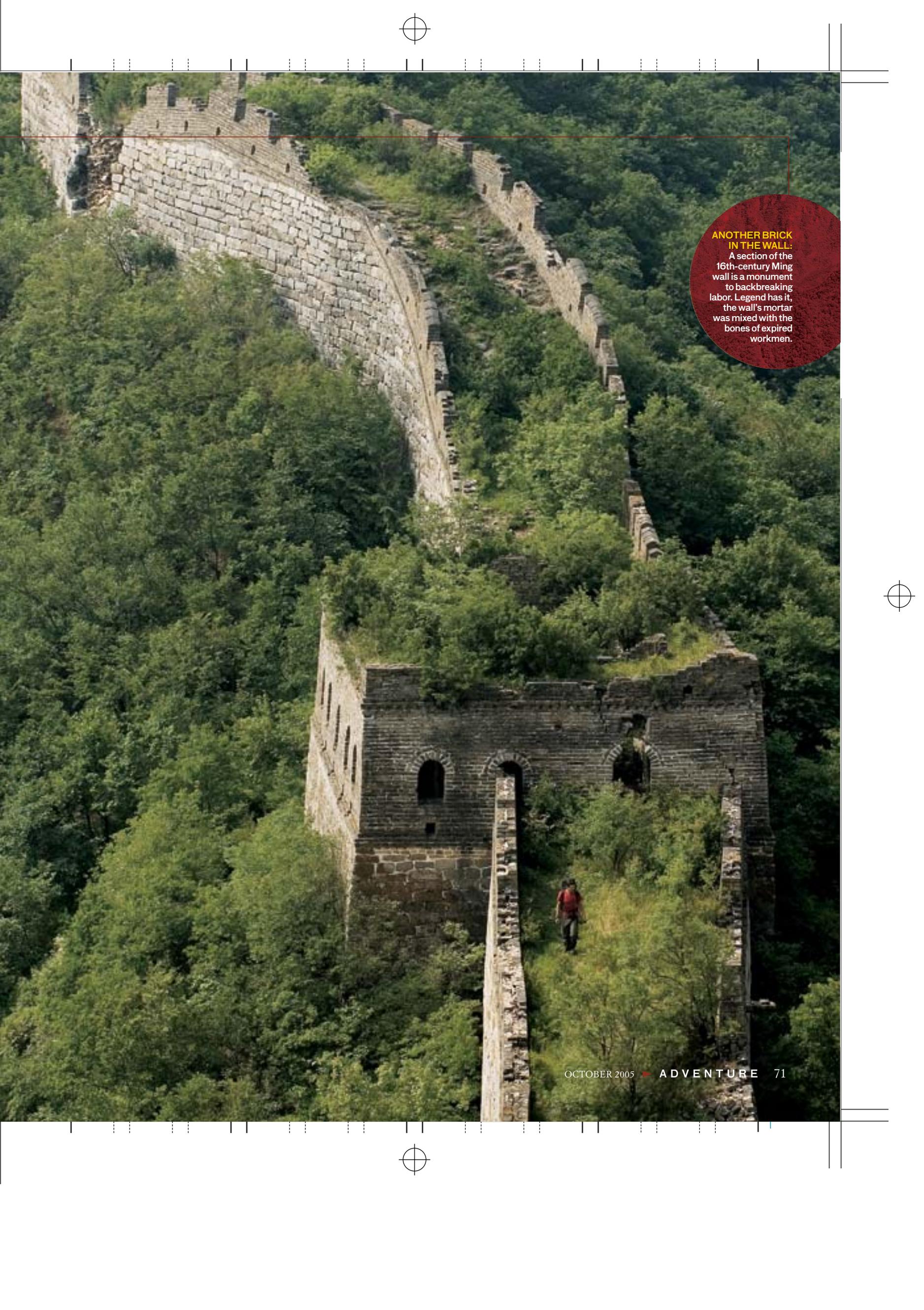
had no desire to set eyes on again. He had just been released from a ten-month Immigration and Naturalization Services detention in Louisiana, where he picked up the dress and mannerisms of a Mexican *cholo*, and was returning to Beijing for the first time in 15 years. He knew without looking that he would find it greatly changed. My face pressed to the plexiglass, we crossed the wall low enough to pick out the individual guard towers dotting a jumble of mountains. The ranks of limestone spurs passed below and behind, and the megalopolis of Beijing appeared, hundreds of construction cranes perched like herons in the concentric circles of expressways. A vast array of new public works, constructed for a new empire.

The Great Wall. Of the mythologized structures of my childhood imagination, there were none that surpassed it. The Pyramids, the Empire State Building, the Eiffel Tower: None, in real life, turned out to be quite as enormous as I'd hoped. But the Great Wall! Barbarian hordes would break against its ramparts like waves on the shore! It took 23 centuries to build! You could see it from outer space!

Well, not really. When Chinese *taikonaut* Yang Liwei touched down after his 21-hour journey in low Earth-orbit, he was asked the inevitable question. Despite the likely pressure of national pride and government minders, he responded that no, he could not see the Great Wall spread across the bosom of the motherland. The wall is only 12 feet wide in most places, so it would be a good deal easier to see, say, I-95.

But debunked legends matter little. The Great Wall is hyperbole defined in masonry: not a single wall but a series of strategic ramparts and redoubts, built by succeeding dynasties over a span of 2,300 years. In places there are as many as 20 parallel sections, and ruins thought to be remnants of the Great Wall have been found as far afield as North Korea and Russia. The total volume of stone and earth of which the wall is constructed could create a barrier three feet high and three feet wide around the world at the equator. Four hundred heads of state have visited, including Richard Nixon, who woodenly opined: "This is a great wall, and it had to be built by a great people." Ten million visitors





**ANOTHER BRICK
IN THE WALL:**
A section of the
16th-century Ming
wall is a monument
to backbreaking
labor. Legend has it,
the wall's mortar
was mixed with the
bones of expired
workmen.

annually come to see the wall at Badaling outside Beijing, making it one of the most popular tourist attractions in the world. I had come to China, paradoxically, to get away from the crowds and see what ghosts of history I could find in the wild and remote sections of the Great Wall.

In the predawn blackness there is a sharp rap on my door. An overly cheerful (given the ungodly hour) voice calls out “Come on boys, the sun’s coming up!” The sun is doing no such thing. It is my hyperkinetic British-expatriate host, William Lindsey, and we are staying in a cabin at his farmhouse in the forested mountains, three hours north of the capital. Angus sticks his head out of his sleeping bag. “Bloody hell, what time is it?” he mutters. Our wake-up call is as relentless as a Chairman Mao alarm clock.

The previous evening, after an exquisite nine-course Chinese meal, from steamed trout to lychee nuts, topped off with several Tsingtao beers, Lindsey had talked late into the night about his personal relationship with the wall and how it had come to play a central role in his life. He has an extraordinary singularity of focus, as stubborn and direct as the wall itself. This is evidenced by the fact that when he was a child, he vowed to a primary school teacher that he would one day trek the whole of the Great Wall of China with a rucksack on his back.

Lindsey may have elicited laughter from his classmates at the time, but in 1987, at 29, he arrived in China to do just that. Beginning at the western end of the wall near the desert fortress of Jiayuguan, Lindsey walked—an avid marathoner, he actually ran much of the way—1,500 miles along the Great Wall. He passed through deserts,

“What an absolutely insane enterprise” says Angus. I’m not sure if he means the building of the wall, or our idea of walking along it.

mountain ranges, and vast stretches of territory that were then closed to foreigners. He was arrested nine times, deported once, and suffered bubonic plague and a stress fracture. But nine months later he reached the eastern terminus of the wall, Shanhaiguan (Old Dragon Head) near the Yellow Sea. He was the first non-Chinese person ever to complete the journey.

No such epic would be complete without a love interest, and Lindsey had fell for a Chinese woman, Wu Qi, whom he met en route. After three marriage proposals, she relented, (at that time, 1988, it had only been four years that foreigners were allowed to marry Chinese), and now they have two sons and divide their time between Beijing and two farms they own adjacent to the wall.

Lindsey, after his adventure, made exploration and preservation of the Great Wall his life’s work. Now silver-haired, but certainly as energetic as the man who jogged the span almost 20 years ago, his life revolves around Great Wall causes. He started a nonprofit organization, International Friends of the Great Wall, and in between lectures and conferences he leads educational treks along wilderness sections of the wall. Lindsey doesn’t have time to accompany Angus and me on our own trek, but he’s agreed to take us up to the wall behind his farm and send us on our way.

With headlamps on in the moonlight, we shoulder our packs and follow Lindsey through his garden and up a stony path through a dark oak forest. The little village is still asleep, its inhabitants likely descendants of the wall builders. Angus and I are carrying enough food and water to last us several days, and because we plan to camp on or near the wall, Lindsey gives us a thorough grounding on the ethic of leave-no-trace exploration. “Every step on the wildwall damages it in a tiny way. The key is to minimize it and watch every step.” Lindsey’s protectiveness of the wall,



HIGH CAMP: After a night in an abandoned guard tower, the author fuels up for the day. Right: Trekking rations come easier than expected in rural China. Here, a roadside honey vendor weighs out a bottle of her best.



his sense of being the guardian of a great and fragile secret, is contagious.

Lindesay's great passion is what he calls "wildwall," or wilderness Great Wall, the vast, unreconstructed, overgrown sections that are free of tourist kitsch, trash, vendors, graffiti, and all the encroachments of modernity. "I love ruins," he tells me, and it seems, really, as simple as that. As we walk, Lindesay outlines the wildwall sections that are under serious threat from the forces of change in today's China. Some remote sections have been damaged by building projects, like a 1,100-yard section near the town of Zhangjiakou, about a hundred miles northwest of Beijing, dismantled stone by stone to pave a section of local highway. The areas that have had the most tourist development, like Badaling, Mutianyu, and Simatai, are scarcely recognizable. The original wall has been rebuilt, paved over essentially, with little concern for historical accuracy or respect for the wall's landscape.

Moreover, the busiest tourist sites are in something of an arms race with one other, tarting up their venues with all manner of kitschy attractions. There are zip lines, go-carts, giant slides, and gondolas to take hordes of tourists to and from the parking lots. At Badaling there is an utterly depressing "bear garden," where traumatized Asian black bears pace back and forth in concrete pits. Tourists pose on Bactrian camels in Ming-era costumes or alongside cardboard cut-outs of Chairman Mao. "It's horrifying," says Lindesay, "The Great Wall is an entire landscape, not just the wall itself. Its greatness is in its wholeness, and every alteration, every tourist trap makes it less."

While my sense of aesthetics is in complete agreement, had I been raised in the Cultural Revolution, when fun was considered a bourgeois abomination, I think I might like to whiz down a slide alongside the Great Wall, too. But Lindesay is a purist: "My concern is the wall. I'm not a sociologist." It's true though, the changing economy of China is greatly increasing the pressure on the wall's environment. And with the



economy booming and the Olympics coming in 2008, there's no end in sight to the development creeping out from Beijing.

In fact, the state has made a cash offer to everyone in Lindesay's little village, many of whom have farmed alongside the wall for generations. While development rules prevent building new structures so close to the wall, the Chinese government wants to retrofit the village's houses as a high-end resort for the Olympics. "In that case, I really would lie down in front of the bulldozers," says Lindesay.

The fact that he is foreign-born affords him the right to be a gadfly in a way that would be unthinkable for most Chinese, even in the current atmosphere of relative openness and reform. Still, he has discovered his limitations. Lindesay approached UNESCO, the United Nations body that administers cultural treasures the world over, and tried to get them to place



the Great Wall on their list of most threatened sites. “I was told, cryptically, ‘The Dragon should not be antagonized,’” he says to me. “Saving face is very important to the state, and the worst way to get what you want is to tell them they are doing something wrong.”

The sky is beginning to lighten. We see the dark ridgeline above us, and silhouetted against the sunrise is the serrated edge of the Great Wall. Lindsay segues into a brief history of Chinese wall building. The earliest large-scale fortifications were built during the Warring States period in the seventh century B.C., before any notion of China had been formed from a host of clashing fiefdoms. Successive dynasties built huge defense walls to the north of the empire to keep the nomadic hordes of the steppes at bay. After the wall had been breached in 1211 by the Mongol armies of Genghis Khan, it took a century and a half for the Chinese Ming to establish power. Over the next three centuries, the Ming constructed the most elaborate and complete defense walls the world has ever known.

This Ming wall, the one we plan to walk, is a testament to an obsessive, desperate xenophobia, a desire to keep the greater world at bay that, it could be argued, did not truly begin to recede until market reforms were put in place by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. As Lindsay views it, the Ming wall was the greatest epitaph to the Mongols and the utter dread they instilled. “This is their wall,” says Lindsay, in an ominous tone that seems to augur distant hoofbeats.

After a last scramble, we find ourselves standing in a crumbling, Ming-era guard tower, built sometime between 1368 and 1644, the year some traitorous high-ranking officials let a massive army of Manchu horsemen breach the wall near Shanhaiguan and capture the capital. With the barbarian hordes it had been built to keep out sitting on the throne in the Forbidden City, the Great Wall was rendered obsolete while its mortar was still drying. Now in the tower, oak trees sprout between torn-up tiles on the floor and create a canopy where, centuries before, a peaked wooden roof had been. The dawn is totally still, except for the rustle of leaves in the breeze and the cry of a cuckoo echoing through the hills.

To the left the wall climbs a steep face up to another tower on a limestone pinnacle high above us. To the right and as far as I can see over an endless march of green peaks receding in the morning haze, the wall zigzags, plummets, and soars, sticking to the highest points as it follows its relentless path west. Guard towers at regular intervals mark its progress. They would have stationed perhaps a dozen soldiers each, but their main

LIFE ON THE WALL
Clockwise from left: A hiking club from Beijing, ensconced in a nine-course picnic atop the wall; the infamous “lawn-mowed chicken”; chilling out in a ruined guard tower near Mutianyu; a new sign posted by the Beijing municipality to ward off hikers from unreconstructed sections of the Great Wall; descending the wall is akin to doing a never-ending Stairmaster—in reverse.

use was as intervals for an elaborate smoke-signaling system. Lindsay tells us that in the far west, the army conducted an experiment to see which would send a message fastest: jeeps, horses, or smoke signals. The smoke signals far outpaced the horsemen, and the jeeps were bogged to their axles in sand in short order. The Ming had made signals from a mixture of wolf dung, sulfur, and potassium nitrate. The thick black smoke was such an effective warning signal that to this day the Chinese phrase “wolf smoke” means “crisis.”

In his rapid Liverpool brogue, Lindsay keeps adding bits of advice right up to the moment of departure. “Now, there’s no point attempting to walk down anything that’s too dangerous.

You can always backtrack, get off the wall, and walk alongside it. There’s one bit about a day’s walk from here that’d be suicide if you tried to get down it. You must be supremely careful.”

Uh-huh.

“And do watch out for lightning. You’ll be up on high ridgelines the whole time. I got struck once. Didn’t hurt me but stopped my watch dead and fried my digital camera.”

Righty-o. And with that, we bid Lindsay farewell and set off along the wall.

The sun has broken the horizon, burning off the haze that now retracts into an extraordinary landscape of forested crags and valleys. All along the surface of the wall, fired-clay bricks of the parapets lie in jumbled heaps in stands of oak saplings and blooming lilacs. We have arrived in a place where time and weather have progressed toward their final victory over the works of man. The great imposed order of the wall is returning to the chaos from whence it came.

We stop for lunch in the shade of a roofless guard tower. The menu consists of rye crackers and tuna fish with mustard, polished off with British digestives. “That would be ‘cookies’ to you Yanks,” offers Angus. We had stocked up on food at one of the new Western shops that have sprung up in Beijing’s diplomatic enclave. The city has fallen in love with the trappings of Western consumerism, ranging from 57 (count ’em) Starbucks shops to one lonesome Lamborghini dealership a few blocks away from the Great Hall of the People. As much as I like to submerge myself in the culinary offerings of countries I visit, the Chinese have some disquieting offerings in the trekking food department. I wanted to be brave, but I confess that the dried cuttlefish and salted plums I picked up stayed tucked safely in the bottom



of my pack, reserved for an emergency that, mercifully, never arose.

Along the wall we continue, sometimes pushing our way through overgrowths, sometimes getting on hands and knees to fit under an eroded archway. The towers are cool respites from the day's heat, most of them with intact alcoves inside. We don't see anyone. The going, in places, is incredibly dangerous. Time and again we pass spots where a misstep would send us over the parapet, crashing down into the trees and scree fields far below the ridgeline. We walk at times like ballerinas, a slow tiptoe.

Occasionally we reach points where the wall falls away over a drop and we climb down to walk alongside through the thick undergrowth, getting scraped up in the process. The lack of any well-marked trail, any tickets or any guardrails to keep us from falling off, gets right to the heart of adventure. Nothing has passed this way, it seems, but a great deal of time. "There's nothing like some good bush-bashing," says Angus, forcing his way through a thicket. "Reminds me of when I

was a kid." I explain to Angus that Bush-bashing in America is more of a political pastime than a recreational one.

In the valley bottoms far below, there are farming villages, but up here the only sign of human passage is the rough trail and the occasional carelessly dropped water bottle. We pick up every bit of refuse we come across. There is, as yet, little environmental ethic in China. The society is still too close to its impoverished past, too busy extracting wealth to think much of impact and conservation. China is well on its way to catching up with the United States in energy consumption, and, with a population nearly five times ours, the impact will be that much greater.

The recent and titanic industrialization of Chinese society has emptied out the countryside, and this movement has been the main engine of economic growth. Increasing prosperity has lifted 140 million Chinese out of poverty in the past decade. While Lindsey had said that 20 years ago there was no such thing as a Chinese hiker, with (Continued on page 92)



ADVENTURE GUIDE

The Great Wall

GREAT WALL TREKKING:

■ The author's guide, **William Lindsey** (+86-10-6175-1982), leads multiday tours (\$355) on wilderness wall sections in the Beijing municipality. Hikers camp alongside the wall or overnight at adjacent farmhouses. Lindsey also leads tours in neighboring Hebei Province, which has excellent and little-visited Ming-era defenses.

■ There is some debate as to whether DIY trekkers are welcome on the Great Wall (see Rules and Regulations, right), but your best bet is the rugged six-mile stretch between **Jinshanling** and **Simatai**, 55 miles northeast of Beijing. Taxis are easy to arrange in the capital to either site (\$60 round-trip). Plan on taking at least four hours for the walk: The trail is stony and notoriously steep.

■ Other well-preserved and accessible sections of the "wildwall" are **Huanghuacheng** and **Mutianyu**, north of Beijing. For far-flung travelers, the province of Hebei has no

restrictions on wall walking, but almost no infrastructure for trekkers.

■ If you want to act like a Chinese tourist, take the toboggan ride in **Simatai** (\$4), or head to the reconstructed section of wall at **Badaling** (\$6) for an afternoon. You'll face fierce crowds and even fiercer vendors, but it's probably the easiest way to see the wall.

RULES AND REGULATIONS:

The Great Wall is seriously threatened by development and encroachment, so walks must be undertaken with a leave-no-trace ethic and extreme caution for the fragile structure. The Beijing municipality enacted regulations in 2003 to conserve the 400-plus miles of wall within that district's borders, which include limiting access to undeveloped portions. What this means in practice can be difficult to discern, though, so check with **International Friends of the Great Wall** (www.friendsofgreatwall.org), Lindsey's group, for the latest developments.

GETTING THERE: Air China

(www.airchina.com.cn/en) has daily direct flights to Beijing from Los Angeles, starting at \$890.

LODGING: Haoyuan Hotel

(\$58; www.haoyuanhotel.com) in downtown Beijing has comfortable rooms surrounding a historic Qing dynasty courtyard and on-site res-

taurants. On the wall, camping is usually the only option.

SUPPLIES: China might be the world's best place to score knock-off camping gear, but don't expect your ten-dollar NorthFake jacket to be either waterproof or breathable. Stock up on trekking food for the Western palate in the Chaoyang District at **Jenny Lou's Shop** (1 Nong Zhan South Road), near the west gate of Beijing's Chaoyang Park.

RESOURCES: *Lonely Planet China* (Lonely Planet, \$30) has extensive listings, a section devoted to Great Wall trekking, and practical trip-planning tips. The University of Pennsylvania historian Arthur Waldron's *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge University Press, \$25) is the most comprehensive non-Chinese book on the subject. Lindsey's memoir, *Alone on the Great Wall*, details his epic 1987 trek (Fulcrum, \$15).



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wealth comes leisure time. Beijing has gone from zero private cars 15 years ago to over two million today, and now people are starting to explore the countryside again, this time as tourists. It seems ironic that the city the Great Wall was built to protect is now, in a sense, its greatest threat.

After a few more hours of stair climbing and making our way down steep inclines, we settle on a guard tower in the distance and decide to make it our camp for the night. We clamber up to it in the afternoon light, and each pick an alcove to bunk down in. We are traveling as light as we can; a bivvy sack with an air mattress makes a fine cocoon for the night. After the sun sets, Angus and I talk in the twilight, and the wind picks up, moaning through the tower. We forgot to bring a camp stove, and a fire is out of the question on the dry ridgeline, so it's trail mix for dinner. "I wish I knew the wolf-dung signal for 'bring us a cup of tea,'" says Angus.

It's not hard to conjure the lonesome life of a Ming sentry up here, waiting for something to happen, wishing for the rumble of an invading horse-army to break the monotony. Winters, with icy winds blowing off the Mongolian steppes, would have been brutal. The wall, atop this high ridgeline, must have been an imposing deterrent to any Mongol scouts who scoped it out from below. The Ming soldiers wore armor of hide stretched over wicker. They would have been armed with bows and crossbows, and the most strategic points on the wall—passes and valley bottoms—would have had cannons after the Chinese invention of gunpowder in the ninth century. But the wall was really a last line of defense, and the Ming would often use more diplomatic strategies to ward off invasion, usually involving payment of tribute—protection money, so to speak. The Mongols were a fearsome lot, and the Chinese jealously guarded their prosperous kingdom, but it was an act of nature that sparked the most devastating clashes between the two civilizations.

The Mongolian steppes were periodically hit with a weather phenomenon known as a *zud*: a winter with severe blizzards and months of sub-zero temperatures, which kills millions of head of livestock and decimates the economy. The most recent *zud* occurred in the winter of 2001, and Mongolia was nearly bankrupted by the disaster. In ancient times, a *zud* would throw Mongolian society into utter disarray, threatening disease and famine. It left little choice to the Mongol horsemen but to set off en masse and plunder the wealthy, fertile Northern China plain. Horses, with which the nomads had an almost mystical connection, were their secret weapon; they helped concentrate a vast number of archers in a surprise attack with terrifying swiftness.

So out of fear of that gathering storm, the Ming improved on the fortifications built by a dozen dynasties before them, and created a

system of defenses more vast and complex than anything the world had ever seen. In Chinese it was called *Wanli Changcheng*, "the Great Wall of 10,000 *li*." A *li* was the length an arrow traveled when shot about a third of a mile, and 10,000 was a number so large as to be considered infinite, hence an endless wall.

During construction, Lindesay had told us, the landscape surrounding the wall would have been utterly different, the forests razed for scaffolding and to fire the brick furnaces, the hillsides gouged by quarries for the foundation stones. The air would have been thick with smoke and the ring of iron against stone. I run my fingertips along the lime mortar pressed between the tower's clay bricks and realize it was pointed and smoothed this same way by builders 500 years before. Legend has it that the white mortar was made of the crushed bones of builders. Each block of stone, carved, carried, and stacked in place, has a story. Under the Ming, wall building was a national priority, and a draconian penal code swelled the ranks of forced laborers. Dozens of minor offenses brought a life sentence laboring on the wall; more serious crimes were given "perpetual" sentences, which meant that if a prisoner was worked to death, a member of his family would inherit the sentence and be forced to build the wall. As I drift off in an alcove of the tower, with the wind blowing through the arched windows, all that dark and violent history seems alive, and the tower is swirling with ghosts. The night passes full of strange dreams.

We wake up easily at sunrise, break camp, and try to get some distance before the full heat of the day sets in. Water on the high, dry ridgelines is the only limiting factor to the journey, and we figure that tomorrow we'll have to duck down to a village and refill. Angus sings "All Along the Watchtower" to himself, which immediately becomes lodged in my head. We tell jokes and recite movie lines and speculate on the poor buggers who had to build this bloody thing. Much to my chagrin, I start talking like an Australian.

Each guard tower is a new haunted house to explore, with peach trees growing through its arrow slits and lizards skittering across the stones as we pass. The constant up and down is a welcome change, and the views are so breathtaking I scarcely notice that we've climbed and descended thousands of vertical feet in a relatively narrow band of altitude. It's quite like walking laps on the track of a roller coaster.

At one point we arrive, through a tangle of bushes, at the spot that Lindesay must have meant was "sheer suicide." The wall drops over the edge of a precipice like a cataract of stone, and the treetops are a hundred feet below us. One step and I'd be mortar. We backtrack to



one of the exit stairs (only on the China side of the wall, of course) and follow a rough trail through brambles and oak scrub until we pick up the wall again, far below. I spend lunchtime digging splinters out of my palms with the tip of my knife. There's no reason to rush along the wilderness wall. It is an utterly fantastical landscape, and we laze around one particularly scenic tower-topped pinnacle for the better part of the afternoon, like goldbricking Ming sentries.

The next day we wake again at sunrise and make our way up to a great platform of stone from which the wall falls sharply away, splitting into two directions. This is a problem Lindesay encountered numerous times in his long trek across China. He would lose track of the crumbling wall and ask for directions, and a local farmer would draw two lines in the dirt with a stick. The wall is doubled in many places, a strategic fail-safe device. Here, the northern route branches off toward a high mountain and seems to fade out in the forest. The southern route heads steeply down toward a village by a river, and, low on water and sick of trail mix, we head for it. The steps are incredibly steep, and we work our way down hundreds of vertical feet, one move at a time, to the valley bottom.

Dirty, sunburned, and laughing we stumble into a village. The language barrier is nearly

total, though Angus possesses a handful of Mandarin words. We sit down in a little riverside restaurant, and I puzzle over the Chinese characters on the menu. The last English menu we had seen, in another small town at the base of the wall, had included such delicacies as "burnt hare," "deep-fried sparrow," and "spicy, sliced mule." We had ended up being served a dish I

back up to the wall on the far side of the river. The river is flanked by a huge cliff, and it seems that the Ming let nature do the work here and they picked up wall building high on the far side. We can see the wall, far above on the ridge, and start making for it along a stone path through terraced farm fields. A local party official with a red armband comes over to us, trying to sign that we shouldn't go up. We sign that we want to take pictures. This is still

The wall drops over the edge of a precipice, and the tree tops are a hundred feet below. One wrong step and I'd be mortar.

would call "lawn-mowed chicken." Beak, feet, and all. So you'll forgive me if I was a bit skeptical. We order fish. A few minutes later, the chef comes out holding a beautiful 18-inch rainbow trout, its gills still pulsing. He produces a scale and makes a show of weighing it in front of us, though I have no idea how to read it. Not ten minutes later we are brought the fish, split open and fried with chilies and garlic, along with mustard greens, tofu, rice and green tea. It is a perfect meal. All Angus can say is "bloody brilliant!"

From the village we have to make our way

a place where foreign tourists are still a curiosity.

Upon returning to the capital the following week, we will find out some information from Lindesay that puts the official's actions into context. Two years earlier, the Beijing municipality had enacted regulations to discourage people from walking on unreconstructed sections of the wall. The municipality is an area the size of New Jersey, and its northern mountains contain about 400 miles of wall, of which only a few miles have been reconstructed. However, static preservation of the wall is an impossible task; it would



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require as much work as it took to build the thing in the first place. So what is to be done to conserve so precious a piece of world heritage?

Lindesay, for his part, took a break from the wall after the regulations were introduced, but when he saw hundreds of walkers still venturing out onto the wilderness sections and the authorities making no effort to enforce the regulations, he returned. "The conclusion, I felt, was that educating people about conservation issues on the wall itself and allowing them to carefully experience the Great Wall in its wild state were more important than following the letter of the law," he told me back in Beijing.

Lindesay's suggestion, and I see his point, is that the only way to truly preserve the wall is to create a culture of stewardship and conservationism among the thousands of rural villages that live in its shadow. The wall doesn't need to be sealed off from outsiders; practically speaking, it can't be. What can happen is the local farmers can protect and guide and watch over the wall, as part of their heritage. Perhaps a pipe dream, certainly a complicated idea to explain in sign language. The party official relents and waves us on.

We hike up through the terraces, but somewhere get split off the main trail, and our path peters out into bracken. We can still see the wall a few hundred yards above us, so we bush-bash through the underbrush, snagging packs and skin and clothing on the sharp branches. Finally, after an hour of hot, dirty scrambling, sometimes on hands and knees, we find ourselves sitting on our packs at the base of the wall.

"Say, are we on the China side or the Mongolia side?" asks Angus.

"Well, we came up on the left side of the crag, but then the path hooked right over that ridge, and . . . oh, crap."

I look from side to side and realize we've made it to the wall, alright, and just like a bunch of hard-luck Mongols, we're staring at a sheer, unbroken, excellently preserved section of the Ming defense, 20 feet of limestone blocks topped by a four-foot parapet of bricks. The stairway, of course, is on the China side. We appear to be stuck, but in keeping with the improvisational nature of our adventure, I figure there must be some way over. You just have to think like a Mongol. Certainly not hand-jamming between blocks; besides not wanting to risk damaging the wall, the five-century-old masonry is amazingly flush. I could barely get my fingertips into the seams.

We walk along the base of the wall, looking for a crack in the Ming's defenses. Finally, a bit of luck. The Ming engineers had made use of a natural stone outcropping and built the wall around it. The stone was set out enough from the wall that standing on top of it, one could almost reach the edge. Plus, a section of clay bricks had fallen and lay like huge dominoes on top of the outcrop. We climbed up and

stacked the fallen bricks into a little platform. I stood on that, and Angus (luckily six foot four) climbed on to my shoulders, and hoisted himself onto the wall. Then he pulled up our packs and finally grabbed my wrists and hauled me, grunting, over the rampart.

"Do you think the Ming sentries would have noticed us?" he asked.

"I think we would have been pincushions."

Exhausted, we settle in a half-collapsed tower for the night then pack up at dawn and continue on, day after day along the wall, exploring decaying battlements, puzzling our way around obstacles, following the insane route plotted centuries before by the defenders of the Middle Kingdom. We duck into towns for water, but are always relieved to get back on the wall. In one tower, we find a marble tablet, faintly carved with ancient characters. We sit out a day and long night of thunderstorms, sheltered in a half-standing tower, lightning flashing along the ridge. The thunder sounds like an approaching army and seems to rattle the huge stones. We walk a long section in the high mountains that was built a thousand years before the Ming, rough-hewn stones and dry masonry that vanishes at times in the underbrush. At one point, we run into an outing club from Beijing that insists that we join their nine-course picnic. Mostly, though, we are alone with the wall.

The Mandarin character for "China" is a square with a line through it, representing an arrow hitting a bull's-eye. The Middle Kingdom was at the center of the world, with concentric rings of order fanning outward. From out here on the perimeter, a signal message might take only a few hours to reach the throne of the emperor at the Gate of Heavenly Purity in the Forbidden City. The center of that world is long gone, the throne in the Forbidden City is empty, and a huge portrait of the most recent emperor, Chairman Mao, hangs over its gate. Out here on the boundary of the known world, swells of frost and the results of windblown seeds are clawing the old stones apart.

Nature inevitably has the final say, even more final than the state. That first morning, when Lindesay walked us to the wall, he described a conversation he'd had with a friend where he'd asked how long the wildwall could last. Maybe, the friend had said, order must return to chaos. Lindesay's voice was filled with a resigned sadness at the thought. Out on the wall on our final night, it seems an extraordinary and fragile privilege to be watching a full moon rise from an ancient tower near the beginning of what many are calling the Chinese Century. I look out over the moonlit peaks, traced by the ghostly line of wall, wondering what sort of equilibrium will ever be reached between humans and nature, between gravity and stacked stones. ■