



There's so much more to the Great Wall than the tourist hotspots. The old Badaling and Ming Tombs combo? Been there, done that, never again. Whether you're a weekend wayfarer, Beijing newbie or local born-and-bred, **Grace Chee** scopes out the best alternative ways to see China's most enduring monument. Illustrations **Jinna Kaneko**

Cycle along back paths

Bike Beijing (6526 5857; bikebeijing.com) runs guided bicycle tours (from 1,020RMB for one day) alongside the Huanghuacheng section of the Great Wall. The tours are well organised, and provide a hotel pickup service so you can begin the ride outside of downtown. The road and mountain bikes are of good quality, and helmets are readily available. The meandering back roads winding past quiet farms make for a tranquil escape from the city.

Cycle China (6402 5653; cyclechina.com) offers a similar one-day led tour to the Huanghuacheng section of the Wall (from 450RMB per person depending on group size), with two to three hours of cycling combined with a short hike. From April to October, it also runs a two-day self-guided trip that involves seven hours of biking and three hours of hiking. Cycle China provides the lodgings, gear, pickup and drop off, but for the rest of the time, you're on your own with only a map for company.

For hardcore cyclists, Bike China (138 8226 6575; bikechina.com) offers nine- to 17-day trips that cover multiple cities and sights, including Beijing and the Great Wall.



Cruise in a vintage motorbike

Okay, so you can't exactly drive a motorcycle on the Great Wall itself. But you can cruise around the surrounding countryside in a sidecar attached to a vintage Chang Jiang 750 motorbike – a copy of the BMW R71 developed by the Germans during the Second World War – and finally fulfill those biker-gang dreams... kinda.

Beijing Sideways (139 1133 4947; beijingsideways.com) offers one-day Wild Great Wall tours that take you on a hell of a three-wheeled ride through lush mountain paths to the Silver Mountain Pagodas and lesser-known Huanghuacheng section of the Great Wall, where you can explore the abandoned ruins and enjoy a homemade French picnic before being driven home.

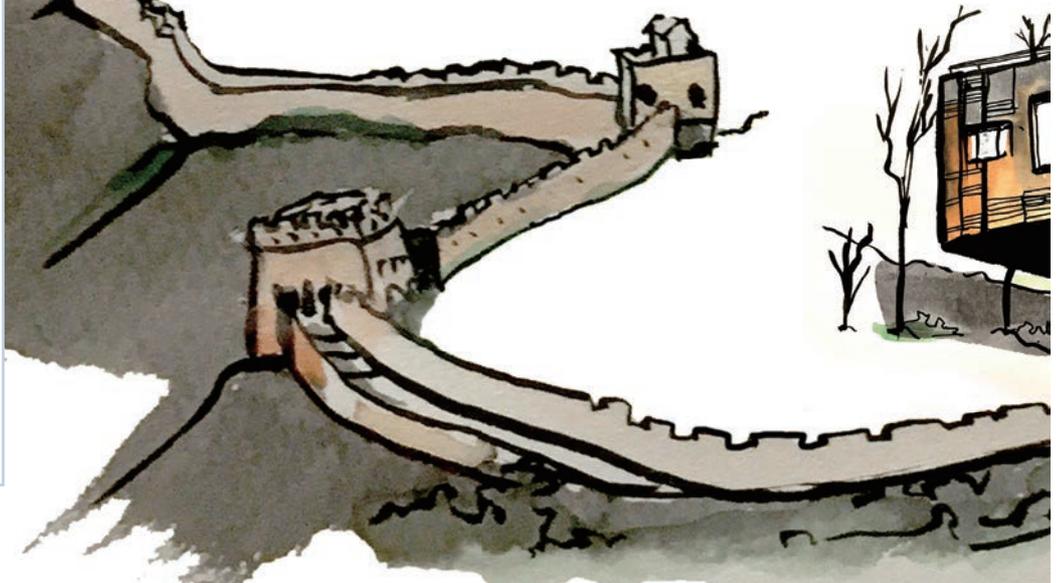
Tours (starting from 2,400RMB per person) are tailor-made and led by 'Insider Guides', who are all Beijing veterans.



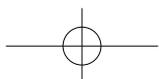
Get a bird's eye view

HNA Capital Helicopters (Hainan Airlines' sister company, if it makes you feel any safer; 185 0078 3345; greatwallhelicoptertours.com) operates custom helicopter tours from Badaling Airport that fly over various sections of the Great Wall. Flit around crumbling watchtowers in an AS350B3 Squirrel or EC135 Eurocopter before swooping over the breathtaking landscapes of Guanting Reservoir and Kangxi Grasslands. Don't forget the obligatory selfie in front of the 'old wall', only accessible by air. For the brave you can even take off the doors on certain helicopter models in the quest for that perfect Instagram snapshot.

These chopper rides give you the VIP treatment all the way, inclusive of fresh fruit, but they don't come cheap. A 15-minute jaunt starts from 1,500RMB, but you can (of course) stay up there till kingdom come if you're happy to hand over a few extra *kuai*.



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Indulge in a boutique hotel

The boutique hotels next to the Wall are perfect for weekend escapes. A one-hour drive out of the city will take you to luxury resort Commune by the Great Wall (8118 1888; commune.sohochina.com), a complex tucked away in the Shuiguan Mountains that showcases beautiful contemporary designs by Asian architects. The Commune runs like a fancy private club, with 40 themed villas, 175 suites, three restaurants, an outdoor pool, a tennis court, and, best of all, a direct path to the Wall.

The Commune was an award-winning exhibit back in 2002 at the Venice Biennale. Although parts of it look a tad tired today, the resort still offers good value for money. It's close to empty on weekdays, and, with the staff outnumbering the guests, service is absolutely exquisite. Double rooms start from 1,688RMB per night.

Another option is The Brickyard (6162 6506; brickyardatmutianyu.com). Located northeast of downtown Beijing in Beigou Village, the renovated glass factory has 25 guestrooms (double rooms from 1,360RMB) and nine villas (2,860-7,980RMB) decorated in elegant, understated style. The one-of-a-kind vacation homes scattered throughout the village house up to ten people and are made for family getaways or staycations with a big group of friends. Without the temptation of televisions or phones (don't panic, you can still access Wi-Fi), the sleepy little village is a true retreat.



Try the night shift in a watchtower

For rugged, outdoorsy types, Great Wall Adventure Club (138 1154 5162; greatwalladventure.com) organises multi-day hiking trips that include overnight stays in abandoned watchtowers under silent, star-dusted skies. There's no better place to appreciate the magnitude of this amazing feat of engineering.

Tours range from one to 12 days and routes cover various levels of difficulty. Plus, Great Wall Adventure Club has more than ten years of experience operating Great Wall tours, and is the only company with the official licence to take foreigners on camping tours. Prices vary depending on the group size (as little as 1,859RMB for one night if you're in a group of ten), but all camping gear and meals are provided.

Trek along the wild wall

Several companies offer hikes along the untamed and untainted parts of the Great Wall, letting you get up close and personal with the man-made wonder. Family-run local business Beijing Hikers (6432 2786; beijingshikers.com) offers expert-led hikes along the Wall three times a week, on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays. The day trips generally cost 400-500RMB and cover remote paths of different lengths. Visit Beijing Hikers' website for a comprehensive hike schedule updated monthly.

Alternatively, Wild Great Wall Adventure Tours (139 1132 1502; wildgreatwall.com) offers more fixed routes. Hikes range from one to four days in length, with prices dependent on group size (from 490RMB per person).



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