

# JIM SPEAR

Katie Barnes talks to the man behind The Schoolhouse, a sustainable tourism enterprise - including a boutique hotel and spa - that he's established in a remote village near the Great Wall of China

In 1986, American Jim Spear and his wife Liang Tang moved with their daughter to Beijing. Spear had a master's degree in political science from UC Berkeley and took a consulting job in the city at an exciting time of rapid development. On a weekend trip to a remote part of the Great Wall of China in Mutianyu, 70km north of Beijing, they purchased a peasant's house on a whim with a view to turning it into a country retreat.

Since then, they've turned an abandoned primary school into a restaurant and glass factory, old homes into designer rentals and a brick kiln into an eco-lodge and spa which has welcomed guests from over 100 countries. The businesses, known collectively as The Schoolhouse, have put Mutianyu on the tourist map. And they've done so while supporting the local community.

Here, Spear tells *Spa Business* about his inspiration for The Schoolhouse, how the project grew and what it's like doing business in rural China.

**Where did you get the idea to develop The Schoolhouse?** Not long after I moved to Mutianyu full-time, the mayor called me to the village hall and gave me a lecture - the community had a declining and ageing population, low incomes and



Spear was asked to create a business to support locals by the village mayor

lack of investment. He asked me to give something back to my adopted home. He really got me to open my eyes to what was happening around me.

**What was your vision?** To make an investment that would provide jobs to local employees and suppliers while running an ethical, sustainably-designed, operation.

Today our businesses include a gallery, general store, orchard, several farm plots,

a food product development centre, three Slow Food restaurants, rental homes, meeting facilities and, of course, the Brickyard boutique hotel and spa.

Overall the goal was to help Mutianyu at the Great Wall become a more recognised tourism destination - and now it ranks 14 in the top 25 landmarks in the whole world on TripAdvisor!

#### What's it like doing business in China?

Like most other foreign investors we've been granted 'national treatment' - meaning we get treated like a Chinese-owned business. That's not always a blessing, as there are strict rules and laws to abide by. But overall it's fairly transparent. People who fail here often blame corruption or culture, but sometimes that's just an excuse for not doing a good enough job.

#### Why did you build the Brickyard? My wife

found a working tile factory in Beigou, the village next to Mutianyu, in 2006 and thought it would be a great site for a new project. It was a desert and the chimneys belched out horrible acrid, black smoke. I was appalled and thought 'no way' until she told me to turn round and I saw the incredible view of forested ridges topped by the imposing Great Wall.

#### How did you design it? My aim was to

keep the factory buildings and complement them with rooms, all 25 of which have views of the Great Wall. I redeployed every scrap of building material, including used bricks and broken glazed tiles. I think the Brickyard is a happy marriage of traditional and vernacular building styles with a modern aesthetic.

#### Tell us about your book *Great Wall Style*

which launched last year. I have a passion for design and as well as the Brickyard, I've refurbished dozens of homes in or near Mutianyu including nine that we rent out. After these were featured in



The Brickyard supports the Slow Food movement and meals are based on homegrown produce



Spear kept many original features of the brick kiln in the spa including red bricks (above) and glazed tiles (left)



The site was chosen because of its impressive views of the Great Wall of China (below left and right)



## INTERVIEW: JIM SPEAR

► *Architectural Digest*, people asked to see more. With the help of their wonderfully talented photographer Robert McLeod and an international stylist, Ampol Paul J, we created a book that would encompass Great Wall style – not just my designs but the incredible setting of the Great Wall, the villages and the villagers themselves presented imaginatively.

**Who are your customers?** There's an equal split between Chinese citizens and people from other countries, with most of those coming from Europe and North America. There's a mix between tourists and business people who have meetings here or take a break at the Great Wall before or after corporate trips elsewhere.

**What's your spa like?** My wife and I have enjoyed spas in many places. I'm really selfish, so when I designed the Brickyard Spa I designed it first to please us. It's not huge – we have just three treatment suites – it's not gold-plated. It's a concrete expression of what I like to think of as the 'luxury of simplicity'.

The building is set apart from the rest of the Brickyard in an area that features our kitchen garden, the lotus pond and yoga platform, arbors and secluded areas for relaxation. The grounds get more beautiful, fragrant and peaceful as the years go by.

The walls are red brick with tiled murals created by local craftsmen and the floors are polished native slate. All of the furnishings were handmade to my design from distressed old elm.

It's an intimate place to relax in peace. The Gold Suite has a sauna with direct views of the Great Wall. There's an exercise room as well as an outdoor whirlpool where guests can take in the mountain scenery and stars at night 365 days a year.

**What's the benefit of having a spa?** A balanced life requires physical and mental nurturing and many of the guests we attract feel the same way. And our relaxing spa complements the many sports and activities on offer around Mutianyu.

It gets booked up, especially on weekends, and the number of guests taking treatments increases 25 per cent each year.



Spear has a passion for design and sustainability

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**How did you decide what treatments to offer?** This was easy. We kept it simple. Chinese tui na is a special, traditional bodywork massage that stimulates energy (or chi) in the meridians and muscles. We were able to find experienced therapists to offer a high-quality treatment. We also offer a warm foot soak followed by a complete massage of the feet and lower legs. That's a no-brainer as so many of our guests explore and hike the mountains near us.



Spear was involved in a book focused on Great Wall Style design

**What yoga classes and retreats do you have?** We offer outdoor sessions

by the lotus pond with a professional teacher nearly every Sunday morning in spring and autumn when the weather is most suitable. This year, we organised six weekend yoga retreats that included complementary meals. The programmes are small-scale, simple and participants report enjoying them very much.

**What products do you use?** Everything's natural. Our balms, shampoos and conditioners are from Shagrila Farms, a supplier that shares our commitment to making a difference in rural China. Liquid soap is by Kaimi, certified natural and pure. There's a selection of high-quality

teas from toasted barley to peppermint. And we make our own potpourri, foot soak and eye pillows containing local lavender, while our filtered ice water has lemon and mint from our garden.

**How does the spa help to support the Mutianyu community?** It supports nearby suppliers. Many products are sourced locally including our spa pyjamas, which are handsewn by a local seamstress and our singing bowls from our sister business Schoolhouse Art Glass.

As a rule, we also like to employ and train local people but unfortunately we weren't able to hire therapists from the area as we couldn't train or certify tui na which is a specialised therapeutic massage.

**What's your overall goal at the Brickyard and The Schoolhouse?** To provide wonderful experiences for our guests and sustain our business while making a difference in our community.

**What drives you?** Beauty, building, learning, providing ways for other people to thrive, making guests feel special and becoming a better person. ●



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