

OFF THE WALL

Jim Spear gives back to the village that inspired his home's aesthetics

WORDS BY ZOE LI. PHOTOS BY JUDY ZHOU



Above: Spear and Tang, the founders of China Bound Ltd

Opposite: The master bedroom at The Pavilion

“**H**aving a house by the Great Wall was the dream of my life,” says Jim Spear, who we managed to catch in between meetings at his 200-seater restaurant Da Lu Guan’r (大路馆儿), or The Roadhouse, the latest and largest in his series of restaurant ventures at Mutianyu.

Fortune had a hand in helping the American and his Beijing-born wife, Tang Liang, realize their dream. While hiking the wall, Spear struck up a conversation with a local T-shirt vendor. Staying in touch, the man eventually helped Spear land his first property, one that boasted a million dollar view of the Great Wall.

That was over ten years ago. Today, Spear and Tang run China Bound Ltd., a sustainable tourism project focused on the Mutianyu village communities. Their series of boutique hotels, restaurants, and holiday homes are constructed, and staffed, by employees from the local community, such as Li Fengquan, the T-shirt seller who secured Spear’s first deal all those years ago. Li now runs his own cleaning and gardening services company with 30 employees, and his main client is China Bound. “I could never have done it without him,” says Spear of Li; one could safely assume Li would say the same thing about Spear.

This page: Exterior of the master bedroom at The Pavilion

Opposite page: Restored village houses become beautiful hotels (clockwise from top left) The Pavilion's kitchenette; The Hillside Haven's second-floor sitting room; the simple elegance of Grandma's Place; Hillside Haven's real stone fireplace



"We don't want to strong-arm anyone into doing anything they don't want ... [the villagers and us] have to be highly sensitive to each other"

China Bound's strategy of drawing on the local workforce to implement small-scale businesses has helped to keep both skills and capital within the village community, and it has also played an important role in the conservation of local architectural heritage.

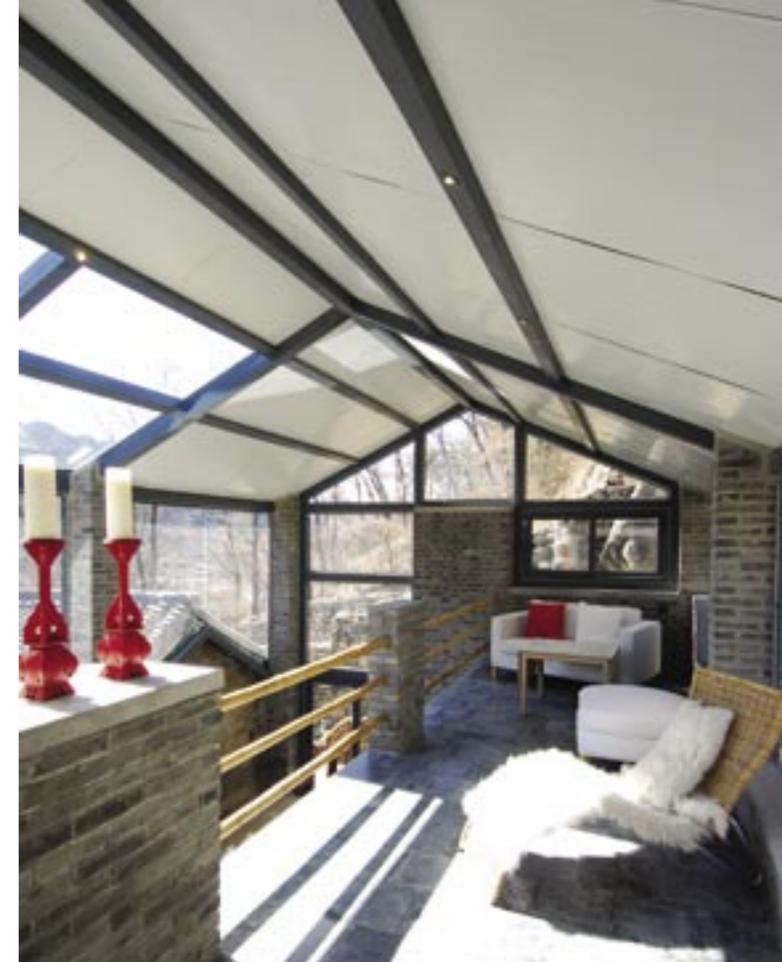
A self-taught designer, Spear's previous projects include such ambitious designs as a penthouse apartment with a vermilion and fuchsia stained-glass theme, and a 500-square-meter villa harboring a Mao-themed toilet that boasts a mirrored ceiling, so that "sitting on the toilet you are surrounded by Mao." Relocating to the countryside, Spear took a minimalist approach to his designs by maximizing the use of previous structures, or "existing footprints," as he terms them.

The well-known Schoolhouse, so named because of its original function as an elementary school, was near dilapidation when Spear and his wife first came across it. No longer in use, it had been long abandoned to the elements. Immediately recognizing its potential, the couple have since restored and converted the classrooms to form his offices and an intimate Western restaurant – The Schoolhouse Canteen. Spear later expanded the site to include several other houses, and with partners Julie Upton-Wang & Wang Peiming constructed a glass-art studio to share his love of the craft with visitors.

The Spears' own family home started out as a humble village house, which was restored and enlarged with the addition of bedrooms and connecting corridors, such that all rooms open onto a central courtyard. This layout fosters a sense of shared common space, without sacrificing privacy. Windows are placed strategically throughout the house to take full advantage of views of the Great Wall. The master bathroom even has a glass ceiling, which allows Spears to gaze at the Wall as they take their morning showers.

"The Great Wall itself is the theme," says Spear of his Mutianyu designs. Glass is a predominant element in all of his houses at Mutianyu, creating what may become known as his signature greenhouse-esque structures. The glass houses allow nature to come into the home, blurring the boundary between indoors and outdoors. The Pavilion, one of the guesthouses for rent, is one such structure that successfully utilizes the surrounding scenery. The glass walls encasing the open kitchen and sunken indoor grill allow guests to enjoy magnificent views of the Great Wall as they prepare a barbecue in any of Beijing's four seasons. During the day, natural light fills the room, and strategically designed windows allow fresh air to circulate, without unsightly support beams obstructing the view.

However, the works of China Bound have not been without their





Opposite page: Spear and Tang's bedroom

This page, top left: Spear's study contains his collection of mirrors

Top right & bottom: Tang's antique dresser dating to the 1920s

struggles. "It's important to remember that we are guests here," says Spear. "We don't want to strong-arm anyone into doing anything they don't want ... [the villagers and us] have to be highly sensitive to each other." Spear goes on to explain that he has strived to maintain his ethical principals throughout the establishment of China Bound, and hopes to continue to be useful to and accepted by the local community for a long time to come.

Their architectural designs, at least, have no trouble blending in with the local village. In fact, they are so unobtrusive it would be practically impossible to differentiate the restored houses from their neighbors, if it weren't for glimpses of the telltale glass panes peeking

out from amongst the clutter of stone features. As our guide led us on a meandering dirt path from one house to another, we never knew which door she would finally stop at, for each was as nondescript as the next. But when we finally arrived at the correct entrance, we helped her push open the heavy metal gates and walked into a space that was at once ancient and modern; marrying nature and artifice, with the most amazing views of the Great Wall. ①

www.chinaboundltd.com
www.chinacountrysidehotels.com



Opposite page: The Spear family home features a central courtyard

Below left and right: The family's residence is filled with lovingly collected antiques

Bottom left: Spear's sizable teapot collection on display; right: the glassed-in master bathroom with a view of the Great Wall

