

- WIN A TRIP TO AMSTERDAM 2
- WHY MADAGASCAR NEEDS MORE VISITORS 4
- ON THE TRAIL OF THE GOLDEN COMPASS 8
- SOPHIE BUTLER: CONSUMER EXPERT 9
- MY KIND OF TOWN: MONTPELLIER 10



# The Sunday Telegraph TRAVEL

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China's greatest monument stretches for thousands of miles, and traverses some of the country's most majestic landscapes. But as Bruce Holmes discovers, it only takes a few days to get its measure

## Walking the Wall



**H**ow did an invading army breach this extraordinary barrier, we wonder, as we march in single file through the cornfields of northern China and cast our eyes upward towards our first goal. Treachery, is the answer. As we stand upon the Great Wall of China and pause for breath, Ken Collins, our Australian guide, begins the history lesson.

This so-called Simatai section of the Great Wall was built during the Ming Dynasty period to keep out hostile tribes from the north. The wall did its job, but the dynasty's fall in 1644 came about when a disaffected general was bribed to open the gates at the First Pass Under Heaven, thus allowing the Manchu army to enter the kingdom and march on Beijing.

A bus ride of several hours the previous day had brought us north-east from Beijing to Hebei

Province, the starting point for our six-day Great Wall Trek. For much of the hike we will be traversing a more or less continuous part of the wall from east to west, beginning at Simatai then moving through the Jinshanling and Gubeikou sections, covering 25 miles in all. Each night we'll be camping near the wall with a host family.

Stepping out at Simatai on our first day, we soon find it more of a climb than a walk and the surface underfoot varies greatly. But that doesn't stop 11-year-old Mitchell, from the US, the youngest member of our group, from being up with the leaders. His grandmother Ellie, keeping up easily herself, tells us the trip was Mitchell's idea. "He'll be giving a presentation on the wall when he gets back to school," she says.

After making good progress we leave the wall to visit some local villagers, friends of our guide.

The mother of one family invites us into her house, which, though humble, is neat, new bricks replacing the old wood. Maize dries in the sun and small children show us how they entertain themselves with flying cicadas tied to

pieces of cotton. Though we wince, we're reminded that there are no PlayStations here.

Leaving the village, we tackle a steep path up through the sun-dappled forest. This is a challenging climb and I wonder how men in full battle gear climbed such slopes and still had

energy to fight. Eventually we emerge from the wooded hillside, and it's time for lunch at Wanjinlou Tower on the summit of Mount Simatai, the highest point of the wall.

After a well-earned break, we trek down the ridges as the summer heat starts to take its toll. Reaching camp, we're exhausted and enjoy a cold Chinese beer. There are 11 in our group, two English, four Australians and five Americans, with four of us aged over 45. I realise that it hasn't taken long to make new friends.

Next night, camping near Houchuan village, we sense something of rural China. Donkeys graze lazily, an old farmer shepherds his long-haired white goats, and there are old stone dwellings with roofs of thatch and shingle and fields full of corn. It's a world away from Beijing.

Our Chinese host family looks after us, pitching tents, providing washing water and

Wonderwall: the world's longest artificial structure, built as a defence against attacks from the north, stretches 4,000 miles from Shanhaiguan to Lop Nur

setting out drinks and nibbles before cooking some wonderful food. We quickly develop a sense of camaraderie, Ken smoothing any communication difficulties. Ellie suggests that the height of the cornfields makes for a perfect shower curtain. From that point each of us follows her lead, taking the bowl of warm water behind the tallest ears we can find, before re-joining the group as refreshed as if we'd had hot running water. Okay, maybe not quite.

After a peaceful night we continue our walk, following the ridges of the Yanshan Mountains, which make for spectacular views, but also some memorable ascents. After a while the trail levels

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