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It's still there, and it's still a wonder

Sunday, April 09, 2006

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What: The Great Wall of China meanders east to west across 4,500 miles of mountains, deserts, plateaus and grasslands of northern and north-central China. **Why go:** This is one of the few wonders of the ancient world -- equivalent to the Egyptian pyramids or the Greek temples -- that still exists. Although portions of the Great Wall are either in ruins, buried under sand or vandalized by poor homesteaders, it is still awesome to see the longest structure ever built by man. The 1994 Space Shuttle Endeavor took radar images of the Great Wall from outer space, but, contrary to belief, the wall cannot be seen from the moon. **Back story:** Sometime between 700 B.C. and 400 B.C., independent kingdoms in China started constructing defensive walls to protect themselves against marauding nomads of the north. After Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor, united these kingdoms in 214 B.C., he connected the separate walls in a 10-year project that involved hundreds of thousands of workers, including soldiers, local people and political prisoners. Depending on the location, the wall was built of brick, stone, yellow sand or jarrah branches. Rammed earth was used to form the core of the wall and when workers died, according to legend, their bodies were added to the foundation.

One myth that is repeated to this day in folk songs, traditional operas and textbooks is the story of Meng Jiangnu, a beautiful young girl who married Fan Xiliang before he was forced to work on the construction of the Great Wall. For five years, the young bride waited at home, not hearing a word from him.

Then one night, she dreamed her husband was screaming, "Cold, cold!" Immediately, she made some padded clothes and set off alone in search of him. But when she arrived at the construction site, she learned that Xiliang had already died and was buried inside the wall.

Heartbroken, she cried day and night until her wailing made the wall fall down. The emperor was furious and ordered that she be punished. When he saw her great beauty, however, he relented and asked her to marry him. She agreed on the condition that her deceased husband receive a grand funeral.

After the funeral, the grief-stricken widow and the emperor took a trip to the Bo Hai Sea. Instead of marrying the emperor, however, Meng Jiangnu jumped into the sea when the guards were not watching. To this day, two black, rocky reefs near shore are known as her tomb and tomb tablet. A temple on a nearby hill commemorates the lady of chastity. **Hiking the wall:** The most popular section hiked by visitors is Badaling, 47 miles northwest of Beijing at an elevation of 3300 feet. Like a giant dragon, the wall snakes up and down the hillside with ramparts, turrets and guard towers placed at strategic points. The stone-and-brick walkway on top of the wall is approximately 25 feet high and 19 feet wide. Badaling used to be heavily guarded by warriors in order to safeguard China's capital city, Beijing. What you see is the section renovated over a 200-year span by the Ming dynasty starting in 1368.

A party atmosphere exists on the wall today as multigenerational families take pictures of each other on the steps and towers. Parents and children fly kites, and groups of friends huff and puff as they climb the uneven stairs, which range from 6 inches to 15 inches in height. A hand railing comes in handy during the steepest parts, especially on rainy days when the steps can be slippery. The watch towers provide shelter but also become bottlenecks with people pushing through to the other side.

Vendors are prevalent, persuading visitors to get their pictures taken sitting on top of camels or dressed as emperors and empresses. Some tourists are enticed to buy a plasticized "I have climbed the Great Wall"

certificate, which comes with an official dated photo of the hikers on the wall.

In addition, Badaling has a cable car for nonhikers, a roller coaster that speeds down one of the hills, a history museum, a theater showing a film on the history and legends of the wall, a wild animal park nearby and, in winter, a snow-holiday park for skiing and ice skating. The wall is open year-round, but late spring and early autumn are the best months for sightseeing.

If a few hours' trek isn't enough to satisfy your adventurous spirit, consider joining China Hiking Adventures (416-605-7479) for a 15-day excursion to the most historic and best-preserved parts of the Great Wall. The hiking tours, which start in May and continue through the end of October, begin in Badaling and end at the Old Dragon's Head, the only portion of the Great Wall that meets the sea. Getting there: All U.S.-based tours of China that include Beijing have the Great Wall as part of their itineraries. Visitors traveling on their own can hire a taxi at their hotel and with the help of an English-speaking doorman negotiate rates for the daylong excursion. (Be sure to pay only one-third of the negotiated fee after being dropped off at the wall so the driver returns for you at your set time.) The concierge at your hotel can also direct you to tour buses that leave daily from Tiananmen Square. More info: China National Tourist Office/Los Angeles, 818-545-7507; www.cnta.com/lyen

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