

The Great Wall of China

Ever since the age of five, I had dreamed to see and climb the Great Wall. During my trip to China this summer, my dream finally came true.

I had learned a lot about the Great Wall from multiple sources, including books, but I had never got an opportunity to experience it in real life. I knew that the Great Wall was the only man-made structure that could be seen from space, and it was one of the seven modern wonders of the world. I had read in books that the Great Wall was known for being the biggest ever construction project, and was famous for its imposing structures. These made me long for it even more.

The Great Wall, or in Chinese terms, “The Wall of Ten Thousand Li,” is a wall with extended length of 4,000 miles, or 6,400 kilometers. The east end of it is just north of Beijing in eastern China while the west end is in the Taklamakan Desert in mid-west China. The Great Wall is made of stones and earth, and was first started by Emperor Qin Shi Huang of the Qin Dynasty (221 BC-206 BC) in the 2nd century BC. It was built, fixed, and renovated several times between the 6th and 16th centuries. The main purpose of the Great Wall was to protect China from Mongolian invaders up north. At first, the Great Wall was constructed of earth, which was easily destructible. With the invention of bricks in the Ming Dynasty (1268-1644), the Great Wall was stretched and fixed using much stronger stone bricks. Soon, the Ming dynasty became very prosperous thanks to the save protection provided by the Great Wall. At its peak, over a million soldiers stood guard on the Great Wall.

However, there were enormous costs to build such a great wall in the ancient times. About two to three million people died in building it. One million people died in the Qin dynasty alone in constructing the first 3,000 miles (4,800 kilometers) of the Great Wall. All the healthy young men were recruited to construct the Great Wall, most of whom died because of the exertions and the dangers of falling rocks.

Many famous people have commented on the Great Wall. Chairman Mao Zhe Dong, China’s first chairman, wrote in one of his famous poems, “To not climb the Great Wall is to be less than a non-hero,” emphasizing the significance of the Great Wall in his mind.

There are also plenty of stories about the Great Wall depicting both its magnificence and how hard it was to build it. The most famous one is undoubtedly, “The Legend of Meng Jian Nü.” This story has been passed down from generation to generation ever since the start of the construction of the Great Wall. In the Quin Dynsasty, Meng Jian Nü’s husband was taken away to build the Great Wall. Meng Jian Nü was very sad and waited longingly everyday for his return. After years of not seeing her husband, Meng Jian Nü decided to visit the construction site of the Great Wall to find him. However, while she searching for her husband, she was informed that he had died while building the Great Wall. She cried and cried until she found her husband’s body. She then buried him and jumped into the churning waters of a nearby river.

A few days after landing in Beijing, China, we finally launched our exploration on a section of the Great Wall. The Badaling section of the Great Wall was mainly used for guarding the capital city of Beijing during the Ming Dynasty. This section was built of stone and fixed several times as invaders attacked Beijing.

I stood at the base of the Great Wall looking at it from afar. What a spectacular view it was! I felt triumphant that I had finally been able to see it after waiting over half a decade.

From far away, the Great Wall looked like a long, misty snake hiding in the thick fog and winding down the countryside in small waves. Faint outlines of the countless fortresses were connected by long sections of stone walls under the foggy morning sky. It looked like it was not especially steep, only a little hilly.

When I got up close to the majestic wall, I learned that the steps up were practically vertical, exactly the opposite of what I thought. The wall of the Great Wall was about ten inches thick, and plastered together with bricks hauled up from nearby quarries. The thick walls and battlements were chipped away with age. The width of the path up to the Great Wall is about fifteen feet (five meters) and the side walls are about five feet (1.5 meters) high.

Climbing the Great Wall was not exactly a walk in the park. I thought it was more like running a marathon when you were not even prepared. All I could do was to push myself to climb to the top. The day we went was a little foggy, so we could not see very far from us. Each step was very steep and tall, and at least 16 inches high. We could only pull ourselves up by grabbing the icy metal railings that lined the long fortress. As I took each step, I could feel that all the blood and sweat used to build the wall, continuously strengthen it and keep it from collapsing even after thousands of years. After we climbed for just a small section, to the nearest stronghold, I looked over the wall. I guess I should not have looked down, because all I could see were sheer cliffs and large masses of unending forest. It was extremely scary to look down from such a great height, as I soon learned. The fortress had low and narrow arched doorways that led into a small room supported by thick columns. The room had large rounded windows that allowed soldiers to see miles away. As we neared the second fortress, the fog cleared up. I could see the mountains and the Great Wall spreading in all four directions, partly concealed in tons of overgrowth. The Great Wall looked like a lost snake, alone in the sea of trees. It looked particularly impressive from one of the high fortresses along the Great Wall.

In total, we climbed only 1/3000 of the Great Wall, or two kilometers. I could not imagine how they built over 6,000 kilometers of the wall while I was totally tired after climbing only *two* kilometers. Although I only climbed a tiny section of this miraculous wall, I was contented that my wish of being able to experience the Great Wall was fulfilled.

It is no doubt that the Great Wall has lived up to its name as one of the seven wonders of the modern world, and as one of the most impressive structures on Earth. The breathtaking scenes made me stare up in awe and the interesting history of the Great Wall made me want to learn about it even more. Built thousands of years ago when all work had to be done by hand with very limited machinery, the Great Wall is truly a marvel. It demonstrates the greatness of human beings, through the efforts and skills needed to build such a massive wall of defense. It proved that anything is possible for mankind, as long as we put our full efforts into it and as long as we unite together as a whole.

I count myself very lucky to be able to see and climb such a masterpiece made purely by the raw power of mankind.

Submitted by James Z.