

The Great Wall of China

This text is about the Great Wall of China. It contains information about what the wall looks like, who built it and the threats that it faces. It also describes some myths about the wall, and what the real facts are.

What to do —

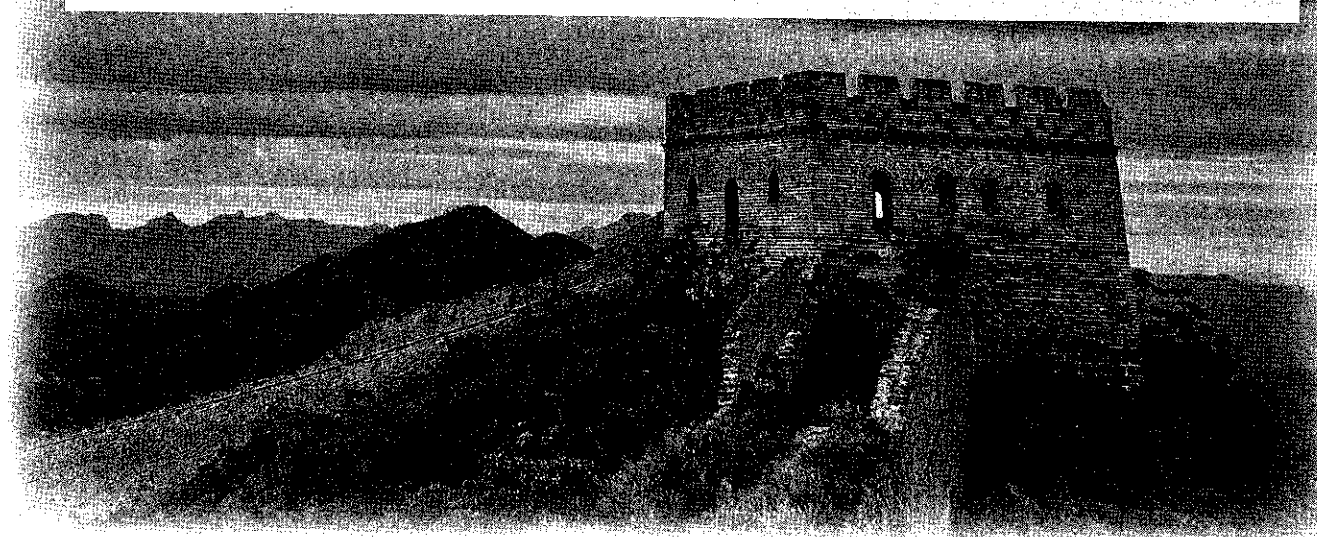
- 1) Read the non-fiction text *The Great Wall of China* — you'll need to turn over for some of it.
- 2) Now have another read. That way you'll be sure you've understood it all.
- 3) Then take a mini break — imagine riding the world's fastest rollercoaster. Now that's got your heart pumping, turn over and try the questions.

The Great Wall of China

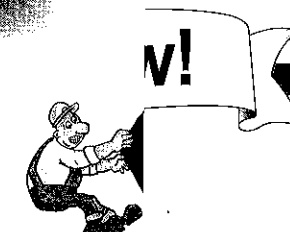
Snaking its way across northern China, the Great Wall of China is one of the world's most recognisable sights. Stretching into the distance as far as the human eye can see, the extensive grey and brown barrier cuts through several Chinese provinces and a range of landscapes, including lush green countryside, arid desert and steep mountain passes. Its many fortresses and towers break up the seemingly endless path of stone and bring memories of China's distant past to life. Visitors to these fortresses and towers walk in the footsteps of the soldiers who were once stationed along the wall, keeping a wary eye out for attackers and using beacons to send messages along the line.

The wall's name in Chinese literally translates to 'long wall', and no other man-made structure reaches further. A widespread myth about the Great Wall is that it is visible from the moon. However, astronauts attest that even this enormous feat of human engineering cannot be seen with the naked eye at such a distance, and the wall's similarity in shape to other natural landmarks like rivers makes it hard to recognise even from a point much closer to the Earth. The only way to spot the wall from space would be to use a powerful telescope or camera.

Another popular misconception about the wall is that it is a single continuous structure. Instead, it's actually a set of several different walls, some running parallel to one another or meeting at junctions. The official length of the wall, including all these different parts, is estimated at over 13,000 miles.



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The Great Wall has such a piecemeal structure because it was constructed by several different rulers over more than 2000 years. The wall first began to take its modern-day shape when the first Emperor of China joined together several smaller, existing walls to protect the country against invasion from the north. The wall was then extended during the Han dynasty* (206 BC – 220 AD) as a way to safeguard the Silk Road, a trade route along which luxury foods, precious stones, and fabrics such as silk were transported.

The final section of the wall was built over a millennium later, during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). As before, this section combined new stretches of wall and older, existing sections, which were repaired or rebuilt. This section, which is known as the 'Ming Great Wall', is measured at over 5,500 miles, although some of this length is made up of mountains, lakes and rivers that formed a 'natural wall' against invaders. Most of the wall that is now visible was built during this period, so it is the Ming Great Wall that is most frequently visited by tourists today.

The immense scale of the Great Wall proves the ambition and determination of the societies involved in building it. Parts of the wall were formed from bricks or slabs of stone, which were cut into shape and then loaded into place. The workforce consisted of soldiers as well as poor farmers and criminals who had been forced into labour. Materials were painstakingly borne up to the wall on the backs and shoulders of the labourers, or in bamboo baskets. It was dangerous and exhausting work, which claimed the lives of many of the labourers; some were even buried within the wall itself.

A famous legend tells the story of Meng Jiangnu, whose husband was killed while working on the wall and entombed within its stones. According to the rumour, her tears prompted the bricks around his body to disintegrate, enabling her to retrieve his remains and give them a proper burial.

* dynasty — a series of rulers from the same family

In the centuries after the fall of the Ming dynasty, the wall was largely abandoned. It was only in the middle of the twentieth century that the Chinese government began a mission to protect and rebuild it. In December 1987, the wall was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site — a place that is considered especially important and valuable to humankind. As a World Heritage Site, the wall is protected under international law, and efforts to conserve it for future generations are encouraged.

Today, some sections of the Great Wall have been fully restored and made easily accessible to visitors. For example, cable cars have been erected at several points, allowing visitors to avoid a steep climb up hundreds of steps. Thanks in part to this, the wall is now a leading tourist attraction in China — in the busy summer season, just one section can receive up to 70,000 visitors in a single day.

However, while most visitors treat the wall with the respect it deserves, some spoil its historic beauty by leaving litter or drawing graffiti. Shocking damage has been caused by human actions — some parts have even been destroyed to make way for roads. The wall also faces other threats that are putting it in danger. Being extremely old, it has suffered a great deal from the effects of erosion, which have caused whole chunks to crumble away. As a result, some parts of the wall, especially the north-western sections, are believed to require urgent restoration if they are still to be standing in twenty years' time.

Despite the dilapidated state of some sections, the Great Wall is still one of the most astonishing human structures on the planet today, and a record of many centuries of Chinese history.



Open the flap for the start of the text.