

Beijing and the Great Wall

By Bill Poorman



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More than once I said out loud, "I can't believe we're actually standing here." The family and I were on the Great Wall of China, the global cultural icon just north of China's capital, Beijing. For a history buff like myself, this was the trip of a lifetime and it's easy to travel there from Singapore for a quick four-day trip.

On Day One, we met our guide at the airport who proved invaluable. Having a translator was a huge comfort. She arranged a driver for all parts of our trip, including from and to the airport; and she knew how to plan our short visit to maximize sight-seeing and minimize crowds. Altogether our guide, driver and car cost about US\$700, including tips. We thought this was a bargain, but friends later told me we likely overpaid. Maybe you can do better.

Day Two was Great Wall day, but first our guide took us to a large jade shop. This was not on our itinerary, but we got the sense that guides are trained to bring all tourists here and yes, of course, we bought some souvenirs. Next, we stopped at the Ming Tombs, the burial complex of the Ming imperial dynasty. Visitors often come here after the Great Wall since it's on the way back to Beijing, but our guide smartly brought us here first, which allowed the morning tourist buses to clear out. By the way, make sure to time your trip to Beijing carefully. Some weeks (such as the time around Chinese National Day) can be very crowded and the wintertime can be quite cold.

After a great lunch in the valley below, we finally made it to the Great Wall. There are several sections you can visit from Beijing. We chose to visit the Mutianyu section because we had read that it can be less crowded and has some family-friendly features. While you can hike to the hilltop, we took a chair lift, which our kids enjoyed. From there, we simply walked back and forth, although if you're feeling more ambitious, you can hike

for hours. To get back down, we rode the nearby single-person toboggan ride. Yes, it's touristy and doesn't exactly date from the Ming period, but the kids loved it.

Day Three we visited Tiananmen Square and The Forbidden City. Again, for a history buff, standing in Tiananmen Square was extraordinary. At the north end of the square is the Tiananmen Gate with its famous giant portrait of Chairman Mao, where, of course, we took a family photo. The Forbidden City itself was impressive, but I would recommend briskly moving through it to save time for other sights. Walk along the side, rather than down the middle where the crowds are. After The Forbidden City, we had fun touring a *hutong*, a preserved section of old Beijing, on a rickshaw.

On our final day before we left for the airport, we quickly visited the Temple of Heaven complex, where the emperor prayed for a good harvest. If I had it to do over again, I would have spent more time here. The Forbidden City feels like a museum, while the Temple of Heaven is a park that is alive with activity. On that weekday morning, groups were doing Tai Chi exercises, musicians were performing and people were playing games and talking.

Beijing is a fabulous and easy trip from Singapore and we're glad we took the chance to visit while living in Asia. While you can't see everything in a few short days, you can get a flavor of imperial China and the capital of one of the oldest cultures in history. Not bad for a quick get-away.

Photo by Bill Poorman

Bill Poorman is a part-time writer and a budding sinophile. He has lived in Singapore about a year-and-a-half. He also doesn't like crowds, which you might have been able to tell.

