

The End of the Great Wall

Finding the Silver Lining in a Barren Landscape

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

As the train rounded the bend, a giant neon dolphin wearing a Gene Kelly top hat came into focus. After miles of Gansu Corridor desert and steppe, we had arrived in a Chinese version of Tijuana, Mexico; the desert skyline was lit with neon signs advertising Sunshine Strip bars and KTV.



Author by Great Wall watchtower

The train doors were unlocked, garbage bags filled with the detritus of the journey thrown off, and we, along with a goodly number of domestic tourists dressed for the part in 10-gallon hats, spilled into a sea of taxi touts. We were in Jiayuguan — famed frontier town, the western end of China's Great Wall and, for nearly 2000 years, the point of no return for soldier and political exile alike.

Beware long-anticipated journeys, when destinations are chosen for their historical significance; be prepared to make adjustments.

Tourist handbooks list four sites for Jiayuguan: the Wei and Western Jin tombs, the end of the Great Wall, a fort and the 'Great Hanging Cliff'. Most domestic tourists focus on the latter two and add the local zoo and 'water world'. Only the first two, the tombs and the remnants of China's Great Wall and ancient fortifications, are worth the trip.

The Jiayuguan Fort may have been the 'Impregnable Defile Under Heaven' and the last major fortification of Imperial China, but it should be removed from UNESCO's list of world heritage sites until the city cleans out the gauntlet of tawdry tourist shops lining the entrance area. Similarly, the reconstructed stretch of the Great Wall, originally built during the Ming Dynasty, now known as the 'Great Hanging Cliff', was too Disneyland for our taste and apparently for most other visitors as well; most stayed only long enough to have their pictures taken.

Less than half an hour from town, however, is one of the last of the Great Wall's watchtowers and the remnants of a military base; on a cliff above a desert canyon's rapidly running stream. These fortifications overlooking the Qilian Mountains once defended against the near-constant threat

of mounted foreign invaders. It's a barren but beautiful spot where the wind howls and the small speckled lizards are nearly invisible in the brilliant sun. Ancient Chinese poems penned here speak of missed families, loneliness and despair. Here, *Huangliang* (desolation) is a word you often overhear.

The real stars of Jiayuguan are the thousands of tombs from the Western Jin and Wei Dynasties (220-420 CE) discovered east of the city in recent years. The 700 excavated painted bricks from these



Tomb brick

underground, multi-chambered tombs are famous in China, and replicas or photographs of them can be seen in nearly every major Chinese museum. The bricks deserve their fame; they are both fascinating and charming, depicting such domestic scenes as preparing for a feast, roasting meat, picking mulberries, feeding chickens and herding horses. Of the 18 tombs that have been excavated, only one is open to tourists.

I went to Jiayuguan because I wanted to see the end of the civilised world that ancient Chinese and Silk Road travellers had seen and experienced. *Huangliang* is the right word. Even the dancing neon dolphin couldn't overcome the desolation.

Visitors' notes: The easiest way to reach Jiayuguan is by train from either Dunhuang (4 hours) or Lanzhou (7 hours). You can see the two recommended sites in approximately three hours by taxi (RMB 100); admission fees are RMB 36 + 21 respectively for the tombs and the Great Wall fortifications site.

Patricia Bjaaland Welch, an ACM docent and former university lecturer on Asian religion and culture, spent the summer traversing northern China by train and bus from Lhasa to the Yalu River. She had two goals: visiting China's most historic sites and finding its best domestic wine.

Photos courtesy of the author