

3-4 Around Huangyaguan

Time suggested A couple of hours (Taipinzhai to Huangyaguan)

Grade and terrain Moderate walking on mainly good surfaces, with many staircases

Facilities None on the Wall; extensive in Huangyaguan village



Great Wall near Taipinzhai

Walking this section of Wall works particularly well if you can arrange to be dropped at Taipinzhai where the road gives access to the Wall, and stay overnight at Huangyaguan. You can then walk one-way into Huangyaguan, which takes two to three hours, instead of having to double back to be collected. The Wall continues to be walkable well beyond Huangyaguan so you can explore on the far side as well, either that day or early the next morning. The walkable section is about 40 km (25 miles) in total.

From Taipinzhai you climb steeply to a prominent watch-tower, only to descend equally steeply beyond it. This section has enough long steep staircases to provide an energetic aerobic work-out. You can take it slowly, however, and enjoy the remarkable views over the surrounding mountains and plains. There are so many photo opportunities that it isn't difficult to recover your wind.

There is a beautiful watch-tower in this section known as Widows' Tower, with roofed living quarters on its upper storey. According to legend, the money to build it was donated by twelve women whose husbands had died while helping to build the Great Wall. Notice in the photograph how the colour of the brickwork changes near the foot of the descent from Widows' Tower, from orange-brown to slate grey. You may notice further traces of orange-brown, but slate grey bricks predominate in the Huangyaguan section.



caption

Overlooking the Widows' Tower





Steep staircase typical of the Huangyaguan section

The history of this section is complicated. Originally it was built in AD 556 during the Northern Qi Dynasty. Over the next millennium, it had fallen into disrepair, and in addition to major reconstruction work, watch-towers, battlements and barracks were built. This was in about 1567, under the reign of Longqing (Ming Dynasty). After more than four centuries, the Ming Wall and buildings were understandably crumbling, and most of what you see today was restored in 1984.

Some of the restoration work has gone well beyond the Ming original, and if you stay at the barracks at Huangyaguan, reserve some time to explore the complex, as well as the Wall. It is worth getting your bearings, especially on how to reach the exit from your accommodation, before dark falls, as the layout is labyrinthine. The official 'Eight Trigrams Maze' here is allegedly based on a military formation, and it is easy to get lost in it. There is also a Forest of Steles (decorative stones) and a small Great Wall Museum. Above all there is the beautiful Garden of Longevity, laid out on the principles of feng shui, having regard to compass points, balance among the elements and so forth. It is a peaceful place to relax after the exertions of wall-Walking.

View from the upper storey of a watch-tower

