

Episode 20a: The Great Wall of China (Part 1)

Summary

In the first part of a two-part episode, Nick and Wendy talk about visiting the Great Wall of China at Badaling, near Beijing.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking about China for, I think, the first time in this podcast. Umm, and it's a country that we've spent a lot of time in and a country what we hope to spend more time in in the future. Umm, but what better way to begin talking about China than to talk about the most famous thing that there is in the country which is the Great Wall of China.

Wendy: Yeah, I think that's safe to say that that is, uhh, the most famous site, uhh, to see in China. That's, uhh, the one thing that everyone will ... every visitor to China will be sure not to miss.

Nick: And I think, you know, there's a lot of countries that have really famous sites but in terms of truly iconic world sites, the Great Wall of China is really, you know, I think probably one of the top, what?, three-to-five things that's ever been constructed by humans in terms of its fame and glory.

Wendy: Yeah, and impressiveness and, you know, huge size. Umm, they say that you can see it from the moon, which, uhh, it turns out¹ is not really true. Uhh, but, you know, it's something that we learn about even when we're young children, everyone from a very young age knows what the Great Wall is.

Nick: Yeah, exactly. When I think about the things that I was aware of in other countries when I was very young, you think about things like the Taj Mahal in India, uhh, the Pyramids, maybe, in Egypt. I remember I knew about the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy, just because it's a strange tower and it is leaning, and the Great Wall, and maybe the Eiffel Tower, and that's probably it. Those are really among the famous things that there are.

¹ it turns out: in the end it has been shown that

Wendy: Umm-hmm.

Nick: And so when we went to China for the first time, and we were going to go and live there for about six months, this was way back in 2008, and one of the things that we were obviously going to do was to visit the Great Wall, and I remember saying to you that I wanted to see it many times in different places.

Wendy: Right, yeah, I remember that too.

Nick: Umm, just because I've always had an interest in defensive walls and fortifications and things like that, so it was something that I'd been waiting a long time to see. We'd been travelling for quite a few years, we'd gone to quite a few places, but we hadn't been to China. So finally when we went to China, umm, you know, I thought I'd have this great opportunity to see the Great Wall. Of course, the problem in Beijing, which is where we were living, is that there's a huge amount of pollution and it's very rarely a really nice day, a so-called blue sky day, and so for basically all of the main attractions in Beijing, what we tried to do was to wait until we had a nice day, umm, especially because I like to take photos and I like to have blue sky in my photos if I can help it². Uhh, and so we arrived there and I don't think we visited the Great Wall for a few months after we arrived.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: And do you remember how it happened? Because we went on holiday, we had one week of holiday, umm, and we travelled around China a little bit for a week and we came back on the Saturday night. And we were quite exhausted 'cause we'd been moving quite a lot and taking a lot of transportation. And we were just planning to relax on the Sunday and go back to work on Monday. And then we looked at the weather forecast and saw that it was forecast to be this blue sky day, which almost never happens in Beijing. I think when we were there for six months and we saw maybe five or six of these really nice blue sky days the whole time that we were there. And so we were really tired and we didn't want to do it but we said, "Right, we've actually got to get up early and go and see the Great Wall while we have this chance," because we didn't know if we would have another chance or not.

Wendy: Yeah, I'd forgotten that but I vaguely remember³ now that you say that.

Nick: And so I like to go to sites early before there's a lot of people, umm, before there's a lot of heat if you're in a hot place and if it's summer, and while the light is really nice. And so I think I made us get up very early...

² if I can help it: if I am able to control the situation, often used in the negative (*not* if I can help it)

³ vaguely remember: remember but not very well; the opposite is vividly remember (see Episode 6)

Wendy: I'm sure you did.

Nick: Probably at six o'clock or six-thirty or something to try to get to the Wall, because you have to travel outside of Beijing to get to the Wall. And so we were very tired but we got up and you very graciously agreed to come and do it with me. Umm, and so we arrived at the area where the Wall is, and this is a place called Badaling, which is the most famous section of the Great Wall, and it's the closest to Beijing which is probably why it's the most famous.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: But when people say they've been to the Great Wall, this is usually the section that they're talking about. And so we arrived and then we bought our tickets but then we were a little bit confused as to how to get to the right entrance, because you went through one section and then you have to climb up to get up on top of the Wall. And we must have somehow missed a turn or something, and there weren't a lot of people around because it was still very early, umm, and then ... so we took a wrong turn, somehow, as we were talking about, umm, before, I think we ran into some kind of a zoo. I remember seeing a caged bear, it was a very sad, umm, zoo-entertainment area, but we just completely didn't know where we were going.

And finally we found an entrance and we were able to climb up and get up onto the Great Wall. And it turned out that by complete accident, we'd discovered this other entrance that nobody else goes to. And so we got up onto the Wall, and we were the only people on that section. And then, after a while, we could begin to see in the distance that the other section, the kind of main entry, was filling up with lots and lots of people, and we had completely by accident⁴ discovered this undiscovered part of the Great Wall. So that was really great, that we could just walk, uhh, at our own pace⁵, and there weren't any other people there, and I could take my photos, and we could just really enjoy it, umm, for what it was. Because of course, one of the other things about going to sites or attractions in China, is that there's always a lot of people.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: The domestic Chinese tourist market is absolutely massive⁶, umm, and so sometimes you're at popular sections of the Great Wall and there are just thousands of people there.

⁴ by accident: not intentionally. You can add complete(ly) as in two examples in this paragraph for more emphasis. The opposite is *on purpose*.

⁵ at our own pace: going as fast or slowly as you want to, without there being other influences.

⁶ absolutely massive: very, very big. When you use a strong adjective such as massive, if you want to emphasise it further the adverbs to use are *absolutely* or *really*, not very.

Wendy: Yeah, or even much lesser known sites, there will still be thousands of people, just because there are so many Chinese people. So having a place like that all to yourself is really an incredible luxury that very, very few people get to experience.

Nick: And so I remember we just kind of walked slowly along the wall, you know, up and down, umm, just by ourselves, really enjoying it. And then some of the people who had gone to the main entrance, they began to ... because it was a part of the path that they were walking on eventually led them to the place where we were. So eventually some people started to come to where we were, but it was really amazing to have this blue sky day at the Great Wall of China with no other people, uhh, and that was really incredible. And then of course we walked around to more of the other sections as well, and then suddenly it began to fill up and there were a huge number of people, umm, in the end.

And so Badaling is, as we said, a really famous part of the Wall. It's been restored quite a lot, and that becomes apparent when you visit other sections of wall as we did later. But I think the restoration is pretty well done, I wouldn't say it's over-restored, I don't think ... I think it looks pretty good. Umm, I don't know if that's what you think.

Wendy: Yeah, umm, yeah, I think the Wall, you know, it's a pretty basic structure anyway. Umm, you know, it's a wall, it doesn't have a huge amount of decoration and lots of little dainty flourishes, you know, it has, umm, some turrets⁷ and some, uhh, crenellations⁸ is what it's called when the wall kind of goes up and down at the top, but it's a pretty basic thing, so even though they ... it is reconstructed very heavily and, umm, you know, they've recreated perfectly all of those crenellations but it still doesn't really look too overdone because it's still a pretty simple structure.

Nick: Right, and the other thing about the Wall that people might not really think about because everybody's focused on the Wall itself is that even at this area in Badaling which is close to Beijing, it's among nature, umm, there's lots of trees and lots of forested areas around it and you so, you know, it's just a really nice place to walk along the Wall for a while and you can just look out at the surroundings and, you know, it's very pleasant as long as there aren't too many people there, uhh, enjoying it with you.

Wendy: Yeah, I think we were very, very lucky to have that experience, a) because we had the luxury of living in Beijing for several months so we could wait for a blue

⁷ turrets: small towers

⁸ crenellations: alternating fortifications and open spaces used on top of walls or towers to allow defenders to shoot arrows or guns onto the attackers

sky day. You know, most people who are travelling to China as tourists, they might have three, four, maximum five days in Beijing on a typical itinerary, and probably none of those are going to be blue sky days so, you know, their pictures are not going to look great, because it's going to be full of pollution and really ugly grey sky. Umm, so we had that luxury and then we also got really lucky by going the wrong way and getting lost, which turned out to be a great thing.

Nick: And the other thing that we do remember is that we could look back and see in the direction of Beijing and you could see all the smog and pollution, uhh, kind of hovering⁹ on top of Beijing. It's like when you're in a plane and you go above the clouds and suddenly it's a nice day above the clouds. Well, in, sometimes in Beijing you can go above the smog¹⁰ and it can be a nice day, umm, out at the Great Wall.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And so that's one experience of the Great Wall of China. We will have a second episode, a part two of the Great Wall of China, where we talk about some of the other places, umm, that we went along the Wall as well.

Wendy: Yeah, 'cause like you said, uhh, it was your dream to see the Wall in lots of different ways and go there lots of different times and we did over the course of our time in China, so we've got a lot more to say about the Wall actually.

⁹ hovering: being in the air but not moving

¹⁰ smog: polluted air

Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Nick and Wendy wait for a few months after moving to Beijing before they finally went to see the Great Wall of China?
2. Why does Nick like to visit historic sites like the Great Wall early in the morning?
3. How did Nick and Wendy manage to be on the Great Wall all by themselves?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. The Great Pyramid at Giza is _____. I couldn't believe how big it was.
2. "We like to travel independently rather than going on a tour, because then we can travel _____.
3. Castles from fairytales or from the world of Disney tend to be pretty castles with lots of little _____.
4. Castles that are truly for defensive purposes rather than residential purposes usually have _____ to help defend them.
5. I only _____ camping holidays with my family because I was very young.
6. Nobody believed her but _____ that she was telling the truth.
7. Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas _____ while he was looking for a sea route to India.
8. In most large Chinese cities, there is a huge amount of pollution and the _____ is unbearable.
9. The helicopter was _____ in the air while the pilot was waiting to land.
10. I try to avoid large crowds _____.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever seen the Great Wall of China? If so, what did you think about it? If not, would you like to see it one day?
2. Do you think factors like weather and crowds can affect your experience when you visit a historic site? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever been lucky while travelling like Nick and Wendy were and 'accidentally' discovered something great?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. They wanted to wait for a blue sky day so they could enjoy the Wall more.
2. Nick likes to visit sites early in the morning because there are fewer people, because it's not as hot, and because the light is better (for photography).
3. They took a wrong turn and ended up at a secondary entrance which other people didn't know about. That led them to a different section of the Wall from where everyone else was.

Exercises

1. absolutely massive
2. at our own pace
3. turrets
4. crenellations
5. vaguely remember
6. it turns out
7. by accident
8. smog
9. hovering
10. if I can help it