



## The Schoolhouse at Mutianyu Great Wall



### Village Retreat with a Social Mission

The Schoolhouse at Mutianyu Great Wall is a village retreat located in Mutianyu and Yingbeigou villages in Beijing, China. Mutianyu is within the boundaries of the Mutianyu Great Wall Tourism Zone park and Yingbeigou is adjacent. Founded in September 2006, our retreat has grown from one home to eleven with a total of 30 guest rooms. We were selected by Wild China as one of the top 5 hotels in China in the 2009 Best of China Awards. We have earned 4 Green Stars from Eco Hotels of the World.

All the homes were based on rundown and under-used village houses with as much of the original structures preserved as possible and new construction aimed to harmonize with the vernacular village styles. The abandoned village primary school was transformed into our main restaurant and office, symbolizing our efforts to sustain the life of these small villages. Using existing footprints is also eco-friendly and we match this with a series of green building measures including use of

salvaged and other local materials, insulation, thermal-paned windows, in-floor radiant heating, passive solar designs, and natural ventilation.



Each original house was leased at market prices from individual peasant families who received the proceeds directly. No one has been displaced by any of our development projects.

Every house comes with modern amenities and all the houses have private yards but guests step out of the gate to be immersed in a living village community. Guests can cook for themselves in the houses or take a short walk to dine in one of our three restaurants in the villages, each created from existing buildings and each serving food which is home-made from the scratch. We obtain ingredients increasingly from our own gardens and edible fruit and nut trees, as well as from other local suppliers, as part of our sustainable foods program. Our wastes are composted or recycled.



We work closely with our neighbours, the village governments, and park authorities to ensure our developments fit into the community and contribute to helping Mutianyu become a distinctive and sustainable

### **The Schoolhouse at Mutianyu**

Great Wall destination. Our employees are trained and our guests are educated to observe park rules respecting protection of the Great Wall and the natural environment in our area. We help visitors learn about village life by administering a program of non-commercial visits with local families.

We outsource services such as construction, landscaping, and maintenance to local businesses and preferentially hire residents from our own and nearby villages in our township. We hire local performers and entertainers. We have established a handicraft art glass factory at The Schoolhouse. To sum up, we are a for-profit business with the social mission to help provide modern livelihoods so that people have the economic ability to sustain our rural community without leaving home.

### **The Schoolhouse and a Sustainable Community**

The Schoolhouse at Mutianyu Great Wall is a for-profit business with the social mission to help sustain the villages that have allowed us to live and invest here. Rural communities all over the world are disintegrating as the young flee to jobs and excitement in cities and population declines and ages. This is the situation faced at Mutianyu Great Wall, just an hour from downtown Beijing, with the added tension of economic benefits of tourism increasingly concentrated on a small segment of the community and many left behind. There is also growing pressure for the large scale development that undermines the community and ultimately replaces a unique sense of place with something generic. We contribute in three concrete ways: dispersed and small-scale development within the local community, creation of employment opportunities, and specific outreach programs.

## 1. Dispersed and Small-Scale Development Within the Local Community

In the last four years The Schoolhouse has been responsible for bringing about Rmb 60 million of outside private investment to Mutianyu and the adjacent village of Yingbeigou, each with a registered population under 400. These villages are among twenty-one in the Township of Bohai, the larger community of which we are part. No one has been displaced by any of our development projects and we have used existing footprints right in the villages instead of tearing down or building greenfield.

The investments include leasing more than 30 empty or under-used houses right in the villages and turning them into vacation retreats, eleven of which are for rental through The Schoolhouse, thus comprising the rooms of our dispersed resort. The original houses were all leased at market prices directly from individual peasant families who have used the proceeds creatively to set up businesses, to educate their children, or to care for their elderly.

Here is an image of one rental home, Eagle's Rest, as it appears today next to a picture of the original abandoned peasant house as we found it. The image on the right shows the lease signing ceremony for Big Rock House conducted in the Yingbeigou Village Hall by the owner, the foreign buyer, and the mayor.



**The Schoolhouse at Mutianyu**

All of our business properties started off from run-down buildings. The Schoolhouse, our reception and fusion restaurant, was the village primary school until it was abandoned in the early 1990's when schools in our township were consolidated because of declining enrolments. Our premium dining room, The Smithy, was once the village blacksmith shop. Here are before and after views:



Schoolhouse Art Glass, a non-emitting craft enterprise with lampworking and a hot glass workshop, was an empty warehouse next to the school. Here are images showing the workshop under construction, a glassblower at work, and finished products:



Our Art Room gallery and guest artist studio started its life as the communal tractor shed during the period of collectivized agriculture. Pictured below are the old garage prior to renovation, our logo, and paintings created and exhibited here, the second one serving as the cover illustration of one of our books:



Our noodle shop Xiaolumian was an inhabited but decrepit stone farmhouse and implement shed in Yingbeigou when we found it (below left). The owner was a day labourer for one of our contractors. We leased his home for an upfront cash payment and provided him with quarters and employment as a security watchman on one of our other properties in the village. Today Xiaolumian provides our resort with a charming dining experience that offers a chance to lounge in the restored farmhouse interiors with their original heated “kang” beds.



The Roadhouse, our Chinese restaurant where we have staff housing, central stores, main kitchen, trout pond, and garden, was the first of the big local restaurants and had fallen into hard times and utter

disrepair but is now a park-like haven with panoramic views (below middle). The Roadhouse kitchen garden (below right) is one part of a comprehensive sustainable foods project adopted by The Schoolhouse. This program includes composting, growing our own vegetables and herbs, tending our own orchards, procuring from local growers and suppliers, and preparing homemade dishes from scratch without chemical additives.



The existing housing stock in Mutianyu and Yingbeigou Village includes several hundred residences and other nearby dying villages in Bohai Township also nestled under the Great Wall have many more houses and abandoned buildings so there is a long-term potential to continue to revitalize the communities. Our model for development already seems to have an encouraging demonstration effect. Other outside investors have started to lease and rebuild existing homes in the area. A local entrepreneur added a low-profile motel to his existing restaurant business. Yingbeigou Village turned its abandoned village office into a cooperative restaurant serving village-grown foods and also restored a home into a pleasant guest house.

## 2. Creation of Employment Opportunities

The Schoolhouse indirectly creates employment opportunities by helping build Mutianyu as a destination brand so that there is demand for new services and attractions from visitors who stay longer and spend more money. More immediately and more concretely our young business is responsible for the payrolls of over 200 people.

The Schoolhouse preferentially hires people from Bohai Township and the village mayors proactively assist us with recruitment. Some of our staff is farm housewives not previously formally employed. We also welcome part-time and short-term employees such as students who would not otherwise be able to find steady for-pay employment. We encourage employees to learn new skill sets and favour promotion from within. Our entire kitchen team except the executive chef is comprised of local people who came without previous experience and can now run kitchens serving a variety of cuisines independently. Our engineering manager is a native of Mutianyu who has recently gone to a four-day schedule so he can earn his college degree while still supporting his family.



The Schoolhouse's operations also have a ripple employment impact as we actively source services and purchases from other locally-owned businesses. For example, our gardening provider is a small business with about 15 full-time employees. It was established by a



neighbour in Mutianyu who was originally a tee-shirt vendor at the Great Wall tourist site (pictured above middle with one of our partners). We ask local folk artists to perform for our guests instead of bringing in outsiders and thus contribute to their livelihoods at the same time as we encourage preservation of traditional arts. We let construction and renovation projects to local contractors who employ only local labourers and skilled craftsmen. Our designs, calling for maximum use of local materials such as native stone, brick, tile, and old fruitwood, also support the businesses and workmen that supply us.

### **3. Outreach**

As one might expect The Schoolhouse has several programs for charitable donations and voluntary service but here we would like to describe several other means we use to reach out as participants in the community. First, we take care to involve local residents in our development and construction planning and designs, including face-to-face meetings with nearby residents. Zoning and approvals are still quite nebulous here but we also have a serious and on-going dialog with the village mayors and councils, the Great Wall tourism zone officials, Bohai Township leaders, Huairou District government, and up into the Beijing and central authorities. We can't succeed by being anti-development but we can hope to influence the course enough so that our area isn't overwhelmed and something of the traditional rural lifestyle pictured below is preserved.



Second, The Schoolhouse has helped foster the Sister Village relationship between Mutianyu and Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, USA, the hometown of one of our partners. Shelburne Falls faced declining agriculture and rural industry that left it on the verge of extinction just 40 years ago but today it is a thriving tourism destination based on scenic attractions and arts and crafts with many restaurants and small-scale lodgings. The Great Wall Tourism Zone director is shown below (left) sharing thoughts with the head of a delegation from Massachusetts. The exchanges have been eye-opening on both sides and the next visit from Massachusetts is scheduled for April 2010.



Third, The Schoolhouse has worked with the village governments to set up a program of non-commercial home visits (shown in the right three images above). The participating village families receive a token honorarium for each visit and no home is visited so frequently that the experience becomes simply passé for the residents, who tend to be the elderly (and lonely) residents at home during the day. We arrange the

visits and conduct tours as well as provide interpreting service for qualified educational institutions on a pro bono basis when we can fit into our over-all business requirements. We have helped many student programs in Beijing and from around the world to make these visits. Thus, in addition to seeing the Great Wall visitors have the chance to gain insight to a rural community joining the modern world.

**Learn more at [www.theschoolhouseatmutianyu.com](http://www.theschoolhouseatmutianyu.com)**