

# When Hitting the Wall Takes on a New Meaning

The Great Wall of China Marathon.

BY BRENDAN COURNAME

At one time or another, almost every marathoner “hits a wall” in the marathon. But in the Great Wall Marathon, runners literally hit the wall—twice. Runners climb the Great Wall of China just after the five-kilometer mark and a second time at the 34-kilometer mark of the race.

It is challenging and intimidating, both physically and mentally. The elevation and the undulation of the Wall make breathing a struggle, and the scenery itself takes your breath away.

May 16, 2009, was the 10th Annual Great Wall Marathon. This is a fantastic race, well organized by the race directors, and promises a real sense of accomplishment when a runner crosses the finish line.

The 2009 event was a little different from that of previous years. The world’s attention was drawn to Beijing in 2008 as China hosted the International Olympic Games, a coming-out party of sorts for China as it put forth its best efforts at impressing the rest of the world.

## Arrival

I traveled to Beijing with Kathy Loper Events. The flight from Chicago was over 13 hours nonstop, and the 11-hour time difference took some getting used to. Happily, the marathon was a week after arrival, allowing for the body to adjust.

Our tour guide, “Joe,” told us some of the history of Beijing, dividing history into four periods. There is “old” Beijing (pre-1949), the period under the leadership of Mao Tse-tung (1949–1976), the uncertain years following the death of Mao (1976–1989), and the modern times (1989–present).

The most dramatic changes have been in modern times, culminating with the 2008 Summer Olympics. Modern glass-walled office buildings rise near the ancient temples and the remaining *hutongs* (small neighborhoods) of old Beijing. Tourist attractions are accessible by wide streets built to accommodate modern vehicles, replacing the bicycles of a few years ago. Acceptance of westerners into the tapestry of everyday life has improved.

The rooftops of the airport terminal, which is in the shape of a dragon, appear out of the hazy, polluted skies when we descended through the clouds. The dragon is an ancient symbol of the emperor, and the terminal's design pays homage to the emperors of long ago. The confluence of the dragon, the expansive terminal, and the pollution welcome the world to modern Beijing.

## Experiencing Tiananmen Square and other venues

Until modern times, hotels accommodating westerners were few in number. Foreigners were relegated to the Hotel Beijing. Today westerners can stay at any of several hotels, including many well-known hotel chains from America. Many are located in the central district of Beijing near Tiananmen Square.

Tiananmen Square is a large expanse of concrete in central Beijing where Chinese gather for major events and many Americans remember tanks facing down political protesters in 1989. The square can accommodate over a million people. In one corner is the mausoleum of Chairman Mao, where the chairman's body is preserved and on display. To the north of the square is the entry gate to the Forbidden City, ancient home of the emperor.

Our hotel was a five-minute run from Tiananmen Square. Each morning we would run from our hotel across Tiananmen Square to a viewing spot west of the square. A few minutes before dawn, a Chinese military detachment marched through the gates of the Forbidden City, exiting the wide doors under the portrait of Chairman Mao, and raised the Chinese flag to the sounds of the Chinese national anthem wafting across the plaza.

Hundreds of tourists arrived in buses from the countryside each morning, joining Beijing residents in watching the flag-raising ceremony. A group of oddly dressed Western tourists drew stares.

One morning we passed a group of elderly Chinese visitors. One man in the group shook his head and spoke angrily while pointing at the women in our group. He disapproved of our attire, but especially of the clothing worn by the women: running shorts, singlets, and T-shirts; he was vocal in his displeasure.

This mixture of long-held values contrasted with the appearance and behavior of Beijing residents, most of whom wore shorts, T-shirts (with the names of western clothiers and sports teams), and sandals.

Beijing retains an old-world charm while clearly clawing its way into the modern age. Ancient temples and buildings such as the Forbidden City and the Emperor's Summer Palace are not far from the Olympic venues or the large, modern, western-style office buildings in the business section of Beijing. These modern buildings could be in the United States or Europe and are a far cry from the ancient Chinese architecture.

The Forbidden City, home to Chinese emperors since the 1400s, abuts Tiananmen Square. The original buildings were constructed entirely from wood, with no nails holding the materials in place. Wooden construction materials were formed and pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle—gravity holds the pieces together.

About 10 kilometers from the Forbidden City is the Olympic Sports Center. The National Stadium, the Bird's Nest, and the Aquatics Center (the "Cube") are common venues recognizable from the 2008 Olympics. Unlike in the Forbidden City, modern technology and design dominate the construction of these buildings. One building, approximately 25 stories high and the length of a city block, was built solely to house the computer and telecommunications network for the Olympic Games.

Most of the Olympic venues are open to tour groups. Unfortunately, the venues have not been used for competition since the Olympics, and they remain closed to visitors who wish to use the facilities as well as tour them.

For a fee, visitors can walk on the infield of the Bird's Nest. Because the track and infield were covered with plywood and artificial turf, visitors could not run



▲ Coach Brendan outside 2008 Olympic venues in Beijing. In the background are the "Bird's Nest," site of track and field events, and the "Cube," site of water events.

**ad**

the track, visualizing Olympic glory. But standing in the middle of the stadium, looking up through the open roof and around the seats in the stadium, we recalled the roar of the crowd during the opening and closing ceremonies and the various track and field events that filled our television screens in August 2008.

The National Stadium (gymnastics venue) and the Cube are both a short walk from the Bird's Nest. Unlike the Bird's Nest, the gymnastics floor, the warm-up pool, the competition pool, and the diving pool are viewable only from the stands.

## Getting around

Beijing is an accessible city, easy to get around by foot, cab, or subway. Tour books list street names in Chinese characters and English letters. Most Chinese do not speak English, and being able to point to a location on a map in Chinese and English helps in getting directions.

Cabs are plentiful, but be careful, as some are not licensed properly and do not have meters. Hotels have cards with the name and location of the hotel in English and Chinese. Show the cab driver the card before getting into the cab.

In some areas, like the commercial hutongs, rickshaws are a common mode of transportation, another throwback to premodern times.

Beijing also has a well-organized subway system providing access to many areas tourists are likely to visit. The transportation system is easy to navigate. New subway lines were built for the Olympics.

Ticket kiosks are available at every subway station. Push a button for English translation, review the lines where characters are in English lettering, and buy a ticket to your destination. Travel from Tiananmen Square to the Olympic Center via the subway system took less than 20 minutes at a cost of approximately 30 U.S. cents—much cheaper and faster than a taxi or bus.

Each car has a map of stations in both Chinese and English letters. Colored lights mark each station; stations passed are in one color (either red or green), the upcoming stations in the other color (either red or green), and the next station flashes yellow. Stations are announced in Chinese and in English.

## People aren't so different after all

The Chinese are friendly people. It was strange being in a place where almost no one speaks English. Joe told us that even in the 1990s it was not unusual for Americans to be followed down the street by locals who had never before seen an Occidental. Today Americans walk the streets unnoticed, and examples of the homogenization brought about by western influence are prevalent. Starbucks, Subway, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and McDonald's restaurants are common sights. Menus offer much the same fare found in America.

► In the countryside, a young, friendly villager gives “thumbs up” for encouragement up the climb.

During our morning runs, we ran through park areas and saw Chinese of various ages practicing martial arts, staying active, and enjoying life. Pleasantries were exchanged as we ran by, saying *Ni hao* (“Hello,” pronounced “nee how”) or *Xie xie* (“Thank you,” pronounced “shay shay”), acknowledging us even if not fully understanding our presence or purpose.



Courtesy of Brendan Cournane

Four members of our travel group were middle school teachers from Virginia. Their students read about China as a reading project throughout the year. As part of a physical education class, the students totaled their miles run in class and “ran” to China with their teachers, providing virtual support. The teachers blogged to their students about the experiences on the trip. The video was streamed halfway around the world, showing how life is different yet similar in different cultures.

The teachers were allowed to visit a small school in Beijing. We were told this was unprecedented, but the exchange of letters among the students of the two schools established a connection between East and West, among the students, and between two schools and cultures. More similarities were discovered as the teachers and students held a question-and-answer session.

Later, we came across schoolchildren on a field trip. They asked us questions in English (“How old are you?” and “Where are you from?”). Although most adults do not speak English, schoolchildren are learning and preparing for future interaction with other cultures.

Modern Beijing still has several hutongs, small neighborhoods where a few hundred families can live together, often with shared toilet facilities and kitchen areas. These communities are tiny by American standards, and each living unit supports up to three people sharing one room as living room, bedroom, and dining area. About eight people fit around the table for lunch, all in the primary room of the house.

As Chinese hosts brought food to share, it provided more evidence of how friendship and good will are universal.

## The main event—marathon day

All of the touring around Beijing, getting to know the people, and visiting the sights were merely a prelude to the main event—running a marathon that includes a portion on the Great Wall of China itself.

In addition to the full marathon, a 5K, 10K, and half-marathon race are available, with concurrent starts for the 10K, half-marathon, and full marathon. There is an eight-hour time limit for all the races (5K, 10K, half-, and full). Marathoners also face a time limit of six hours by which to cross the Wall the first time, return from the countryside, and start the second crossing of the Wall. Marathoners who do not enter the Wall for the second time by the six-hour mark are stopped from the second crossing of the Wall.

Water is plentiful on the course. In fact, it may be too plentiful. Water stations are available approximately every two kilometers. Water is distributed in capped half-liter bottles. The caps make the bottles easy to carry. However, since the time to complete the marathon is conservatively estimated at one and a half times that of a normal marathon, the amount of water consumed could lead to problems of hyponatremia if you are not careful.

On Thursday preceding the race, all runners were bused to Huangyaguan for a mandatory visit. To understand the upcoming undertaking, runners are taken to the point of entry onto the Great Wall and advised to walk the portion of the Wall to be run on race day. Runners may change events after the walk on the Wall; many downgrade.

Runners are advised to take pictures along the Great Wall on Thursday and are advised against bringing cameras on race day, focusing instead on the racecourse. I am grateful I did not heed that advice. The countryside and villages provided experiences of China most tourists do not see. Carry a small digital camera on race day to remember the villagers and the sights.

The race starts and finishes in Yin Yang Square, the balance between heaven and earth, in the village of Huangyaguan. Overlooking the square is Zhen Wu Temple, with incense burning as a tribute to Buddhist gods. Even nonbelievers can offer a prayer or maintain a moment of silence in honor of the gods; runners ask for a good day.

After a half-mile warm-up, runners climb a steep, winding road for five kilometers to the entrance to the Great Wall. Up 100 steps, a left turn, 20 more steps, and you're there: the Great Wall of China! What a magnificent view! The gray bricks and white mortar of the steps seemingly extend forever. Pictures cannot adequately capture the expanse and undulation of the Great Wall.

Approximately six kilometers of the marathon are run on the Great Wall. That portion of the marathon has some of the most difficult sections of any marathon in the world. Hitting the Wall at this point of the marathon is literal as well as figurative, especially on the return trip.

**ad**



Courtesy of Brendan Courname

▲ From here, it's 100 steps up, a left turn, and 20 more steps to the Great Wall of China!

The race information tells us there are 5,164 steps to be covered; marathoners cover the distance twice, west to east and then east to west. Up and down, twisting toward all points of the compass, the psychedelic flow of the bricks was mesmerizing. I blinked a few times to better focus on what lay ahead of me.

I knew that I would not be able to run the Wall, but I thought I would be able to get into a rhythm while walking. I did not count on the bricks being so uneven in height, width, and depth. When I entered the Great Wall, the initial set of steps dropped sharply, some of the steps about 1.5 feet (0.5 meter) high and shallow. Others were only a few inches high and quite long. There is no easy rhythm in crossing these steps.

There are several watchtowers along the wall, providing shade and water. The first tower is about 100 meters above the entrance sign to the wall. We have climbed over 500 meters within the first 6.5 kilometers. The local villagers have carried water to the towers on their backs.

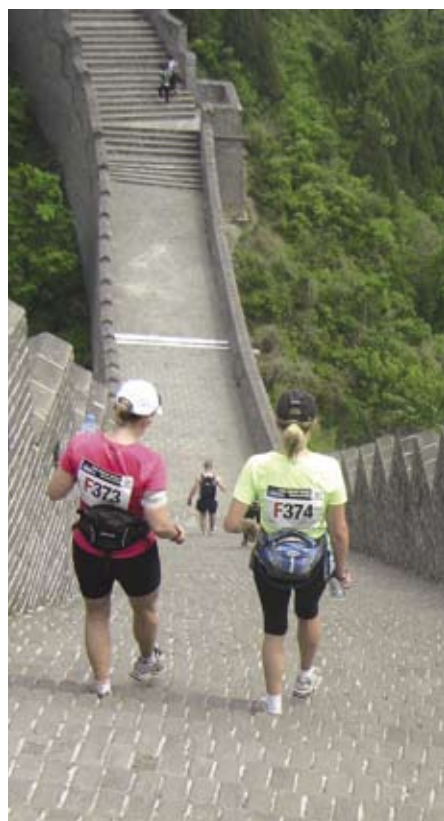
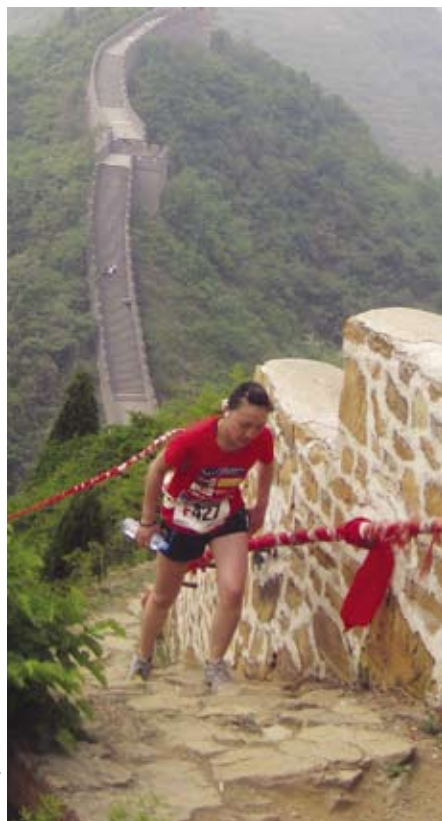
Ahead of us, the next tower. We are still climbing higher on the Wall; we haven't reached the highest point yet. With the undulation of the Wall, the next watchtower seemed well over a half mile away.

On our right, attached to the brick retaining wall, is a bar for us to grip; a few feet to our left is a drop of several hundred meters, with no retaining bricks or

wall—slow going at this part of the race. Runners cross this portion in single file, slowly and carefully stepping down.

Due to the steepness of this part of the Wall, inevitably there is a backlog of runners. Runners in all events were standing, waiting for their turn at moving down the steep descent. Unfortunately, marathoners lost precious time standing as participants in the 10K and half-marathon prevented many from moving expeditiously across the Wall the first time. Some paid a heavy price for this delay later in the day when they barely missed the cutoff for the second climb on the Wall.

After several ups and downs along the Wall, we reached a breathtaking point in the course. In front of us, barely visible in the distance through the haze, was Yin Yang Square. We had another steep, narrow descent, with no protection from a sharp drop off on the left. This was a goat path, uneven terrain and dirt



▲ Some parts of the Great Wall are dangerous, steep, and narrow, requiring handrails to maneuver (left). The steps of the Great Wall vary in height, width, and length—good for repelling invading marauders, but difficult for running during the marathon (right). Marathoners cross the Wall in both directions.



◀ Through the polluted haze, Yin Yang Square, the start/finish of the marathon, is visible. This view is from the 8K/34K marker, high on the Great Wall of China.

sections mixed in with the bricks. We went down 576 steps, with little to no protection. The only thing more daunting was seeing the 34K sign alongside the path reminding marathoners they would return this way in the opposite direction in 26 kilometers.

Once over the Wall the first time, we left Huangyaguan and were into the countryside. This is a part of China rarely seen by tourists. Over the next 26 kilometers, the course is run on a mixture of paved roads and dirt trails, through fields and villages, climbing through some of the mountainous regions of Tianjin Province before returning to tackle the Great Wall once more.

While not as awe inspiring as the Wall, these 26 kilometers provided some of the most memorable images from the trip. After departing Yin Yang Square, we were on the main road toward Beijing, with traffic flowing in both directions. Alongside the road were vendors with a variety of local fare.

After a half mile or so on the road, we turn off to a dirt path alongside a river. It is on this part of the course that runners can run for a while, making up time

spent on the Wall. The next 10 kilometers allow for running, but thoughts of the Wall and the initial 576 steep steps reinforce the need for caution; it is not wise to try to make up too much time on the flat parts of the course.

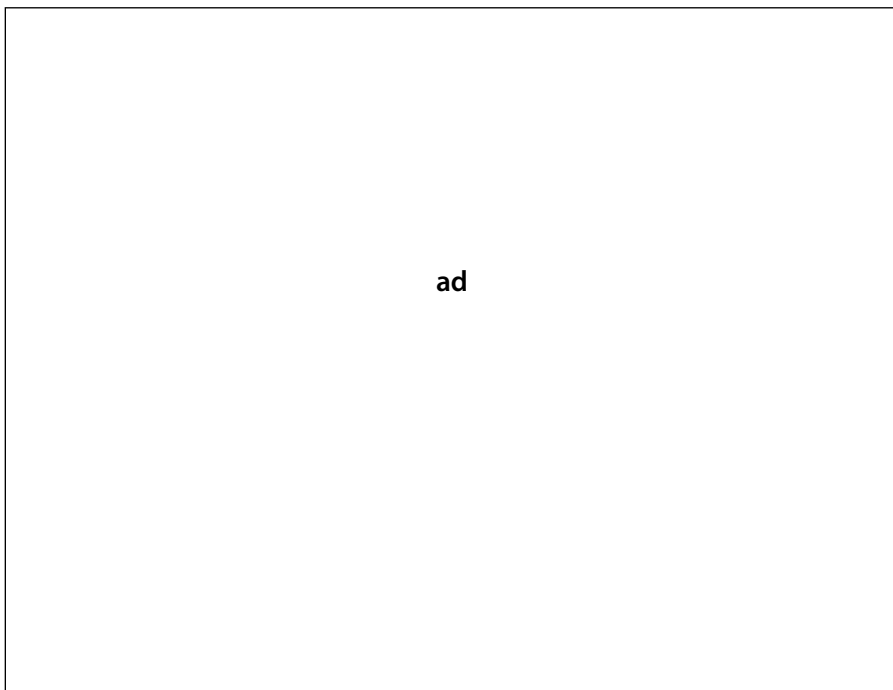
The next several kilometers bring runners through a series of villages. Guides in bright-blue-and-yellow jackets direct runners. *Ni hao* and *Xie xie* bring smiles and giggles from the locals in the villages.

Around 21 kilometers, the halfway point, we start to climb a well-paved road. As I climb and the road turns, I see the progress of the climb over my shoulder. Over the next three kilometers, we will ascend an additional 100 meters.

Even with smooth roads underfoot, thoughts of the second ascent on the Wall remain foremost in mind. I was well within the six-hour time limit to start the second climb over the Wall; this is the time to take in the countryside and the beauty of the course.

What goes up must come down. After the high point of the road in the village of Qingshanling, the course descends for several kilometers. Between 23 and 30 kilometers, there is a drop of over 250 meters and a total variation of over 300 meters.

The best part is that we are on the way home, back to Huangyaguan and the second visit to the Wall. This is another point on the course to bank some time, but



the descent is very steep. Running too fast here, even on good pavement, could cause sore quads later when you need to cross the Wall the second time.

The road surface varies from pavement to downhill sections of dirt and gravel. Some parts are steep and rutted, treacherous from three-wheeled vehicles used to transport crops and equipment through the country roads. If not careful, it is easy to twist an ankle or knee.

The kilometer markers click away, once more approaching Huangyaguan village. Now comes the second crossing of the Great Wall.


Shortly after leaving Yin Yang Square, runners start up the narrow steps and goat paths to the Wall. A steep uphill climb starts the return visit to the Great Wall, with an immediate climb of over 576 steps and a 10 percent incline. This is tougher on the return.

Runners ascend approximately 235 meters (about 770 feet) in the first half kilometer of the Wall. In less than five kilometers on this crossing of the Wall, we will have vertical gain and loss of 855 meters (about 2,800 feet). Mental and physical fortitude are necessary here.

The race finishes with a descent over the five-kilometer path we climbed at the start of the race. The quads strain on the downhill, but the reward is getting near.

At the bottom of the downhill, we run on flat ground for the last half mile, entering Yin Yang a final time today. Ahead is the finish line, a gold finisher's medal waiting.

The bus ride back to Beijing is a time of reflection, for savoring the accomplishment of running on the Great Wall of China, and for thinking of the people along the course and the sights seen. I have run endurance events on six continents (including Antarctica) and in each of the 50 states. This is one of the most difficult marathons in the world.

I think about the scenery and the living conditions of the Chinese, both in the countryside and in Beijing. I think of the similarities between our cultures and the differences, knowing that both can be bridged. Grateful for what life has presented me so far, I think to future adventures and smile. 



Courtesy of Brendan Courmane