

# Country Manners

By Erik Nilsson  
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**American Jim Spear is among the first expats settling in Beijing's outskirts, not far from the Great Wall.**

While the vast majority of foreigners in China settle in major metropolises, a growing number of expats are heading for the hinterlands. The epicenter for this trend in Beijing is Bohai Township, a northern suburban area where more than 20 foreigners now lease homes long term. About a dozen of these abodes are concentrated in the hamlet of Mutianyu, which has become something of a global village with the influx of internationals.

American Jim Spear was among the first to pioneer this suburban frontier. It began when he was visiting the nearby Great Wall with a foreign friend in the early 1990s and struck up conversation with a T-shirt vendor.

"I think he wanted me to buy a T-shirt; I got a house instead," Spear says.

The man's name was Li Fengquan. Today, he lives three houses down from Spear and is one of his best friends.

"I told him I envied him for living in such a beautiful spot with wonderfully clear air and that I had always dreamed of having a house under the Great Wall of China," Spear says. "He said he would help me find a house, and he did."

For the former senior vice-president of Chindex International, the Mutianyu home was at first just a holiday hideaway. "Eventually, when our kids were out of high school, I quit

my job in the city and moved full time to Mutianyu with my wife Liang Tang. It was a midlife crisis," Spear says.

The first order of business was renovating the house, which, Spear says, was "a lot of fun". "Friends liked what I was doing in Mutianyu and asked me to help them find similar properties and turn them into year-round getaways."

The partner of China Bound Ltd has helped more than a dozen foreigners find and fix up a holiday hideaway in the area.

Americans Lily Ng and husband David McIntyre say the house is perfect for their family, which is now based in Hong Kong. They plan to add a second child to the family soon as a playmate for their 3-year-old daughter Rhys, who was adopted from Jiangxi province in 2005. And their travel schedules often put the husband and wife in different countries from one another.

However, they usually return to Beijing about once a month for family time.

"This home is our haven and a bit of a root in China," Ng says. "I am ethnically Chinese; we all love living in China, and this root is important to our family."

For Julie Upton-Wang, her family's rural refuge provides a place reminiscent of where she grew up.

"I am a country girl and love living in the countryside," says the American, who grew up in Shelburne Falls, a small New England village of 3,000.

Originally, Upton-Wang and her husband Peiming Wang leased a house in River Garden, about 30 minutes north of downtown Beijing, to get away from the city. However, what might be the country's largest exhibition center will soon be constructed nearby.

Upton-Wang believes Mutianyu's national park status would safeguard it from such development. And she adores her new home.

"It sits under a majestic crown pine tree that is the pride of the village, as it has been labeled a 'National Treasure'," she says. "The open patio and flower garden across from the house was actually the village temple before the 'cultural revolution' (1966-76). We have been told that these two things give the house phenomenal feng shui."

Like most homes snapped up by foreigners, the place was renovated into a mix of the modern and traditional.

"Mere preservation is sterile; we look for living houses in living villages," Spear says.

Upton-Wang says they found a beautiful balance between preservation and renovation. "We kept the original kang (heatable brick or adobe bed common in North China) in my

son's bedroom, where he intends to invite all his friends for overnights," Upton-Wang says. "My husband loves to grill and designed a teppanyaki table for the kitchen."

Many of the villagers have taken inspiration from what they've seen their foreign friends doing and are upgrading their own homes.

"In my opinion, that is what improving rural lives and the urbanization of villages is all about," Spear says.

But the impact of these foreigners' presence in the village goes beyond home decoration, says Upton-Wang, who became Spear's partner in a local restaurant and blown-glass retailer known as the Schoolhouse.

"Some villagers have started their own businesses and have increased their business acumen with the use of computers and excel spreadsheets," she explains.

"They see opportunities above and beyond selling souvenirs on the Great Wall. There is an increased awareness about how to develop the living standard but maintain the essence of the village."

This is something Paul Ranjard, of France, says he has noticed since he acquired his country home.

"Mutianyu has rapidly changed for the better," says the 63-year-old, who has lived in China for more than a decade. "The authorities have engaged in lots of environmental improvements, and the tourism becomes more diversified and is significantly upgraded."

Spear says this is something the villagers appreciate about their foreign neighbors.

"We didn't start with a big philosophy of sustainable tourism, but we've evolved some pretty specific ideas on hiring and training local people, helping local people start their own businesses, creating craftworks, using existing footprints, following sound business principles, and encouraging visitors to stay longer and spend more money."

He explains the influx of foreigners has helped the villagers, many of whom considered leaving for the city, appreciate where they live.

"The peasants themselves want to escape from that rough life, even if they don't want to leave their ancestral homes; I think you can have a rustic yet comfortable living experience in the village, and the people I'm helping obviously feel the same way."

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American in Beijing

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At the same time, many of the foreigners with homes in Mutianyu say they have learned a lot from their time among the villagers.

"A village is a different world, and I guess the gap between city people and country people is a reality in all countries, including France," says Ranjard, who has lived in China for more than a decade. "The gap is, of course, more obvious in China, with cultural and economic differences being more visible."

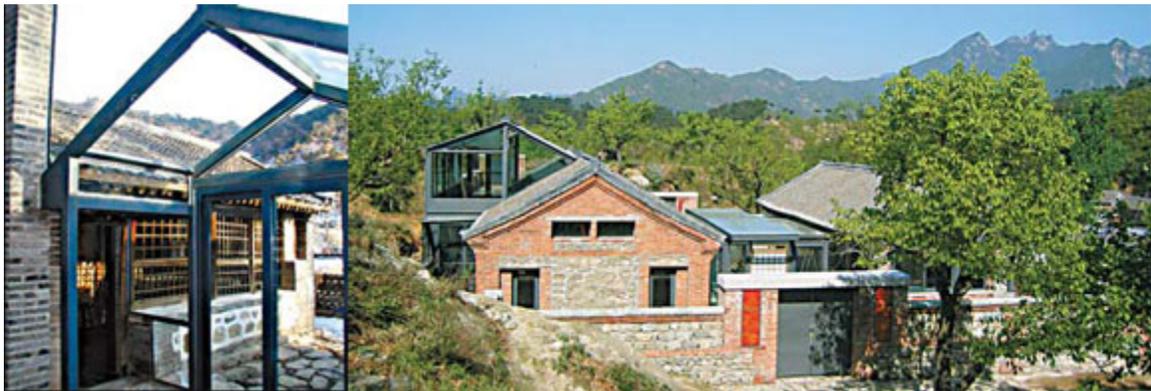
Upton-Wang says this is one of the reasons she enjoys bringing foreign friends to the village.

She recalls one visiting group of women who asked about countryside weddings.

"They had never really met anyone who had experienced this," she says. "One elderly Chinese woman laughed when asked if she was carried in a fancy palanquin: 'He was too cheap; I got to be carried home to his family by a donkey'," the woman told them.

Over the past two years, Upton-Wang has spearheaded the establishment of a sister village relationship between Shelburne Falls and Mutianyu, which was the first between China and the United States.

"Frankly, (the villages are) not that different," Upton-Wang says. "People in my hometown are incredibly sincere, proud of their village, welcoming hosts to those who choose to visit and yet charmingly stubborn in their own set ways. I find the same in Mutianyu."



**Left and right: A local house is renovated into a mix of the modern and traditional. Photos by Wang Ru**