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WEDNESDAY, 4 FEBRUARY 2009

## Eco Lives: James H. Spear, Jr.



James H. Spear, Jr.

## Welcome to Travel Eco

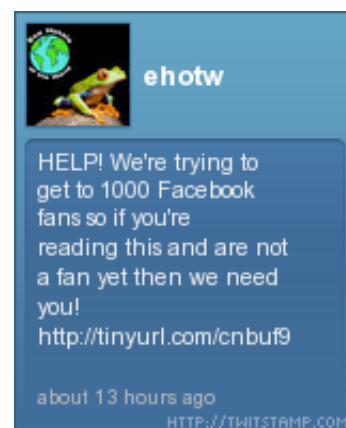
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I have been resident in China since January 1986. In the Spring of that year I first came to Mutianyu Great Wall as a casual visitor. I was entranced by the dramatic, craggy mountains and the impossible construction of the Wall. Exploring the pine forests, orchards, and tiny villages in the area was the perfect antidote to downtown Beijing, where I lived and worked. On one visit to Mutianyu in the early 1990s I sat on a rock to rest after walking down from the Wall. A local guy selling tee-shirts struck up a conversation with me. I think he wanted me to buy a tee-shirt but I bought a house instead.

Actually, as we were chatting I told him how much I envied him to be able to live in such a beautiful natural environment with fresh air and blue skies and that one of my dreams had always been to be able to live under the Great Wall. He immediately said, I'll help you find a place. And he did. As a "laowai" I would never have found my way into a Chinese village to acquire a home but it was just this accidental, magical encounter that changed my life.

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For many years our house in Mutianyu was a weekend retreat but some years ago when our kids were off to university my wife and I decided to live full time in the village. The first thing I did was rebuild our peasant's house into something suitable for year-round living. I finally got my Great Wall view study and a view shower to boot. Friends liked the house and one thing led to another and now I've designed and built over 20 homes in the area for foreigners and Chinese alike, including the guest houses we are now able to offer as The Schoolhouse Rental Homes.

I'm afraid to say that we got into the tourism business just as accidentally as I found my house here. When I moved out here full-time the village mayor sat me down and told me that in case I hadn't noticed the village folk were having a hard time. Jobs were scarce and the community with 500 years of history was being pulled apart as the young people just moved away. He told me they had welcomed me into their village and that it was about time for me to give something back. He said I was a rich foreigner and I should make an investment in Mutianyu. So I had to be kicked in the pants.

With the unanimous agreement of the village council we took a long-term lease on the abandoned village primary school and have revamped it into an art glass workshop, and art gallery, and a restaurant. Over time we've added two other restaurants and a lodging business and also are spreading our projects into other nearby villages. We didn't start out with a big philosophy but over time we're developing a very concrete sense of what it means to be sustainable in the context of a local community. We've gotten a lot of attention and support from the Beijing government as the authorities here are grappling with how to deliver better life chances to rural folk without the countryside emptying out, a dilemma that recurs all over the developing world.

Anyway, I've always believed that the perfect is the enemy of the good enough so we are simply persevering and making incremental improvements in our approaches to social and environmental sustainability. The process of getting certified with 3 Green Stars by Eco Hotels of the World gave me ideas how we can continue to do better, so now we're shooting for 4 stars!

You can see Jim's property here.

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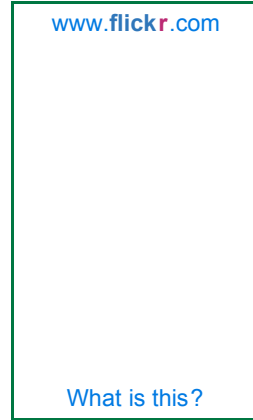
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