



Rank outsider

The famous terracotta army may be the reason most tourists venture to Xian, but **Bruce Holmes** finds the historic city has much more to offer.

The contrast is striking. In the foreground stands one of the many watchtowers that line the medieval wall of Xian, a former imperial Chinese capital; in the distance an apartment building under construction rises skywards.

During the Tang dynasty (AD618-907), when the city was known as Chang'an, there was a wall here. It was rebuilt by Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of the Ming dynasty, in 1378. Almost 15km long and surrounded by a moat, it is now one of the best preserved fortified city walls in the world, standing 12 metres high and 12 to 18 metres thick.

A regular venue for cultural events, the wall is also a good place from which to gain a perspective of the city. You can walk along it, but tourists are more often seen on bicycles. Having been designed to facilitate the speedy movement of troops in times of attack, the wall offers plenty of room for manoeuvre.

At both ends of the city stands a gate, with the South

Gate being the busiest. Within the walls near the southern entrance is the Forest of Stone Steles Museum, of particular interest to students of Chinese language and history. Here, stone tablets engraved with calligraphy, painting and historical records are on display.

At the centre of the old city stands the Bell Tower, built in 1384 under orders from Zhu. It served as a platform from which to survey the surrounding countryside, to provide an early warning of an attack by enemies. These days, the surrounding shopping malls are the draw for many visitors and locals, but the well-preserved wooden tower is worth a look; a wonderful example of Ming-style architecture, with three layers of eaves and an internal spiral staircase.

Its sister building, the Drum Tower, is nearby. Built in 1380, it holds 24 drums linked to the Chinese agricultural calendar and since 1996 has been home to what is reputed to be the largest drum in China.

Next to the Drum Tower is Muslim Street, famous for food such as steamed stuffed buns and fruit pies with persimmon. Xian has a Muslim population of 50,000, descended from 7th-century Persian and Afghan traders who did business along the Silk Road before marrying Han women and settling in the city. Northwest of the tower is the Great Mosque, originally constructed in AD742 without the domes and minarets common on mosques elsewhere.

The attractions continue outside the old city walls. At a tea house on Xiao Zhai Dong Road, reached by exiting through the South Gate, an elegant young woman explains the intricacies of various teas. Ginseng oolong tea is good for the skin and stomach, she says, and the black lychee tea was said to maintain the beauty of the emperor's concubines.

Nearby is the Shaanxi History Museum. With Xian having been the capital during dynasties spanning 1,100