



Clockwise from above left: Xian's impressive fortified wall is the best vantage point from which to gain an overview of the city; the terracotta warriors, Xian's top attraction; the Small Wild Goose Pagoda has survived 70 earthquakes since it was built in AD707; the city wall was built for the speedy movement of troops in times of conflict; a cultural display at the South Gate.

years, this is very much a museum about the history of ancient China. Exhibits are arranged chronologically and walking from one hall to the next gives an understanding of successive dynasties. One highlight is the model of the city during the Tang era and preceding Sui period.

A few blocks to the southeast is the unusually named Big Wild Goose Pagoda, a structure rising 64 metres towards the skies. It was constructed in AD652, during the reign of Tang emperor Gaozong, to house an array of Sanskrit scriptures and relics brought to China by a prominent Buddhist scholar, Xuanzang, when he returned from a 17-year journey to India along the Silk Road. There is a sense of peace here, focused on the statue of the Buddha serenely seated in a square next to the pagoda.

And the origin of the name? According to legend, monks of one branch of Buddhism, who were then allowed to eat meat, couldn't find any. When their prayers were answered by a wild goose dropping from the sky before them, they decided it was a sign they should be more holy and stop eating meat.

Together with the "big" is the Small Wild Goose Pagoda, which affords views over Xian. The pagoda has survived 70 earthquakes since AD707, the year in which it was built, apparently because its base is made from packed earth shaped like a hemisphere, which allows pressure to be evenly distributed. The scenic area here includes a museum, a temple and gardens – and something rather unusual: stone posts engraved with

the heads of gothic-style figures that were once used for tying horses to.

Of course, no trip to Xian would be complete without an excursion 35km outside the city. It was here, in a field in 1974, that peasants uncovered fragments of terracotta warriors while digging for water, leading to one of the greatest of all archaeological finds. Emperor Qin Shihuang, who had been the first to unify China, in 221BC, wanted protection on his journey to the afterlife and had placed around his mausoleum an estimated 8,000 "warriors", accompanied by horses and chariots. All but one of the warriors were unearthed broken, presumably victims of the peasant uprising four years after the emperor's death, so what visitors see now is the result of painstaking reconstruction work by scientists and archaeologists.

Faces from 2,000 years ago – each warrior was given a unique look – greet the multitudes who travel to Xian to look into the eyes of the past.

Getting there: Dragonair (www.dragonair.com) flies from Hong Kong to Xian. Rooms at the four-star Bell Tower Hotel cost from HK\$365 a night. See www.asiarooms.com.