



## Wall-to-Wall Carpet of Nature

THE COMMUNE BY THE GREAT WALL IS AN IDYLIC GETAWAY, BOASTING A COLLECTION OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE DESIGNED BY 12 ASIAN ARCHITECTS INCLUDING SINGAPOREAN, TAN KAY NGEE. Story by JULIANA LOH



**Touted as one of the world's** top boutique hotels, the Commune by the Great Wall is run by the Kempinski Hotel Group, and the brainchild of visionary entrepreneur, Zhang Xin, the co-founder and co-CEO of SOHO China, a Beijing-based real-estate developer. Her bold initiative brought together 12 Asian architects to explore the vast potential of creating understated luxury in a unique space, while retaining its unique attributes. A challenge that was clearly met head-on when the Commune by the Great Wall won a special architectural prize at the 2002 Venezia Biennale.

Initially, the project was considered commercially unviable with only 12 villas, so another 30 were built, bringing the total to 42 villas and reopened as a hotel in 2006. Fairly accessible, it is an hour and a half's drive from Beijing's City Centre; chartered flights and helicopters can be arranged to Badaling's private airport, a 15 minutes' drive from the Commune.

Set against the backdrop of one of the world's ancient wonders, this is a



perfect villa getaway with family and friends, to enjoy quality time without distractions, and to soak up the historical ambience of the area. With a total of 236 rooms and suites, the villas have different characteristics, and are discreetly dispersed on the hill, along the steep slopes of the picturesque valley.

As you relish your time away from the hustle and bustle of city life and the demands of the daily grind, the secluded setting offers you indulgence at Anantara Spa, a workout at the gym and opportunities to explore contemporary art at the Commune gallery.

Nature-lovers, can enjoy long walks along the commercial side of the Great Wall, which offers breathtaking views. Those seeking adventure can hike up another side of the Wall at Mutianyu, and toboggan down the hill. Taking the cable car up is also an option, as it also gives plenty of fantastic photo opportunities as you enjoy the view without straining to catch your breath. ▶

- ▶ Go a little off the beaten path and wander away from the confines of the Commune to stumble upon the villages of the Beijing suburbs in the vicinity. One of the loveliest things about Beijing is its diversity and unusual landscapes of the exceptionally modern right alongside the rural areas. This is prevalent throughout the city, echoing the nation's growing rich/poor divide. The friendly villagers are likely to invite you into their humble homes for tea or dinner as you greet them.

The best time to visit is in September and October when the air is fresh and cool; ideal for barbeques on the rooftop. Beijing summers can get warm and stifling, while the winters, bitterly cold. Yet, for those who don't mind the biting chill, the winter landscape by the Great Wall could also be the perfect Christmas getaway with friends; stay indoors by the fireplace to enjoy a stunning view of snow over the Great Wall meandering into the distance.



Corporate events and seminars can also be hosted here which comes complete with meeting facilities and the ability to host up to 600 for banquets that offer Chinese, Western and Southeast Asian cuisine. Those intravenously attached to their Blackberries and Macs, will be delighted to take note of the full wireless and mobile connectivity.

The Commune Club takes up an area of 4,109 square meters. The two-storey reinforced concrete construction sits on the junction of valleys on the south and east, facing the Great Wall on the west, gifted with the most beautiful landscape of the entire neighborhood. It also serves as a multi-functional public area for dining, parties, and other events. It houses a courtyard restaurant, a terrace lounge, a ballroom, a gallery and a private cinema which can accommodate 20 to 40 people.

The Ballroom is 856 square meters in size and has complete conference facilities; able to seat up to 500 people for dinner or accommodate 800 for a cocktail party. [www.communebythegreatwall.com/en/](http://www.communebythegreatwall.com/en/)



## MUST-VISITS IN BEIJING

### The Legation Quarters

Currently the talk of the town, the man behind Three on The Bund in Shanghai, brings a similar concept to Beijing at the Legation Quarters that stands next to Tian An Men and the Forbidden City. Formerly the Qing dynasty American legation in 1903, Handel Lee introduces a stunning compound with a theatre, art gallery and posh eateries with Michelin-rated chefs. [www.legationquarter.com](http://www.legationquarter.com)

### 798 Art District

As Chinese contemporary art takes the world by storm, art-lovers should consider making a trip to the now-defunct Bauhaus-styled factory turned art district, housing over 300 galleries. Dashanzi is commonly known as 798 Art District with international exhibits from artists and fashion designers, including Comme des Garçons, and Martin Margiela. Admission to most exhibitions is free, save the celebrated UCCA (Ullens Centre of Contemporary Art) that opened late 2007. [www.ucca.org.cn/](http://www.ucca.org.cn/)

### Sunset at Houhai on Water

Hire a boat at Houhai for a leisurely afternoon as you watch the sun set over the lake and *hutongs* in the old quarters of Beijing. Battery-powered motorboats cost from RMB60 (with RMB240 deposit) for an hour, with rowing boats costing even less.

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## The Shape of Ideas

With rapid urban development taking place in China in the recent years, many international architects have come this way to make it their playground. This year's Olympics have given the capital city monumental buildings like Rem Koolhaas's CCTV Tower, Herzog & de Meuron's Bird's nest stadium and PTW's Water Cube amongst others. The Commune sparkles with a different Asian contemporary flavour with its myriad of unique linear designs and an interesting mix of styles by renowned Asian architects of diverse backgrounds.

Designed by architects from Hong Kong, China, Japan, Thailand and Singapore, each distinctively-designed villa offers spectacular views of the Great Wall and the vast landscape beyond. One can also expect lush pieces decorating the interiors of the 12 main villas, furnished with items by the likes of Philippe Starck, Karim Rashid, Marc Newson and Michael Young.

Award-winning Singaporean architect, Tan Kay Ngee, tells us a little more about his project at the Commune – 'The Twins'.

### *Q: What inspired the design of The Twins?*

**A:** The design of house number nine started with a quadrangle – a typical layout of traditional courtyard house in Beijing. By breaking it into halves, the result was interesting – the then-enclosed internal square allowed the landscape of the external world to creep in, giving us a new way of looking at the relationship of the courtyard, the built form, and the environment around it.

The 'L' portions in two different sizes of the house had been referred to unofficially as 'China' and 'Taiwan' which is also known as 'the two (twin) brothers' 两兄弟 by the mainland Chinese. This pun is intriguing, giving a twist in its meaning with a nice sense of humour that is rarely found in architecture – which is usually far too serious!

I still wish the developer had followed our specifications more closely by using local stones from the ground excavated next to the Great Wall for example, to give the intended expression of solidness to the appearance of the house... but that is another story..

### *Q: How long did it take to design and complete the entire commune project?*

**A:** The designing took about four months, with construction drawings another four months, and building work roughly about 10 months.

### *Q: Would you have done anything differently?*

**A:** The design would still very much be the same. However, some of the details and specifications were not realised as I had envisioned them, and it would be nice to see them in exact intention if we were to redo this.

*Q: Thematically, how did you design the twins, taking into consideration the different seasonal landscapes by the Great wall?*

*A:* As the landscaping flows through the courtyard and the sense of being close to the surrounding hills and the Great Walls are very much the main focus of the house – like houses in a Chinese Landscape painting – the owner of the house is encouraged by the design to engage with nature.

*Q: How did you approach local and international projects, given that they require rather different approaches depending on seasons, landscapes etc?*

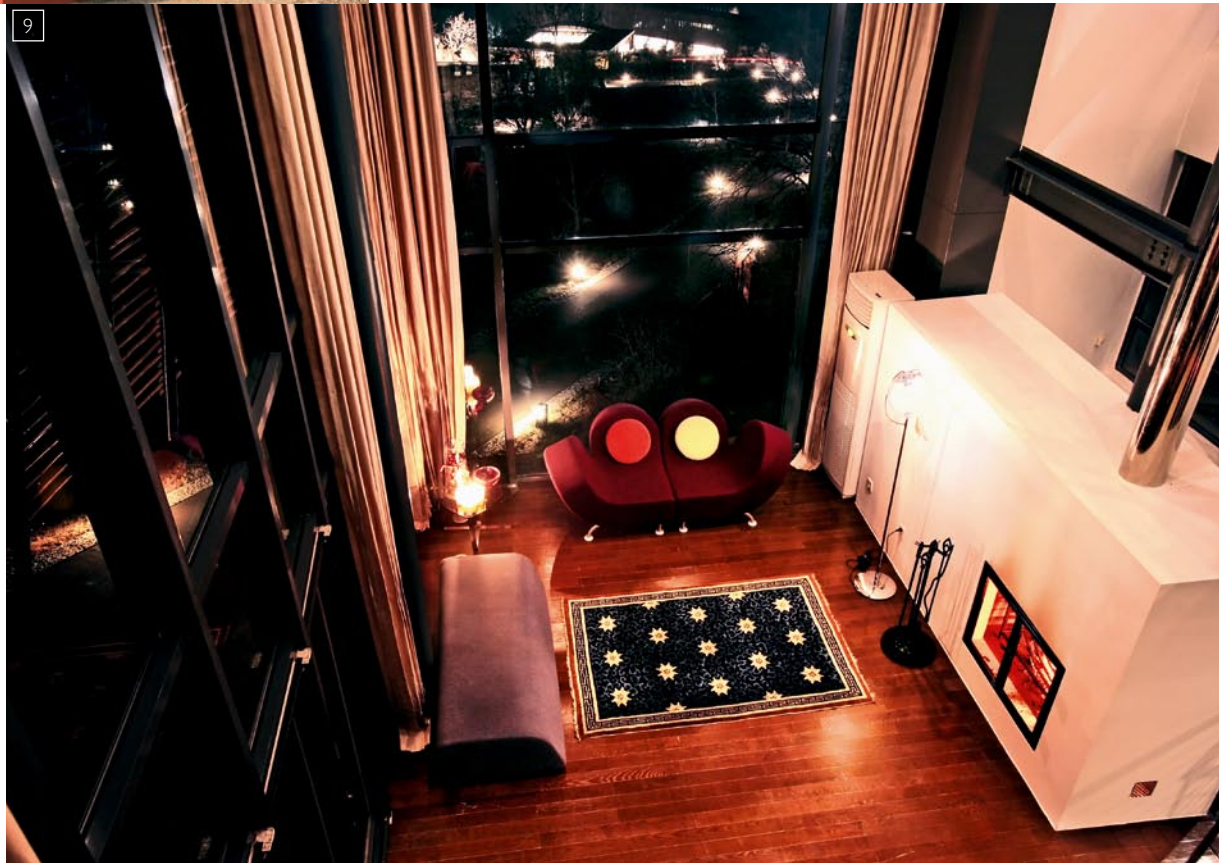
*A:* I am very interested in the weather conditions of Southeast Asia. Intangible elements such as sunlight, humidity, rainfall can be dealt with innovatively in the process of design; considerations would suggest shape and form to the architecture being created.

I am also attracted to tropical flora and plants these days. In order to experiment and study how tropical plants grow and add colours to their surrounding, I have started keeping a private garden next to my office.

My other conscious effort is to search for a language of architecture that is both Chinese and Southeast Asian, avoiding the clichés of the tiled roof or decorative motifs, but rather creating something that is reminiscent of original sources, and yet is something that is modern and inventive; belonging to us.

*Q: As an architect, what are your views on the vastly changing architectural landscape in China, particularly the question of sustainable design and 'green architecture'?*

*A:* We are currently working on another villas project in Hangzhou. I think China is no different than Singapore or UK or Japan. It is catching up [with global trends] very quickly, and people are receptive to new ideas and aware of various environmental issues.



**1.** View of *Spilt House* in the day.

**2.** *Suitcase House* under the starry night.

**3.** Front view of *See & Be Seen*.

**4.** *Furniture House* glistening under the sun.

**5.** Interior of *Forest House*.

**6.** Dining area of *Bamboo House*.

**7&8.** *Cantilever House* at by night and day.

**9.** Living area of *Distorted Courtyard House*.