

TALES & TRAILS



MYSTERY, HISTORY & MAJESTY



Yungang Grottoes

Vast, majestic and around 1,500 years old, the Yungang Grottoes in Datong display Buddhist art and are a testament to East-West cultural exchanges in the 5th century. Carved into the mountain's natural terrain and stretching about 1 kilometer from east to west, this UNESCO World Heritage Site contains 45 major caves and 209 affiliated caves that house more than 59,000 Buddhist statues. Compared to many other grotto temples in China, the Yungang Grottoes exhibit the most exotic influences. In the later caves of Yungang, visitors can view the local adaptation and secularization of Buddhist art in ancient China.



Xuankong Temple

In Datong's Hunyuan county, the towering Hengshan Mountain cradles the Xuankong Temple, or the Hanging Temple, which appears delicately suspended against a nearly vertical cliff face, as if supported by only 30 pillars. Up close, one can see how ancient wisdom ingeniously enables the temple to "hang" on the cliff 60 meters aboveground — equivalent to a 20-story building — for an astonishing 1,500 years. Within a limited space of some 300 square meters, the temple complex comprises more than 40 halls that honor Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian cultures and showcase the creativity of overcoming the challenging terrain.



Huayan Temple

The nearly 1,000-year-old Huayan Temple in Datong is one of the largest and best-preserved temple complexes from the Liao (916-1125) and Jin (1115-1234) dynasties. Built in 1038, it was destroyed due to war and rebuilt in 1140. The complex features characteristics of the Khitan people and bears witness to the integration of the nomadic and Han cultures. Historically, multiple ethnic groups successively established regimes in Datong, and the Huayan Temple, with its architecture, sculptures and murals, exemplifies the extensive interactions among ancient ethnic groups and reflects the profoundness and inclusiveness of Chinese culture.



Yingxian's pagoda

At 67.31 meters tall, the Sakyamuni Pagoda of the Fogong Temple in Yingxian county, also known as the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda, is one of the world's oldest and tallest of its kind. Built during the Liao Dynasty (916-1125) and later restored, the pagoda has withstood severe earthquakes and political turbulence for nearly a millennium. It has five visible stories and four hidden ones, with each visible story housing Liao Dynasty statues. The octagonal timber-framed structure features nearly 60 types of *dougong* (interlocking brackets), which adorn the structure while bearing the load for the columns and providing buffering against external forces.



Mount Wutai

Mount Wutai, located in Wutai county, is one of China's four sacred Buddhist mountains. Since the 1st century, many monasteries have been built against the backdrop of the grand natural landscape, making it one of the largest ancient Buddhist architectural complexes in the world. The architecture, along with its sculptures, stone carvings, murals and calligraphy works, bears witness to the local adaptation of Buddhism and its spread throughout East Asia over the past 2,000 years. The complex includes Foguang Temple, with its eastern main hall being one of the four Tang Dynasty (618-907) buildings still surviving.



Pingyao

Shuanglin Temple and Zhenguo Temple are key components of the Ancient City of Pingyao, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Shuanglin Temple was built in the 6th century, and the existing structures were rebuilt during the Yuan (1271-1368), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. It's known for housing more than 2,000 painted sculptures, created mainly during the Ming Dynasty, which vividly depict Buddhist anecdotes and ancient productions and lifestyles. Zhenguo Temple hosts one of the earliest timber-framed structures found in China. The Wanfo Shrine, built in the 10th century, is known for housing rare painted sculptures of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907-960) period.



Xiaoxitian

Xiaoxitian, or the Thousand Buddhas Monastery, in Xixian county was built in the late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) atop a mountain resembling the shape of a phoenix. Constructed along the mountain's contours, it contains various two-story buildings arranged amid winding paths. Its northern library houses more than 7,000 volumes of Ming Dynasty Buddhist scriptures. Another highlight of Xiaoxitian is its 170-square-meter main hall that houses nearly 2,000 painted sculptures. These gilded statues of Buddhist figures, landscapes, architecture, plants and animals, the largest being 3 meters tall and the smallest as tiny as a thumb, demonstrate maximalist, luxurious aesthetics reminiscent of nirvana.



Feihong Pagoda

Amid the verdant trees of suburban Hongtong county seat sits Guangsheng Temple, a complex of Yuan (1271-1368) and Ming (1368-1644) structures. Built in the 2nd century and given its current name in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), it has been destroyed and rebuilt several times. Atop the mountain stands the 13-story octagonal Feihong Pagoda, or "Flying Rainbow Pagoda". As its name suggests, the 500-year-old tower is adorned with colored glaze motifs featuring Buddhist figures, animals, flowers and jewels, with wind chimes hanging from the eaves of each tier. At the foot of the mountain, the Shuishen Temple is known for its Yuan Dynasty murals, particularly one depicting a stage performance of the time.



Yongle Palace

Yongle Palace was built in the 13th century in Yongle town of Yongji county in Yuncheng city as a dedication to Lyu Dongbin, a revered Taoist sage. In 1959, its structures and murals were moved to their current site in Ruicheng county for preservation. The large-scale Taoist temple complex is particularly known for its 700-year-old murals that cover about 1,000 square meters. In the Sangqing Hall, a splendid mural measuring 94.68 meters long and 4.26 meters tall showcases a grand scene of nearly 300 sages paying homage to supreme deities. The imposing composition, with each figure radiating vitality and displaying unique costumes and facial characteristics, is an important masterpiece in China's painting history.



Wanrong's towers

In *Black Myth: Wukong*, two pavilions stand facing each other from a distance, their prototypes made from Feiyun Tower and Qifeng Tower in Wanrong county. The Feiyun Tower in Dongyue Temple is a Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) timber-framed structure distinguished by its unique construction techniques, load-bearing structures and artistic design. The 23.19-meter-tall tower has four central pillars extending from the ground to the top floor. The tower's name *feiyun*, meaning "floating clouds", is derived from the 345 clusters of *dougong* that exhibit diverse shapes. The Qifeng Tower is known for a stele inscribed with a homonymous poem written by Emperor Wudi of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 24).

Cultural circuit



Xuankong Temple appears delicately suspended against a nearly vertical cliff face in Hunyuan county, Datong city, Shanxi province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY.

Some heritage sites in Shanxi province featured in the video game *Black Myth: Wukong*. PHOTOS BY ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY AND PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



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If you go

Reaching the popular destinations in Shanxi province requires approximately three hours by high-speed train from Beijing to Taiyuan, the provincial capital; two hours to Datong; and four hours to Pingyao Ancient City. In addition to the Shanxi Museum, where visitors can get an overview of the province's history, the Taiyuan Northern Qi Dynasty Mural Museum, built on the site of a 6th-century official's tomb, features vivid wall paintings in their original settings. The Linfen Museum is a

must-go for bronze enthusiasts.

The Great Wall winds over 1,000 kilometers across Shanxi, with the earliest relics standing for over 2,000 years. Xinzhou's Yanmen Pass, Yangguan's Nianzhi Pass, and the Laoniou Bend at the border of Shanxi and the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, where the Great Wall and Yellow River meet, are among the most popular attractions.

The annual Pingyao International Film Festival and

China Pingyao International Photography Festival exhibit diverse intellectual works against the backdrop of the centuries-old Pingyao Ancient City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Don't miss the variety of gourmet treats, especially flour-based foods and dishes enhanced with Shanxi's iconic mature vinegar.

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