The Terracotta Army — Why and How They Were Made

The Terracotta Army was constructed to accompany the tomb of China's First Emperor as an afterlife guard. The thousands of detailed life-size models represent the army that united China at the end of the Warring States Period (476–221 BC). They were molded in parts, fired, then assembled and painted.

It is considered one of the greatest archaeological sites in the world, and one of the greatest discoveries of the 20th century.

Also Read How to Visit the Terracotta Army — an Insider's Guide

Quick Facts

- **Attraction name:** The Qin Tomb Terracotta Warriors and Horses
- **Chinese:** 秦陵兵马俑 Qínlíng Bīngmǎyǒng /chin-ling bing-maa-yong/
- **Features:** hundreds of life-size model soldiers, horses, and chariots in battle array
- **Construction:** 246–206 BC. With the tomb of Emperor Qin Shihuang it took 720,000 builders.
- **Time needed:** half a day
- **Suited for:** history and Chinese culture enthusiasts
- **Physical requirements:** low (indoor sightseeing); wheelchair-accessible lifts and corridors are provided

More Facts You Probably Don't Know about the Terracotta Army

**Why and How Were the Terracotta Warriors Made?**

First Emperor Qin (/chin/), from whom China gets its name, ordered the creation of this army of terracotta statues.
6 Steps to Make a Terracotta Warrior

You will find that some terracotta figures are without heads, but their bodies are complete. Studies of their portions have revealed that the heads, arms, and torsos of the figures were created separately and then assembled.

It is believed that most warriors' heads and arms were produced in molds as separate modules. After assembly, clay was applied to the surface of the sculptures so that artists could model the faces and hairdos individually.

Then, the figures were fired in kilns to make the clay hard and durable. Afterwards, they were painted with bright colors.

As a result, every figure looks different and unique, just like real people do. After 2,000 years of erosion and humidity, most figures have lost their original vivid color.
How They Were Discovered

The Terracotta Army figures’ excavation is regarded as one of the greatest discoveries of the 20th century. It had lain underground for more than 2000 years before farmers digging a well in 1974 uncovered what is now considered one of the greatest archaeological sites in the world.

The first part of the Terracotta Army site to be discovered was named Vault One. In 1976, two other vaults were uncovered about 20 meters away, and were named Vault Two and Vault Three.

The tomb is a treasury for the Chinese people and for the whole world. In December 1987, UNESCO selected the Tomb of the First Emperor (including the Terracotta Army Vaults) as a World Cultural Heritage Site.

The History of the Terracotta Army
Have more questions about the Terracotta Army? Read FAQs About the Terracotta Warriors and Visiting Them.

**Major Attractions inside the Museum**

The museum mainly consists of three vaults and an exhibition hall: Vault One, Vault Two, Vault Three, and The Exhibition Hall of the Bronze Chariots. (Vault one is usually crowded with tourists. According to our experienced guide, the best views are from the front of the vault around the corners. See map below.)
The vaults are arrayed as the buried army was in strict accordance with the ancient directives on the Art of War: facing east towards the ancient enemies of Qin State (and towards the entrance), with Vault One on the right flank, Vault Two on the left flank, and Vault Three a command post at the rear.

Click to see The museum travel information including the best time to visit and the recommended route map.

**Vault One - 2,000 Warriors Displayed**

Vault One displays about 2,000 warriors

Vault One is the largest and most impressive — the size of an airplane hangar. It is believed to contain over 6,000 terracotta figures of soldiers and horses, but less than 2,000 are on display. All the most impressive Terracotta Army pictures were taken in Vault One.

All soldiers and horses face east in a rectangular array, each one either armed long spear, dragger or halberd. The vanguard appears to be three rows of infantry who stand at the easternmost end of the army. Close behind is the main force of armored soldiers holding weapons, accompanied by 38 horse-driven chariots.

On the southern, northern, and western side there stand one row of figures serving as the army's defense wing. Standing in front of such a grand ancient army array, one would feel the ground shake to the footsteps of the advancing soldiers.

Every figure differs in facial features and expression, clothing, hairstyle, and gestures, providing abundant and detailed artifacts for the study of the military, cultural, and economic history of that period.

This vault opened to visitors in 1979. It measures about 210 meters long and 62 meters wide and the bottom of the pit varies from 4.5 meters to 6.5 meters below ground level. Ten earthen walls were built at intervals of 2.5 meters, forming 9 circling corridors.

**Vaults Two - Uncovers the Mystery of the Ancient Army Array**

Warriors and horses in vault two form a rigorous battle array.

Excavation and restoration is still ongoing at vaults two and three.

Excavated in 1976, Vault Two stands about 20 meters north to Vault One. As the highlight of the whole mausoleum, it uncovers the mystery of the ancient army array. It consists of four units, measuring 94 meters east to west and 84 meters south to north and 5 meters deep., forming a 6000 sq. meter built-up area.

The first unit contains rows of kneeling and standing archers; the second one is a chariot war array; the third unit consists of mixed forces with infantry, chariot and trooper standing in rectangular array; and the last one includes numerous troopers holding weapons. The four units form a rigorous battle array.
Vault Three - Represents the Command Post

Vault Three is the smallest one. There are only 68 terracotta figures, many of which are without heads. It's obvious that Vault Three represents the command post, as all the figures are officials.

The Exhibition of Bronze Chariots

Bronze Chariots

The two bronze carriages displayed in the hall were discovered 20 meters from the west side of the Tomb of Qin Shihuang in December 1980, and were elaborately restored before exhibition.

The carriages have about 3,400 parts each and were driven by four horses. The second one is 3.17 meters long and 1.06 meters high. The bronze horses vary from 65 cm to 67 cm high and 120 cm long. Each weighs 1,234 kg in total.

They were mainly made of bronze, but there were 1,720 pieces of golden and silver ornaments, weighting 7 kg, on each carriage. The carriages were so well-made, and so vivid, that they boast being the best-preserved and having the highest rank among the earliest known bronze relics in China. These chariots are the biggest pieces of ancient bronzeware ever found in the world.

See the Terracotta Warriors in Detail — Categories, Distinctive Features, and Weaponry

Three Major Categories

In the three pits, approximately 8,000 life-size, vivid in battle formation were revealed in the course of excavation — a whole army, which would accompany its emperor into immortality.

The excavated terracotta figures fall into three major categories: infantry, cavalry, and charioteers.

The infantry can be further divided into subcategories, including officers of high, middle, and low rank, light-armed and heavy-armed foot soldiers, and standing and kneeling archers.

The charioteers can be further divided into two subcategories: chariot drivers and chariot warriors.
**The Categories of the Terracotta Warriors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infantry</th>
<th>Charioteers</th>
<th>Cavalry</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>officers</td>
<td>soldiers</td>
<td>chariot drivers</td>
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<tr>
<td>high rank officers</td>
<td>lightly-armed foot soldiers</td>
<td>chariot warriors</td>
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<td>middle rank officers</td>
<td>heavily-armed foot soldiers</td>
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<td>low rank officers</td>
<td>standing archers</td>
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<td>kneeling archers</td>
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**Distinctive Features: Facial Shapes, Hairstyles, and Dressing**

Every figure differs in its facial features and expression, clothing, and hairstyle in accordance with its rank.

A figure with a '目'-shaped face

**Facial Shapes**

Analyses show that the facial shapes of the terracotta figures can be roughly **classified into eight types**, and each shape resembles a Chinese character: 目, 国, 用, 甲, 田, 由, 申, and 风. For example, '目'-shaped faces look relatively narrow and long, and have small features.

**Hairstyles**

Hairstyles in ancient times were not only part of people's lifestyles but also a reflection of their social status. The hairstyles of the terracotta warriors are **different based on their ranks** and arm of the services.
The different hairstyles of the Terracotta Warriors

The hairstyles of the figures can be roughly divided into two types. The first type includes figures wearing their hair in a bun on the right side of the head. The other type depicts figures wearing their hair in a plait and forming a bun at the top of the head that was then covered with a cloth cap.

Bands, ribbons, or pins were used for typing up their hair.

**Dressing**

The clothing of the terracotta figures is different. You can tell the rank and arm of military service of each figure from its dressing. Let us take some figures as examples:

The **general** wears two layers of robes beneath an armored tunic that protects his chest, back, and shoulders. He wears square-toed shoes, which are lightweight and curve upwards at the front. Only one general was found in Pit 1 and two in Pit 2.

A cavalryman

**Armored warriors** wear robes covered by turtleneck, heavily armored capes designed to protect their chests, backs, and shoulders.

**Cavalrymen** wear pillbox hats, neck scarves, and light body armor to the front and back. Their shoes are soft and round at the toes so as not to injure their mounts.

**Chariot drivers** have extra protection for their outstretched arms and hands that need to control the horses’ reigns. They wear helmets to protect the back of their necks.

**Weaponry**

Many of the figures originally held real weapons of the time, such as bronze swords, longbows, arrows, spears, dagger-axes, and other long-shafted weapons. The weapons were treated to make them resistant to rust and corrosion, so that, even after being buried for over 2,000 years, they are still sharp.

We have developed some beyond ordinary activities in Xi'an, including to discover a mysterious place to have a close experience with a Terracotta Warrior. Contact us if you want to add these activities to your itinerary.

**Recommended 2-Day Essence of Xi'an Private Itinerary**

**Itinerary**

**Day 1. Xi'an Arrival and City Highlights**

Your guide and driver will pick you up from the airport. Head to central Xi'an, and start to discover the ancient capital. Start learning about China's history from some of China’s most precious historical treasures, displayed at Shaanxi History Museum. From large bronze wares to exquisite golden carvings, it is a feast for your eyes.
After lunch at a local restaurant, take a cycle ride on the Ancient City Wall to appreciate the ancient city’s scale. The walls, ramparts, gates, and watchtowers form one of the oldest and most complete city defenses still in existence. Enjoy watchman’s-eye view of the city.

Day 2. The Terracotta Warriors and Xi’an Departure

Admire the soul of the city, the Terracotta Army. With your guides’ detailed explanation, you will visit the three main army formations and find answers to your questions about this “eighth world wonder”.

After visiting the museum, your guide will bring the warriors close to you as you learn how to make warriors from a local shokunin family rather than a factory.

In the afternoon, see classic Chinese architecture combined with dozens of historic Buddhist statues and murals at the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, which is also the symbol of Xi’an

The rest of the day will be free to spend at your leisure. Maybe enjoy some souvenir shopping or local food… Your guide will help you with his/her expert local knowledge.

Having enjoyed 5,000 years of Chinese history in 2 days, our Xi’an tour guide will see you off at the airport or railway station when it’s time to say goodbye.

Price: from $269

Price inclusions:

- One-on-one travel advisor service during planning
- Private English-speaking tour guide service and private transport
- Entrance to attractions listed in the itinerary
- Lunch at a local restaurant mentioned in the itinerary
- Hotel with Western breakfast

Follow the link for more details about our Essence of Xi’an Private Tour.

Get started... Each tour can be tailored.

More Popular the Terracotta Army Tours

China Highlights customers at the Terracotta Army Museum

No visit to Xi’an, or even China, is complete if you don't visit the Terracotta Army. See our more popular tours to explore this ancient wonder:

- THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE (Beijing, Xi’an, and Shanghai) — Visit China's classic sights in this 8-day tour — our BEST-SELLER.
- 4-Day Xi’an Ancient Relics Tour: Discover more of Xi’an — capital of 13 ancient dynasties — to explore China's ancient culture.

Or we can help you tailor-make a tour to meet your requirements.
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