

Visiting The Middle Silk Road: Western China

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Some time ago my wife Elin and I resolved to see the Silk Road cities in western China. Having seen the western part of the Silk Road in nearby Samarqand and Bukhara, which are situated across the border in Uzbekistan, we thought it would be interesting to see the middle part of the road just to our east in China. It really made sense to do this before we left Central Asia.

It was a good decision to go. The journey was loaded with fascinating surprises. Moreover, seeing this extreme of the Silk Road put the history of the whole region into better perspective. But it was also instructive to see the energy and power of Mighty China roaring ahead, even in its remote western provinces. For example, on the drive between Urumqi and Turpan we passed through the largest installation of wind turbines in Asia.

[Urumqi](#), the bustling capital of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, is but a 2 1/2 hour flight from Dushanbe. Tajik Air and China Southern both fly there regularly. A city of about three million people, Urumqi is the gateway to the Silk Road cities of Kashgar, Turpan and Dunhuang—among others.

The capital city and the region are booming. It boasts one of five major airports in China.

We obtained our tickets to Urumqi via the US Embassy travel office. Our in-China tour was organized very easily online through Sinoway Travel, which can be found [here](#).

We simply gave Sinoway the dates and times of our arrival and departure



At the wind farm between Urumqi and Turpan.

in Urumqi. And then we told them which cities we wanted to visit. They got back to us within 24 hours with a very reasonable proposal that included all accommodation, breakfast and lunch, airport transfers, private guide services, transportation (ground and air) as well as basic entry fees to all points of interest.

All our guide services were for exclusive private tours. We were never part of a group. The total came to about \$300 a day for the two of us. Which, as I said, included all transportation and accommodation.

Our travel experience was completely satisfactory. We did, however, come to the trip with realistic expectations. We knew that there would be some shortcomings, which there were. It should be stressed that the route we took is popular for Asian and Chinese tourists. A few hardy Westerners do make it out to these

attractions; however, the accommodation and food is designed for the Asian market, albeit with a nod to the odd westerner.

That said, the standard was generally acceptable (and in Dunhuang it was outstanding). For example, in most hotels there were enough Westernized choices at the mainly Chinese breakfast buffets to keep us fueled for our active itineraries.

As it happened, our trip was plagued with travel delays rooted mainly in bad weather. However, the guide services were so reliable that these delays caused us virtually no problem. Our plane to Urumqi was four hours late, but our local guide was waiting for us with a car.

Our train to Dunhuang was six hours late due to a landslide, but our local guide was right there waiting for us. She had slept in the car. The

bottom line is that when we did face annoyances or problems our guides were flexible, helpful and informed. Moreover, the adjustments made to our itinerary due to the delays were accomplished with great intelligence and flexibility. In fact in every case virtue was drawn from necessity and the changes worked mainly in our favor.

Follows now a brief day by day account of our journey. On arrival (four hours late) we went straight to the hotel, The Ramada Inn Urumqi. And after a simple Chinese meal we went to bed.

We spent day two in Urumqi. We visited the very up-to-date [Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region provincial museum](#), which is certainly a must.

The guide gave us a thorough overview of the demography, geology and history of the region we were about to visit. We also saw the famous [Uyghur Bronze Age mummies](#) in the museum.

Mysteriously, people of clear European origin lived in the region as late as 3000 years ago—and perhaps much earlier. They mummified their dead complete with Celtic art and tartan textiles. And the mummies are remarkably well preserved. Fascinating.

After a Central Asian lunch in a very fine Uyghur restaurant, we visited a camera shop then visited the city's bazaar that afternoon. When we made it clear that we were not in an acquisitive mood we were left to browse and window shop with very little pressure. There were many wonderful high-quality souvenirs, handmade knives, jade, lapis etc. But with our suitcases full of travel gear we were able to resist nearly everything except some samples of communist memorabilia. Our weakness.

Day three saw us off to [Kashgar](#). Once again our local guide was waiting for us with a private car and driver. Our guide's English was so good I thought that he had spent time in the United States. We went directly to the hotel, The Tarim Petroleum Barony Hotel to be exact. After a well-appreciated late start we took in the old town of Kashgar on foot. And then we made an obligatory visit to a silk carpet and jade emporium.

Once again there was no undue pressure to buy and we learned quite a bit about jade geology. That afternoon, after yet another Central Asian lunch, we went south of Kashgar to see a peaceful mausoleum dedicated to the memory Mahmood Kashgari, a famous imam who created the Turkish - Uyghur dictionary.

This trip had not been on the original itinerary, but since we had time, and because we wanted to see some countryside, our guide arranged it. In this case the journey was the destination. Along the route south of town we got stunning views of the Tian Shan Mountains. A pleasant walk in the shaded confines of the mausoleum park provided some welcome exercise.

Our second day in Kashgar (day four of the trip) began with a relaxed start and a run out to the Abakh Hojam Tomb. Once again we were treated to a pleasant sojourn in a beautifully shaded Islamic retreat built in the 17th century. There were a few tourist activities available. And this author took the chance to take his first and last and very brief camel ride. Ouch!

After the mausoleum we headed out for the great photo opportunities available at the Kashgar livestock market. Great stuff. It became clear that, although we were in China, the Silk Road served as a cultural avenue. I began to think of it as a long narrow country unto itself, with its own languages, customs and foods.

We might as well have been farther west in Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, so familiar was the feel.

After lunch (we requested Chinese food instead of plov) we headed to a house belonging to a friend of the guide and waited for our flight back to Urumqi. As it turned out we waited too long. Our guide had confused our flight with another later one (similar numbers) and we flat out missed the one on which we were actually booked. Fortunately the one he had mistakenly thought we were on had seats available and, after a few intense phone calls, he got us on board. Since we had always expected to leave at that time anyway we were not particularly put out. Our local guide in Urumqi, though confused, was waiting for us when we arrived. Back to the Ramada Inn.

Day five saw us make a relaxed start off in the direction of [Turpan](#) by private car. This famous oasis is the second lowest place on earth. It is also home to a couple of ruined silk road cities which were both on our itinerary. Turpan is also famous for its grapes and raisins. A 2000 year old irrigation system, known as the Karez system, taps the water table of the Tian Shan range. It still serves to green a long valley that is completely dedicated to the culture of grapes --- over a hundred varieties.

Day five also saw us make a pleasant trip to the vineyard park, where we saw a small ethnographic museum, bought a few raisins for the train trip the next day and wandered the cool shaded confines of the miles of fantastic grape arbors. Sweet. Note: Our hotel in Turpan was a disappointment. The Turpan Grand Hotel. We had to switch rooms because the air con was failing. The split packs in the fresh room worked a treat, but the carpets were filthy beyond measure. Dead roaches. Breakfast was strictly Chinese, but our guide organized

coffee for us on request. Ask to stay at the Tu Ha Petroleum Hotel instead (Oil people the world over take care of themselves).

Day six saw us pay a visit to two Silk Road cities, [Gaochang](#) and [Jiaohe](#), as well as to the Thousand Buddha grottoes at [Bezeklik](#) and, lastly, a trip to the cool confines of the [Karez irrigation](#) museum. We were blessed with a little cloud as normally this tour of the ruins is very hot. As it was we were pretty well spent by the time we had finished walking the dusty ruined streets of Jiaohe, a wealthy medieval settlement that remains in a remarkable state of preservation.

The grottoes at Bezeklik, though worth seeing, had been raided by Western collectors in the chaos that was China at the beginning of the 20th century. Much of the art was taken to Germany. Some of it still exists, but sadly some of it was destroyed in World War II.

The plan for day six was to leave Turpan by train that evening and travel to Dunhuang in a sleeper car. However, the welcome scarf of cloud that served to shield us from the worst of Turpan's heat manifested itself as a torrential downpour in the nearby mountains, causing our train to be five hours late.

Once again our local guide saved the day by promptly booking us a room in a Chinese hotel near the train station. Strictly speaking the accommodation was closed to foreigners, but he booked the room in his name. And, given the terrible delay, the management extended us the courtesy of letting us use the room (for a small additional charge).

The room was air-conditioned and had a working shower—albeit cold water only. We were able to wash up and get a little rest before boarding the train in the middle of the night.

The train itself was a sheer delight. Clean and specially designed

for Silk Road tourist travel. The toilets and washing facilities were up to the standards of any I have seen in the east. Our car even boasted a European potty. Woohoo.

We arrived in [Dunhuang](#) at about noon on day seven. Our local guide was, of course, waiting for us. She was in a state of some anxiety concerning our level of comfort. We assured her that we were rested and relaxed due to the good common sense of our guide in Turpan.

After getting some rest in, [The Silk Road Hotel Dunhuang](#), we



Magao Cave art.

headed out for an evening of sightseeing at the famous singing sand dunes of Dunhuang. This is a small desert of Sahara like sand that has been blown against the root of the Tian Shan by the strong prevailing winds.

There were opportunities to rent Jeeps and ATVs, to go sand boarding, and to fly light aircraft. We simply chose to walk the dunes a bit and take in the atmosphere of the structures built around a natural oasis that formed near the edge of the dunes. This crescent lake, once the site of a genuine Buddhist monastery, now houses a tourist center built in Chinese style. By the way, the Silk Road hotel boasts a spectacular view of the dunes from its rooftop bar.

Day seven saw us off to an early start to visit the Gobi Desert, where we were to find the extreme western end of the [Great Wall of China](#). This section of the wall dates from the Han Dynasty—about 2000 years ago. At this distant point the wall—which is always built up of local material—was constructed of a layered composite of mud and reeds. It is astonishing that it lasted so long.

The layered effect is wonderful to see. The wall ended nearby at the foot of the Tian Shan Range. Further on, the mountains themselves were used in lieu of a fortification. And semaphore beacons were placed at strategic points along the mountain ridges.

After a charming Chinese lunch in a country vineyard we visited a private museum dedicated to this part of the Silk Road. Behind the museum we rode out to see the famous Yangguan Pass itself, the storied gateway to the barbarous West. Abandon hope all ye who pass this way.

On our way back to the city we stopped off to walk around a movie-set town. The town accurately reconstructs a medieval Chinese settlement. Originally built for one movie it has been used for many over the years and is a popular local amusement.

Day eight was reserved for the grand finale of our tour; that is, a guided visit to the famous [Mogao Caves](#). These numerous man-made grottoes are festooned with a thousand years worth of Buddhist religious art. There are murals and polychrome statues of the Buddha, bodhisattvas and disciples.

The caves were the first UNESCO site in China C.A. 1987. Mogao was nearly destroyed during the cultural Revolution, but a last-minute order from Beijing preserved it from the depredations of the Red Guard, who had already destroyed the monastery



Night Market in Urumqi

at the nearby Crescent Lake in the sand dunes (visited earlier).

Photographs were forbidden inside the caves. The interiors are dim. Our guide advised us to bring our own flashlight and we are glad we did.

A highlight of our tour of the caves involved a visit to the third largest Buddha in the world. Built inside a sky lit cave the Buddha is the size of a five-story building. Built by the Empress Wu he looms above you in the confined space. And, frankly, he is far more evocative of temporal power than of spiritual repose.

Our guide thoughtfully arranged for a birthday lunch for yours truly after having overheard that I had reached another milestone. It included a violet cake and a voluminous electronic rendition of Happy Birthday. Both Elin and I were genuinely touched.

After lunch we visited the White Horse Pagoda, a local shrine which commemorates the burial place of the trusty white steed of a highly revered Buddhist monk from medieval times. We were spared a silk carpet factory visit by our understanding guide. Instead, at our request, she took us to the local shopping mall where we

gleefully searched out some Chinified English T-shirts before we boarded the plane to Urumqi—on time for once.

Back in Urumqi, and with the help of our guide, we located a restaurant on the first floor of the Silver Star Hotel that promised to deliver up a Western dinner. We had a very decent meal of steak and French fries, a welcome change from the rich Chinese fare we had been scoffing.

As it turned out our Ramada hotel was quite near the night market of Urumqi. There was an entire street dedicated to flaming comestibles as well as several other lanes of stalls dedicated to cheap consumer goods. It was crowded, lively and made for fantastic low light photography. God bless my Nikon.

Day nine. [Heavenly Lake](#). Our last stop along the tour was meant to be our first. But a washed out road prevented us from going to the Heavenly Lake on our first day (We went to the museum instead. A very happy accident). This lake is very much a local tourist attraction. And had we not seen everything else we would have given it a miss, particularly as we came from beautiful mountainous

Tajikistan. Hint: Opt for the museum over this excursion.

However, we enjoyed the trip to the mountains on a hot day as much as anyone. We took a boat ride, road the cable car up and down to the lake and snapped off pictures of the new Buddhist temple and the various aspects of local tour culture.

The area is populated by indigenous Kazaks who, in addition to still grazing their animals in the area, now make a good business of renting out rustic yurts to Chinese city dwellers. Back in the city we searched out the Almaty Restaurant. We had Russian intourist food. Borsht, cutlets mashed potatoes. Fair to say we were tired of Chinese. Besides, the waitresses spoke Russian. We felt quite at home.

Our flight back to Tajikistan got off to an uneventful start. It left on time. We were looking forward to a timely arrival when the captain suddenly announced that he had turned back to Urumqi in order to repair a technical fault. This after about an hour in the air. We landed back in China, waited about an hour and a half for them to repair the fault (whatever it was) and took off again. We finally got out of the airport at 4 a.m.

More Photos

See the authors' online photos.

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