



## The Silk Road by Train

---



By Stephen M. Nagy, Jr., MD

THE *SILK ROAD* REFERS TO an overland trade route beginning, at its easternmost point, in current day Xian, which was China's capital, then known as Chang'an, for 1100 years. It courses westward both north and south through Sinkiang, the westernmost province of China, predominantly desert - the size of Alaska - bounded on the north by Mongolia and the south by Tibet. It then crosses the Pamir Mountains, the central Asian plains, northern Iran and Iraq, arriving, finally, at the western coast of the Mediterranean (*i.e.*, Tyre, Antioch) and from there by ship to Rome.

The "road" was, in fact, a series of wealthy commercial cities and oases where goods were traded and moved both east and west. Marco Polo and his uncles spent four years traversing it in the 13th Century. It originated in the 2nd Century BCE and functioned until just several centuries ago when it was superseded by sea routes. Until recently, travel in the region was arduous due to poor roads, limited facilities and the desert itself.

The Chinese, with German aid, 5 years ago built a series of modern railcars in TsingTao, the base of the original German concession where they still brew a renowned Chinese beer. The new train, the *New Orient Express*, travels the northern Silk Road from Xian to Kashgar, a city only several miles from the Pakistan and Afghanistan borders, with a special itinerary, stopping for visits at ancient Silk Road cities and oases. Public transport by rail is available but without private accommodation; more problematically, it is very crowded and rife with smokers and befouled lavatories.

The logistics of my practice dictated that my Mandarin-speaking wife and I opt for the last tour of the season, six days and five nights from Urumchi to Xian; three of these nights were to be spent on the train and two in hotels while it lay over in a railyard. We chose to begin our Silk Road adventure in Kashgar, the center of the Muslim world in Sinkiang province, braving a 13-hour flight to Beijing, 4 hours to Urumchi and 2 hours to Kashgar over a 2-day period.

Kashgar is inhabited primarily by Uygurs, a large Turkish-speaking minority descended from early nomadic tribes; they have Caucasian facial features and are adherents of Islam. It is the site of the largest market in Central Asia but no longer boasts the commerce in animals, especially Kasak horses, yet it still attracts hordes of Chinese tourists as well as Kasaks and Pakistanis from across the borders on weekends. The city, being 80 percent Muslim, teems with veiled women in unwaisted



dresses, men in skull caps and sashed coats; the streets in the old town, lined with typical Uygur one-story mudbrick homes, feature freshly slaughtered lambs hanging from carts with the price per pound prominently displayed, the beast carved to order before your

eyes.">

The restaurants serve a wide variety of unusual dishes, primarily wheat noodles, lamb vegetables, all spiced, no pork; most are never seen and probably not available in California. Tea is still poured from a raised large kettle with a long tapered spout, allowing the tea to cool so it does not break the glass. There is an obligatory tour of the largest mosque in China during which our young Muslim guide sat us on its rugs and explained the Five Pillars of Islam.

Although the global climate for tourism has been chilled by acts of terrorism in Spain, Russia, Israel and the United States, the hotels are filled with Chinese tourists who take extensive day trips to Hotan to buy knives or to travel 22 hours over 14,000 foot peaks to the Sost Pass in Pakistan.

We returned to Urumchi, an essentially new city of 2 million and the business center of Sinkiang but not a Silk Road outpost. It has been forcibly populated with Han Chinese to reduce Muslim influence and presumed restiveness - although the standard of living is considerably higher than the neighboring Muslim countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, burdened with teetering economies. It is a city one could easily miss unless choosing to languish in one of its 5-star hotels.

We descended almost 3,000 feet into Turpan, the lowest point in China, an oasis watered by an ingenious series of interconnected underground wells over 2,000-years-old explicated in a new museum. The city is home to the ruined cities of Gaochang/Jiaohe destroyed by mongol hordes. The flaming mountains are where *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was filmed; in its ravines we visited the Bezeklik 1000 Buddha caves; these sites are all within a short driving radius on uncrowded roads. Until the Muslims conquered, proselytized and forcibly converted the population in the 13th century, Buddhism was the primary religion.

Along the entire Silk Road, Buddhism worship was centralized in caves and grottos richly decorated with murals or frescos and Buddha sculptures, some of epic proportions. These were commissioned or supported by wealthy merchants who would pray for the success of their caravans. They were analogous to the cathedrals one finds on the major pilgrimage routes in Europe.

We boarded the train a number of miles from Turpan - the Chinese constructed this stretch of over 1,000 miles from Xian to Urumchi as a colonizing intrusion into their least developed province, thereby bypassing many Silk Road outposts. The train is private and usually taken up with large tour groups of Americans and Europeans, and especially overseas Chinese from North America, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc.

We had booked our tour on an internet website only to be informed several days before that our "group" never materialized. We were, therefore, appended to a Bay Area, 40-person group occupying one-half of the train and one dining car which divided it; the other half was occupied by Hong Kong Chinese with whom the group never interacted. Unless one purchases a suite (there were only 4 on a train), one travels in a small compartment with two single berths, side by side, separated by a narrow aisle. Bathrooms and washrooms are at the end of the car. One wished for a better design, and debated whether to blame the Chinese or the Germans. There were no closets or drawers and the beds did not convert to a seat for travel during the day. One sat on the bed or moved to the bar car usually populated by Americans singing Karaoke. An upper berth would have greatly improved space, but was an invitation to a medical disaster given the age and corpulence of the tourists.

The next stop was Dunhuang, a must on any tour, the site of the Mogao Caves, the richest treasure house of Buddhist art in China. It was, unfortunately, looted by western archeologists in the 19th and 20th centuries; a large part of the library now resides in the British Museum. Nonetheless, the art is still very much intact although somewhat defaced by time and religious fervor.

In the midst of the surrounding desert, one can see remnants of the Chin and Han walls built well over a millennium before the Great Wall constructed by the Ming in the 14th century. In fact, a well-preserved fortress constructed at the westernmost outpost of the Chinese empire may be found in the next city, Jiayuguan. It was a place of exile, and from here caravans left for their westward trek to face the sand, heat and marauding nomads.

We had at this point exited the Muslim world and were now in Gansu province, still felt to be a Chinese backwater. We overnights to Lanzhou, the major railhead of Northeast China and the center of its nuclear industry. The city sits in a valley of the Yellow River with mountains on both sides. After an hour on a new road and a boat ride, we arrived at the Binglingsi Grottos, now partially inundated by the first major dam built in China in the mid-1950s. Although providing a significant amount of electric power, it controls the floods which devastated China for millennia and which led to its toponym, the river of sorrow.



There is no boat landing and one must climb on the decks of beached rivercraft to reach the bank. The trip is most memorable for the vistas on the Yellow River hemmed in by brown steep jagged cliffs. Then it's overnight to Tianshui, a short distance from which are the murals and sculptures of the Buddhist grottos of Maijishan. To visit them, one mounts complex scaffolding built into the side of the cliff, echoing a similar ancient structure used by pilgrims to pray and worship at the shrines.

The rail journey ends with a pleasant ride through terraced, cultivated mountains to Xian, a city now of seven million. It is least crowded in the dead of winter or the blistering heat of mid-summer. Like Beijing, it is a morass of new cars, taxis, and buses but many fewer bicycles than when we were last here 10 years ago. The monotony of the traffic is made bearable by the luck of having a curious, communicative, chattering guide.

The central part of the city remains spectacular with its large intact wall, moat, central Drum Tower, etc. However, it is terribly polluted. The terracotta soldiers have not changed but are simply more numerous and more lavishly displayed. Then known as Chang'an, it was the capital of China for 1100 years. It was during this time that academics feel China reached the pinnacle of its ancient civilization, especially during the Tang dynasty in the 7th to 9th centuries. This is celebrated in what are now several Tang dynasty shows which feature the music, dance and costumes of the period. Though somewhat commercial, they are a graphic reminder of the culture brought westward by tribal pressures and nomadic incursions that altered the face of much of Eastern Europe to the present day.



One undertakes such a venture for various reasons. For my wife, it was to experience and confirm the depth and length of Chinese culture seen through its art, architecture, and ingenuity - a civilization that had developed printing with movable type, porcelain, the mechanical clock, the kite, etc., long before the Normans were eating with their fingers and picking meat from their teeth.

For me, it was sociogeopolitical as well, to confront a country building, consuming, and

rumbling into the 21st century, having emerged over a period of 100 years from feudalism to embrace not only a collectivist philosophy but also, over a 10-year period, a vicious form of totalitarian brainwashing termed the Cultural Revolution and, finally, coming to its senses, opting for a more permissive market-oriented society. Over five millennia, its history was one of basic nonaggression - only to be conquered twice by northern tribes, invaded by the Japanese, plundered by European colonials and now protecting itself by insisting on its hegemony over buffer areas, *i.e.*, Tibet and especially Sinkiang. This latter region is still Muslim at heart and more closely related to the newly-liberated central Asian republics although is rich in oil and mineral wealth. China vividly recalls having lost its major northern buffer province, Mongolia, 50 years ago.

The food was another revelation. If one periodically frequents good Italian or French restaurants in the United States, one encounters few surprises when visiting Italy or France, although there are always minor nuances in preparation. On the other hand, even if one has experienced a variety of Chinese restaurants with ostentatious four to six page menus, one is unprepared for the breadth and ingenuity of Chinese cuisine, even in relatively unknown Chinese cities. Undoubtedly, it is the finest cuisine in the world.

Although we encountered few problems, one of the major vicissitudes of traveling by oneself is confronting a completely foreign written and spoken language, in stark contrast to traveling in western Europe. In France, one finds McDonald's, Disneyland Europe and English speakers; you might even run into the masseur you met at the spa in Calistoga.

Although China has embraced English as its major second language - signs on roads, in hotels, airports and railroad stations are in both English and Chinese characters, as are historical descriptions at major sites - the vast majority of Chinese do not speak or read English. A Chinese could not read your map labeled in English when you flag a taxi. If you do not show him the address in Chinese script, you might as well walk. It is foreign travel as it was centuries ago, and one still encounters squat toilets.

On the other hand, the country is eminently safe. The Chinese are courteous to a fault, socially adept, and relatively intolerant of violent aggressive behavior. Americans, who tend to be enamored of their civic creed, may not understand the obeisance to order. Travel is well organized; for example, domestic air flights are consistently on time or arrive early, benefiting from the absence of strikes and a labor pool that is young, ambitious, and responsive.

It was a wonderful journey. My advice today is go now. In 10 years the Silk Road will be a six-lane highway with rest stops and fast food Muslim restaurants - if you can put up with the traffic.

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society  
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819  
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

Copyright © 2000-2008 Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society - All Right's Reserved