
In the footsteps of Marco Polo - Discovering China

Author: Justin Fox

Date: 01 September 08



Justin Fox visited China to travel the ancient Silk Road. Join him as he treks from the Yellow Sea in the east to the Kyrgyzstan border in the west on a 5000-kilometre journey through the heart of China.

I lay face down in the dark on an elongated armchair. I could feel her silk pyjamas against my skin. She was light as a feather, with cherry blossom lips and her touch was sure. I had come to travel the Silk Road and this was my first contact with the fabric. It was cool and ... silky, like her hands. She ran her body down my back, lifted one of my feet and began to pull on each toe. Quite hard. Just then a hand grenade exploded behind me and a heavy-calibre machine gun opened fire. Somewhere a man was screaming for his life.

It was the climax to a long afternoon at the Xian equivalent of a Virgin Active gym – a glitzy five-storey emporium for fitness, beauty and massage. I had started in the basement, stripped naked save for plastic sandals. The hall I was ushered into contained showers, pools, spa baths and jets of water issuing from walls and ceiling. Columns in the shape of lotus plants reached to a sapphire ceiling glittering with fake stars. Dozens of naked men lay like crocodiles in steaming pools doing business deals. This was hardly the China of Mao Zedong, or was it?

After a succession of water-jet pummellings and long soaks, I dressed in uniform tunic and Y-fronts and took the lift to the fourth floor where massage, pedicure and manicure were on the cards. Glass walls offered views of the old city: gardens, pagodas, bridges, crenelated walls. Then I was led into a darkened

room for an hour of scalp-to-toe massage. I'd expected New Age music, perhaps the sound of the sea or whales, to create a soothing atmosphere. Big screens featuring a Second World War movie came as a surprise. But then again, everything in China proved surprising. The country had simply blown me away; not always in a good way, but away nonetheless.

The power of silk

Getaway had been invited to take part in an overland expedition following the Silk Route across Asia. A convoy of four Land Rover Discoveries was to trace the footsteps of Marco Polo from Xian, the ancient capital of China, to Istanbul. I joined the first – and longest – leg which traversed the length of China.

The Silk Road is actually a web of many routes that occasionally come together at a particular nodal point, pass, fort or oasis. Its origins are unclear (silk was found in a 10th century BC Egyptian tomb), but for many centuries it was the most powerful symbol of trade between East and West.

Of course, it was not just about silk. The 1 000-strong camel trains were laden with an array of precious goods – everything from rhino horn to frankincense, dwarfs to caged lions. And it concerned much more than trade. Political, religious, social and cultural links were forged. Products such as cucumbers, figs, grapes and wool were introduced from the West, while porcelain, oranges, gunpowder, the crossbow, paper and printing made their way to Europe from China.

Seldom did any single caravan do the entire trip (Marco Polo was an exception); instead goods were bartered and sold in a complicated network of journeys. As far as possible, our tyre tracks would follow in the steps of those camels.

The night drive to Beijing

It was dusk in Tianjin's bleak dockland and we were freezing. We waited for workers to come and open the container in which our vehicles had been shipped. It had been a long day and I was exhausted from jetlag and lack of sleep. Earlier that afternoon, I'd acquired my Chinese driving licence.

There had been an exam of sorts with Yue Chi, our guide and team leader, doing the translation. The traffic police chief was a gentle soul who didn't want to put the honoured foreigner through too onerous a test. So it was more an amiable discussion on the vagaries of Chinese driving than a rules-of-the-road grilling. Mr Justin had to beware of animals, pedestrians and, most of all, cyclists.

Later I sat jotting notes about the trip until Yue interrupted me. 'Whatever you do, don't laugh, but the captain says he is very touched that you are writing down everything he's been saying.'

I swallowed hard to stifle a giggle and nodded a thank you.

Eventually the dockyard workers opened the container with a clang, releasing two Land Rovers. They'd been shipped across the Pacific from Canada and were to join our other two, recently arrived, vehicles in Xian. The journey was suddenly upon us. Yue handed me the keys: 'The first leg is yours.'

I got behind the wheel of the green Discovery and visualised, for a moment, the entire continent of Asia stretching out before us. Then I took a deep breath and turned the ignition. We left the dockyard and

drove through a forest of skyscrapers, all under construction. The traffic was pure insanity and soon we were stuck in the longest jam of trucks I'd ever seen. Beijing, when it materialised in the early hours of the morning, was a baptism of fire – for driving in the capital requires a unique blend of aggression and Zen passivity unknown in South Africa.

Marching with terracotta warriors

With the vehicles dispatched to Xian, Yue and I made the overnight journey there by rail. The train ride swooned by in a haze of factories, cigarette smoke, twanging music and the smell of too many passengers cooped up together.

Xian finally emerged out of the smog as we slid to a halt in the shadow of the city walls. This was the capital of ancient China and symbolic start of the Silk Route.

Xian was once one of the world's great cities and reached its zenith during the Tang Dynasty between the 7th and the 10th centuries. The street plan mirrored the imagined cosmic order in this place of extreme wealth, refinement and excess.

It was here that our team assembled for the great trek. The group comprised a mix of Europeans and North Americans, Chinese guides and Yue's husband, David Visagie. He's from KwaZulu-Natal (they met in a Bedouin camp in the Sahara) and is responsible for logistics and keeping the vehicles shipshape.

It was from his capital city, Xian, that Emperor Qin first subjugated, then united, all the disparate states of the region to found the 'modern' nation in 221 BC. A force of 700 000 labourers toiled for 40 years to build his tomb and fashion the army of more than 8 000 terracotta warriors that protect it. Each soldier, general or charioteer has individual features and facial expressions, each is a work of art in its own right. To stand in the main hall before a life-size clay army is to feel the power of the Chinese state – so ruthless two millennia ago ... and still so autocratic today.

After hours of wandering the warrior halls, our team needed a stiff drink. Meals so far had offered interesting culinary adventures, for those brave enough to try bullfrogs and scorpions. Some felt they were ready for the sea horse, snake and lizard wine (each with the creature coiled in the bottle). 'Good for arthritis, knee aching and shoulderitis!' enthused our sommelier. I was feeling just fine, so demurred.

It was time to leave. We gathered at the Marco Polo monument, a stone camel train led by the intrepid Italian who pioneered the Silk Route for Europeans. A band played traditional music – a loud beating of drums, tambourines and clashing of cymbals – as we circled the monument, trailed by a television crew, journalists and a crowd of onlookers come to peer at the band of foreigners re-enacting the iconic journey. The sirens of a police escort began to wail and we set off, cleaving a path through pedestrians, bicycles, taxis and tricycles. The police peeled off at Xian's outskirts and China's open road was there for the taking.

The muddy mother of civilisation

For the first few days, we trekked northwest through the densely populated regions and fertile valleys of Shaanxi and Gansu provinces. The land was all green wheat fields or splashes of yellow rapeseed fringed

with poplar trees, calligraphy brushes against a mustard skyline. Villages were misted in spring pear blossoms and the mauve of rioting foxglove trees.

Every spare patch of earth was cultivated, every hill terraced. Men and women in straw hats tilled the land with hand hoes. The rich, loess soil (yellow silt from the Gobi Desert) had been carved and sculpted by farmers over thousands of years to form pale wedding cakes. It's as though a giant spatula had cut, scraped and edged the land, while cave dwellings were bored into the cliffs. Rivers were canalised, factories encircled every town, electricity pylons marched westward. Everything was covered in coal dust and the air was thick with a mixture of pollution and sand blown in from the desert.

At the ugly factory city of Lanzhou we crossed the Yellow River, known as the irascible 'mother' of Chinese civilisation. The banks were lined with waterwheels (formerly used for irrigation), apartment blocks, pagodas and mosques. Further west, the road entered the Hexi Corridor, hemmed by the Qilian Mountains to the south and Gobi wastes to the north. All caravans had to come this way. Invaders too: Huns, Mongols and Turks always threatened and sometimes descended like a desert wind to kill and destroy.

Snow-capped peaks soared into the clouds on our left, while to the right the Great Wall meandered through a barren plain. I'd visited the wall in Beijing – a bulwark of stone, restored and swarming with tourists. But 2 000 kilometres west, it was just a crumbling mud-brick snake, its watchtowers reduced to termite mounds, its forts like flooded sandcastles overtaken by dunes. I found such defensive vestiges more evocative than the sanitised Beijing version. In these outposts you could imagine the imperial soldier standing guard, combing the north for Mongol cavalry. Today, only dust devils twirl like dervishes across the sand.

Behind the wall

Eventually we reached Jiayuguan, the symbolic end of the Great Wall and of 'civilised' Han China. A 14th century castle marks the spot. Beyond this point, Silk Road caravanners would have to chance their luck. Criminals and outcasts were sent here to be ejected through the fort's western gate, the 'mouth of China' ... banished into the wilderness, a barbarian wasteland thought to teem with monsters and demons. It was considered a fate worse than death. From up on the ramparts, I gazed across the plains. Snowy mountains loomed like jaws in the west. We were headed that way. A day's drive from Jiayuguan, we reached a remarkable Buddhist site. Mogao comprises hundreds of caves, some serving as shrines, others as accommodation for the devout. Over the centuries, it grew into a religious and cultural centre. Silk Road caravanners would make a detour to this holy spot and pray for a safe journey.

We wandered through dozens of caves, some with large, reclining Buddhas, others packed with statues of disciples or demons. The iconography picked out by our torch beams showed influences from all corners of Asia and an eclectic meeting of religions. There were Hindu angels, Christ-like figures, human-headed birds of the Taoist pantheon and the Queen Mother of the West borne on a sled of phoenixes. An adjacent museum housed thousands of manuscripts, sutras and silk paintings in a variety of languages, showing the vast network of trading connections into which these holy caves were plugged.

That afternoon found us trekking through sand dunes on camels, their big hooves kicking up the dust. It was bitterly cold and, as our camel train laboured over the dunes, I thought of the hardships our predecessors on this route must have endured. It would have taken years for a consignment of silk to get from Xian to the entrepôts of Europe. Chinese deserts were the most taxing section of the road. In local parlance, *taklamakan* means 'you go in and you never return'. Eventually our camel train reached an oasis – a simple pagoda in the dunes. Beside it was a lake that had been used as a caravanserai by thirsty travellers since the time of Christ.

Later, driving west, the landscape reached a level of bleakness we had not so far encountered – endless plains of gravel with not a blade of green. We were now in Xinjiang, a province larger than Western Europe and home to the Muslim Uyghur people. They are the easternmost of the Turkic tribes, boast their own alphabet (similar to Arabic) and their national dress and facial features are distinct, with brown hair, round eyes and beards. Often antagonistic towards Han China, these are central Asian people with a fiercely independent mindset.

Lost cities and desert wine

Although the plains were eventually replaced by mountains (some rising to 5 000 metres), our GPS altimeter showed we were continually descending. By nightfall it read 80 metres below sea level, close to one of the lowest places on earth. Although the Turpan depression is pure desert, snow melt from the surrounding mountains makes it ideal for growing grapes. Over the ensuing days, we explored the lovely town of Turpan, with its vines that extended on trellises right across the road. We descended into an underground canal system that has for centuries piped glacial water through the city and to surrounding fields.

Adjacent towns, many of which thrived a thousand or more years ago, stood in ruins, wars or climate change having doomed them. We used donkey carts to tour the city of Gaochang – a former node on the Silk Road complete with palaces, temples and a once impregnable city wall – now fallen into ruin. Further west lay Jiaohe, a citadel on an island in the Yarnaz River. We wandered among Buddhist temples, public buildings and stuppas, some recognisable, others turned to sand as the mud bricks have crumbled in the sun.

One balmy Turpan night, we landed up at the home of a Uyghur friend of Yue after threading our way through tree-lined back streets where children rode donkeys, women washed clothes in the furrows and men baked bread in outdoor pizza ovens.

We were welcomed into a courtyard by a large family and took our seats on carpets under a vine pergola. From an outdoor kitchen came a procession of dishes, unlike the usual Chinese fare to which we had become accustomed. The Muslim-inspired cuisine featured lamb, yoghurt, kebabs, home-baked breads and hot pots. The local wine was dark and port-like and was served in shot glasses for easy downing with each toast.

A band struck up traditional Uyghur tunes. There was a violin, played from the hip, a drum and a couple of mandolin-like rawaps. The singing had a mournful lilt and every now and then an elder would break into a quavering wail. It was beautiful and haunting: a sound that captured the spirit of Central Asia.

Then the dancing began. First came a little girl, the daughter of the house, doing a dainty twirl around her father. He proudly banged a tambourine and sang in a sad, husky voice.

Next came a teenage member of the household, dangerously beautiful. Shy and smouldering, she had chestnut eyes, long curling locks and a floral dress that swirled about her. I could see how a Silk Road caravanner might lose his way in such oases, abandon the trek ... and alter a bloodline. Her movements had elements of China, the steps were reminiscent of Turkish dancing, her hands bent with Hindu precision, the planted heel was pure Russia. All of Asia was there. The music grew more insistent. An elderly gent leapt to his feet and joined her in a powerful, romantic dance.

Soon the Turpan dusk – the sun only set after 22h00 – was whirling with lithe locals and our troop of enthusiastic but inept foreigners.

Crossing the 'Sea of Death'

From Turpan our route bent southwest out of the Gobi and into the sandy Taklamakan Desert. The symbolic transition was a mountain pass of savage beauty called Argaybulak Daban, a mix of black shale cliffs and golden dunes cut by a river that offered a fragile tongue of vegetation.

The trans-Taklamakan expressway is something of an engineering marvel, an arrow-straight road through 522 kilometres of shifting sand. It's pure Namib. No Silk Road merchant would have dared follow this route: instead the caravans split, skirting the desert to the north or south and re-congregating at Kashgar on its western edge.

After another 14-hour drive, we reached the desert's southern shore. Over ensuing days we drove along the fringes of the Kunlun Shan range, the outer rim of the Tibetan plateau. The land was stony and flat, the oases green and vibrant with mud-brick houses and ornate porticoes with carved doors. All the villages had silk factories, some just back-room affairs with a handful of women working the looms. The fabrics and carpets bore designs that had not changed in centuries. You could easily see why Europeans were prepared to empty their coffers for these objects of beauty. Indeed, in the first century AD, so much silk was being imported into Europe that the outflow of gold threatened the stability of the Roman economy.

Serrated mountains were our constant companions to the left. Among them was K2, rising to 8 611 metres, the second highest peak in the world. We were now only a stone's throw from India. The Taklamakan stretched endlessly on our right. Out in the shifting sands archaeologists keep turning up new cities, testament to thousands of years of desert living. Mummies have been found with distinctly Western features and blonde hair, some clad in silk robes, others with face paint to look like animals. Scientists are still piecing together these 4 000-year-old civilisations that long pre-date the 'modern' Silk Road.

The greatest caravanserai of them all

Finally Kashgar, China's westernmost city. Despite attempts by Beijing to smother Uyghur spirit, this place still feels remote, central Asian. It's also the site of a famous Sunday market, where up to 100 000 villagers and nomads descend for a day of frenzied commerce. The main bazaar, which sells everything

from silk to fridges, was impressive, but the real spectacle was the livestock market a few kilometres out of town.

The roads in all directions were thronged with people, wagons and trucks. Flocks of sheep and camel trains clogged the parking lots. The offloading area was a cacophony of mooing, bleating and the honking of horns. Cattle were dragged from the back of flatbeds, leaping into the air amid a throng of onlookers. Men inspected hoofs, teeth, then haggled boisterously over prices. Donkeys were being shod in what looked like medieval torture devices, the creatures dangling from beams until the farrier was done. Farmers prettified their sheep, trimming pelts and tails like fussy hairdressers. Some animals were slaughtered on the spot and made their way into cauldrons of broth and stews that bubbled round the edge of the market.

Kashgar was the end of my Silk Route. For the rest of the team, the road led west via Iran and Turkey. For me, four flights and four days of travel would return me to South Africa. Standing in the midst of the market, I felt I was at the very heart of Asian trade, in an engine room of commerce that stretched back countless centuries.

Peering through the dust, I looked across the market towards the mountains that almost encircled Kashgar. Within a few hours I could be in Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan to the north and west, or in Afghanistan and India to the south; to the east lay almost 5 000 kilometres of desert – the way we had come. Just then the weight of geography, the otherness of China, the vast scope of trade and the trajectory of time felt utterly overwhelming.