

THE SILK ROUTE ... THE EASY WAY?

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Beijing – Luoyang – Xi'an – Jayuguan – Dunhuang – Turpan – Urumqi

Almaty – Tashkent – Samarkand – Bukhara – Khiva – Volgograd – Moscow

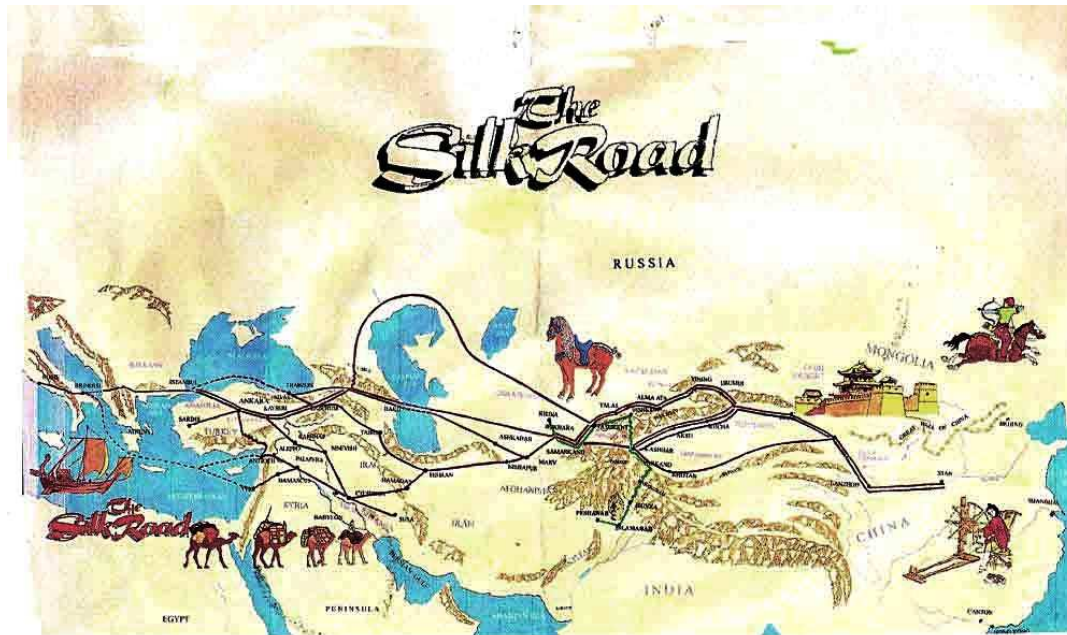


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Images: John Biggs, Catherine Tang

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The Silk Route has been operating for over 2,000 years as a trade route between East and West. Actually, there are several silk routes. They all start in Western China at Xia'an or Chang'an as it was then called, although the Japanese claim an early silk route originated in Japan. The routes then variously wend their ways west, ending in Antioch and Rome. It would have been a hell of a journey, swaying on rocking camels, across scorching desert and freezing mountain passes, but in fact very few did the whole journey: the Chinese merchants would on-sell to Middle Eastern, who in turn would on-sell further down the track until the merchandise would reach Europe at a price reflecting the multiple mark-ups. Fortunes were made.



The Silk Route started during Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) when, in 138 BC, Emperor Wu Ji sent an emissary to the West, Jiang Qian, to try to obtain help against the Huns, who were continually harassing China from the north. Qian was imprisoned by the Huns for 10 years but he finally returned to say that Western rulers had enough problems of their own but that he had seen their large strong horses, "Heavenly Horses" he called them, that would be the best weapon the

Chinese could use against the Huns. Actually these super-horses were our ordinary horses, but the Chinese and the Mongols at that time had little Manchurian ponies that didn't do the job of warhorse awfully well. The Chinese therefore started buying these

European brutes in exchange for silk especially, but also porcelain, jewels, artworks, glass mirrors, lacquer ware, herbs, and Chinese inventions the West hadn't thought of yet, such as gunpowder and paper. When it was discovered that these super-horses would only eat alfalfa, Emperor Wu Ji ordered the peasants to grow alfalfa to feed his war machine, which created massive environmental changes. Apart from horses and their fodder, the Chinese also imported from the West grapes, wine, furs, honey, silver, gold, Buddhism, and female slaves and dancers, presumably nonBuddhist. By 119 BC, trade along the Silk Route was well established and this is often the date given for the start of the trade. All of which attracted bandits robbers right along the route. The only times the Silk Route was relatively safe was during the tyrannies of Genghis Khan and of his deposer, Tamurlaine, or as the Uzbeks prefer to call him, just plain Timur. We come across more of Timur later in Uzbekistan.

But in addition to the trade in goods, there was the cultural and genetic exchange. Ethnicities and cultures evolved. Genghis Khan's conquest of the whole of Silk Route and adjoining countries in the 13th century resulted in Mongolian genes being present in 1 in 12 Asians alive today, a high proportion of which are traceable to Genghis himself, with his estimated hundred children from his many wives and many more concubines, not to mention those by-blows resulting from his enthusiasm for extra marital fornication and rape. It wasn't called the Silk Route for nothing.



The Silk Route comprises many routes, branching at Dunhuang at the edge of the fearsome Taklamakan Desert, second only to the Sahara in size: the name in Uygher means "you go in but you don't come out." So to avoid this place of death, one route goes north of the desert, which we take, another to the south. In the 16th century, however, ships of the sea took over from the ships of the desert, the sea voyage being quicker and safer. This spelled the end of Silk Route for trade, except for one trade: tourism, which is where we come in.

Captain's Choice, our previous tour operator (see "The Captain's Choice of South America" and "Eastern Europe by Train", this website), hired two trains, a Chinese train from Beijing to Xianjiang Province in the far West, and a Russian train that took us through Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan to Volgograd (Stalingrad that was) and finally Moscow.

The greater part of our trip includes the main part of the Silk Route, from Xi'an through Samarkand to Khiva, over 5,000 km.

Beijing

In Beijing we pass an official looking building, walled off from the street. A crowd of people are camped at the entrance. There is a high police presence of paddy wagons, parked within body throwing distance.

“What’s that about?” someone asks.

“That’s the Beijing Municipal Office,” our guide David (not his real name) replies. “These people are protesting against some local developers. These people have been evicted from their homes and they are allowed to protest. See? We are very democratic in China.”

This is a refrain he is to repeat with increasing improbability. David is now walking us through Tiananmen Square.

“We have made the Himalaya Express Railway to bring benefit for the Tibetan people. Tibetan Buddhism is very complex. The Dalai Lama represents only a minority of Tibetans.”

Huh? That’s not what I had gathered to be the case but on cue, we meet three very happy



Tibetan monks on Tiananmen Square who, all smiles, offer to be photographed. David introduces us to these monks saying that they are more representative of Tibetan Buddhists than the Dalai Lama. David continues about other minorities: “The Uyghers, for instance, have even more privileges than we Han Chinese ourselves.” The Uyghers live in Xinjiang Province in the far west and as we shall be visiting there, I’ll go into that issue later.

But whether David truly meant these curious statements, or he was obliged to make them, I don’t know. It would be futile challenging him publicly and I didn’t have the chance to get him drunk to have a real heart to heart about these matters.

* * *

Beijing sprawls over 16,800 sq km, its population just under that of Australia at 18-20 million, of which 12 million are genuine Beijingers. The others are itinerants, mainly rural young men working as labourers who make the fantastic development possible that is occurring in the major cities. The rural farmers used to be self-sufficient but corrupt officials give permission, or turn a blind eye, to developers who simply seize land and develop it, either for industrial purposes or to provide luxury housing for China’s growing number of billionaires.

The Chinese tourist paper, the *Global Times*, reports that China was 147th out of 150 countries in terms of their degree of charitableness. But the article was quick to point out that that ranking refers to the selfish “new money”. The poor are in fact extremely

generous: those itinerant city labourers send their impoverished rural families about one third of their earnings. Generosity in China is all in the family, in true Confucian spirit. We saw evidence of their selfishness of the new money, in the matter of cars. Cars are relatively cheap, the cheapest at \$5,000AUD being within reach of the middle classes so that 1,000 new cars are registered each day. There are virtually no cars more than 7 years old, because there is an emissions test (startling evidence of the greening of China). To encourage use of public transport and bicycles, the government decreed that cars with a number plate ending in 8 could not be driven Thursday, those ending in 7 on Friday and so on. The answer? Buy a car with a registration number ending in a different number. Some *nouveau riche* buy 3 or more cars so that they can drive every day of the year. The social and environmental cost for this selfishness is daily evident: pollution is heavy and in nearly all major cities traffic is reduced to walking speed.

The worst traffic jams in the world are not in Beijing itself but on Route 6 to Mongolia. We had a taste of that when we were to go to Badaling, which is the most important access to the Great Wall, but we couldn't get there because the road was jammed solid with coal trucks; we had to see the Wall at a lesser access at Juyongguan. Route 6, the busiest highway in the world, goes to Manchuria where there are vast coalfields. Huge coal trucks create traffic jams 100 km bumper to bumper, and some drivers are locked in for 9 days at a stretch. Local farmers make a fortune selling the drivers food at inflated prices. A couple of Australian mining companies are also making enormous fortunes not by mining in Australia, which they still do, but in Manchuria, where it is cheaper to mine than it is in Australia, and best of all, coal mined is not a carbon discredit for Australia and neither is it for Manchuria, because as a third world country it is exempt. The amounts of coal involved are far more than the coal mined in Australia. It is a disaster both for climate change and for Australia economically, as we lose the mining royalties. But it has the blessing of the Rudd-Gillard Government – and certainly that of an Abbott Government, if we had one.

The Forbidden City

In Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan, founder of the Yuan Dynasty, set up his pleasures domes not only in Xanadu, as Coleridge had dreamt, but also in a place called Dadu. We now call it Beijing. Subsequent Yuan emperors were not so energetic, and with cyclical inevitability, the next dynasty was born in blood: the Ming dynasty. The first Ming emperor, Ming Tai Jung, was so brutal with his Mongol predecessors that he executed all previous officials but had the good conscience to wake screaming from nightmares at what he had done. Accordingly he removed south to Nanjing, but relocated back to Beijing again after deciding to build a new super safe palace and seat of government there. His new palace contains 9,999½ rooms, the half signifying that as Heaven has 10,000 rooms so the Son of Heaven in all modesty must have less than that. He built high fortifications



around the palace and its extensive grounds, a moat 8 m. deep, and 8 layers of pavers on the ground so that no one could tunnel underneath. He had guards on duty day and night. It was built in 14 years, amazing given the scale of the place. Only the emperor and his immediate family lived there, which included his numerous concubines but not his children: when they became adults, they would be very likely threats. He called this maximum security cat house The Forbidden City. The overwhelming feeling is one of grandeur and hubris: the huge Hall of Harmony, the Imperial garden, the concubines' quarters, the number of animals on the roof depicting their status. The emperor had comparatively modest quarters but with the maximum nine animals on his roof.

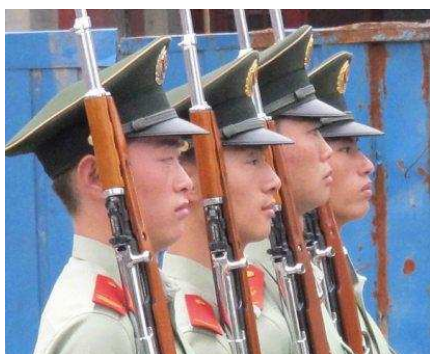


The Son of Heaven also built the Temple of Heaven around the same time as the Forbidden City. This is an all wooden structure without any nails. It has been burnt down but rebuilt a couple of times – and repainted for the 2008 Olympic Games.



Ming emperors repeated all the mistakes of previous dynasties. Partly because of internal plotting and rivalry between the sons of all those concubines and partly because of another effect of all those concubines, Ming emperors had a short life span. One emperor died from enervation after one joyous night involving fifty concubines simultaneously (the logistics of that escape me but that is what we were told). All these distractions did not do much for the governance of the country. Tai Jung's paranoia about those dreaded Mongols still hammering away at China from the north led him to massively strengthen the Great Wall, which had been there

for well over 1,000 years already, but neglected to defend it adequately. The Manchus over-ran it in 1644, and thus began the last of the dynasties, the Qing. They too repeated the cycle. At first very efficient, they became ingrown and ultra conservative and, in the 19th century under the Empress Dowager Cixi, corrupt. The last Emperor was her nephew, Pu Yi. Here is the throne behind which she used to lurk dictating answers to the child Emperor.



The Forbidden City is the axis of Beijing. The Meridian Road emerges from the bowels of the Forbidden City, then pierces North, dividing Beijing harmoniously into balanced East and West sectors. It goes through the outer city that starts at the Gate, crosses northwards through the next layer where government took place and where ordinary people may enter. Today there is much ceremony corresponding to the Trooping of the Colour. Chinese soldiers are even more machinelike than British

Guardsmen: they have to be exactly 1.81 m. tall (is the second from right in high heels?), impeccably turned out, and ruthlessly inspected before going on parade. We are to see similar Russian machines later in Volgograd.

Continuing along the Meridian Road we come to the massive wall facing Tiananmen Square, still displaying Mao Zedong's picture, to the Gate of Heavenly Peace, where the unheavenly massacre of protestors, mainly Chinese students, took place on June 4 1989. This is where we meet the three happy monks who really represent Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan people.

The Summer Palace

The original Summer Palace was an enormous park of gardens, mansions and exotic animals and fish; it was in the wonder-of-the-world league. It was partly designed by Jesuit missionaries, and by the Emperor Qian Long in the 18th century to escape the summer heat. But that was nothing to the heat of the enraged Lord Elgin, who in mid-19th century was busily engaged in forcing opium on the Chinese population with the aid of gunboats. This act of international drug pushing was done with the blessing of the British Government in order to redress a balance of payments problem with China. Several of Elgin's personal staff were kidnapped during these one-way negotiations and murdered. In retribution, Elgin ordered the sacking of the Summer Palace. Buildings were razed to the ground, the park destroyed and countless treasure and artefacts looted, many finding their way into the homes of English and some French officers. For more on this cultural atrocity (and for much else, like the origin of "death by a thousand cuts") read George MacDonald Fraser's splendid *Flashman and the Dragon*.

The Empress Dowager Cixi promptly rebuilt another Summer Palace, a few kms distant. A small lake was turned into a much larger lake, Lake Kunming. The soil dredged to enlarge the original lake became a protective mountain, so between water and mountain, with perfect *fung shui*, the Temple of Longevity was built. Much of the funding for all this was swiped from the Chinese navy's budget, and in gratitude or in irony, Cixi had a marble ship built to adorn Lake Kunming. Unfortunately it was less than effective in fighting the Japanese navy. It was arguable that had she allowed their funds their rightful appropriation, her nephew, the



Last Emperor Pu Yi, may not have been

exiled and been made a Japanese puppet as Emperor of Manchuria, to die in China during the Cultural Revolution at the age of 67.



Today, the Dowager Empress's supreme folly could do with a lick of paint and some TLC. It is a major tourist attraction and a recreation centre for local citizens as they play cards,

Chinese chess, music, fly kites and rip off tourists.

Hutongs

Hutongs are basically three or four single storey double rooms facing an open inner courtyard, which is often draped with grape vines, giving a fruity shade in summer. Built over two hundred years ago, hutongs were originally privately owned, mostly government employees, and hierarchically organized. The number of beams in the doorways proclaimed the status of the occupants. Many had a shin high barrier in the doorway to keep the ghosts out: not having knees, ghosts were unable to step over the barrier. During the



the Cultural Revolution in the late sixties the Red Guards thought privately owned ghost-free hutongs were bourgeois and all the families were kicked out. In 1973 when Deng Xiao Ping thought that to be rich is glorious, he gave back the hutongs to those families who were still around. Many weren't, so the government rented out the remainder as cheap inner city accommodation.

But those inner city hutongs became a problem come the 2008 Olympic Games: they spoil the image of a bright, new, modern Beijing and plans for a bright, new, modern multi-lane highway to the Olympic Village. They had to go, to make room for road widening and for bright new modern high rise flats. The occupants had to move fast after compulsory eviction orders had been issued, because the developers and their bulldozers arrived within 24 hours.

But the few remaining hutongs looked so old and so *ethnic* behind their venerable walls! They became a tourist attraction. Never mind, some tourist friendly hutongs were hastily recobbled. Rickshaws take us around the narrow streets of the hutongs, and we visit one, still occupied by a family.

The Great Wall

The Great Wall of China is in fact several great big walls built over two millennia from 1500 BC, covering 25,000 km in all. All were in the end overrun by those they were designed to keep out. One great burst of wall-building came from the monomaniacal Qin Shihuang who founded the short lived Qin Dynasty. All dynasties from then on, for 500 or more years, added their bit. Some of the best preserved – or rather most effectively

rebuilt sections – are at Badaling near Beijing, which were completed by the paranoid Ming emperor Tai Jung in the 14th century.

We stop at a cloisonné factory for lunch, and (they hope) for us to buy. The work is intricate, done by different workers at each stage, the wiring of the pattern the trickiest part. The gaps are then filled with enamel and polished.



We are supposed to visit the Wall at Badaling but couldn't make it because of the traffic gridlock of coal trucks. I had been there twenty years earlier when the traffic was no problem at all (see "The Generosity of Dr. Hong", this website). The Wall at Juyongguan, before Badaling, is still pretty impressive, but it was a wet day and the steep and uneven steps were a slippery challenge, the photos disappointing.



Luoyang

Luoyang was one of the ancient capitals of China until 221 BC when Emperor Qin moved the centre to Xi'an (see below). Today Luoyang is a large provincial town of some 5 million people, notable for some industry, high density slow moving traffic, an ancient burial ground of a Neolithic village about 8,000 years old, the Buddha caves a few kilometres from the town, and the fact that in 2010 my grandson Harry had been deputy manager of a hotel there for six months, between school and university.



Our hotel in Luoyang was awe inspiring from the outside and cavernous on the inside, designed on the modern new-Chinese-money idea that bigger is better. Our bed was two double beds pushed together, 2.4 m. wide in all. Outside was a nice park, where people danced western style to Chinese music, did tai chi, calligraphy, and one man played his mournful flute to the ducks.



The Longmen caves, 12 km from Luoyang, were built from 300 - 800 AD, and follow the banks of the Yi River for about 1 km. There are over 100,000 Buddhas from 2 cm to 17 m high. Erosion has spoiled some, vandalism others, including the removal of some to museums in the US. Many people had more fun photographing each other than the statues.

A more ancient monument is in the centre of town. When recently excavating for the rather splendid town square, several layers of burial ground were found. This is now a museum. It was the custom during the Zhou Dynasty to bury the chariot and horses of the deceased with him. The Emperor had six horses, which were buried with him; lesser men were allowed no more than four horses to be buried with them. In one case, a man crushed under the wheels of a chariot was added to accompany the deceased into the hereafter.



And now we start on the Silk Route proper.

Xi'an

One of China's three bullet trains hurtles to Xi'an but we take our ordinary train, which allows us to see some great scenery alternating with environmental degradation. Little villages sit on the edge of industrial sites; tiny, shabby houses have beautifully kept vegetable gardens and large fields of sweet corn.



We arrive at night, to be greeted by streams of lights and lit pagodas seeming to float high in the air. It is the city wall, built during the Tang Dynasty, 13 km long, and still intact today. There are arrow towers at regular intervals overlooking the moat, now dry, that had made the city almost impregnable. The wall and the arrow towers are lit each night and look splendid. Xi'an is a city of some 2 million and apart from the inevitable traffic jams is a very pleasant place after ordinary Luoyang.

Xi'an, or Chang'an as it was then, was where the Silk Route started, but there are traces of much earlier settlement at the Neolithic village of Banpo (about 6,000 BC). From that time on, things were pretty unsettled up to the Warring States period (475 – 221 BC). The 22 year old Qin Shihuang became king of one state in 237 BC. His first job was to defeat the other six states, which he did in 221 BC, declaring China to be one country and himself as first emperor, thereby starting the Qin Dynasty in 221. He established the idea of central government, unified system of weights and measures, the standard width of chariot wheels, and massive building projects; the Great Wall, his own palaces, that took a work force of 2 million, his own mausoleum, which took 720,000 men and took 40 years to complete although he was on the throne for only 38 years. He also



destroyed anything that might challenge his authority, such as the writings of Confucius, which he burnt, and Confucian scholars, who he murdered. Through his power and his building projects, Xi'an was splendid, larger than Rome.

Qin Shihuang's mausoleum, at 34 square km and 100 m. tall, was the largest in the world. It is still sealed, by Government order, but legend has it that he rebuilt underground a replica of his palace, with rivers and lakes of mercury as more long lasting than water. In this underground monstrosity, all his childless concubines were interred, still alive. It was the custom to include the royal guard but Qin was afraid that if they knew that they too were to be interred alive they would revolt. Instead, he made replicas of his guard, a force of 8,000 men and horses, of which only 1,000 survive today. The horses were the small Chinese horses of the time, but the men were built larger than life, up to 6 ft 5" in order to frighten any foes, and weighed 500-900 lbs. They were made in three parts: the thick, solid legs, the bodies hollow and dressed according to rank, and the faces each individual made probably from the workmen as models and several ethnic groups are presented: Northern and Southern Han and several minorities.



When Qin died, his sons were too weak to control the populace. The peasants were angry at being forced to work on Qin's palaces, his mausoleum, the Great Wall for little pay yet still being taxed on top. They broke into his precious mausoleum and smashed many of the statues and set fire to the supports. What we see today is a sad and damaged fraction of the originals. The fire burnt the timber supports so that the roof came crashing down, damaging the statues and burning the colouring off them.

The Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) followed the Qin. It was during this period that Jiang Qien took off for the West in 138 BC, as I have explained, thus starting the trade along what we now call the Silk Route. Apart from establishing the Silk Route the Han Dynasty a very creative time, during which the following inventions appeared: iron technology for agriculture, glazed pottery, paper, the seismograph, the wheelbarrow, the ship's rudder, the compass, a loom for embroidery, the hot air balloon, horse stirrups, and China's examination system for selecting public servants or mandarins. We visit the Forest of Stele, the heaviest library in the world. It consists of stele or stone slabs of writings of Confucius and other documents from the Han and Tang Dynasties. The Emperor's stele warrant a separate temple, while those of lesser people get just a slab on the wall.



We visit a jade museum to learn that mountain jade is soft and river jade is hard, many different colours, much heavier – and much more expensive. The jade museum has a beautiful array of objects. Here is a section of a jade decorated panel. We then have

dumpling lunch that a clever cook makes at the table: chicken dumplings are chicken-shaped, duck duck-shaped, rabbit rabbit-shaped, but oddly they all taste of old-fashioned sausage meat. We finish with a soup made in a wondrous machine fired by meths.

In 629, a Buddhist monk, Xuan Zhuang, travelled the Silk Route to India to obtain Buddhist scriptures. He return to Xi'an to store them in a new pagoda. The story goes that he and his monks were hungry, and Buddha inspired a goose flying overhead to drop dead at the monks' feet. Gratefully replete, they built their pagoda on the spot and called it the Flying Goose Pagoda. Outside a man flies a monster kite over 100 m. long.



Xi'an celebrates the creative Tang Dynasty, with a special display of Tang artefacts in the History Museum. The Tang dynasty was one of the most creative of all, artistically and in civic life. Here is example of another sort of creativity. The Tang emperor Xuan Zong so loved his concubine Yang Gui Fei, said to be one of the most beautiful women in Chinese history, that he neglected the affairs of state. His generals were alarmed, telling him he must get rid of her or the army would lay down their weapons and not defend him. With great sadness, he ordered her death. On hearing this, she decided to suicide rather than so embarrass her lover. She was found swinging from a tree before the soldiers got to her. But the body in the tree was not her but her maid, dressed in her clothes. Honour was satisfied on all sides and the happy couple resumed their affair. We see the story played out in a splendid Rogers and Hammerstein musical, Tang style.



Our trip to Xi'an finishes with another romantic touch. Catherine and I are in our respective public toilets at the site of the warriors, when through the PA system we hear a song we had played at our wedding: *The Moon is my Heart*:

*You ask me how deep my love is for you
How much I love you.
My feeling for you is true, my love for you is true.
The moon is my heart*

Soon after returning home, we are having lunch in a restaurant, the Noodle Box, in Sandy Bay – and that same song enwraps us again. It has travelled from Mt Nelson, to Xi'an, to Sandy Bay, Hobart.

Jayuguan

From Xi'an the scenery is flat and desolate but beautifully relieved by a distant background of the snow covered Xiling Mountains. The next stop on the Silk Route is Jayuguan, where we are greeted by a band of ladies who had been waiting two hours for us. As would the Daughters of the American Revolution, these Daughters of the Cultural Revolution show their patriotism by marching proudly.



Jayuguan is the western starting point of the Great Wall and now a small industrial town based on iron and steel production but the CBD is pleasant, our hotel traditional Chinese. The minibar in our room has a small bottle of King Lion Red Wine 1998 at an absurdly cheap 10 Y (\$1.50). I open it and gag. It is completely oxidised and undrinkable. But having opened it, I do the decent and front up to reception and attempt to pay. The receptionists looks at me suspiciously, rings for a maid who is to accompany me to my room to verify that I had in fact opened the stuff. Yes, she confirms that I had. I pass over their Y10.

The food is surprisingly bland, despite the sight on the outskirts of town rows upon row of fiery chillis drying in the sun. I ask the guide if our food is authentic she says it is, but adds hesitatingly, "The chef knew foreigners were coming so he left out most of the spices." To cater even further for the tastes of these foreign devils he makes our favourite dish of: chips. Thank you chef but they are awful.

In previous times Jayuguan was an important post to protect the Silk Route. At one end of the town is a section of the Great Wall. That has now gone but a poor imitation was built in 1987. It is a pleasant climb, however, and gives a great view of the Gobi desert. At the bottom is a recent array of statues of people and animals that were important in the history of the Silk Route, including Jiang Qien himself, not to mention his camel.



The other end of town was protected by a magnificent fort, built



in an impressive 4 years in 1372 (another example of Tang enterprise). There are protective walls made of sticky clay that hardens like cement, a river forming a natural moat, more walls 10.7 m. high, another moat, and an inner and an outer court, with three great watch towers. There is a nice story about the architect, Yee Kai Jin. One version is that he had one brick left over which enraged the overseeing engineer, Fung Xing, as wasteful. He ordered Architect Yee's execution for

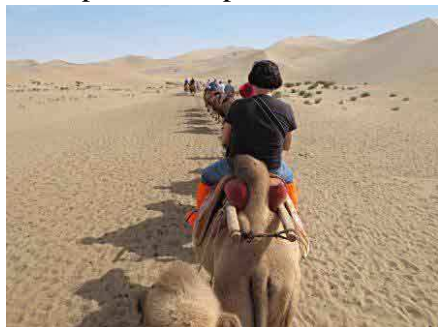
extravagance. Yee thought fast and said that he had had a dream in which God had told him to leave a brick over. That brick was the keystone of the whole structure; remove it and the fort would collapse. Another version is that he told the engineer he would build with an exact number bricks. The engineer didn't believe him so the Architect Yee replied: "All right, I'll add one more brick." He did, and it was left over. Whichever version is true, there is indeed one brick displayed halfway up a blank wall so that it may be seen but not removed. If it was, the whole fort might collapse.

Dunhuang

Dunhuang was the most important part of the Silk Route for here it branches north or south of the impassable Taklamakan desert, second in size to the Sahara. Today, Dunhuang is a pleasant town of 200,000 or so. Set on the edge of the desert, it is the centre of hectares of wind turbines, another reminder of how far China is ahead of Australia in developing renewable energy. Another reminder is that the economy of this arid desert town depends on grapes, fruit and cotton, the vast quantities of water coming from snow melt piped from the mountains a 100 km away. Dunhuang has broad clean streets with well-tended flowers on both sides, the street lights are made up as lanterns or bells. If Jayuguan with its dark traditional hotel and paranoia about people offering to pay for wine they mightn't have drunk, Dunhuang represents the new China. But old or new we still have to queue to have our hand-carry given an airport type screening in the splendidly vast, clean, new Dunhuang Railway Station.



To impress this upon us that we are indeed on the Silk Route, we are deposited on camels



that take us to the Singing Sands and Crescent Lake. Sliding down the sands is a tourist treat, for as the sands rush down they sing. Miraculously, this seeming vandalism doesn't matter, for at night the desert winds drive the sands back up to where they came from. Walking uphill on sand is tricky, you slide down and to recapture your ground you have to start running

only to slide back again. It is like talking to a politician from one of the major parties.

That evening we are treated to another Tang musical, but it turns out to be a lovely hotch-potch. We are greeted at the door by a bevy of beautiful girls in period costume, who later

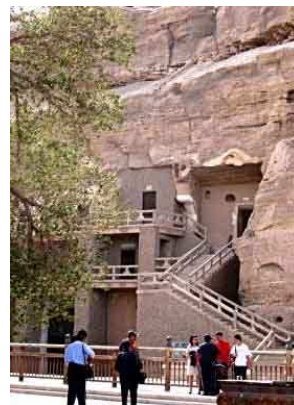


perform Tang, Hindu and Thai dances. The most impressive performance is by a man on the *er hu*, a two stringed bowed instrument looking and normally sounding like an anorexic cello, but this chap plays “Horse galloping to battle” like a manic Yo Yo Ma. Afterwards we visit the night market.



In the morning we visit a carpet factory, where you can see the transition from Chinese to Muslim motifs, but no thanks, too expensive. The Muslim mosque is next door, the first we see of many as we travel west. Then to the day market for basics. The buyers are very keen on protein, nothing is wasted, for as the flies alight on the meat, a lady with a knife at the ready sees that they stay there; perhaps they make good flavour enhancers.

Dunhuang is famous for its Buddhist statues and paintings. As Buddhism made its way east along the Silk Route during the Tang Dynasty, monks carved thousands of caves from a bluff hill side and painted murals of scenes of the Buddha preaching with his disciples, and left some tombs. Later in the Qing Dynasty, from 1700s on, painted carved statues were placed in some caves, and were sealed off with doors. It was only in the last 100 years that they were discovered. Each cave is now locked and only a few at a time are open to the public. The caves are very stuffy and crowds attend at a time. Unfortunately a party preceding us had a garlic-chewing member: the stench of second hand raw garlic did not enhance the experience. Photos are not allowed for fear, they say, of damage to the paintings, but in this high-ISO, no-need-for-flash digital age, the reason is rather that if you want images of the paintings, you buy them at the gift shop: no BYO at this cultural restaurant.



So we do buy one, from the artist himself, which fits the décor of our living room perfectly.

Again, as in Jayuguan, the food in Dunhuang restaurants is bland, some dishes almost tasteless. I am told again that it has been dumbed down for our delicate Western palates. But hey, isn't food part of the travel experience? I made further enquiries from the travel team and fellow passengers to find that chillis cleave western palates into a divide, that is almost as exclusive as the gender divide. Very well, where you have the Chinese system of many dishes per table for sharing, make half authentic and half dumbed down. The issue is not about chillis but about authenticity.

Xinjiang Autonomous Region

“The minorities and the Uyghers especially have more privileges than the Han Chinese themselves. We are very generous to the Uyghers. They have free education; we have to pay. They have lower taxes than we Han Chinese. Yet,” our guide adds in tones of pained astonishment, “the Uyghers created a great problem for the Chinese Government.”

Rubiya Kadeer’s *Dragon Fighter* (Kales Press, 2009), on the other hand, makes it pretty clear that it was the Chinese Government who had had created a great problem for the Uyghers. Kadeer points out that the Uyghers are a Turkic race with a close affinity to the Uzbeks and Kazaks, little or no affinity to the Chinese. The Uyghers were conquered by Genghis Khan, as was the rest of Asia, and were autonomous until reconquered by the Manchu Qin dynasty in 1760, who in turn were conquered by Chang Kai Shek’s army in 1911, from whom Mao took over. The Xinjiang Uygher Autonomous region was declared by Mao in 1955, with explicit rights of self-determination and even of secession for “our brother nation”, which of course never happened. The northern part of the region is very rich in gas and oil, which the Chinese want very much.



When the Chinese communists took over, the Uyghers were self-sufficient merchants and farmers, which made them class enemies. Uygher land was seized, forests that had hitherto been sustainable were cleared, and rivers diverted and now they are dry. Post Mao, things are no better. Any Uyghers who try to do business as Kadeer had done are met with this:

“We have been watching and waiting for you to become rich. You and the Uyghers should never forget that it’s an impossibility for you.” (op. cit. p. 164)

This from a senior official, who with twenty officers had stopped her at Chengdu airport and confiscated all her money. She was taxed and double taxed many times over, she had had her goods seized by Chinese officials, she was forced to pay massive bribes. Despite all that, she persisted and persisted to become one of China’s richest women and a member of the People’s National Congress. But when she spoke out in Congress about these problems she was imprisoned under horrific conditions for 5 years. On her release, she left China to join her husband in the US, but she continued her international campaigning on behalf of the Uyghers. In an attempt to keep her quiet, the Chinese Government harassed her adult children, imprisoning two. Letters from her children to her, begging her to desist from political activities, were released by Government but they turned out to be forgeries. A film of her life, *The Ten Conditions of Love*, was screened at the 2009 Melbourne Film Festival, despite the Chinese Government protesting that the Festival was being used as a stage for anti-Chinese terrorist propaganda. Chinese films were withdrawn from the Festival, the Festival website was

hacked and the Festival programme replaced with the Chinese flag and they block booked out all sessions. The film went ahead nevertheless, causing the Australian Ambassador to China to be summoned and rebuked.

In July 2009, there were violent riots in Urumqi in which 197 people died, because two Uyghers were killed after a Han-Uygher brawl. Government blamed Kadeer for inciting the riot, but she denied any connection.

As the Xinhua News Agency August 12, 2009, put it:

CANBERRA, Aug. 11, 2009 (Xinhua). Rebiya Kadeer is a regular liar and a bald-faced one at that. ... Lies, even repeated a thousand times, remain lies. A clumsy liar draws the derision of those with discerning eyes, and each lie Kadeer tells will be a display of her true separatist nature.

The “Preface” at the History Museum in Urumqi, the capital of Xianjiang, says:

The ancient Western region mainly refers to today’s Xinjiang. Xinjiang has been an inalienable part of the territory of China. This is a region where multi nationalities and many different kinds of religion prevail. ... (this exhibition shows) the contributions of the people of all nationalities in Xianjiang have made for safeguarding the reunification of the motherland, for enriching the motherland’s cultural treasure-house, and to make the masses of audiences receive the education in patriotism.

As in Tibet, then, it comes down to who you believe: the party line or the minority people themselves.

Turpan

Turpan is 70% Uygher, 30% Han. The same population as Hobart, but at 600 square kms is rather larger in area. Like Hobart too it is the town of The Four Superlatives. Turpan is the hottest region in China, the lowest at 100 m below sea level, the driest, and produces the sweetest grapes. (Pause for Reflection: what are Hobart’s Four Superlatives?). Grapes are 90% of Turpan’s economy, providing sweet sultanas, raisins, table grapes and wine grapes. Most farmers place grapes in drying rooms of open brick boxes in which they tie up their grapes. In ten days in this hot dry atmosphere they are raisins. I bought a bottle of their Dry Red (not cheap at \$30) but it too was too sweet and cloying, tasting oddly enough like Canadian wine made from the native N. American grape: “foxy” is how the pundits describe that taste



but never having tasted a fox I wouldn't know. I bought another bottle at half the price which had similar characteristics except it was less cloying. Interesting, but not my taste. (Another Pause for Reflection: tourist operators should acquire bottles of wine representing the region they are going through and hold tastings with notes provided for those interested).

Annual rainfall in Turpan is 16.6 mm, less than an inch, while the evaporation rate is 3,000 mm pa. So how is all this agriculture possible? Two thousand years ago, the grasslands dried out and rather than move the tribes decided to burrow their way to the mountains 200 km away. They achieved this by sinking wells every 25 m. into the



ground and then meeting up underground until they got to the foot of the mountains where the snow melt had sunk into the ground. We are taken underground where we see free-flowing, cold, clear water. There are 25,000 km of these Karez, as they call them. This enormous process took so long that those doing the hard work knew they themselves would not benefit, but the children and their children's children would. The

comparison of what we are today doing to our environment for our immediate gain but to the detriment of our children and our children's children, is not morally reassuring. Even on a more practical level, if the locals with the primitive tools of 2,000 years ago could transport water 25,000 km without loss through evaporation, why can't modern Australians, with the latest technology, transport water over much less distances? I suspect the answer is not technological but political. Shame.

Turpan is the clearest indication yet that this part of China is more Muslim than Han Chinese. The food is Chinese-Middle Eastern fusion, spicy, lots of lamb and different vegetables. One of the sights of the town is the Ermin Minaret, different in that it is one single tower, and not heavily ornamented.

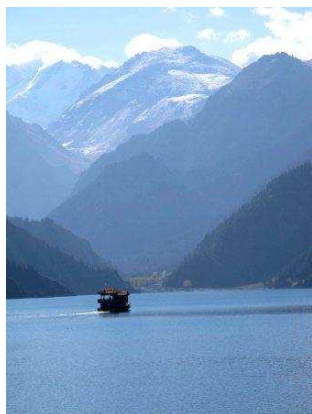


The Uygher town of Jiaohe was attacked by the Mongols in the 14th century. They couldn't cross the river and scale the walls so they starved the city out and then entered and slaughtered everyone in sight. The once great town gradually crumbled into the ruins it is today. This story prompts me to return to this puzzle of the Uyghers' relationship to China, so I ask our Uygher guide: "When did China assume power over the Uygher people?" "The Uyghers always were part of China," he asserted. Which is what the notice said in the Urumqi Museum, but it is not what Rebiya Kadeer said.

Urumqi

Urumqi, the capital the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, has a population of 2.4 million. Originally an overwhelmingly Uygher city, 80 per cent are now Han Chinese. As in Lhasa, Tibet, the Chinese practiced “soft” genocide. The Han Chinese are offered lavish accommodation for free, high wages and relaxation of the one child policy, so of course they go in droves, swamping the indigenous culture. Today, only 13 per cent of Urumqi’s population are Uyghers.

Urumqi a few years ago was a small town, but today it is the huge and modernized capital of an important industrial and agricultural region. We stay at the Sheraton Hotel in a large room with large separate bathroom, both with great views of the city. In the morning we are taken to the Tien Shan Mountain to Heavenly Lake, famous for the legend that the Mother of Heaven bathed therein. Well may She have done so for it is a beautiful place, if highly commercialized, with the usual crowds of tourists photographing each other by the sign saying “Heavenly Lake.” Just to prove they have been there, I suppose.



The Urumqi History Museum, apart from putting its spin on the “patriotism” of Chinese ethnic minorities, is famous for the mummies discovered in the Taklamakan Desert, where hot dry air preserved them. The “Beauty of Loulan”, as one mummy is called, is over 3,000 years old, in Celtic style clothing. and she had blue eyes, red hair, and European features. The museum was over-run with school children, begging to have their photographs



taken.

We leave China on 1st October, the national day, but it is no holiday for the customs officers at Alashankou on the China-Kazakhstan border. They are late in arriving. They march in step into the cavernous building with military precision. We wait further while a pleasant English-speaking officer has a friendly chat with selected people, including Catherine, asking such questions as: Is this your first visit to China? Where are you from? What are the changes you have seen in China since your last visit? During this friendly interrogation, a bull-necked thug in impeccable olive-green uniform takes close-up photographs of our faces.



Long queues; our passports are examined page by page. Weirdly, our writing on the departure forms is laboriously overwritten, as if we had spelled our own names incorrectly. Several people are singled out for intensive search where the X-rays revealed dolls and plastic miniatures of the Xi’an Warriors. “Where are the receipts? How do we know these are not art treasures?” Finally, waiting in our bus, a tall grim-faced officer

enters the bus, counts us, and raps: “Passports!” We obediently get our passports out. Some are examined cursorily, some like mine he examines closely; he turns the pages slowly, stops, looks at me with sharp suspicion, narrows his eyes, then hands it back. Other passports are not examined at all. Marching down the aisle to the front of the bus, standing at impressive attention, he counts us all over again, and, by the le-e-e-ft, smartly descends from the bus. We are free to go.

Maybe the officers were just pissed off that we had spoiled their holiday. Maybe the flip side of fierce patriotism for their glorious Motherland is a paranoid xenophobia that sees all visitors as potential enemies intent on pillaging their treasures. Whatever, arbitrary bullying and redundant routines are not the way to encourage tourism.

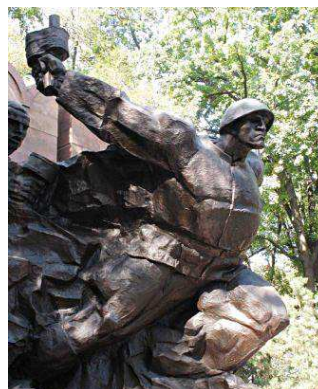
Kazakhstan: Almaty

We leave Chinese paranoia and enter Kazakhstan through a 2 km fenced corridor. The Kazak immigration officers are splendidly dressed with their high Russian caps, but the proceedings are smooth.



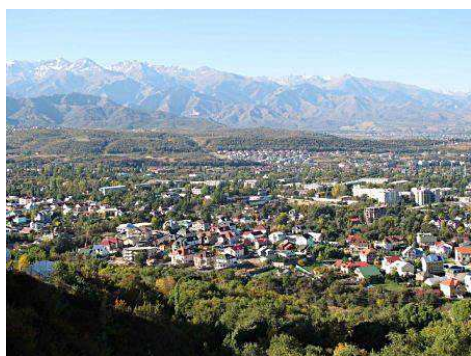
Kazakhstan is huge. It borders Russia and until 1991 was a Soviet satellite. Today it is an independent, proud republic. Like the Uyghers and the Uzbeks, the Kazaks are a Turkic race. Almaty comprises a rich mixture of Kazaks and Russian, German and Korean, a mix that is reflected in some remarkably attractive faces. The oddly high proportion of Koreans in these ex-Soviet republics like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (our next visit) is due to the fact that during the war, when Russia was at war with Japan, the Russians thought the Koreans looked a little too much Japanese, so they shipped large numbers out to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as a security precaution.

Despite the Russian occupation we are assured that Russians and Kazaks get on very well, although the Russians were resentful that their empire was no more, and eyed off northern Kazakhstan as rightfully Russian. To solve that problem the Kazakhstan President shifted the capital from Almaty to Astana in the North, preempting a Russian takeover, for that would be full-on war. In 2011, the Asian Games are to be held there. Most people are Sunni Muslims who distinguish themselves sharply from the fundamentalist Shi'ites: men are encouraged not to wear beards and women not to cover their faces. There is also a splendid Russian Orthodox Cathedral of the Heavenly Ascension, constructed in 1903 of wood; it has survived two major earthquakes whereas many other buildings did not. The Cathedral was variously a storehouse and a concert hall during the atheistic Soviet occupation but was



reconsecrated in 1995. We saw many people lighting votive candles while priests stand around and consult one on one. What are they talking about? I wonder.

In front of the cathedral is a monument to World War 2. Kazakhstan itself wasn't directly attacked, but that didn't prevent the Russians from erecting some typically brutalist monuments. But just round the corner is some light relief: Kazaks and their horses.

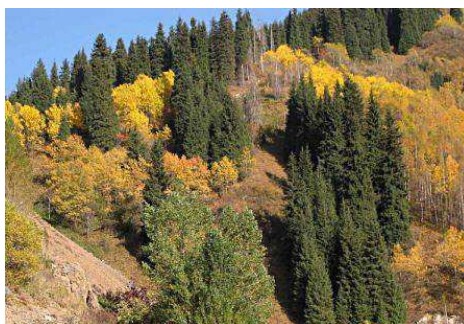


Almaty (pop. 2.4 million) is the second largest city in Kazakhstan. Stepping off the train the platform is dirty and basic, but then you drive along clean wide tree-lined streets on a grid pattern, against the backdrop of the dramatic snow capped Tien Shan Range that we had visited from Urumqi yesterday. Keen photographers are advised to arise at 5 am and photograph the new day's sun flaming the peaks, but I settle for the less dramatic but less self-punishing sunset.

Although in the middle of semi-desert, Almaty is a garden city, with large parks, gardens and flowers in profusion, all fed with snow melt. We are seeing the city at its autumn best. The guide book says Almaty is Asia's best kept secret. There are splendid modern buildings, one massive office block is designed to mirror the peaks on the mountains behind. Latest model cars fill the streets, Audi and Mercedes the norm. The source of Almaty's wealth is oil. However that wealth is distributed unevenly. From the train we saw those third world villages where the locals are living at subsistence level.

Rima, our city-proud guide, takes us to the Kazak musical instrument museum, comprising hundreds of instruments, most two and four stringed versions of the violin and ubud, drums, squeeze box and wind and brass, which she enthusiastically rabbits on about to a steadily dwindling audience. Then to the History Museum to a similar mosaic of detail, which rather hides the big picture. In the middle of a large room is a yurt, a mobile home borrowed from the Mongols and a traditional Kazak dwelling. It is made of felt, which Kazak women assemble and dismantle in 2 or 3 hours while the men play their music.

We visit the mountains and have lunch in another yurt; it feels very protected and solid, cool in summer and warm in winter. A good looking Kazak couple show their skill with kazak instruments. Rima had told us that horse meat is especially nutritious and Kazaks eat a lot of horse, which is why Kazak men are strong and live long, and Kazak women can be very beautiful. We found out for ourselves at lunch that horse tastes like excellent light beef, but we need much more than we ate there to become strong and beautiful. We share more of the Kazak diet: lamb, beef, nuts and fruit, especially apples: Almaty means the city of apples.



A few kilometers from Almaty are the Tien Shan Ranges, another end of which we had visited the previous day in Urumqi. Here the mostly deciduous forests are dense, rich with wildlife, birds and animals including the snow leopard, snow tiger, wolves, foxes porcupines. The Kazaks are protective of their environment but because wolves kill people, you can shoot them if you like.

Our hotel, the Hyatt Regency is a modern and striking building, but our room is no great shakes, tea and coffee are not provided, not even bottled water, and a can of beer is about \$12, internet \$30 US for 24 hours. Correction: that was what we were told on check in, but on check out they insisted I pay \$36. The reason, we are informed, is that the fee is a stock Kazak Tange of 5,200 and the exchange rate had changed.

“What? Up 20% in under 24 hours? We were quoted \$30,” I reason, “and we are still within that time. No, I will not pay!”

A shouting match ensues in which the words “liar” and “thief” might have entered our discourse. Our splendid tour leader, Jo, intervenes with calming effect: Captain’s Choice will pick up the fee. “That is not the point!” I expostulate, but to no effect. Peace is restored. I recall that when we had entered the grounds previously a security guard had run around the minibus with an upturned mirror on a stick, checking that there were no bombs stuck to the chassis. I was puzzled then, but after this exchange I can see that some, less patient than I, might have entertained such an idea.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is a rich country. Not that you gain an impression of riches as you bump and roll on ill-maintained rail tracks – there was a marked difference when our train ran on Chinese and later Russian maintained tracks – and note the subsistence level farms and dwellings beside the tracks. But the story goes that when God was allocating countries to all the nations of the world, there was nothing left for the remaining Uzbek nation. They complained to God, who said “Never mind. I’ll share a piece of my Paradise with you.” Certainly the country is well endowed, not only with magnificent scenery, but with gas, oil, gold, precious stones and, as we were told, 100 of the 118 elements in the periodic table.

Uzbekistan was part of the old Turkistan, and was annexed by the Russians in 1874, becoming part of the Soviet Empire in 1917. It was proclaimed a country in 1924. A commissar, after drinking too much vodka, had doodled with an arbitrary pen to form the boundaries Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and several other -stans. Then in 1991, the whole lot became independent. 78% of Uzbekistan’s 28 million population are Uzbeks, speaking a Turkic language now infused with Russian, Tajiks, and several minorities including those poor displaced Koreans: in all 100 ethnic groups are presented. It is truly multicultural: people are blind to religious and ethnic differences and intermarriage is commonplace.

Except that here, unlike Kazakhstan, there is simmering resentment against the Russians, about the way they dominated the culture, built stumpy ugly buildings with strong materials that made demolition very difficult so that renovation was only feasible on the inside. Wages just before the Russians left were equivalent of \$100US a month, which was not quite liveable on. The average wage now that is \$500US per month.

A major catastrophe was Khrushchev's plan in the 60s to irrigate crops of mega-thirsty cotton and to make that Uzbekistan's major export. Irrigation channels are emptying the



Aral Sea, leaving two small lakes. A similar story to the Murray-Darling and Queensland cotton stations, although we can't blame that on Khrushchev. One or two islands in the Aral Sea were used by the Soviets for germ warfare experiments but today they are islands no longer but part of the landscape. Maybe we got a taste of a stray biological weapon or two later, as explained below. The Aral Sea suffered a double

whammy when an earthquake sealed off an underground channel connecting the Aral and the Caspian Seas. The Caspian is now slowly rising, which is good news for lovers of caviar.

The State owns all land, but not the houses. Farmers are required to grow certain proportions of cotton or wheat, they can grow what they like after that. All farming is organic, no chemicals. Each farm is about 90 ha or just over 220 acres and are gradually being privatised as the farmers buy their land from the State.

Certainly people in the city seemed well dressed and drive modern cars, but this sort of wealth we didn't see replicated in the countryside. Like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan is a Sunni Moslem country, and Shi'ite type fundamentalism is illegal. Women are encouraged to keep their faces visible and men not to wear beards, and if they want to, they can obtain alcohol at any of the many liquor stores we saw. There are all sorts of religions, and none are seen as exclusive: intermarriage and ethnic diversity is common.

But Uzbek bureaucracy exists. One of our group had bought some stuff in China they wanted to post ahead, about 7 kgs. No, the Post office informs then, you will have to obtain a clearance in person from the Minister of Cultural Affairs. They didn't bother.

Tashkent

The train approaches Tashkent via some seedy looking suburbs, and as we descend to the platform we are greeted with an all pervasive mooring that is quite alarming. As we approach the source, the drums separate the sound rhythmically and a paleo-clarinet sort of thing picks out a tune. We are being greeted in traditional Uzbek style, with



a glass of the local bubbly to cheer us up.



We board our buses, which take us to the CBD via wide, clean tree-lined streets. The CBD is adorned with splendid buildings, some Russian, some modern Uzbek, much Muslim and one lone Gothic Roman Catholic Cathedral. But trees and water are the motif for Tashkent. When a child is born, the father plants a tree that becomes the child's tree for life. All sorts of Asian and European trees fill the 200 parks and ring the 300 fountains. Tashkent is a thriving city of 2.5 million, seemingly prosperous, plenty of modern cars and sophisticatedly dressed people, but a glance at some of the houses suggests that the spread of wealth is wide.

In April 1966, an earthquake devastated central Tashkent and Russia sent workers and materials, free of charge, in an emergency rebuilding programme as commemorated in a typical Russian brutal statue in honour of the glorious Russian workmen.



We see the array of Muslim buildings, the style of which is the hallmark of the region: richly ornate pillars and bright blue domes of the mosque, in a complex of madressahs.



There are Muslim extra-curricular

schools for the religious education of children and post-secondary colleges for training imans. In the centre of these buildings is the Muslim library which contains the Koran in its original language plus several other versions, laboriously copied by hand. The large madressah at the rear still takes in some children but most of the little classrooms are occupied by craftsmen and women and shops,

selling all sorts of handcrafts: clothes, furs, hats, pottery, jewellery, metalwork

Tashkent was founded in the 1st century and was totally sacked by Genghis Khan in the 13th century. The local hero we know as Tamburlane, but as that means Timur the Lame, the politically correct title is just Timur. With a ruthlessness equal to that of Genghis, Timur recovered the city and a lot more, nearly reaching Moscow, and far west to the Mediterranean. Statues and paintings of him are everywhere. He was as violent as Genghis, but at least his violence was for the Uzbeks not against them.





Tashkent was an important part of the Soviet rail network. When 1991 loomed, the Russians left much rolling stock behind, which now form a major rail museum, second only to a larger rail museum in Siberia. The Russian rail gauge is wide at 1520 mm (just short of 5 ft), as compared to 1,435 mm or 4'8½" for USA and most of Australia, except of course for Tas and Q at 1067 mm. or 3'6". The Russian trains are impressive for their sheer size of the locomotives, most having 10 driving wheels and multiple bogies, as in 4-4-10-2 (o-o o-o O-O-O-O-O o, that is, looking side-on, two sets of 4-wheel bogies, 5 pairs of massive driving wheels, and a small 2-wheel bogie in front) where 2-6-4 is a usual Australian locomotive. Here is a train commandeered in Germany that needed to be refilled every 100 kms with 100 tons of coal and 17 tons of water (or it might be the other way round), a massive folding snow plough, the train that Stalin used to ship dissidents to Siberia (the single bogie did little to smooth out the bumps), and the last steam trans-Siberian loco with massive 6ft driving wheels.

Samarkand

*White on a throne or guarded in a cave
There lives a prophet who can understand
Why men were born: but surely we are brave,
Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand.*

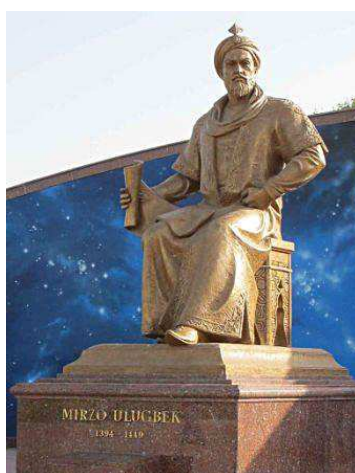
*Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
And softly through the silence beat the bells
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.*

*We travel not for trafficking alone;
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:
For lust of knowing what should not be known
We make the Golden Journey to Samarkand.*

James Elroy Flecker

Flecker's poem reflects the Edwardian obsession with an idealized, romantic Middle East, Lawrence of Arabia just a year or two down the track. I suppose the lust of knowing is what drives us to these parts but I'm not sure it is the lust of knowing what it is that should not be known, for how we would know if we didn't know it? But surely we were indeed brave to take the Golden Road to Samarkand, as Catherine found out the next night, when she erupted with severe food poisoning in our Samarkand hotel. Or it might have been those Russian-bred germs emanating from the drying husk of the Aral Sea.

Samarkand is one of the oldest cities along the Silk Route. It has had more than its fair share of plunder and mayhem, starting with the conquests of the Persian Cyrus the Great, followed by Alexander the Great, who colonized the city in 329 BC, many of his men intermarrying, which is said to be the genetic source of the occasional blue eyes you see today. More biological diversity, injected rather more forcibly still, followed Genghis Khan's rampages until Timur, a genuine Uzbek of Turkic origin, got rid of the Khan. We are treated to a fashion parade by Uzbek students, showing us not only their creativity but the benefits of ethnic mingling and fanning at least my fiery heart with hotter winds.



Timur made Samarkand his capital, and the first monument we visit, near our hotel, is his mausoleum, in which are also the bodies of two sons and two grandsons, including the astronomer Uleg Beg. Then we go to the heart of Samarkand, Registan Square, lined on three sides by heavily ornate madressahs and a mosque – that is the one with the dome. Here I learn that the dome on the mosque is in effect a PA system. The iman stands at the right place and his lengthy sermons are clearly audible anywhere in the building. The most brilliant madressah is that built by Uleg Beg, Timur's grandson, whose love of astronomy is reflected in the decorations and who intended the madressah as a school for science and mathematics, which did not impress the imans, who had a fundamentalist

Muslim version of intelligent design in mind for the science curriculum.

We look forward to a sound and light show at Registan Square that evening. What a brilliant idea: coloured laser lights sharply picking out the glories of the madressahs! But what a letdown. The sound was so loud it distorted, consisting mainly of corny verse, while the light was a matter of randomly switching on and off the lights of the three madressahs facing the square. But it could have been worse. Our learned lecturer on the tour,



Ian Cummins, said he had attended this show in the 70s, and the verse then was a glorification of Lenin.

Near Registan Square is the Bibi Khanum mosque Timur ordered in honour of his Chinese wife. But he was impatient, the builders cut corners and unlike the other mosques, it is not in good shape today. It lies along the oldest road in Samarkand of some 2,000 years, not that it looks like it, which takes us to the huge central market: a boy delivers bread on his head,

food is neatly stacked, a lady at a market stall flashes her brilliant gold teeth, and beautiful people stroll around in colourful clothes.

Timur's sons took after him, in that they fought each other for ten years. Uleg Beg, Timur's grandson, who built the main madressah in Registan Square, was very different. He preferred to rule the world of the mind to ruling empires. He was an astronomer and mathematician, calculating trigonometric tables of sine and tangent values correct to at least eight decimal places. His most



enduring contribution was his observatory, a massive sextant 63 m across and extending 90° not the usual 60°. He used that to plot the coordinates of over 1,000 stars and to calculate the length of the year to a few seconds of current estimates and the degree of the earth's axial tilt, which is the most accurate to date. Unfortunately, he used his scientific knowledge in preference to Muslim tradition, which enraged fundamentalist Muslims. His own son decapitated him. I asked the guide if Uleg Beg's demise was a religious or a political issue. A silly question. At that time there was and still is no separation of church and state. More cheerfully, the observatory hill is a favourite place for weddings.



Our final visit is to a necropolis, built over what Genghis Khan left of the city wall: mosques, a madressah, mausoleums, and up and over into a present day necropolis.

Bukhara

Bukhara is said to be "the jewel" of the Silk Route, one of the oldest cities with old architecture protected by 80 years of Soviet neglect. We visit first the 10th century mausoleum of Soulimnyi. This had been spared by Genghis Khan because he tended not to sack mausoleums out of some sort of respect. But the most massive structure is the Ark Citadel, going back to the 5th century. It suffered heavily from bombardment by the Red Army in 1920. It has walls specially built to resist rising damp, with logs spaced through.



It was the home of cruel and corrupt emirs, and a coronation court where the last emir was crowned in 1910. It also houses the dreaded "bug pit" in the prison complex, where was home to snakes and scorpions to keep the prisoners company. Two celebrated prisoners were British diplomat Stoddart who in 1836 offended



for his lack of diplomatic manners: not accepting presents,

dressing carelessly, so he was dumped in the Bug Pit until he agreed to accept Islam as a condition of release. This enraged fellow Brit Conolly, who came to sort the emir out but he too was placed in the Bug Pit but, unlike Stoddard, as a staunch Christian he refused to accept Islam. They both were executed in 1842 for espionage.

Nearby is a decrepit wooden mosque, with an old man on guard. We visit the summer palace of the emir, equally decrepit: all rather disappointing. The real treat we are assured is in the morning: the famous Bukhara market. Alas, few of us are able to make it for the following reason.

We have dinner that night in a madressah turned restaurant, with a splendid dancing act, assisted by Jo our tour manager in appropriate dress. The food turns out to be a biological minefield. For starters, there are the usual line ups of bean and tomato salads, all very nice (Uzbek tomatoes are a rich red, juicy and taste like tomatoes used to taste when I was a kid). But they are whited sepulchres: fair without, foul within. The next course is a tagine of tough dry meat, onions and potatoes: as foul without as it transpired it was also foul within. Or again it may be those Russian-bred germs. Whatever, that night my innards explode, along as I am to discover with many other innards belonging to those who had attended that dinner. It was the worst case of food poisoning I have suffered. A partial recovery the next day, to be sure, enough to do the tour of the next city, Khiva, but thereafter it is three days of never straying from leaping distance of a toilet. The only blessing is that in the Russian train each cabin-compartment has its own private toilet: in the Chinese train, one would be staggering along a lurching corridor to the public toilet at the end – certainly to find it already occupied by another suffering wretch. And in both trains, toilet paper tore off lengthways, in useless ribbons. Why?



Khiva



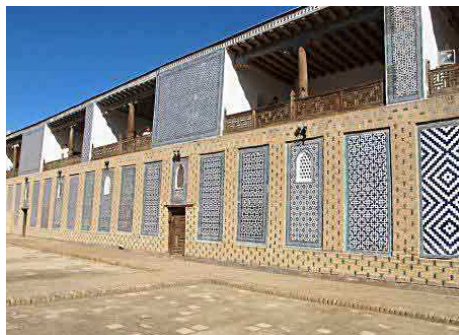
Khiva and our last stay on the Silk Route itself. After Khiva, our predecessors would have urged their camels to go North of the Caspian Sea to Europe, or South, touching base at Antioch.

The Russians took a shine to Khiva and heavily restored the old city. Our guide book says some see it as “over-restored and too cleaned up.” I disagree. You get more of a feeling here of how things were

than anywhere else – well, I did anyway.



The old city is enclosed with a restored wall, and one enters through a restored gate. Inside, merchants lay out their wares as they would have of old: furs (hopefully but assuredly not artificial), rugs, pottery, cloth, metalwork and so on.



The old harem is very well kept. The emir used to sit on one side of the courtyard, watching his concubines disport themselves on the balconies opposite, now and again choosing one for a bit of fun. He selected his girls from the age of 8 and discarded them at the age of 18 – and this was as late as 1910. Even if the girls were unhappy about this treatment, their families were not. They were richly rewarded for the honour of having their daughter serve the emir’s pleasure. Perhaps this

shameful history has prompted Khivans today to use the old city as a favourite venue for proper weddings.

On a different note entirely, outside is the statue of al-Khwārizmī, the founder of algebra by virtue of his deriving the first systematic solutions for linear and quadratic equations. Not for nothing then does the word “algorithm” come from the Latin version of his name.

Volgograd



Mother Russia challenges our train as we enter Volgograd, the city on the Volga, the longest river in Europe. It is a tad chilly as we step off the train, but sunny and warm during the day. Hah, we think, a Russian autumn is delightful! We are to be proved horribly wrong a day later.

We have five hours here to see the impressive sights. All of which are about one event: the Battle of Stalingrad, as Volgograd was then called. The battle was the turning point of WW2. The previously invincible German army marched to the outskirts the city, planning to take it in one week. So confident

was Hitler that he unaccountably delayed for five weeks, thinking that the delay was of no consequence; it was still a balmy mid-summer. But this was all or nothing for the Russians. That one week dragged out to 200 days, from summer to one of the worst winters on record. The Germans lost half a million troops, the Russians one million; 98 per cent of Stalingrad was laid waste. The Russian winter had yet again saved Mother Russia. In February, 1943, the Germans ignominiously retreated, as had Napoleon 130 years earlier. The Russians pushed after the



retreating army, eventually right up to Berlin itself. And that was the end of the German dream and the beginning of an Eastern European nightmare.

The first stop is in the city centre where high school students in military get-up guard the sacred flame. The guard is changed on the hour. The girls' white scrunchies are fetching but surely a military first. I think this chap is a teacher seeing that the girl's scrunchy is up to scratch. I hope that's what he's doing, anyway.



That is a curtain raiser for our next stop for more guard changing below the protective, massive, arms of Mother Russia herself. She was once the highest statue in the world, at 85 m. to the tip of her sword, until the Chinese built a Buddha. As you approach the statues from below, you enter stage by stage, each revealing more and more, until you reach the Hall of Heroes, adorned with the names of 7,200 Russian soldiers who had fallen. We then see another changing of the guard, this time very precise by professional soldiers, first at the lower entrance of the Hall of Heroes, then at the upper entrance.



Our next trip is to a panorama in the History Museum, beside the old Flour Factory that had marked an important crossing on the Volga during the battle. There, in 360° diorama, are depictions of actual events during the epic struggle.

Stalingrad probably suffered worse than any other city in WW2, but Warsaw was also devastated, as was Berlin. Visitors to these last two cities see the past commemorated, certainly, but you also see hope in the enormous rebuilding and renovation that has been done since (see "Eastern Europe by Train"). Stalingrad obviously rebuilt itself, but it seems that that is not what they want visitors to see, or themselves to revere. Rather, Volgograd seems to prefer to dwell on a terrible event that occurred nearly 70 years ago. The change of name to Volgograd was political, a poke in Stalin's dead eye, but in keeping with our tour, it is no surprise to learn that there is strong local opinion that would revert the city's name to Stalingrad, but the betting is that political correctness from Moscow will put paid to that.



Moscow

So to Moscow, where we arrive in Moscow late afternoon, just in time to check in, change, eat and attend what we thought was the Bolshoi Theatre to see an opera: Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges*. The performance is by the Bolshoi Opera but the theatre is not the Bolshoi Theatre, which is undergoing renovation (still! It was being renovated over



two years ago when we were there last) but a smaller adjoining theatre. It turns out that the programme includes an overture by Humperdinck and five songs by Mahler, which I hadn't heard before. As soon as the orchestra tunes up, the sonority hits. The orchestra is large, and is like Russian choirs: richer, darker, more sonorous, than Western orchestras. The TSO is a chamber orchestra in comparison.

I liked the Mahler best, sung by a very expressive soprano. We are disappointed that the Ravel is a concert performance only, but it often is, being remarkably difficult to stage. Unfortunately we knew nothing about the opera, and knew nothing more at the end: it seemed an impressionist piece of noise making, and with Ravel's gift for orchestration, some very striking noises indeed are made – but what was it all about? Some cat and dog noises, hissing nasty women, a lost looking boy, some sweet sounds ... Google told me what that was all about:

A rude child is reprimanded by the objects in his room that he has been destroying. The unhappy objects come to life. The furniture and decorations begin to talk; even his homework takes shape as it becomes an old man and a chorus of numbers. The bedroom then becomes a garden filled with singing animals and plants that have been tortured by the child. He attempts to make friends with them but they shun him. In his loneliness, he cries out "Maman". At this, the animals attack him and each other. A squirrel is hurt. The child bandages the squirrel, then collapses exhausted. The animals have a change of heart. They carry him back to his house, sing his praises. The opera ends with the child singing "Maman", as he greets his mother, in the very last measure of the score.

Well, well! I wish I'd known that beforehand; it would have helped a lot.

Next day is the Moscow routine – Kremlin, Red Square, St. Basil's Cathedral. We are given an early private visit to the Kremlin before the crowds, assured that we'll sail through the security check. But no. The Kremlin guards decide that these Australians should receive no favours. We stand in a queue for half an hour in freezing wind and spatters of snow. Bastards. We had been here once before ("Eastern Europe by Train") but the Kremlin Armoury Museum is more interesting second time round, impressed yet again by the obscene extravagance of the Russian Tsars, especially from Ivan the Terrible and through the Romanovs. Catherine the Great's robe that took two years to make, contains 33,000



pearls embroidered into it – and was worn once. We are impressed again that the cash-strapped Soviets protected these examples of imperial greed and wickedness instead of cashing them in. It seems that they saw these treasures not as examples of greed, but as evidence of the might of Holy Mother Russia, which is after all more important. All the outside sights we previously saw are now adorned with beautifully autumned trees whose glory is dimmed by a reluctant sun.



Then to Novodevichy Convent, where Peter the Great dispatched both his over-bearing sister, Sofia, and his first wife. We had done most of this before in brilliant weather (see “Eastern Europe by Train”) and today it is alternating between snow and rain, with a freezing wind. We visit an important Russian cemetery, important because it contains the graves of Russian heroes of stage and film and one Nikita Khrushchev, but standing in the biting cold, a chest cough surging anew, now constipated after the short, sharp eruptions, and gaping at gravestones, seems a bizarre way of spending a big bunch of dollars. We chicken out and go back to the hotel.

Our final day, some sunshine, and a trip to St. Sergius Convent, which houses “the Russian Vatican” some 40 km from Moscow (see “Eastern Europe by train: Moscow”). We walk along the path to the convent, lined by old ladies shoving their begging tins at the devout passersby. But this time there are few people visiting. The well containing the water that preserved St Sergius’ body from decomposing is today unattended by those nicking water for the preservation of their own bodies. The domes and onion domes look brilliant in the sun framed by golden leaves. We are in time to hear the beginning of a service, the priest intoning and a single young woman responds as the choir in a voice as pure and innocent as the faces of the priests and nuns we see here. I am astonished yet again at how Russian Orthodox Christianity survived eight decades of official atheism. But I see that as a matter of sociology, not of theology.



So to the airport, snuffling and barking with what turns out to be acute bronchitis, apparently caught from endless recycling of respiratory problems since day one of the trip, each recycling producing a more virulent version of its predecessor. But all is not lost. As we queue up at the airport a tall, elegant man in a flowing black cloak pushes to the front and demands to be upgraded to Business Class. The check-in clerk asks one of our number if he would mind being downgraded to Economy so that this tall, elegant man can sit with his girl friend who is in Business Class. Yes, our colleague would bloody well mind. Exceedingly. Exit tall, elegant man. In the adjacent First Class queue, another of our number is checking in Business Class, having been asked to use the First Class check-in to save time. A Korean with a First Class ticket sees a Business Class boarding pass

about to be issued. Crimson with fury, he pushes in front of our colleagues and screams that he be served first. Our colleague, an extremely nice English lady, is asked to remove her bag from the weigh-in. (What's with these Russian check-in clerks to be intimidated so easily by poncy men in flowing black cloaks and raving mad Koreans? I ask myself). But I needn't have worried. As sweetly as Miss Marple, our colleague picks up her heavy bag and drops it onto the gibbering Korean's foot.

So *terribly* sorry.

Conclusions

Our destinations were fascinating; there is no way we would have organised such a trip ourselves. We learned an awful lot about areas that hitherto were mere names, with the added advantage of Ian's lectures, our accompanying historian, whose wisdom is acknowledged here. And to do all that from a train, after our Eastern Europe trip, seemed just right, although previously we hadn't lived on the train. Here we slept in small compartments, *tiny* compartments in the Chinese train, with the added discomfort of the toilet at end of the corridor. A problem for aging men in the middle of the night.

But the real downer was health. Bronchitis, which haunted the group from the beginning, thanks to one member of the party who brought it with him and that circulated, and Uzbekistan's gastronomically volcanic microbiological minefield (or it could have been those escaped germs from what was an island in the Aral Sea). We had previously travelled in rural China, S. America and other places with no problem, so maybe we were due for a dose. But not of recycled bronchitis, thank you, the effects of which I was still living with weeks after our return.

