

Travel the Silk Road the Houstonian Way

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An old Chinese saying: *you are not a plucky hero until you reach the Great Wall* may now have a corollary: *you ain't much of a traveler until you trek through the Silk Road*. A group of 24 diehard Houstonians (half of them Aggies), varying in age from 6 to 75, flew to Hong Kong via the North Pole to start the journey Marco Polo made famous 700 years ago. The stop in Hong Kong is just a convenience for Continental Airlines. It is also the gateway to China but it has nothing to do with the Silk Road.



The Silk Road has linked the east to the west for 2000 years. It reached its height of significance in the 12th century during the Tang dynasty when the great inventions of China -- paper, gunpowder, printing and the compass were traded to the West; while the three great religions – Buddhism, Islam and Christianity were introduced to the East. The Silk Road is actually a group of routes linking the Shaanxi, Ningxia, Gansu and Xinjiang Provinces within China to the Middle East via Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The Houston group flew from Hong Kong to Xian in Shaanxi to start its arduous 12-day adventurous journey, albeit deliberately westward to Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.



Xian, formerly called Chang'an, is the oldest capital city in China. It is now booming with a population of 6.6 million. It was made famous by farmer Yang Quanyi who accidentally discovered the buried Qin terracotta warriors while drilling for water wells in 1974. We arrived after 9 pm to the small but clean Xian Airport. We were amazed, as we traveled toward town, with the extraordinary illumination of the

highway interchange. Houston's Loop 610 interchanges pale in comparison. We had dim-sum, normally consumed in mid-morning and lunch time, around 10 pm. Instead of "while in Rome, you do what the Romans do," some of our steak and potatoes Aggie friends would have rather fasted for the night than to dig-in in this regional cuisine. We stayed at the five-star ANA Grand Castle Hotel which served American breakfast.

Our day started with a visit to the Bell Tower which was built in the Ming Dynasty for people to tell time by listening to the morning bell and dusk drum. We were amazed, as we continued our tour, that not a single nail (dowels only) was used to construct the 1378 square meter base and 8.6 meters high building atop the Dynasty City Wall. As mortar was not developed until the 18th century, workers used sticky rice, sand/gravel and grapefruit juice to bind the stone blocks into the formation of the 10-meter high wall.

The visit to the Qin Mausoleum included a lengthy one-mile walk from the bus terminals to the entrance. The subterranean world of the terracotta army of about 7,000, formed their ranks and dressed in appropriate army fatigues back in biblical times, were to serve Emperor Qin in his after life. Emperor Qin, according to our history teacher local guide Jason, made sure that anybody connected with this life-time projects were entombed as well so as to destroy all evidence of its ever existence. Farmer Yang, discoverer of the tomb, now life-time meeter-greeter at the Museum, personally autographed my copy of *Awakened*, the official guide book. The world must be shrinking, while in the gift shop, we bumped into a large group of University of Houston students. FYI, the DIY (Do It Yourself) version of the miniature terracotta figures, complete with clay, mold and kiln for one to fire, are more expensive. Our tour also included a stop at Huaqin Hot Spring where Emperor Tang Yuan Zhong's concubine, Yang Guifei, was said to have sun-bathed regularly and openly (a no-no taboo during the days of the Tang Dynasty). In the 1930s, Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek was captured and placed under house arrest while vacationing at the Hot Spring in what historian later termed the Xian Incident.

Exhausted, exhilarated, but hungry, we were delighted that evening to be treated to an imperial dumpling banquet for dinner. Some of the dumplings, 18 different types in all, were shaped in the form of ducks, suckling pigs and other appetizing figures. After the delightful dinner, we then caught the overnight train to Lanzhou.

The train reminded me of the old steam-chucker in the movie *Murder in the Orient Express*. It had four bunk beds per cabin. One might call our car the middle class accommodations. The more luxurious upper class car featured two fold-down beds in one cabin while the more affordable lower class sleepers featured two rows of triple tier bunk beds, open-door and partitions throughout the entire car. Our male members would choose the upper bunks and leave the lower bunks to the ladies. Communal wash basins, dormitory style, were more the rule than exceptions. Self (yourself, who else) flushed toilets with empty buckets, and for one to fetch water was optional. We seemed to have cultivated a special bond among ourselves. We learned to look out for each other when pick-pocketers, real or imaginary, were lurking around. The men would flank the ladies when we walked as a group. We learned not to lose sight of each other. We played cards

and visited each other's cabin and even explored the train to see the "lower class" sleeping arrangements.

Lanzhou is the capital of Gansu, the second poorest province in China. Only Qinghai is poorer. Brad, 25, our local guide was born in Qinghai. How he, a poor peasant boy, manages to speak adequate English, German, and Japanese in addition to many dialects of Chinese after graduating from Lanzhou University, is a miraculous achievement. Incidentally, our eldest tour member happened to teach English at Lanzhou University in the 80s. Brad told me that during down time in winter, he would go back to the University to pick up a new language. I asked him to learn Spanish to prepare himself for the whole enchiladas from Texas!



We had the famous Lanzhou beef broth noodles for breakfast. The noodles were made from scratch from a small log of dough and then pulled and folded in geometric progression in powers of two: 2, 4, 8, 16, etc. until the strands were thin enough for us to consume. The chef performed the pulling and folding in front of us. We visited the White Pagoda Mountain, Five Spring Mountain Park, the Yellow River Goddess and the Water Mill. We were shown how 13 bloated sheep skins were harnessed together to form a raft for peasants to cross this upper reach of the Yellow River. That evening, we stayed at the five-star Gansu

Sunshine Hotel. After enjoying the unique herbal foot massage, we went to the night market to bargain for gifts.

Next morning, we journeyed by coach to Wuwei. We saw extreme poverty on the way. Peasants practically live in mud huts and caves. The highway was bumpy and discontinuously under construction. I was marveled at the way they built the retaining wall. Workers would sling the heavy granite block over their shoulders and slotted them in a row, over 75 degrees incline, to form the wall. At the toll road stations, I also saw heavy-duty retractable/movable lane barriers, rather than the cones or concrete traffic barriers that we are accustomed to in Texas.

Wuwei is the second largest city in Gansu. It was once very prosperous as the gateway to the Hexi Corridor. The Confucius Temple was once the center for cultural studies by ancient scholars and is now very run-down, evidence of the lack of funding from Gansu and local authorities. We actually crouched down to the inner chambers of the Han Tomb of Leitai, where the renowned bronze flying horses, the logos of national tourism, were excavated. We arrived late and stayed in the three-star (best in town) Zhangye Hotel. We were told Bill Gates also stayed there in 1996. If it was good enough for good ole Bill, it certainly would be good enough for us; case closed. At any rate, we were in no position and too tired to argue.

Zhangye was once the political, economic, cultural and diplomatic center of Northwest China. Incidentally, Marco Polo lived there for about a year. The giant reclining Nirvana

Buddha of Zhangye is so big that the size of an adult measures about only half the size of its thumb. We then journeyed to Choquan (Wine Spring) and visited the Wine Spring Park.

The abundance of fruits (although not ripe) hanging from the trees and vines was a sight to behold. We could not resist picking a few grapes and peaches. After lunch we were treated to a musical performance by Uyghur dancers and we danced with them as well. In the afternoon, we visited a beautiful but run-down lake. Parents were taking their kids for a stroll. A three-year old girl talked to us in English. I was deeply touched on the way back, I saw the same girl hanging to her father's waist, without any helmet or safety belt, riding at the back of the bike on the highway. That night, we stayed at the five-star Jiu Quan Hotel. We had the fabulous wine spring chicken, which makes one drunk just by eating, for dinner.



The next morning we journeyed to Jiayuguan, the westernmost terminal of the Great Wall. We went to Jiayu Pass, a desolate outpost on the edge of wilderness but strategically situated for defense. It was built by General Feng during the Ming Dynasty. The air was crisp and cool, suitable for us to climb the towers and run up the horseways, dress as warriors, wield rented Weapons of Minimal Destruction (WMD: halberd, Kwan Do, and sword),

and shoot arrows at targets below in an attempt to re-enact scenes from centuries past. The freedom we experienced in this outpost was simply exhilarating, as there were no crowd for us to contend with. Imagine us running around with swords and amour in three-to-four deep tourists atop Badaling, the eastern end of the Great Wall near Beijing.

In the afternoon, we traveled across Gobi Desert to Dunhuang, one of the most historic sites of our journey.

Dunhuang served as a rest stop for traders and as a gateway through which Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity entered China. Incidentally, Gobi means nothing can grow in Mongolian! We had a simple folksy dinner at a country inn where we were serenaded by tribal musicians. After dinner, we chimed in and danced to the featured tunes in movies *Deliverance* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*.



We stayed at the Silk Road Dunhuang Hotel where, again, Bill and Belinda Gates' picture was shown prominently in the lobby. The imposing front entrance looks like the Great Wall gate. It is a cluster of seven buildings, modeled after the Tang and Han dynasties

with quadrangles like a small township in the desert. This complex reminded me of

Shangri-La in the movie: *Lost Horizon*. The construction was entirely ecologically friendly, using de-odorized cow dung and straw for the plaster to authenticate period materials. It is a combination of classical architectural design with modern facilities. It is a must-stay hotel for the Silk Road trip.



We made special arrangement to visit Yumen Pass—the Han Dynasty remains of the Great Wall, amid whipping and howling wind. We were supposed to visit a shepherd’s farm house. He was not there. But his four dogs greeted us nonchalantly, in blinding dust storm, as if to take pity on these poor city

slickers. We then ventured to one of the most mystical landforms of sedimentary rocks on earth at a place called Devil City. This part was once under water millions of years ago. Incidentally, the top American box office movie *Hero*, featuring Jet Li and Maggie Cheung, was filmed there. I thought the outdoor scenes were cyber effects. Now I have my pair of tennis shoes to prove that I actually walked on this ocean floor. That night we had a musical performance at a local theatre. Former Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama and his entourage, cut in line, sat in front of us and blocked our view. We had no choice but to pretend polite, reluctantly, of course.



The axiom, “when you have to go, you have to go” finally came to light when we were on a long stretch of road across the Gobi Desert. Our bus driver made an unscheduled pit stop in response to an urgent request. Men would peel off to the left and women, umbrellas in hands, would sheepishly peel to the right and hide in the sand dune troughs, to answer the call of nature. I still could not see the necessity of umbrellas, as there were no vultures peeping from above. Petro-China, the national oil company, has provided state-of-the-art toilet facilities at some service stations, to replace the open latrines, the hitherto notorious loo dreaded by westerners.



We had a 4:30 wake-up call for departure to Mingsha Mountain to see the sunrise and for camel rides by 5:30. Dawn is the best time to ride when the temperature is mild and the wind is calm. Our camels were scrawny. The camel shepherd was just a youth. He led us to Crescent Lake, the oasis. There, for 10 yen, I climbed 685 steps to the top of



the sand dune to slide down on a wooden sledge. I longed for hang gliding but it would inconvenience the rest of the group had I participated and crashed. When we got back to the hotel to

shower, my body, ear, nostrils, pockets, and shoes were literally sand filled. The camel ride was not really comfortable but it was quite an experience. Ironically, we had camel palm meringue as hors d'oeuvre, a local delicacy, for dinner that same night!

After a hearty beef (Muslim country) bacon and eggs breakfast we headed to the famous Mogao Grottoes or the Caves of 1,000 Buddhas. It was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987. This honeycomb of caves was constructed over a millennium, from 400 to 1,400 AD. In its heyday, the complex had thousands of caves where the world's richest treasure of Buddhist sutras, murals and sculptures were kept. Now, 492 grottoes and 250 residential caves remain. Almost every grotto contains a group of colorful paintings of Buddha and Bodhisattvas, or activities of different mythology. Scriptures are written in Chinese, Uyghur, Tibetan, Turkic and other languages. Now, each grotto is assigned a number and its door is padlocked. Our guide would take us to an assigned grotto and open the door as if we were checking in a motel complex. The largest Buddha is housed in the nine-story building. Most of us could not tell the difference between mythologies from theologies. But it was cool inside, a comfortable relief from the 100 degrees outside.

The Dunhuang railway station was two hours drive from downtown Dunhuang. After an early dinner we shopped around before boarding. We found a drug store and wanted to buy cough lozenges. The package was 7.20 yen and I offered to pay the clerk 8.00 yen and asked her to keep the change. She insisted on giving me back 80 cents (10 cents US). That really struck me. Rare honesty still exists in the good old west of China, I suppose!

We boarded the train to Turpan in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The train ride was much cleaner and comfortable this time. Upon boarding the train, the conductress would exchange our tickets for temporary tickets and would give us back the original ones before getting off. How that would catch the non-paying passengers I still cannot figure out. We were told to get to sleep early for the 4:00 am wake-up call.

We got off the train at 5:00 am under clear skies but gusty winds. We were herded into our coach like refugees with our carry-on. Our large baggage would need to be unloaded from the train and reloaded onto our coach. It took more than an hour just for baggage handling because of language problems, I guess.

Xinjiang covers an area of 635,829 square miles, 2.4 times the size of Texas (261,797 square miles). It borders on the eight countries of Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirgrzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, with a boundary line of 5,000 km. The main ethnic groups are Uyghur, Han, Kazak, Hui, Mongolian, Kirgizia, Xibe, and Russian. It has been granted the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) status by People's Republic of China. Its capital is Urumqi. XUAR is a land of extremes: imposing glaciers and snow ridges, vast grassland, boundless Gobi and Taklimakan desert, beautiful oasis, serene lakes and surging rivers. Temperatures vary from 128 to -35 degrees F. The mean annual rainfall is 6 inches. Although Xinjiang is predominantly agricultural and pastoral, it has rich mineral resources. The vast oil fields at Karamay are among the largest in China, and there are extensive deposits of coal,

silver, copper, lead, nitrates, gold, and zinc. New mines as well as associated industry, such as refineries, ironworks, steelworks, and chemical plants, have been established. Most of us were not aware of the vast size and resources of XUAR. Our local guide Serena was a graduate of Xinjiang University majoring in English.

We hired three donkey cabs to go to the ancient City of Gaochang, which was wiped out by a dust storm 2000 years ago. We traveled in convoy. Since our cart or open-air cab was last to leave, we got kicked in the face, so to speak, with dirt and dust. I therefore



tipped the cab or donkey driver 10 yen and asked if he could overtake the other two. This mercenary Ben Hur reacted immediately by cracking the whip and raced past the other slow pokes. The other drivers, however, responded quickly by tail-gating us using our draft, a la Tour de France. We actually had a furious race among ourselves. The trailing passengers had to resort to covering themselves with the SARS masks, a totally unnecessary precaution brought on by some of our worrisome

members. The ruins were dirt red. We actually gathered around an assembly hall to fantasize ourselves as noblemen. Later, we dropped by the foot of the Flaming Mountain which normally is rusty red but it turned out to be dusty gray due to an unexpected dust storm. We visited the Emin Minaret, the adjacent mosque which is the largest in the area, and learned about Islam burial rites.

Turpan has an annual rainfall of 8 mm, yet, it is the greatest Hami melon and grape producing area in XUAR. It owes its success to the unique Karez Underground Irrigation system, a magnificent ancient-time engineering feat, which we observed underground. Urumqi is only 100 miles away, but our journey took almost four hours due to high winds and dust. We saw hundreds of wind turban generators stretching over a mile on the way.

Urumqi today is a sprawling metropolis with 2,1 million people of which 75% is Han Chinese and 13% is Uyghur. But within XUAR, Uyghur is 47% and Han Chinese is 40% of the total 17 ethnic groups residing in this western frontier land. It is both ancient and modern yet beautifully laid out around the Red Mountain. It has more than 50 cinemas, 100 recreational centers and Karaoke bars. The posters of Yao Ming, the adopted proud son of the Houston Rockets, were prominently displayed in anticipation of the pre-Olympic four-nation tournament to be held later in July. In fact, Urumqi out-bid other cities including Shanghai to host the event. It is interesting to note that local ethnic groups do not observe the time zones. All tourists, major stores, hotels, and airlines use Beijing time, which is effectively two hours ahead. Night life starts two hours later than the usual time



we tourists are accustomed to. We stayed at the five-star Hualing Grand Hotel, which is next to a huge convention complex, currently under construction.

The next morning we visited the alpine Heavenly Lake at the foot of Bogda Peak. We came prepared for the “cold” weather and enjoyed the lake cruise and hiking along the shore. In the afternoon, we visited a Kazak family at South Mountain Grassland on the slope of Tianshan Mountain. I rode with the Kazak herdsman (nomads) and found riding the horse down hill “not my cup of tea.” Incidentally, I did have “salty” tea with them inside the yurt just to show my appreciation of their hospitality. That night, we had an all lamb dinner to celebrate our last stop of the Silk Road.

I am glad to learn that Urumqi International Airport will soon be the international gateway into China from Europe, instead of flying into Beijing and then back tracking over there. Urumqi and XUAR will, no doubt, be an important stop for both commerce and tourism.

Someone joked that the national bird for China ought to be the crane – construction crane, that is, particularly at Turpan and Urumqi. Fortunately, most of the Silk Road stops are not the drive-in/drive-out type. Imagine the tour bus dropping us off at the Gochang ruins, the Crescent Moon Lake or the Qin Masuoleum, then, we would not have the fun of donkey cab race, camel rides or the long walk through the buffer scenic route to the terracotta-warrior museum.

From its birth before Christ, through ups and downs, and the heights of Tang dynasty to its slow demise six to seven hundred years ago, the Silk Road has played a unique role in foreign trade and political relations, stretching far beyond the bounds of Asia itself. It has left its mark on the development of civilizations on both sides of the continent. With the recent revitalization of the Silk Road through tourism, the heritage associated with some of these sites, I fear, may vanish because of over-exposure to commercialism. I would rather see people discover the Silk Road, the old fashioned way, to savor its significance.



Author Upgrading his Camel Ride to Cadillac Class, Adios!