

Desert Culture



It was the world's first superhighway, a series of desert and mountain crossing that enabled silk to make its way from the ancient Chinese capital of Xian. The Silk Road allowed links between China and the West to flourish, an exchange of art, ideas and culture as well as trade.

Long before Xian became famed internationally for its silk, China's first emperor was embarking on a remarkable project which has survived almost intact to this day, over a spell of two thousand years. The terracotta warrior tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, with its rows and rows of thousands of clay warriors - each with a different expression - is one of the most stupendous sights in the world.

Visitors to today's Silk Road begin their journey in Xian, marvelling at the inventiveness of the Emperor who, as well as unifying the country and introducing standard weights and measures began the work on the Great Wall, a structure which survives to the day along parts of the Silk Road route.

Xian, with its delightful Chinese-style wooden mosque and high city walls, is the ideal starting point for tours along the Silk Road, beginning in the same place as camel trains of yore. These days, air travel allows visitors to fly over the vast Gobi Desert, alighting in the oasis town of Dunhuang, home to a unique collection of Buddhist cave paintings, originally paid for by Silk Road traders to ensure good fortune on their way through the sand dunes.

Although foreign archaeologists raided some of the best treasures in the caves early in the last century, carting them back to Europe and the United States, there is much left to admire. Close to the town itself is the Silk Road Dunhuang Hotel, a modern-day architectural marvel, built in the style of ancient dynasties, which backs onto the desert itself.

A train ride away - across part of the Gobi Desert once more - is the oasis town of Turpan, famous throughout China for its juicy grapes. An inventive irrigation system allows melting snow from the Tian Shan mountain range to flow in channels through city streets and fields, giving Turpan a plentiful year-round supply of the desert's most rare and precious commodity.

That natural asset has allowed Turpan to flourish over the centuries. It was the site for two ancient cities, the hilltop Jiaohe, built in a fabulous, hill-top location, and the once-thriving Gaochang, which was a vibrant cosmopolitan centre in its day, welcoming traders, artesans, scholars and artists.

The people who live in the shadow of the rich red mountains surrounding Turpan are from the Uyghur minority, renowned for their warmth and hospitality. Uyghurs are particularly fond of singing and dancing: the women dress for performances in vivid red dresses, with the men attired in colourful braided waistcoats and trousers.

The Uyghurs are followers of Islam, as are the Kazakh nomad herders who spend part of their year around the shores of Heavenly Lake, close to the Xinjiang region capital city of Urumqi.

The rich blue of the lake and the bright green of the meadows contrast with the stark white of the snow-capped mountains.

For supplies, the herders and nomads head into cities and towns, where sprawling bazaars sell everything from sizzling lamb kebabs to rolls of embroidered material to ceremonial knives. The biggest bazaar of all is the weekly Kashgar market, where herders come from far afield to trade sheep and goats.

Visiting this far-flung part of China is a chance to seamlessly mix modern-paced adventure with ancient culture. The arts and crafts of the region, strong since the Silk Road era, are still thriving: contemporary skills follow traditions dating back thousands of years, to the First Emperor himself.