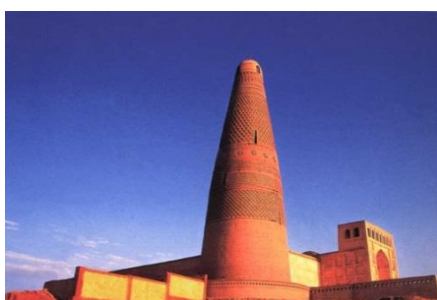


## Islam Culture



Two of the world's great religions - Islam and Buddhism - have co-existed for thousands of centuries along the old Silk Road, each leaving monuments and buildings of staggering beauty and enriching the culture of successive Chinese dynasties.

The religion of Islam generally discourages construction of brash or bold places of worship - simplicity is the norm - but the builders of old took liberties within that framework. In the ancient capital of Xian, the city-centre mosque is a work of wooden art; a series of delightful courtyards inter-connect, leading up to the main place of worship. Non-believers are welcome to stroll in its ample grounds, drinking in the atmosphere of serenity and tranquility.

Several other mosques along the Silk Road route also have distinctive designs. In Xining, the main Islamic place of worship is strongly influenced by the more flamboyant Chinese architectural style, the only building of its kind in the country.

Close to the oasis town of Turpan is a mosque of gorgeous simplicity that has survived for hundreds of years. The Emin minaret is built of local sandstone in the simple local Uygur style and, when seen against a deep blue sky and fading late afternoon sun, is an architectural work of staggering beauty.

Islam was founded in the sixth century, by the prophet Mohammed, and gradually spread east, reaching China by land, from the Central Asian States, and by sea from ships that called into the eastern ports of Guangzhou and Fuzhou in the ninth century. Its popularity was helped when the ruler Hulega, a descendant of the great warrior Genghis Khan, who ruled most of the Central Asian area in the 11th century, adopted Islam as the national religion.

Islam is part of China's rich cultural heritage which has been assimilated and accepted over the centuries, enriching the religious and ethnic tapestry of the country. Traces of ancient Islamic settlements can be found in various parts of China, particularly in the Far West of the country where the religion and culture of these Central Asian people thrives.

The Uygur people in Xinjiang Province, thought to be of Turkish descent, practise a liberal-leaning style of Islam. The Uygurs like nothing better than a large-scale party; a wedding or family celebration is an excuse for young women to dress in rich red dresses, and the men to don their finest embroidered waistcoats. The singing and dancing at these fun celebrations can go on until the early hours of the morning.

The Uygur people are known for being warm-hearted and hospitable. Wander around the bazaars of Urumqi or Kashgar and stall-holders will offer samples of grapes, nuts and lamb kebabs. Richly decorated carpets, jewel-encrusted knives and bright scarves are for sale at other stalls.

Although the Islamic and Buddhist cultures lived side by side there was little inter-marriage, with the notable exception of the famed beauty Abakh Hoja, who became a prized concubine of Manchu Emperor Qnlong.

There are other pockets of Islam followers in the far west of China - the Kazakhs, who graze their sheep along the steep banks of the beautiful Heavenly Lake follow the religion, as do many people in the town where the Tibetan Buddhist stronghold of Ta'er is located. This very place, known for the artistic creativity of its Yellow Hat sect followers, is where the Dalai Lama spent his early years.

It also has settlements of Huis descendants of Arabian merchants who spread out all over China from the seaports of Fuzhou and Guangzhou and are still prominent devotees of the Islamic religion.

Mutual respect and tolerance means there is generally little conflict. Indeed, when faced with the sheer beauty of parts of this region a harmonious mood tends to prevail. The vast expanse of Qinghai Lake with its endless sky and outer fringe of plain and snowy mountains, acts as a spiritual uplift for followers of all faiths.