



DRIVING THE SILK ROAD: *From Bishkek to Beijing*

by Monica Frim

Photography by
Dr. John Frim



Diversifolius poplar trees flank the road near Korla. Also known as desert poplars, these hardy trees can survive up to 3,000 years in the sand and wind of the Taklamakan desert.

Silk. The very word stirs the senses with images of soft, smooth, fabric — downy light, exotic, sensual and cool to the touch. It causes the mind to wander east, to the Far East, to a forgotten time when camel caravans carried not only silk but also gold and silver, precious stones (jade and lapis lazuli), lacquer ware, porcelain, paper and gunpowder along an elaborate network of roads. It wasn't just a single road, but many Silk Roads or "Seidenstraßen", so named by the German botanist and cartographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877. The roads spidered across deserts and over mountains, from Chang'an to Constantinople (today's, Xian and Istanbul), and across Asia as far as India, Persia, Arabia, Greece and Rome.

It was a two-way exchange. While Chinese products trundled west, exotic foodstuffs and perfumes wafted east: myrrh, frankincense, saffron, dates and pistachios. Even horses and caged lions could be bartered for a simple worm's finely spun thread.

But the power of silk extended well beyond trade by integrating the skills and

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

Diplomatic Connections is now dedicating a section of each publication to national and international destinations.

We are continuously asked for more information about different places to travel to.

For our first feature, join Monica Frim on her excursion by Land Rover along the ancient Silk Road from Kyrgyzstan through the heart of China to Beijing — a 4,400-mile journey in the footsteps of Marco Polo.

Travel with us

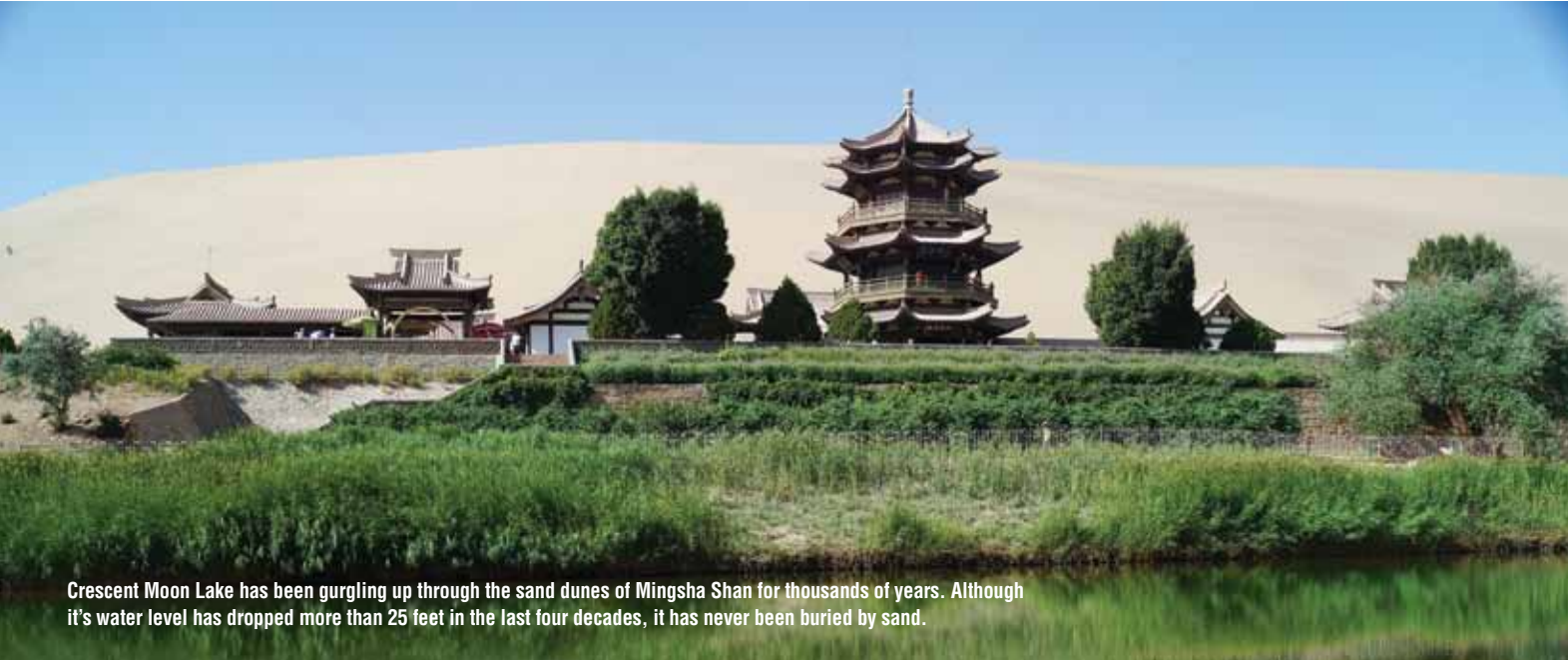


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Thousands of camels drive a thriving tourist business in the sand dunes of Mingsha Shan Mountain, a mere stone's throw from the City of Dunhuang.





Crescent Moon Lake has been gurgling up through the sand dunes of Mingsha Shan for thousands of years. Although its water level has dropped more than 25 feet in the last four decades, it has never been buried by sand.



John and Monica Frim join a modern camel caravan in the dunes of Mingsha Shan Mountain at the edge of the Gobi desert.



A Silk Road expedition vehicle shares the highway with sheep and cattle in Kyrgyzstan.

philosophies of diverse societies while simultaneously storming political boundaries and causing alliances to be forged culturally and economically. It imported and exported religions and exerted its power in a series of journeys, often taking years to reach an endpoint in Rome. Few merchants (Marco Polo, excepted) endured the entire journey. Instead, various middlemen relayed goods from one end of the route to the other and many palms were greased along the way.

My journey along the Silk Road began in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, and my camel of choice was the iron horse: first a chauffeur-driven Mitsubishi for circling Lake Issyk Kul, the second highest lake in the world after Lake Titicaca, then a self-driven Land Rover Discovery for breaching the heart of China. The changeover happened at Kochkor, a village south of Lake Issyk Kul, between Bishkek and the border with China. Here my husband John and I joined a two-car convoy of Land Rovers that had started their journey months earlier in Venice. We were seasoned Canadian travelers, having travelled to more than 80 countries over

the years, but newbies to this group, which also included Austrian, American, South African and Chinese participants. They had joined the caravan along different waypoints, some in Venice, others in Istanbul. Two of them would also be terminating their journeys at different endpoints, the South African, in Naryn, and the Chinese in Kashgar, the westernmost city of China. Our travel bonds would be forged most closely with the Austrian and American with whom we would share driving a vehicle, sometimes for as much as 10 hours a day.

The “Drive the Silk Road” expedition is the brainchild of Yue Chi, a Chinese transplant to Toronto and her South African husband, David Visagie. Together, they form an indomitable team. While David’s skills as a Land Rover specialist ensure that the vehicles are always in top condition, Yue is the driving force behind AAST, a travel company based in Canada and South Africa. As trip leaders go she ranks among the best. She thrives on coming up with innovative solutions to problems that could reduce a lesser traveler to tears. Autocratic border officials? No problem. Missing visas? A mere

hiccup. Lost luggage? Yue will track it. Ornerly police? Yue will even convince them to recant citations for minor traffic violations. Nothing unnerves her. No matter the gravity of the situation, she’d kick start a resolution with her mantra, “Don’t worry, don’t worry. There are no problems, only solutions.” Her creative thought processes extended to overcoming any bureaucratic snafu or unpredictable situation — cheerfully! She commanded our full respect and complete trust.

When John and I touched down at Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan at 2:30 a.m., Yue and her team were somewhere deep within the fabled trading posts of Uzbekistan — spinning dreams or snoring off their day’s adventures. It would be at least three days before we’d all meet at Kochkor. In the meantime, Yue had arranged for her partner in Kyrgyzstan, Elena Dudashvili, the director of Asia Mountains International Travel Centre, to supply us with a driver and guide.

Ah, this was the life. For three glorious days Marat drove us through a landscape of changing terrain and civilizations while Maria enthralled us with tales of battles won and lost, relics found and restored, and political truces forged among disparate peoples. For Kyrgyzstan is a smorgasbord of cultures. The word “Kyrgyz” stems from an old Turkic word for “40” and refers to the forty clans that united in the early 800s AD against the Uyghurs who once dominated most of Central Asia. Today the tiny landlocked country counts Kyr-



Twelve dancers merge to appear as a single entity with many arms in a performance of the Goddess of Mercy dance at a Tang Dynasty Revue.



Night Market in Dunhuang.



Left to right: Girls learn embroidery skills at a young age in Minfeng.; Stretching noodle dough at the Sunday Animal Market in Kashgar.; Three generations of a Kyrgyz family sing traditional songs in their yurt.

Left to right: A Kyrgyz matriarch in traditional dress.; Uyghur young men in Kashgar.; A Uyghur woman and child. Uyghurs are the predominant ethnic group in Xinjiang, an area formerly known as Chinese Turkistan or Uyghuristan. They speak a Turkic language and use a script similar to Arabic.; Street vendors in Khotan, China.

gyz, Uzbeks, Russians, Ukrainians, Uyghurs, Tajiks, Dungans (Chinese Muslims), Tatars and Germans among its five and a half million people. Russia remains an official language. Kyrgyz was only added as a second official language in 1991 after the country's secession from the Soviet Union.

Bishkek still bears monuments of Tsarist and later, Soviet rule. Maria cheerfully guided us among the city's large, concrete public squares with their stately odes to political pageantry, but with leafy parks and gardens that incongruously softened the Soviet penchant for austerity. Then off we were to the Burana Tower, an eleventh century minaret that once guarded the Silk Road 50 miles east of Bishkek. We spiraled up the tower's dark and narrow staircase, fingering its rough brick walls for balance, then popped like squeezed soap into sunshine and vistas of snow-capped mountains and valleys rippling with green. In the other direction, sixth century bal-bals, stone figures reminiscent of miniature moai (the stone statues of Easter Island), marked the graves of nomadic Turks.

The road skirted the red sandstone cliffs of the Boom Gorge that once took caravans through the Tian Shan Mountains, around Lake Issyk Kul and onwards to China. Dusk fell in progressive shades of red, turning the canyons from amber to purple. It would be morning before we'd be able to walk to the lakeshore, wiggle our toes in the ice cold water, which, nevertheless, never freezes, and amble among the methodically laid out vacation homes that are part of the north shore hotel complex where we spent the night.

Surrounded on all sides by mountains, Lake Issyk Kul dazzles like an oiled blue stone. It takes about a day to circumnavigate the 113- by 37-mile lake with excursions to Karakol, an old Russian military outpost at the lake's eastern end that now serves as a jumping off point for treks in the Tian Shan Mountains or the Djety Oguz Valley. Here the craggy contours of red sandstone rock formations bear names like Broken Heart and Seven Bulls, inspired by legends of love gone awry and revengeful slaughter.

Our time with Marat and Maria ended much too soon.

In one prolonged goodbye embrace at Kochkor, my good memories of the past three days surged like fire foam: eating strawberries fresh from a field, bobbing like corks in the tiny privately-owned Salt Lake south of Lake Issyk Kul, scrambling over rocks at Fairy Tale Canyon, listening to Maria playing piano in the salon of our guesthouse in Kajy-Say, and most of all, engaging in private intergenerational "girl-talk" with Maria out of earshot of the men. We transcended our political, cultural, religious, language and age differences, proving that people are people irrespective of backgrounds. I packaged the thought for China.

That night in Kochkor, Yue mustered the troops for a genuine Kyrgyz feast in a yurt, the white felt tents used by nomads throughout the centuries. We gorged on doughy manti filled with ground beef and onions; samosa-like samsi, stuffed with meat, cheese and cabbage; beshbarmak, beef boiled in its own broth, then served with vegetables and noodles; and platters of fruits and berries. But the crowning glory was not a foodstuff, but a rousing rendition of "Manas" in song. In its entirety, the epic poem that tells of the hero Manas's feats and battles to unify the Kyrgyz tribes is more than 20 times longer than Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* combined. Our hostess' teenaged granddaughter spewed out a throaty percussive rendition, somewhat shorter than the poem's original million plus lines, that sent the yurt walls quivering and my arm hairs saluting the invisible presence of the legendary Manas himself. The evening spun into a frenzy of song and dance — a dozen tired travelers in jeans and rumpled traveling clothes swept into a musical eddy with three proud generations of Kyrgyz in traditional padded velour vests, white-felted kalpak hats, and gossamer dresses with multi-tasseled conical headdresses.

If there's one thing that sets AAST apart from other tour companies, it's the opportunities for genuine interactions with local people. An impromptu stop at a nomad camp near the Dolon Pass provided us with an up-close encounter with rosy-cheeked horse herders as well as my first proffered cup of

fermented mare's milk, called koumiss. Gentle reader, I cannot be kind: after a tentative sip, my palate simply went on strike. Yue, however, downed the entire cup. "It's good," she said.

Between Naryn in Kyrgyzstan and Kashgar in China lies a No Man's Land of formidable mountains, barbed wire fences and about a hundred miles between the two countries' formal border patrols. Up, up we climbed over the arduous Torugart Pass that, at 12,310 feet above sea level, provides a snowy separation of countries. After six hours of combined Kyrgyz and Chinese border formalities we descended into the bustling city of Kashgar. Never was a five-star hotel more welcomed!

Kashgar is a timeless city at the convergence of forks of the Silk Road in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Eight centuries after Marco Polo first set foot in this wild west corner, Kashgar still feels like a medieval market town. Its Sunday animal market bustles with goats, sheep, cows and bulls hauled in and out in trucks or tiny flat beds pulled by motorcycles and sometimes bicycles. Entire lamb carcasses hang from hooks until they are cleaved by axe-bearing butchers and sold raw or dropped into cauldrons of bubbling stews. Noodle makers pull wads of limp dough like skeins of wool, stretching them into skipping rope lengths of intricate loops and twists. Farmers shear sheep on dusty mats. Tinsmiths show off knives and old locks. Young boys hawk shiny, oiled blue stones and necklaces that may or may not be lapis lazuli. They blend gently into the jangle of bleats and moos and brays. There's an odd paradoxical calm to all the fussing and haggling. Seasoned negotiators simply place their hands up each other's sleeves and tap out a deal so that bystanders are unaware of the price eventually settled on.

Kashgar's residents are predominantly Uyghur Muslims living in an uneasy peace with China's predominantly Han people. But change is on the way. The animal market keeps moving farther into the countryside as the city expands to make way for an influx of Han Chinese. The crumbling mud walls of the Old City on the hillside are being torn down and replaced with modern bricks, muddled over to simulate the

old, and new restaurants and hotels are cropping up throughout the city. As trade and tourism pull in the cash, the future of Kashgar's past hangs in delicate limbo.

From Kashgar, we followed the dusty southern arm of the Silk Road to Khotan, then on to Minfeng and the daunting 324-mile drive across the world's second largest living desert, the Taklamakan. The word "takla" means enter and the word "makan" means no exit. No self-respecting silk merchant braved this route: caravans took either the northern or southern arm around the desert, for the Taklamakan was historically harsher than the Gobi. Today artificial oases in the form of tiny glacier-blue houses, spaced almost three miles apart, line the entire route. They are the homes of government-sponsored workers who take on the tasks of irrigating the roadside plantings that hold back the shifting sands from the road.

The Turpan Basin is China's lowest and hottest spot, a jumping off point to sun-baked marvels such as Jiaohe, an ancient stone city carved into a rocky plateau reminiscent of Jordan's Petra, and Flaming Mountain, an unclimbable rock mass so hot that even birds won't fly over it. By contrast, a visit to a nearby underground canal called karez was a cooling break. Karezes irrigate an extensive grape-growing district in the desert by way of miles of underground canals that bring water from the mountains to the valley.

From Minfeng to Beijing, China unfurled historical and geological marvels that would make any archaeology buff salivate with wonder. At Dunhuang, on the edge of the Gobi Desert, we rode camels across the dunes of Mingshan Mountain. Nearby, in the Mogao Grottoes we saw some of the best examples of Buddhist artwork in the world in sandstone caves dating from 366 AD and built over 10 dynasties. Farther east, the city of Zhangye in the center of the Silk Road's Hexi Corridor boasted the largest reclining Buddha in Gansu Province. Langzhou afforded a boat ride on the Yellow River and a walk in the gardens surrounding the famous stone sculpture of the Mother Yellow River.

China is a study in contrasts. Dirt roads and superhigh-



Left: The Mogao Grottoes are a shrine of art treasures. Begun in the fourth century AD, the complex comprises 492 caves. Inside, the walls and ceilings are covered in colourful murals of historical and cultural events.; Right: Statue of the Mother Yellow River in Lanzhou.

ways. Poverty-stricken villages with no running water and expanding cities in perpetual construction. Dry scrub and lush mountains. Mega rich and mega poor. You see it all between Lanzhou and Xian, a 500-mile-or-so stretch of tunnels, tolls and tarmac that shrink the country into a one-day lesson in geography. With each tunnel (I counted 50!) we enter a greener landscape, as the tunnels themselves evolve from west to east, from simple holes cut through barren rocks to lushly vegetated canopies that open onto vistas of government-sponsored environmental enhancement. Entire cities appear plunked in the desert. Acres of wind turbines roll by our windows along with fields of melons, beans and wheat. Elsewhere, barren mountainsides are laboriously being terraced and artificially greened with expansive irrigation systems. We see geography changing before our eyes, history in the remaking as the deserts of the past give way to futuristic cityscapes. The dense populations of the east are seeping into the west in ambitious resettlement projects that boggle the imagination.

But if our all-day drive was a lesson in future technology, our drive through the old city wall of Xian took us back 2,000 years to the eastern terminus and cradle of the Silk Road. Begun during the Han dynasty, the Silk Road reached the epitome of power under the Tang Dynasty from the 7th to the 10th centuries when Chang'an, as the city was then called, was one of the grandest cosmopolitan cities of the era. Today the ancient capital's biggest drawing cards are some 10,000 life-size terra cotta warriors and horses that predate the Silk Road by roughly 300 years. They were built for the afterlife of the Emperor Qin who reigned from 221 BC to 206 BC, but only discovered in 1974 by poor farmers digging a well. Today the farmers are museum curators who also sell

books on the warriors and pose for tourists for a fee.

We spent hours wandering among warriors, temples, ancient walls and attending an extravagant revue of Tang Dynasty court music and dances. It wasn't enough time.

Although Xian marked the official end of our Silk Road journey, Beijing beckoned. We stopped over night at the ancient walled city of Pingyao, an incredibly well preserved city whose layout dates from the Ming and Qing dynasties. Its crowded streets were a perfect introduction to the excesses of Beijing: crowds, traffic, Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven and the Summer Palace. We ran ourselves ragged squeezing them all into a full day of guided tours.

The South Silk Road Restaurant may possibly be Beijing's finest restaurant. The name alone befitted the end of a journey that had always been a step shy of overwhelming but bang on as one of the greatest land routes on earth. But if overwhelming didn't quite describe the journey, it suited perfectly our final celebratory meal. Surprise toppled surprise as a procession of some 50 dishes, all artfully presented, arrived at our table: a variety of shredded or thinly sliced fish, paper thin cuts of beef, pork and chicken, duck tongues, smoked eel, bewildering vegetables, exotic fruits, little flans, sweets and pastries. In typical Chinese style, the soups came last — different ones for men and women. I can't vouch for the men's virgin male chicken soup ladled over a solitary scallop, but my snow frog soup with diced pears was a delightful culinary surprise, the translucent meat mild with a velvety texture that melted on the tongue. The meal was just too marvelous to end.

Just like our journey along the Silk Road. ■



"Drive the Silk Road" is an annual event organized by AAST Inc. The full adventure trip spans roughly three months — from the beginning of April to the beginning of July. The route is divided into four segments that can vary slightly from year to year. Travelers may participate in any number of segments or the entire trip. For more information contact: info@aat-journeys.com.

AFTER THE OLYMPICS

Britain proves to be a hugely successful platform for the international arena of sports

By Roland Flamini



LOCOS via Getty Images

Torchbearer 170 Wai-Ming Lee passes the Olympic Flame to Torchbearer 171 John Hulse (third from right) in front of Buckingham Palace in the presence of Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry on the Torch Relay leg through The City of Westminster, during Day 69 of the London 2012 Olympic Torch Relay on July 26, 2012, in London, England. The Olympic Flame was on Day 69 of a 70-day relay involving 8,000 torchbearers covering 8,000 miles.



Stephen Hird/AF/Getty Images

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II meets actor Daniel Craig. They joined together to do an unprecedented opening for the London Olympics 2012. Craig has won rave reviews as James Bond in "Casino Royale."

The Olympic athletes are back home with their medals, and memories of triumphs or failures. In Britain, celebrations for Team GB's phenomenal string of athletic successes were winding down, and the euphoria has given way to a debate over how Britain could do even better in 2016 in Brazil.

One British newspaper suggested that the London 2012 Olympics had restored the popularity of the Union Jack. The collective flag of the British Isles had lost favor as growing separatist sentiment had boosted the regional flags of England, Scotland, and Wales. But suddenly, being British had become