

The Silk Route: from Xian to Tashkent: Historical Overview

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This tour is an epic journey to ancient cities in China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan that waxed and waned over two millennia as trading hubs along the silk route from the heart of China to the Mediterranean. You follow countless traders, skirting forbidding deserts framed by some of the world's highest mountain ranges. Buddhist temples, mosques, tombs, bazaars, madrasas and caravanserais constitute the fascinating architectural heritage of this trade system. Bazaars and weekly markets in Samarkand, Bukhara and Kashgar are survivals of ancient trade, including beneficial exchange between nomads of the steppe and sedentarists of these emporia. Despite their interdependence, city-dwellers and nomads often fought violent wars. The old walls of Xi'an, Bukhara and Khiva were built to protect these cities from steppeland invasion. Great tomb complexes such as the Mausoleum of the Emperor Qin Shihuang near Xi'an and the mausolea of Tamerlane and his family in Samarkand reflect the rise of potentates along the silk route and the growth of their empires. Some cities like Jiaohe in the Turfan basin have disappeared, leaving only remnants of their walls and citadels. Elsewhere, urban citadels and richly tiled palaces survive. Chinese cave temples and pagodas, vast domed Central Asian mosques, distinctive Transoxanian minarets derived from Zoroastrian and Hindu sacred towers, and Buddhist cave complexes, Islamic madrasas and Sufi shrines show how the world's great religions spread and prospered through regional trade. Collections like the Museum of Qin Terracotta Warriors and Horses, Tashkent's Fine Arts Museum and the exquisite murals of the ancient Sogdian city of Afrasiyab (Samarkand) illustrate the lives, beliefs, customs and rituals of myriad peoples – Chinese, Huns, Bactrians, Sogdians, Turkmen, Mongols, Uyghurs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Parthians and Persians who all played historic roles in this fascinating region.

The tour begins by exploring the ancient imperial capital of Xi'an (Chang'an). We trace the history of the city and that of China from the prehistoric period to the time when Xi'an became the Chinese terminus of the silk route. We also study the emergence of unified imperial China in such fascinating sites as the Museum of Qin Terracotta Warriors and Horses in the mausoleum complex of the first emperor, Qin Shihuang. We then commence our journey west along the silk route. We fly across the so-called Gansu Corridor which caravans followed to the Taklimakan Desert. Our journey westward from Xi'an to the Aral Sea is dominated by two vast, forbidding deserts, the Taklimakan in Xinjiang province of China and the Kyzylkum in modern Uzbekistan. We shall skirt these deserts, following the approximate path of silk route travellers. At the eastern end of the Taklimakan and along its northern edge we shall encounter a number of local peoples like the Uyghurs, who still make up the ethnic majority in this part of China. We shall also visit the Buddhist cave complex in Dunhuang, a priceless heritage of this great religion where thousands of medieval manuscripts and artifacts were sealed from the outside world for over a millenium until their rediscovery in the early 20th century. After visiting the caravan cities of the Taklimakan we cross the great knot of mountains which separate it from the great Kyzylkum Desert. Here we shall experience a very different environment, of majestic mountain and steppe landscapes which give us a vivid understanding of the territories of the northern nomads who constantly interacted with the oasis civilizations of the silk route. Further west, between the present Central Asian Republics of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the Amu Darya River skirts the Kyzylkum Desert, flowing west from the Pamir Mountains to the Aral Sea. This river was known to the ancients as the Oxus and the land beyond it as Transoxania. The Kyzylkum isolates the western Aral Sea region, Khwarazm (Khorezm), and its historic city Khiva, from the eastern, Sogdian, oasis cities of Bukhara and Samarkand. They, in turn, are watered by the Zerafshan, which also begins in the Pamirs and flows toward the Amu Darya. It dissipates in the Kyzylkum Desert however before reaching its goal. We fly west to Khiva, the westernmost point of our journey, where the silk route

branched south to Persia and the Middle East or north to Russia. We then return east to the great caravan cities of Sogdiana, Samarkand and Bukhara. In Central Asia we explore the visual culture of the other great religion of the silk route, Islam.

