

China's Silk Road

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CHINA'S SILK ROAD

The term 'Silk Road' was first coined by the German explorer Ferdinand von Richthofen in the late 1800s to describe the 7,000 km of desert caravans that carried trade between the Hidden Kingdom of China and the outside world. Our China Silk Road itinerary has been designed for those who wish to experience the glory of ancient China's far western border region.

We start our tour in Lanzhou, an important Yellow River crossing and a major Silk Road trading hub for merchants from Mongolia, Sichuan and Tibet. Chinese, Huns, Bactrians, Sogdians, Turkmen, Mongols, Uyghurs and Tajiks all played historic roles in this fascinating region. In 1372 the Ming dynasty general, Feng Sheng, defeated the last of the Yuan dynasty's Mongol armies (1279–1372) and built the great fortress at Jiayuguan, guarding the entrance to the Hexi corridor from steppeland invasion and creating the furthest major stronghold of imperial China.

Whilst ancient cities like Jiaohe in the Turpan basin have disappeared, leaving only remnants of their walls and citadels, this region is rich in cultural and religious sites. We will explore ancient Chinese cave temples and pagodas, visit Central Asia's largest mosques with their distinctive Transoxanian minarets derived from Zoroastrian and Hindu sacred towers, climb high to Xiahe to see one of Tibetan Buddhism's greatest monasteries and search the Buddhist cave complex in Dunhuang. This is a journey that shows how the world's great religions spread and prospered through regional trade.

We follow countless traders, skirting forbidding deserts framed by some of the world's highest mountain ranges. We will visit ancient tombs, bazaars, fortresses and caravanserais showing the fascinating architectural heritage of this trade system. Finally ending our tour in Kashgar sitting on the edge of the vast, forbidding Taklamakan Desert, we will visit the famous Sunday Kashgar animal markets and trading bazaar where time seems to have frozen still. Here we shall encounter a number of local peoples like the Uyghurs and Tajiks who still make up the ethnic majority in this part of modern day China.

Come join us on this fascinating journey along the Silk Road. The timing of this tour allows you to combine your journey to the Silk Road cities in Uzbekistan in our STANs Tour in May 2019 or continue onto our Mongolia tour.



Day 1, Monday 27th May
Australia to Lanzhou, PRC

Today we depart Australia on an overnight flight to Lanzhou. Please refer to your individual flight itinerary for details. *Meals in flight*

Day 2, Tuesday 28th May
Australia to Lanzhou, PRC

Upon arrival in Lanzhou, the group will be collected by our local representative and transferred to the hotel for check-in. You'll be at leisure for the rest of the day and we recommend a visit to Gansu Provincial Museum. There will be a welcome dinner at the hotel. *Meals in flight/D*



Day 3, Wednesday 29th May
Lanzhou to Xiahe

From the period of the Qin Dynasty, travellers from Xi'an to Central Asia broke their journey at Lanzhou. Situated

on the upper reaches of the Yellow River, Lanzhou has for millennia guarded the strategically important Hexi Corridor. We start our tour with a boat trip on the mighty Yellow River to visit the Liujia Gorge, a key water conservancy project completed in 1974, providing irrigation, navigation, flood control and hydro electricity

generation. After our boat trip we will transfer to the ancient and remote Bingling Temple, a series of grottoes filled with Buddhist sculptures carved into natural caves and caverns in a canyon along the Yellow River.

The complex dates from about AD 420 to the Ming Dynasty. After lunch we drive to Xiahe to see the wonderful Tibetan Labrang Monastery. Xiahe is



at 3,100m, so upon arrival in Xiahe we will check into the hotel and it is recommended that we rest to acclimatise to the altitude. We stay at Xiahe for two nights. *B/L/D*

Day 4, Thursday 30th May
Xiahe

The Labrang Monastery was established in 1709 and became one of the six great monasteries of the yellow hat Gelukpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Often referred to as 'Little-Tibet', it is the largest Lamaist institute in the world, with a huge collection of volumes of scripture. Labrang is Tibetan Buddhism's most important monastery town outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region. The white walls and gilded roofs feature a blend of Tibetan and Indian Vihara architectural styles. Resident monks wear maroon robes, black boots and shaggy yellow Mohawk shaped hats, sometimes pitched to impressive heights. Time permitting, a short drive to

the Sangke Grasslands located 50kms south-west of Xiahe. *B/L/D*

Day 5, Friday 31st May
Xiahe to Zhangye

An early morning walk around Xiahe to experience the daily ritual of the monks, before we drive back to Lanzhou and board our bullet train to Zhangye. Upon arrival, we'll be picked up from the railway station and transferred to our hotel. Overnight in Zhangye for one night. *B/D*

Day 6, Saturday 1st June
Zhangye to Jiayuguan

This morning we will visit the Danxia National Geological Park which is famous for its colourful sandstone cliff formations. It has been voted as one of the most beautiful natural landforms in China. After lunch we visit Zhangye's gigantic reclining Buddha statue which is 35m long. The temple's huge statue is made of clay on a wooden frame and depicts the Gautama Buddha's attainment of nirvana, with his ten disciples standing behind him. It is largely unaltered since the time of the Western Xia period of the 12th century. We then travel onto Jiayuguan, about a 3 hour drive, where we will stay for two nights. *B/D*



Day 7, Sunday
2nd June
Jiayuguan

Today we will visit the Jiayuguan Fort and the Overhanging Great Wall. In 1372 the Ming dynasty

general, Feng Sheng, defeated the last of the Yuan dynasty's Mongol armies (1279 – 1372) and built a fortress at Jiayuguan, guarding the entrance to the Hexi Corridor. In the Gobi Desert, Jiayuguan's Great Wall is not like other famous sections near Beijing, which are built with grey bricks and big stone slabs. This section is mainly built with loess. The loess soil was tamped together in layers, making the wall very solid. After the Jiayuguan Pass Fort, we will visit the Overhanging Great Wall located about 8 km north of the Fort. It is an extended part of the Jiayu Pass military defence system, protecting water resources and acting as a northern lookout point defending the northern entrance to Black Mountain Valley. After lunch we visit the amazing brick tombs of the Wei and Jin Dynasties (220-420). More than 1,000 tombs have been excavated so far but only one is open for display. The tombs are of families which originally housed bodies of three or more generations. The brick walls have stunningly preserved murals that are quite unique. Tonight we head out and enjoy a local Jiayuguan Hot Pot dinner. Overnight in Jiayuguan. *B/D*

Day 8, Monday 3rd June
Jiayuguan to Dunhuang

This morning we drive to the oasis city of Dunhuang, a 4 hour drive. Dunhuang sits on the edge of the Taklaman Desert and it was a major trading city on the silk road. After checking into our hotel, where we stay for the next

three nights, we will spend the afternoon visiting the Dunhuang Museum. The museum houses over 4,000 relics including documents and sutras found in the 18th cave (the Sutra Cave) of Mogao Grottoes as well as stone tablets, pottery wares, silk and brocade, ancient iron tools and various ancient weapons. *B/D*



Day 9, Tuesday 4th June
Dunhuang

A very early rise this morning to see sunrise at the Singing Sand (Mingsha) Mountains where there will also be an option to ride a two-hump Bactrian camel at the Crescent Spring. Known to the world as "the First Spring in the Desert" the Crescent Spring resembles a crescent moon, hence its name. We then return to the hotel for breakfast and some free time to explore Dunhuang. After lunch we then travel to Yangguan (Yang Pass) which is about 110 km west of Dunhuang. The Pass was one of the two important western passes (the other being Yumen Pass) of the Great Wall in the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–24 AD). In ancient times the word "yang" meant south. *B/D*

Day 10, Wednesday 5th June
Dunhuang

Today we head out to Dunhuang's famous Thousand Buddha Caves – the Mogao Grottoes – which are one of the world's most important sites of ancient Buddhist culture. To get a full appreciation of the caves, we will first visit the Mogao Grottoes Digital Exhibition Centre. The Grottoes are carved out of the sandstone cliffs of the Singing Sand (Mingsha) Mountains. The grottoes' mural paintings and colour statues are regarded as the greatest treasure-house of Buddhist art existing in the world. There will also be time to visit the Grotto Museum. Time permitting, there will be an opportunity this afternoon for you to explore Dunhuang yourself. *B/L/D*

Day 11,
Thursday 6th
June
Dunhuang to
Turpan

This morning we have added a visit to the Xijin tombs before we return to Dunhuang where we will be transferred to the railway station in Liuyuan and take the 4 hour bullet train to Turpan. Upon arrival, we will be picked up from the railway station and transferred to our hotel where we spend the next three nights. *B/D*



Day 12, Friday 7th June
Turpan

Today is a full day of local touring, starting with the ancient city of Jiaohe Ruins which was a Han dynasty fortress designed to protect Turpan from attacks by the nomadic Xiongnu tribe, who ruled the northern steppes. Jiaohe is located in the Yarnaz Valley, 10 km west of Turpan. The site dates back some 2,000 years when the Tocharian's populated the Tarim and Turpan basins. It was a natural fortress located atop a steep cliff on a leaf-shaped plateau between two deep river valleys which formed natural defences. It was finally abandoned after its destruction during an invasion by the Mongols led by Genghis Khan in the 13th century. After Jiaohe, we will visit the amazing underground maze of the Karez tunnel system used by the Turpan people. Turpan's well system was crucial in Turpan's development as an important oasis stopover on the ancient Silk Road skirting the barren and hostile Taklamam Desert. The Turpan Depression is a deep basin descending to 154 m below sea level, which is the second lowest point on the globe (after the Dead Sea). We will then move onto the Uyghur mosque and Emin Minaret - the tallest minaret in China. The Qing Empire conquered this largely Muslim region in the 1750s by defeating the Dzungar Mongols with their superior weaponry in a series of battles. Finally, time permitting, we will visit the Turpan Museum. *B/D*



Day 13,
Saturday 8th
June
Turpan

After breakfast we have another day of visiting ancient local sites in the Turpan area.

First we visit the ruined city of Gaochang "King's City" about 40 km east of Turpan which is an ancient oasis city on the northern rim of the inhospitable Taklamakan Desert. A busy trading centre, it was a stopping point for merchant traders travelling on the Silk Road. It was destroyed in wars during the 14th century, and old palace ruins and inside and outside cities can still be seen today. We will then move onto the Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves, which is a remarkable complex of Buddhist cave grottos dating from the 5th to 14th century. There are 77 rock-cut caves at the site. Some of the murals show a large Buddha surrounded by other figures, including Turks, Indians and Europeans. The quality of the murals vary with some being artistically naive while others are masterpieces of religious art. After the caves, we will visit the lush Tuyugou Valley cut into the Flaming Mountains. It is famous for its seedless grapes and a number of ancient Buddhist meditation caves nearby containing frescoes dating back to the 3rd century. Tonight we will also experience a Uyghur cultural show. *B/D*

Day 14, Sunday 9th June
Turpan to Korla

Today we have a long drive of about 6 hours to the regional city of Korla. Upon arrival you will be transferred

to visit the Iron Gate Pass, also called Tiemen Pass, located in the north eastern suburbs of Korla City about 8 km from the city centre. Tiemen Pass is one of the 26 famous passes in China, and acquired the name 'Iron Gate' for it is solid and firm look. Overnight for one night in Korla. *B/L/D*

Day 15, Monday
10th June
Korla to Kucha

Today we drive for 4-5 hours to Kucha which fell under Uyghurs domination and became an important centre of



the later Uyghurs Kingdom after the Kirghiz destruction of the Uyghurs steppe empire in 840. Uyghurs were among the earliest Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia. In the 8th century they established a powerful kingdom in what is now Mongolia but were forced into the Tarim Basin by the expansion of the Kyrgyz Turks. The Uyghurs were gradually converted to Sunni Islam. In Kucha we will visit the Uyghur's Kucha Mosque, a grand Islam temple with a capacity of over 3,000 people and the second largest mosque in Xinjiang, only smaller than the Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar. Subashi Temple was a Buddhism temple, which was built in the first century and reached its peak during the sixth to the eighth centuries in the Sui and Tang dynasties. At its peak, over 10 thousand monks promoted and developed Buddhism here. In the ninth century, the temple was destroyed by wars and never recovered. We stay for two nights in Kucha. *B/D*

Day 16, Tuesday 11th June
Kucha

Today's program includes a visit to the Kizil Thousand-Buddha Caves and the incredible Tianshan Grand Canyon. The Kizil Thousand-Buddha Caves were initially built in the 3rd century and are the oldest amongst the four grottoes in China. There are a total of 236 grottoes, some with badly damaged statues, but much of the architecture and murals are still well preserved. We will then drive onto the Tianshan Grand Canyon, situated in the southern foot of the Tianshan Mountain. The canyon is at 1,600 m above sea level, with its highest peak reaching 2,048 m. *B/D*

Day 17, Wednesday 12th June
Kucha to Alaer

After breakfast we will visit Kucha Palace, and then drive to Alaer along the new desert road (6-7 hours driving). There are limited hotels used by foreigners in the city so please be prepared for basic accommodation tonight. *B/L/D*

Day 18, Thursday 13th June
Alaer to Hotan

Today is another long drive as we continue along the new desert road to Hotan. Along the way you will pass the Taklamam Desert and enjoy the spectacular view of the mighty Tarim River. Hotan is populated almost exclusively by Uyghur's and is now a minor agricultural centre. An important station on the southern branch of

the historic Silk Road, Hotan has always depended on two strong rivers - the Karakash River and the White Jade River to provide the water needed to survive on the southwestern edge of the vast Taklamakan Desert. It is the largest desert in China and the second largest shifting sand desert in the world. We stay in Hotan for two nights. *B/L/D*

**Day 19, Friday 14th June
Hotan**

Today we will tour the city including a visit to see the traditional Hotan silk workshop and wander through the jades bazaar. After the city tour, we will drive out to the ruins of Rawak Temple. Rawak Temple is located in the north of the desert and it is the only temple which has a Gandara style (similar form as an Indian temple) which is quite well preserved. *B/D*

**Day 20, Saturday 15th June
Hotan to Kashgar**

After some long driving days, we have a break today from our bus and will instead catch a local train from Hotan to Kashgar. Bring some snacks along for lunch on the train trip as there may not be any catering services onboard. We stay in Kashgar for the next two nights. *B/D*

B/D



**Day 21, Sunday
16th June
Kashgar**

Today we visit the famous animal market and the Kashgar Sunday Bazaar which have been meeting places for locals,

merchants and travellers along the ancient Silk Road for hundreds of years. Uyghurs, Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks all congregate, dressed in their traditional clothing, selling horses, sheep, cattle, goats, donkeys and camels. The cacophony of sights and sounds make these Central Asian markets and bazaars such a joy to visit. We will visit the Id Kah Mosque, the largest mosque in Xinjiang together with the Abakh Khoja Tomb. The tomb is a beautiful example of the Samarkand Islamic architecture with exquisite tiled ceilings and classical minarets. Built in 1640, the tombs cover an area of over 2 hectares with five generations and seventy two members of the same family buried within the complex. There will then be some free time to explore the old town of Kashgar which is a labyrinth of artisan districts in which carpenters, blacksmiths, jewellers and farriers work alongside bakeries, teashops and noodle shops. *B/D*

B/D

**Day 22, Monday 17th June
Kashgar to Taxkorgan**

After early breakfast in hotel, you will be driven to the Tajik autonomous county of Taxkorgan, which is located in the eastern part of the Pamir Plateau. The driving time today is about 8 hours, and on the way we will stop to visit the Kalakuliy Lake at the foot of Muztaga Peak. The lake is about 30m deep and at an altitude of 3,600m and was formed by alpine glacial erosion. It is famous for its

beautiful reflections of the surrounding snow capped mountains around. We will arrive in Taxkorgan quite late and will stay for just the one night. *B/L/D*

**Day 23, Tuesday
18th June
Taxkorgan to
Kashgar**

Today we will visit the Stone City and the Golden Grass scenic area.

Taxkorgan which means stone city in the Tajik language,

is at 3,100m above sea level. The Stone city is a famous ruin of the ancient city on the Silk Road in Xinjiang Province. Its power came from its position at the cross roads of both the middle and southern route of the ancient Silk Road where it was the primary passageway leading to the Pamirs from Kashgar, Shache, Yengisar, and Karghalik. In Han Dynasty (202B.C.-220A.D.), the site was the palace city of the Puli Kingdom, one of the 36 kingdoms in west region which were united by the Tang Government (618-907 AD). We will then make our way back to Kashgar. *B/L/D*



**Day 24, Wednesday 19th June
Kashgar to Urumqi**

This morning we will transfer to the airport and take a flight to Urumqi. Upon arrival we will visit Xinjiang Autonomous Region Museum, and the International Bazaar. The Xinjiang Museum was officially opened in 1959 and reconstructed in 2005. The exhibition hall houses more than 40,000 precious cultural relics and specimens such as a mummified body and frescoes from the Buddha Caves. Staying over night in Urumqi for two nights. *B/D*

**Day 25,
Thursday 20th
June
Urumqi**

Today we will visit the Heavenly Lake and Heavenly Mountain Scenic Area which forms a natural highland

scenic area surrounded by snow covered mountains and coniferous forest. In the shape of a half-moon at a height of 1,910m above sea-level, the Heavenly Lake is just like a green pearl inlaid into the northern side of the Heavenly Mountain. Farewell dinner tonight. *B/L/D*



**Day 26, Friday 21st June
Urumqi**

Today is the last day of our itinerary. The morning is free at leisure until we are transferred to the airport for your flight departure back to Australia. *B/meals in flight*.