

From Xi'an to Kashgar

Sunsets over sand dunes on the Silk Road study tour

By Linden Vargish



Sand dunes at sunset, viewed from roof terrace of Dunhuang Hotel

The saying that anticipation is better than realisation was soundly disproved for the 15 participants in the FOM Silk Road Study Tour from 23 September – 4 October 2009. Our already high expectations were raised even further by tour leader Patricia Welch, whose own erudition and enthusiasm motivated each of us to research our chosen topics thoroughly and accurately. In addition to detailed handouts and copious recommendations of reading material and websites provided by Patricia, each participant wrote a paper, and gave a Power-Point presentation or prepared a podcast for the group's enlightenment. These presentations were exceptional, with each tour participant delving deeply into the chosen research topic.

Very early on the morning of 23 September the group met at Changi International Airport for a Silk Air flight to Chengdu, where we made a quick visit to the Jinsha Museum before catching an afternoon flight to Xi'an, the real start of our Silk Road adventure. Over the course of 12 days, we travelled to Dunhuang, Turfan, Urumqi, Korla, Kuqa, Aksu and Kashgar, by plane, bus and train, before returning to Chengdu and then home to Singapore.

Our progress on the strand of the Silk Road that skirts the northern rim of the Taklamakan Desert was replete with visits to archeological sites (Gaochang and Jiaohe), enriched by statues and murals in ancient Buddhist grottoes (Magao grottoes and Kizil caves), studded with breathtaking scenery, (Dunhuang, Flaming Mountains, the 'moonscape' between Korla and Kuqa) and enlivened by history (Chinibagh in Kashgar). We also visited a 'living museum' where we learned about the *keretz*, the ancient irrigation system that carries snowmelt from mountain ranges many hundreds of kilometres distant, continuing to support most of the agriculture in and around the oases and making possible the cultivation of the abundant grapes and melons for which the region is famous. The buildings for drying grapes, with their latticed brick walls, were a common sight in the oases areas. We bought many bags of raisins, currants and sultanas, most

of which were consumed on the spot or on the bus, but a few of which made it back to Singapore.

I asked tour members about their most memorable experiences on this journey of many memories. Dunhuang stood out, perhaps because it was there that we first glimpsed the desert and saw the dunes at their most beautiful. Wrote one tour member, "... the view from the roof terrace of the Dunhuang Hotel. We could see the massive and beautiful sand dunes of the Taklamakan Desert immediately in front of us, seemingly beckoning us onward along the old Silk Road... Dunhuang was just as I had imagined, romantic and filled with promise and hope." Perhaps I should add that the spectacular and romantic view was enhanced for some by a (few) gin and tonics, although even those who 'made do' with cocktails of freshly squeezed watermelon juice were equally enthralled by the dazzling setting, complete with hang gliders silhouetted against the dunes as we watched the sunset from the roof terrace of that splendid hotel.

Not far behind Dunhuang in the 'most memorable' stakes was the experience of visiting the Magao caves near Dunhuang and the Kizil caves outside Kuqa. "...The massive Buddha (at Magao) looming above us. The stunningly beautiful Buddhist statues and murals, created in humble supplication or immense gratitude for a safe journey across the treacherous Taklamakan Desert by ancient Silk Road travellers." And of Kizil: "...The proximity of the murals just beyond your nose! ...The lovely cool stream and the poplars facing the stark caves."

No one will dispute the specialness of the ruins of the ancient cities of Gaochang and Jiaohe, near Turfan. Our visit to Jiaohe, at sunset, was made magical by the fact that we were the only people there, so we could truly appreciate the fading sunlight glancing off the remains of the ancient buildings, and wonder about the lives of those who lived there 2000 years ago.

An experience unique to desert travel was that of being on the fringes of a sandstorm. One of our group remembers: "We



Roxanne Filasetta dons a traditional Uighur woman's cap to ride LaLa the camel

were travelling on the highway from Kuqa to Aksu, when suddenly, about 50 yards to the left, a sandstorm appeared, sweeping across the desert, moving parallel to us, and I could see how the sight of that dense cloud of sand and dust could generate a deep fear in Silk Road travellers of getting lost amidst the miles of desert."

As the date of our departure from Singapore had approached, political unrest in the province of Xinjiang, through which our portion of the Silk Road passed, had caused some concern about our safety. Tour leader Patricia was assured by her contacts in China, and Xinjiang in particular, that the situation was calm, and as it turned out, all was peaceful where and when we went. We saw groups of soldiers every day, but their presence was not excessive. What was intrusive were the frequent H1N1 (swine flu) temperature-taking checkpoints, where white-coated medical personnel would board our bus, march down the aisle thrusting a digital thermometer at randomly selected victims, and then disembark rapidly! Perhaps we benefitted from concerns about the political climate and the H1N1 virus in that tourist numbers were drastically reduced and we were spared having to contend with hordes of other tourists. It was sad, though, for those in Xinjiang whose businesses and livelihoods depended on the tourist trade.

Another concern expressed before the tour was about the food: would we face a diet of unmitigated mutton fat and MSG? To our delight, we discovered that the flat breads (*naan*), succulent kebabs, *samsas*, pilafs, aubergines and other vegetables were excellent, and, thanks to clear dictates from our leaders, we encountered very little MSG. In fact, the generous and tasty meals posed a threat to our waistlines. We also



Muslim women on the streets of Kashgar toting designer handbags and trendy shoes



Incredible scenery and dust along the Silk Road



Buying naan and bagels in Kashgar

had one roadside picnic (by design), complete with local fried chicken and local red wine, when we stopped for lunch to break up a long-haul bus journey between Korla and Aksu. Throughout the trip we also snacked lavishly, passing local foods purchased at rest stops and roadside stands around and around the bus during long rides between towns while we gazed at the scenery, listened to informative podcasts, chatted or napped. Any disappointment we may have harboured about not travelling by camel was dispelled when we met Lala in the rose garden of the compound of the Abakh Khoja family tomb in Kashgar. Much as we loved her (voted the most popular animal we met on the tour), we quickly realised that we were better off doing our serious travelling by modern conveyances and limiting camel-riding and donkey-cart travel, such as we did in Gaochang's ancient city, to short distances and photo opportunities.

The FOM Silk Road Study Tour 2009 was wonderfully educational and very enjoyable. We spent 12 rewarding days visiting some of China's most venerable and important sites and treasures, thanks to a knowledgeable, experienced and sensitive tour leader who had covered every base in advance and had been particularly diligent in selecting competent and efficient local guides. Let's hope we don't have to wait another 10 years before the next Silk Road Study Tour!

Linden Vargish (nee Foo) grew up in Singapore and Ipoh, Malaysia, and lived in England and the USA for 18 years. After returning to Singapore, she lectured in Language and Communication at Ngee Ann Polytechnic until 2000. She now enjoys travelling, especially on FOM Study Tours.

Editor's Note: Patricia Welch has organised another Silk Road Study Tour from 16-29 September 2010. For more information see page 17 or go to the FOM website www.fom.sg

Photos by Susan Hunter