

# At the Heart of the Silk Road

Caves, mummies and a vast desert were highlights of this FOM Study Tour

By Gretchen Liu

After months of anticipation we were in Xi'an for the start of our two-week Silk Road adventure. A visit to the Beilin Museum, famed for its ancient stone steles and sculptures and with a new exhibition hall devoted to recently discovered Buddhist sculpture, presented a stunning foretaste of the extraordinary journey ahead.

Our anticipation was heightened as we flew northwest over the arid Gansu corridor to Dunhuang and our first taste of the haunting desert landscape in perfect September weather.

No amount of reading prepared us for Dunhuang's Mogao Caves. Containing thousands of exquisite Buddhist murals and statuary, they constitute one of the world's greatest repositories of religious art. Only a handful of the 492 decorated caves is open to visitors. Armed with flashlights and our own FOM handouts, we gazed in awe at the exuberance of colour and movement. We jostled with the crowds of Chinese tourists for a glimpse of the once-secret Library Cave where thousands of religious texts, mainly Buddhist manuscripts, lay untouched for a thousand years until the early 20th century. And we gazed in silent admiration at the richly hued paintings in the several superb and rarely-opened caves that Tour Leader Patricia Welch had made special arrangements for us to visit.

Some 90 kilometres outside Dunhuang we visited the western-most fragile remnants of the Great Wall and the ancient rammed earth fort known as the Yumenguan Pass. For centuries this bleak terrain marked the boundary of civilisation for the Chinese.

Another flight brought us to Urumqi, Xinjiang Province's sprawling and industrialised capital. Here we viewed the famed 3000-year old Tarim Basin mummies in the Xinjiang Regional Museum. These mummies, found in excellent condition owing to the dryness of the desert, have posed intriguing questions of ethnicity and human migration. They share many typical Caucasoid features – elongated bodies, angular faces and intact hair ranging in colour from blond to red to deep brown. Their well-preserved textiles indicate a common origin with Indo-European techniques.

And then we were on the road, following by bus the footsteps of early traders and pilgrims along the northern Silk Road as we travelled from Urumqi to Kashgar. Our route took us through the fertile old oasis towns of Turpan, Kucha and Aksu. Once merely exotic names on the map, they are now a rich tapestry of images with each of us forming our own impressions as we observed, absorbed and photographed.

Along the way we stood amidst the ruins of the ancient cities of Jiaohe, Gaochang and Subashi. We explored the unforgettable Buddhist grottoes of Bezeklik, Kumtura and Kizil. We learned about the Karez water system, a 2000-year-old irrigation system that turned Turpan into a lush agricultural basin and centre of viticulture. We admired landscapes of extraordinary beauty, including the aptly named Flaming Mountains and Rainbow Mountains. And all the while we were mindful of the harshness of the vast

Taklamakan Desert now being tamed by modern roads and industries.

Nearly 2000 kilometres later we reached Kashgar. The once fabled oasis town is a somewhat chaotic metropolis visibly in the throes of change. Still, we were able to catch a glimpse of its past in the quiet alleys of the old town, sadly shrinking under a redevelopment plan, where bearded men in embroidered skullcaps and brown *chador*-clad women share space with giggling teenagers. On the famous Sunday Market Day we watched as hundreds of people converged to buy and sell vegetables and livestock, haggling passionately over sheep and cattle and the occasional donkey or horse.

Other highlights included the Great Id Kah Mosque, China's largest and the centre of Uighur life in the city; the Abakh Khoja Tomb, a magnificently tiled mausoleum holding the tomb of a revered 17th century Sufi Preacher; and 'Chinibagh', the former home of the British Consul-General and one of the iconic sites of the 'Great Game' as the jockeying for power in Central Asia in the 19th century came to be called.

Throughout our travels we were ably guided by Mohammed Sawat, an ebullient young Uighur fluent in Mandarin and English whose passion for and pride in his homeland was infectious. And whilst economic development is flooding Xinjiang, much of this remote province remains a world apart, where traditions live on in faith, food and customs.

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**Gretchen Liu**, a former journalist and book editor, is the author of several books on Singapore, including *A Pictorial History of Singapore 1819-2000*. She is a long-time FOM member.

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*Photos by the author*



Top: Silk Road Study Tour 2010 group photo at Mogao Caves, Dunhuang  
Background: The Rainbow Mountains, near Kashgar