

The Silk Road Overland, 1989

By Charles Davis
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In the 1980s, the Old Silk Road, the overland route across western China, saw only a trickle of adventure travellers. Group tours on a route like this were very few and not your typical package deal. Nine of us had signed up for ours, with a young Brit named Steve as tour leader. Steve lacked experience – he knew only a little more about our route than we did – but made up for it in enthusiasm. When we came to a new destination, while we did the sightseeing thing, his job was to seek out tickets to the next place, and forward accommodation. This he accomplished by mysterious methods, given that he spoke no Chinese, except for *xie xie* (thank you) and *bijou* (beer).

As we travelled west, the feel of the country became more exotic and multicultural. The initial travel was by train, but we had left the last rail line behind by the time we reached Dunhuang, in Gansu province. Dunhuang was a city with no motor cars. There were buses, trucks, tractors and (many) bicycles, but no cars, and transport across town to our hotel was donkey-powered.



The bearded fellow with the heavy camera belt was a professional travel photographer travelling with us.

I used the word 'exotic', but the real exotics were us. The deeper we travelled into remote China, the more attention we attracted, and sometimes crowds would gather to stare at us. Walking around Dunhuang, a few of us came across a musical troupe, performing on the street with puppets, playing



traditional Chinese music. It was a fascinating tableau, but before long it was apparent that the 'hairy foreign devils' (that was us) were attracting more attention than the musicians, who

were unimpressed at the distraction, so we moved on.

A bus took us to Turfan, on the edge of the Taklamakan desert. The Taklamakan (translation: *he who enters never returns*) is one very nasty desert, but there are a few towns and cities on its edge, including Turfan, surviving on runoff from the Pamir mountains. We were now well into Islamic China, and the back streets seemed like Middle Eastern towns of undetermined antiquity.



More ancient still were the nearby ruins of Bezelkik, built when Buddhism held sway in the region. The wall paintings in the caves there had once contained paintings, but these had been vandalized by an explorer (Aurel Stein) who took the art back to Europe, where they were destroyed by bombs in World War II. Only photographs survive, copies of which hang, rather forlorn, in the original caves.

The main people of Turfan were the Uighurs, who have become better known in the years since, as ethnic unrest in China grows. At the time, we saw no hint of political problems.



Children of Turfan, 1989.

From Turfan, the road took us ever West. Steve had found some guys with a minibus who were willing to drive us to Kashgar, fabled trading city of the Silk Road, in the far West of China's Xinjiang province. The drive from Turfan took three days, mostly but not always on paved roads. The territory was little known to Westerners at the time, and some of the towns we passed through were still technically closed to foreigners; we carried on regardless, with our bus crew talking our way through army checkpoints. During a lunch stop I took a photo of the road that captures the feel of this harsh region.



We stopped at the town of Korla. This is it – the traffic lights seem rather superfluous. Our presence seemed to intrigue, baffle or (in a couple of cases) anger the locals, but we couldn't understand what they were shouting about. Perhaps we weren't allowed to be there, although the hotel keeper didn't seem to mind.



There was more activity on the highway out of town, where we stopped for a kebab breakfast, attracting an instant crowd of onlookers.



The custom at the time in China was to have foreigner (aliens) stay in separate hotels; given the shortage of foreigners in remoter regions, this was not always practical, so in Aksu the hotel just had certain rooms set aside. My room was helpfully labelled “THE ROOM FOR ARIENS” (*sic*). I kid you not: here’s proof.



Next day, the final drive into Kashgar was dominated by a full-on desert dust/sand storm. We came into a poor little town called Sinhoue in a stinging gale. Lunch was called for, and I was assigned the task of finding some beer (safest drink in these parts). I remember walking up the street backwards to avoid the blinding sand, peering into windows and doorways to see if they were shops, but I accomplished my mission, obtaining several bottles of Tsingtao. I also recall thinking that Sinhoue was

one of the least appealing places to live that I had ever seen.



The day grew long as the bus was hobbled by the dust and stopped frequently; the crew battled to keep us going, clearing out the air filter every few minutes. Barely running, the bus crawled along level ground. Any hills would have finished us. With visibility below 100 metres, it was a long wait before we suddenly glimpsed the buildings of Kashgar through late afternoon haze.

Kashgar is one of those “I can’t quite believe I am here” places. In 1989 it was a moderately prosperous city that still traded in silks and a panoply of other goods. Distinctive central Asian architecture was a feature, including our hotel, which in the 19th century had been the British consulate, in a time when the British and Russian empires were jockeying for influence in the region (called “the Great Game” by Rudyard Kipling).

In the aftermath of the storm, the dust hung thick in the air throughout our visit, the strange light adding an extra air of mystery. I did some sightseeing from a horse-drawn ‘taxi’, rather Russian in style.



The market-place bustled with energy in Middle Eastern fashion. I was struck by the changing face of Islam here, a more conservative bent than further east, with some women wearing a full veil, so complete that not even the eyes could be seen. In Turfan, women in beautiful traditional dress had been happy to be photographed; I was not so sure here. I took a couple of quick photos, unsure about the level of risk.

Kashgar Taxi



Market day in Kashgar

[\(the story continues here\)](#)

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