

THE SILK ROUTE ACROSS THE TAKLAMAKAN DESERT OF WESTERN CHINA

Friday 5th – Friday 27th September 2008

'In the first 1,000 years after Christ, merchants, missionaries, monks, mendicants and military men travelled on the vast network of Central Asian tracks that became known as the SILK ROAD. Linking Europe, India and the Far East, the route passed through many countries and many settlements, from the splendid city of Samarkand to tiny desert hamlets. Sogdian merchants traded in Baltic amber, lapis from Afghanistan, silk from China and wool from the Mongolian steppes; itinerant Buddhist monks, Persian Manichaeon priests, Zoroastrians, and Nestorian Christians sought converts among the desert settlers; storytellers, acrobats, musicians, dancers, courtesans, diviners, peddlers and miracle-workers offered their wares in the market places and temple fairs'.

Life Along the Silk Road by Susan Whitfield

KASHGAR, whose history spans 2,000 years is at heart a medieval city, a vibrant Islamic centre and the largest oasis city in Chinese Central Asia. At the heart of the old city is the Id-kah Mosque and in the surrounding bazaar, silversmiths, boot makers, porcelain menders and bakers, labour in front of teashops and stalls selling carpets, silk, jewellery, hats and intricately carved knives and wooden chests.

Driving south we will visit the craftsmen of **YENGISAR** where many silver knives are still crafted. Until recent decades **YARKAND** (Shache) was the centre for commercial trade along the southern Silk Road as caravans from India and Kashmir travelled north across the mountains bringing silks, tea, precious stones, gold and furs. **KARGHALIK** (Yecheng) is a starting point for those attempting to climb K-2

KHOTAN (Hetian) is famous for its 'white' and 'black' jade, carpets, silk and embroidery. Mulberry and fruit trees as well as maize, wheat, rice and cotton grow in abundance. Here we will have the opportunity to visit weavers and other craftsmen and participate in the flourishing Sunday Market. The ancient city of Yotkan flourished between the 3rd and 8th centuries, and the Buddhist pilgrim, Fa Xian, in the 4th century spent three months visiting some of numerous local Buddhist monasteries. In the 7th century Xuan Zang passed through Hetian on his return from India. 35 kilometres south of Hetian by the banks of the White Jade River lie the broken walls of the ancient city of Melikawat probably the capital of Yutian Kingdom during the Han Dynasty and inhabited until the Tang - evidence of which is a desert covered in sherds. East of Hetian are some thirteen rivers which once flowed more than 40 kilometres into the desert and which soon covered the towns that had once prospered along their shores.

MINFENG (Niya) formed the Kingdom of Shanshan during the first century BC. A visit to the Endere itself would take us two days by camel or truck so we will have to satisfy ourselves with the artefacts housed in the museum. But the adventure now lies in crossing northwards into the shifting sands of the Taklamakan desert ('from which no-one returns').



Kizil

KUQA brings us to the Thousand Buddha Caves of **KIZIL**, set in a magnificent gorge and one of the four biggest groups of grottoes in China. The father of the city's most famous linguist and scholar, Kumarajiva (344-413) called the 'Nineteenth Patriarch of Buddhism' came from Kashmir. During the Tang Dynasty the kingdom reached its zenith. The wealth of the trade caravans subsidized the Buddhist monasteries, in which more than 5,000 monks worked and prayed. The frescoes illustrate some of the finest examples of Gandharan (Indo-Hellenistic) influences overlaid with Persian elements. The Kuchean musical instruments of drums, lutes and reed-pipes heavily influenced Chinese music. Molana Eshdings tomb witnesses the first Islamic missionary from the Middle East to visit Kuqa.

TURPAN (Tulufan) – Huozhou 'Land of Fire' reaching 40 degrees in the summer. Located in a depression 80 metres below sea level with an extremely dry climate. In 108 BC farmers and traders of Indo-European ancestry inhabited the area. The Turpan oasis commanded the northern trade route so control of went back and forth between the Xiongnu and Chinese. Until the 5th century, the capital was **JIAOHE** (Yarkhoto). During the Northern Wei Dynasty the capital of **GAOCHANG** (Kharakhoja) was established here by the Loulan people. **TUYOQ** (Tuyugou) with the backdrop of the 'Flaming Mountains' is a beautiful, timeless village with a friendly Auger community. The mosque is on the road cutting between the lush vineyards up to the cemetery, behind which runs the gorge and caves.

The **MAGAO CAVES**, which honeycomb the cliff-face of the Mingsha Hills, 25 kilometres southeast of **DUNHUANG** contain the world's richest treasure trove of Buddhist manuscripts, wall paintings and statuary. According to legend, in 366 AD the vision of a thousand Buddhas inspired a wandering monk to cut the first of hundreds of caves into the sand-stone cliff face. Over the next ten centuries Dunhuang became a flourishing centre of Buddhist culture along the Silk Road. Visits to the caves and the Institute of Archaeology will be a fitting end to a magnificent journey.