



SHANGHAI TO URUMQI

The Westbound Train

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We had arrived in sticky summer two days before. That night, on the busy Bund promenade, men wore T-shirts rolled to their armpits in the heat. Colonial neoclassical facades stared haughtily across the Huangpu River at the upstart skyscrapers of the Pudong financial district. Overlooking everything was the gaudy, 468-meter-high Oriental Pearl TV Tower. On the way back to our hotel, we passed a middle-aged man strolling through the dank back streets in his stripy pajamas—all the while talking on his mobile phone.

This was Shanghai—modern, brash, chaotic. The main shopping street, Nanjing Road, was heaving with people, and evidently popular with English learners as well as tourists. We were enthusiastically waylaid by two students from Beijing: “Hey, are you Chinese?” the girl asked me disconcertingly. “Your face looks Chinese, but your nose is too big.” A flurry of questions followed about what Mattias and I were doing in Shanghai, our jobs and families; the two swapped places like tag-team wrestlers. One of them, in Shanghai to visit his uncle’s textile business, asked for my email address. “You will be my foreign business contact,” he proclaimed.

The city was fascinating, and I felt that we could explore it endlessly. But we had come here to leave: Shanghai was only the starting point for our journey across China. We would travel for 17 days, including two days and two nights of train travel, across 4,000 kilometers of the vast land. On the way we would climb through mountainous

Qinghai province and crawl across the desert to scorched Turfan, a town on the ancient Silk Road. We would end our journey on the threshold of central Asia in remote and land-locked Urumqi, the city farther than any other from an ocean. And farthest, it seemed, from the hectic modernity of West China.



Train Spotting

The morning we left Shanghai, the city was shrouded in a warm mizzle. As the train crept away from the platform, we heaved our bags into the luggage racks opposite our bunks. Children pressed their noses against the windows. Adults eyed each other carefully, warily sizing up their companions for the next day and a half. A guard bustled in



Shanghai’s Oriental Pearl Tower (above) is a symbol of the city’s economic growth brash confidence in the 21st century. The train journey from Shanghai to Urumqi takes over 48 hours and crosses 4,000 kms of the Chinese interior.

with a kettle of hot water and everyone topped up the jars of tea they had brought for the long journey.

From one of the little folding seats in the aisle I watched as red-brick village after red-brick village passed by, full of new dwellings often built right next to the crumbling predecessors. Shanghai’s energetic workers are apparently too busy to bother demolishing them. A skyscraper appeared through the mist like a leviathan steel-and-glass orchid.

After the febrile energy of Shanghai, the gentle boredom



on the train to Xining was a pleasant change. In between day-dreaming out the window and plastic mugs of coffee, the hours and scenery passed quickly. I watched as the train climbed upwards through tunnel after tunnel and sodden mountains half hidden by the mist. A woman stood next to the sole doorway in a long village wall, holding up her baby to watch the train pass.

The rail line followed a coffee-colored river and crossed it again and again. Lunch and dinner on the train was a choice between the crowded dining car, a trolley of meat stew periodically pushed down the aisle, or instant noodles made with hot water from the samovar at the end of the carriage. The noodle option was a risky one, given the number of bored children racing up and down the corridor.



One old man sitting nearby was about to eat his lunch when a child bumped into his window table. The food toppled to the floor. Calmly, he cleared up the debris, then gazed resignedly out the window. By late afternoon the children had stopped charging through the train and were just looking excruciatingly bored. Many of the adults were snoozing or reading on their cots. Eventually night fell. Then at eleven sharp the piped music stopped abruptly and the lights went out.

Unidentified Snacks

By the following morning the children had obviously decided the language barrier wasn't going to stop them from investigating their travel companions. Before we knew it



our set of six bunks had at least doubled its population. A tall boy in basketball kit with spiky hair, and a plump girl in a T-shirt saying "Just Born" led the charge. "Do you like the World Cup?" "Do you like China?" The children crowded close around. "Do you like whiskey?" "Do you like apples?"

Then interest suddenly turned to my forearms—in particular the hair on my forearms. One boy wanted to know how far up my arms the hair went. I rolled up my sleeve. Just Born measured my nose with her forefinger

Like the crowded streets of Shanghai, the broad fields around the city of Xining are teeming with life: millions of bees making honey and royal jelly from the nectar of oilseed rape plants. Aboard the train, bunks are arranged in along the corridors and packed with children on summer holiday. After just a few hours, it felt like a traveling youth hostel.



friends with Just Born. He poked her in the ribs: “She is a pig.” Just Born glared. “He is a dog.”

At Xining we grabbed our bags and poured off the train with the other passengers. The parents of our former carriage companions looked puzzled as we waved them goodbye, but in no time at all we were left with nothing but a deserted platform and a golden predusk glow.

Honey Central

Xining is not a well-known tourist destination, despite being the capital of Qinghai province and the starting point of the newly completed Qinghai-Tibet railway. But we found it friendly and easy to navigate. The city has large Tibetan and Hui Muslim populations, with numerous Buddhist temples and mosques. At the latter, men



sat in the shade, reading newspapers and chatting. Nearby wooden plaques showed quotations from the Koran written in Chinese characters.

The day after arriving we traveled with a guide to nearby Qinghai Lake, the largest in China. It was surrounded by fields of dazzling yellow oilseed rape flowers, and when we got out of the car we were met by a low roar, like the rumble of a distant waterfall. The oilseed rape is planted for the many bee farms that surround the lake, and royal jelly is a major Qinghai export. Our guide told us how the farmers load their hives onto trucks and spend the year moving around China

and thumb and compared it to the other noses in the carriage.

We were fed a bewildering variety of nuts, fruits and unidentified snacks—and for the rest of the way to Xining engaged in earnest conversation. A Chinese phrase book and a couple of English textbooks helped keep things moving. And now that we were friends the questions turned a little more personal: “Are you married?” “How much do you earn?”

We learned that the children were traveling out to the countryside for the holidays. Most were traveling alone and had made friends for the journey, although it turned out that the boy in the basketball kit was not exactly



following the honey-producing season. The 3,000-meter-high Qinghai plateau is often their last stop of the year before heading home for the winter.

At the lakeshore, tourists were scooping up water in their hands to taste it. We did the same and it had a briny tang. Qinghai is a salt-water lake but well stocked with carp for all that. Nearby groups of Tibetans were posing

for photographs for tourists in the oilseed rape fields. Some had brought their horses, others were standing next to polished chrome motorbikes.

The New Frontier

After a few days, we left on the second long leg of our trip. As before, we had planned to travel by sleeper. But this time we had made the almost disastrous mistake of not getting tickets in advance. Though we had intended to upgrade from the conductor on the train, the train was packed, and there was nothing to do except stand with our rucksacks between our legs, fan ourselves with guidebooks, and try to look as foreign and as helpless as possible. As it turned out, luck—or more accurately the kindness of the train staff—was on our side.



Just as we were resigning ourselves to over 30 hours through the desert standing in a non-air-conditioned carriage, a guard beckoned us to follow. He led us to the far end of the train where two bunks were left in the staff carriage, most likely the last two on the train. The carriage had an atmosphere of hushed gratitude—presumably the other travelers felt as fortunate as we did. The lights in the carriage were kept low, and everyone talked in whispers. Occasionally train staff in their pajamas wandered past carrying toothbrushes and cups of water.

The next day I took my habitual spot by the window and watched as the train headed out into Xinjiang

One of Turfan's major industries is grape production. Over 300 different varieties of the fruit are grown in the city. Bee keepers living with their families on the plateau surrounding Qinghai Lake tend up to several hundred hives each. Classical Chinese and traditional Islamic influences alike are reflected in the architecture of this mosque in Xining (below and top right).





The Karez of Turfan

Without its ancient karez irrigation channels, the oasis city of Turfan would probably be as parched and lifeless as the surrounding desert. The hottest place in China, with a hundred days a year or more in the 40s (Celsius), gets just 16mm of rain a year. One traveler, Aitchen K. Wu, wrote in 1933: "The hot wind is worse than anything that can be imaged, shriveling the skin, scorching the eyes; and the direct rays of the sun carry death. It is a proverbial saying, not much exaggerated, that the people bake their dough cakes by sticking them on the walls of the huts."

Turfan's ancient inhabitants' solution to this extreme environment was ingenious. They built over a thousand underground channels to carry water from the surrounding mountains down to the parched city. The oldest were built as far back as Qing dynasty (1636–1912). Together they run to over 5,000 kilometers.

Each karez begins at a mother well in

the mountains. The channels are dug as far as 90 meters down to prevent evaporation or seepage, and the whole system works entirely by gravity, without the benefit of pumps. At intervals along the course of each karez, vertical wells allow for maintenance.

The desert earth in Turfan is hard, so wooden supports weren't needed in the tunnels. But the work to build them was arduous, highly skilled and highly dangerous. The karez diggers faced the constant risk of suddenly being buried alive, and chronic rheumatism from days spent



standing in the cold water. The cure for the latter was baths of hot desert sand.

Nobody knows who invented the karez, though ancient Persia had similar irrigation channels known as qanats, and the techniques are said to be two millennia old. Possibly, the technology was brought along the Silk Road to Turfan from Persia. Other explanations are that it was imported from elsewhere in China or developed by local Uyghur tribes. What is certain, though, is that Turfan's inhabitants themselves dug the tunnels.

Present-day residents of the city have ample reason to be grateful for the efforts of their ancestors. The karez are vital to the city's agriculture and, more recently, to tourism. Farmers in Turfan grow no less than 300 kinds of grape, and sultanas are a major export. The karez are carefully maintained. Even today, about half of the ancient channels are still in use, and they provide a third of the city's water.

province, literally the “new frontier.” We passed through a brown desert, empty but for the occasional oil well or army truck. It was hard to imagine that the Silk Road once ran through this desert, and that travelers once passed by here on their way from ancient China to Rome.

Life in the Oven

When we arrived in Turfan, our penultimate stop, we quickly found out why the city is nicknamed “the oven.” On leaving the station, we were hit by a wall of heat. Bus drivers in the car park were taking siestas in the trunks of their vehicles. Even the flies seemed too exhausted to buzz.

Turfan’s streets were almost empty, bar a few enervated

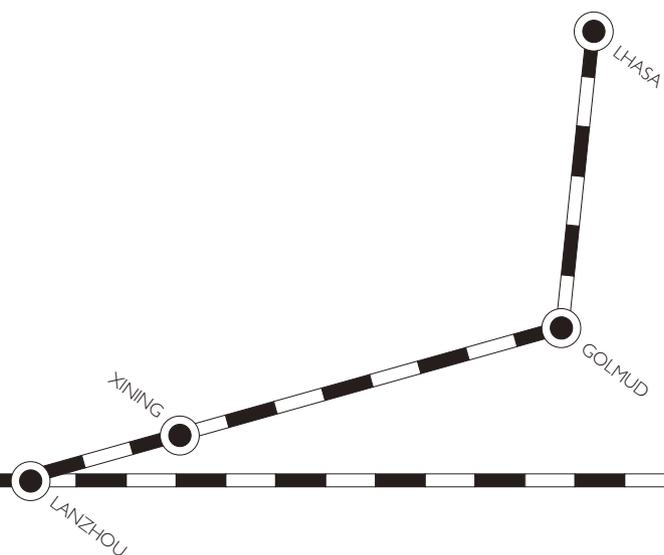
Worshippers sit under the eaves of Xining’s mosque talking, reading newspapers or just thinking (below). Half a day’s drive from Xining is a 4,000m-high mountain pass (right) that overlooks a single field of oilseed rape some 30km in length.





locals taking shelter under grapevine-shaded avenues. Grapes, or rather raisins, are the city's main export. When Mattias decided to head off for a walk alone I took a rest there. Overhead the fruit was heavy and ripe, but tantalizingly out of reach. Opposite me a group of old men sat sitting with wet towels draped over their heads. (Novelist Vikram Seth once came here and wrote that the only way to keep cool in Turfan was to pour buckets of water over your head).

I was fanning myself ineffectually when I noticed that someone had sat down beside me. The fair-skinned, brown-eyed young man introduced himself as Abdullah.



Inevitably, our conversation quickly turned to the heat. A display in the reception of our hotel had said the day's temperature was 42°C. Abdullah showed me his watch; the digital display had gone quite black. "If I put it into the refrigerator for a few minutes it will go back to normal," he said with a smile.

Adullah said he was working in the local school and saving money to study English abroad. He told me that about three quarters of Turfan's inhabitants are Muslim Uyghurs, like himself. They speak their own language and write in Arabic script. I apologized for not being able to speak Chinese. "Mandarin Chinese is difficult for me, too," he said.

Snowcaps

The next day, we left Turfan for Urumqi, an easy two-hour journey on a half-empty train. Despite being in the middle of a vast desert, the city is prosperous and modern, although, like urban areas everywhere in China, it seems to be enveloped in a permanent cloud of construction noise and dust.

We decided to escape the dust with a day trip up



In contrast to Qinghai Lake near Xining, where Tibetan children pose for tourists (left), Turfan is the hottest driest place in China, a perfect climate for producing raisins. Grapes are hung on the walls of special clay huts (top). At dusk, Urumqi's night market (above and right) starts to take on the hustle and bustle characteristic of this frontier town in China's far west.





to Heaven Lake, a renowned beauty spot up in the mountains near Urumqi. The only way to get there is by organized tour. As our ancient vehicle juddered up the long climb to the lake, our tour guide contended with the potholes by jamming her feet against the edge of the aisle. Every now and then she interrupted her narrative to answer her mobile phone.

The vast bus park just below Heaven Lake was packed with excited tourists. An endless stream of electric carts and cable cars ferried the crowds up and down the mountain. Up by the lake's edge, some tourists were admiring the Alpine-like snow-capped mountains that wall the lake, others were having their photos taken in local costume. A young couple paddled in the water, a huge watermelon they had brought for the trip bobbing patiently by their ankles. I slipped off my shoes and socks to join them, but the water was close to freezing. I couldn't bear the cold for long. As I sat on a rock by the shore waiting for my feet to dry in the sun, I recalled that Vikram Seth had come here and swum alone in the lake. These days he would have to dodge the hooting tourist ferries traversing the water every minute or so.

I watched the crowds milling around the shore and tried to take stock of the journey we'd made. Though Mattias and I had anticipated a trip from the modernity of Shanghai to the wilderness of the Far West, in the end, I thought, maybe we had ended up where we started? Even Urumqi, a frontier city in the middle of a desert, seemed to be as much in the midst of rapid change as anywhere else. Another bumpy journey later we arrived back at the hotel. It was nearly dark so we decided to head in for an early night. The next day we would be off to Beijing, then home. But, at the hotel's doorway, I suddenly noticed something that somehow seemed to sum it all up. For here, on the other side of the road, in a city so very far from an ocean, was a sushi restaurant. W

Heaven Lake (below) is a popular day trip from Urumqi for Chinese and foreign tourists alike. The lake is fed by snow melt from the surrounding peaks and the water is icy cold even in high summer.

