

Chengxian, Gansu Province, China
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* Travel Journal: Xinjiang Province *

Thanks to Chairman Mao ushering the People's Republic of China into a new era, on October 1, 1949, and thereby creating a public holiday, Tomas and I enjoyed a week-long journey to Xinjiang Province in northwestern China. We took advantage of the time to travel further west in China than we have ever been before, into the fascinating province of Xinjiang. Here follows a rendition of our journey.

We traveled first by train between Tianshui, our closest city (2.5 hours away by car or bus) to the capital of Xinjiang Province, Urumqi. The train ride was very comfortable, since we traveled "Soft Sleeper", (4 beds in one small cabin), but it was 24 hours long. During the day we watched the landscape change as we traveled west in Gansu. Around our home in Chengxian, where it seems to rain nonstop sometimes, it is green and lush. Gansu to the west becomes more and more dry, and in Xinjiang Province, the rolling hills in the foreground are barren, and surrounded by high snow-capped mountains in the distance.



The name Urumqi means "beautiful pastureland" in Mongolian, although when one enters the sprawling city of almost three million people, pastures are far from one's mind. Immediately upon arriving in Urumqi, we were surprised at how different Xinjiang is compared to the rest of China. Specifically, Xinjiang is home to many of China's different minorities, including the Uighur minority.

Many different minority groups that we saw in Xinjiang looked nothing like the "Han" Chinese who comprise the majority (more than 90 % of China is "Han.") We were surprised to meet minority people who looked almost eastern European, with lighter hair and even light eyes. Other minority people dressed in traditional clothing, such as special hats that especially the men wear.

China has only one official time zone, called “Beijing time,” but Xinjiang is so far from Beijing that in reality, the day is several hours off. In order to compensate for this difference, businesses and shops open and close two hours later than they would out east. Booking appointments can therefore be tricky; one must be sure which time is being used, Beijing or Xinjiang time! However, since neither Tomas nor I are morning people, we loved the business hours, and we joked that we should always use “Xinjiang time”!



We spent the first day wandering around Urumqi, sampling local Uighur dishes, which most always include meat, especially lamb, but we managed to find vegetarian options for me as well. The first time we visited a Uighur restaurant, we could barely manage to order at all, since the Uighur people there spoke only their own Uighur language, which is totally different from Mandarin Chinese, and nobody spoke any English either! Finally we managed to order. What we got was delicious, especially the unique tea they served, which was black with a hint of rose. It was a nice change from the green tea we receive elsewhere in China.

The next day we took an excursion to the famous “Heavenly Lake”. Often Chinese tend to name places exaggeratedly flowery, poetic names, but in this case, the name fit. It was a truly beautiful area, of blue water, bluer skies, and high, snow-capped mountains, the highest of which was over 5000 meters. Since we liked it so much, we spent the night in a traditional Kazak minority teepee-styled home called a “yurt.” A yurt is, we learned, made from a surprisingly complex system of wood,



animal skins on the outside (nowadays also perhaps with plastic for rain protection), and beautifully decorated with brightly-colored rugs and cloth on the inside. Most of the inside is simply one giant bed, upon which are somewhat soft rugs. Yurts have been used for hundreds of years in China, and our hosts also slept in simpler versions, which were scattered around the area. Because it was quite late in the season, only one other tourist spent the night with us in the yurt (a German man, with whom we were shocked to realize that we would prefer to speak Chinese, as opposed to German, which Tomas has studied for years in

Sweden but seems to have mostly forgotten as we live in China!) Normally a yurt would host about 10 people, we were told, all on the same giant bed. Thanks to a mountain of quilts both under us and above us, we stayed toasty warm at night, despite the fact that the temperatures dropped to below freezing outside the yurt, and in the morning it was a mere 2.9 C inside! (About 37 F). While we were at the lake, we hiked around, enjoying the silence that is unfortunately so rare in China. Also, I couldn't resist, for about a dollar, trying on some minority clothing, at the lake's shore.



Back in Urumqi we were pleased to get together with one of our students, whose English name is Sally, and to meet her family. It was the first time that we have visited a student's home. After showing us around several of Urumqi's sights, her parents brought us to their small, tidy apartment and offered us mounds of some of the sweetest melons we have ever tasted. (Xinjiang is famous for delicious melons, along with grapes and raisins). Watermelon with about a



million seeds is not what guests would maybe be offered back home, but here in China we were nonchalantly presented with dishpans for the floor, for spitting out the seeds, and a roll of toilet paper for wiping our hands. Any nervous tension must vanish, I thought to myself, when one sits and spits seeds together with one's host family into giant plastic tubs on the floor!

We then flew from Urumqi to Kashgar, a famous stop on the Silk Road, by plane the next day. Kashgar is a fascinating mix of the old and new, and of mixed cultures, religions, and foods. The Old Town in Kashgar is where we spent most of our time during our three-day sojourn. With its tan-colored dirt or brick houses in Arabic style, we often felt that we were no longer in the China we know. Often it felt more like we were in a country in the Middle East, especially because of how the men and women were dressed. Uighur and other minority people live in Kashgar, together with the Han Chinese people, and the minority men and women wear traditional dress, including shawls, veils, and even sometimes brown towel-type cloth completely covering women's heads. It was almost



shocking for us to see the difference between men and women within the minority culture in Kashgar, since this is so different from the rest of China. These people are also Muslim, and there are several old and beautiful mosques in the Old Town. Some parts of the mosque pictured here are at least 500 years old.

Outside the biggest mosque in town, women and men gathered on the steps to beg, but only men went into the mosque. A few times we witnessed a funeral procession in town—the procession included only men, no women in sight. I asked our taxi driver once, as we drove past a funeral procession, what happens if a woman's father, brother, or son dies. Can she attend the funeral? He said, "keyi," which means, "okay." But somehow, seeing the throngs of men gathered together, I doubted it.



In Kasghar we spent days wandering the city, visiting the huge bazaar, sampling local *naan* breads baked right on the street, shopping, and trying to absorb as much local culture as we could, all the while trying to avoid getting run over by cars, donkey carts, busses, or other vehicles! Although Kasghar is a small city for China (approx. 350,000 people),

people were everywhere, making our visit colorful, interesting, very loud, and sometimes a little frustrating as well. Everywhere we looked on the street there was activity, whether it was men baking *naan* bread in their tiny outdoor oven, or whether it was local blacksmiths pounding on metal the same way they have been doing it for hundreds of years. Everywhere in Kasghar something is happening, people are strolling around, black smoke from outdoor coal ovens stings the nose, mingling with the sharp and unusual scent of spices or exotic tea. In this traditional tea shop, (see picture) this Uighur man mixed all kinds of dried flowers and spices into a fragrant tea mixture that he told me Uighur people often drink.



It was a lot of fun to shop in Kashgar, and this time not only I did the shopping! Tomas loved to visit the outdoor blacksmith shops and the music stores with their many fascinating and beautiful minority instruments. I preferred to spend



my time visiting carpet and rug shops that featured handmade silk or wool rugs from many different countries, all in gorgeous colors and wonderful materials. Whether one shops for a rug or a pound of raisins, bargaining is the order of the day. There are never price tags on anything; the price is haggled over and then decided upon between the customer and the salesperson. Sometimes this is frustrating, but luckily Tomas likes bargaining!

On our last night in Kashgar we found a Uighur Hot Pot restaurant. It was absolutely delicious! Hot Pot, which can be enjoyed all over China, is a steaming hot pot of soup base in the middle of the table, into which people add ingredients and cook right there at the table. The Uighur Hot Pot was especially delicious. It was filled with fragrant spices, and more cloves of garlic than we have ever seen in one pot. With the Hot Pot we were served black tea laced with roses again, a perfect complement.

Our week flew by and before we knew it, it was time to return home. The return journey felt long, especially since Tomas caught a stomach bug and unfortunately spent the 24-hour train ride sick to his stomach. Also, 15 minutes out of Chengxian all traffic stopped since there have been numerous landslides on the highway due to heavy rains. Luckily, we managed to get around on a nearby country road, and now we are very happy to be home again.

Look for new pictures and a video clip from the yurt on our web page: www.e455.se/kina (choose English on the left).

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