

China in your hand

Travelling the ancient trade route of the Silk Road, **Tom Coote** takes you on a journey of scenic parks, Chinese tea houses and temples with a neighbouring teacup ride

When travelling the length of China along the ancient trade routes of the Silk Road, the only real way to do it is by train.

Up until the 16th century, when new maritime routes opened up, the Silk Road had acted as the bridge between all the major civilisations – Egypt, China, India, Persia, Arabia, Byzantium and Rome – for more than a thousand years. Around 30% of the trade was made up of silk, but these routes would also carry fruit, plants, paper, art, compasses, jewels, gold, gunpowder – and the Black Death. More importantly, they carried ideas, skills and DNA.

The best-known start and end points of the Silk Road are Chang'an (Xian), the old capital of China, and Byzantium

(Constantinople/Istanbul), but many Silk Road trips bypass those cities all together. I began my journey along these ancient trade routes by travelling up from Luang Prabang in Laos by sleeper bus to Jinghong, before spending another night in a cramped bunk on a bumpy bus to arrive at Kunming. From then on, however, it is possible to travel all the way across China, to Kazakhstan and beyond through Central Asia, using the far more comfortable sleeper trains. They may cost a little more than the night buses but are reliable, far cleaner than they used to be, great value for money by European standards, provide you with a plentiful supply of hot water for instant noodles and tea, and will

save you the cost of a night's accommodation in a hostel or hotel. I've also always found that I sleep very well on trains, so unlike with the night buses – whose narrow bunk beds are often just a little too short for many Westerners – you don't waste half the next day shuffling around like a sleep-deprived zombie.

Kunming

Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, is home to more than five million people. It was once a gateway to the Silk Road and acted as a crossroads for trade between India, Myanmar and Tibet. According to the tourist brochures,

Kunming is also 'the city of Eternal Spring'. On exiting the night bus from Jinghong on a chilly March morning, wearing only the shorts and T-shirts I'd been getting away with for months on South-East Asia, I was shivering so hard that I couldn't even hold up my badly photocopied map of the sprawling metropolis.

THINGS TO DO The large parks in all major Chinese cities are always popular with the locals who are often forced to live in large, grey tower blocks. As in many of these mega parks, Green Lake Park in Kunming features a large boating lake surrounded with pedal boats, scenic tea houses, giant



Yuantong Temple, Kunming



Cloudland International Hostel, Kunming



Teahouse, Chengdu

chess sets, brightly painted outdoor gym equipment, and several groups of enthusiastic line dancers. All over China you find groups of all ages and abilities doing their own kind of choreographed dance routines. It seems similar to US-style country dancing but, like most cultural imports, it has been transposed and modified into a uniquely Chinese form of expression. There is none of the inhibition that you find among amateur dancers in the West and neither the dancers themselves nor the crowds that gather to watch them seem particularly concerned about just how good or bad the dancing actually is. It's just a bit of fun and exercise.

Not far from Green Lake Park is Yuantong Si, a Chan (Zen) Buddhist temple that was first built in the late eighth or ninth century. Over the years it has been restored and rebuilt a number of times. More recently it was expanded with money from Thailand. Unusually, it lies in a natural depression and you go down steps to the temple, rather than ascending. It is very popular among the huge numbers of domestic Chinese tourists (as is almost anything scenic that you can take your picture in front of).

As the only Western tourist in the temple complex, I edged between the incense-lighting worshippers and tried to avoid walking into too many holiday snaps. I tried not to make a nuisance of myself and nobody seemed to mind me wandering around their holy place. Not all Western visitors have been so well tolerated. At the beginning of the 20th century, one of the French engineers who was working on the Kunming to Vietnam railway project set up house in the temple's main building. There weren't many nice places for foreigners to stay in Kunming at the time, so he selected the Yuantong Treasury hall as his place of residence. This didn't go down too well with the locals who still wanted to be able to get into the temple to pray and burn incense sticks. It took a few months but they eventually managed to chuck him out. It would be difficult to imagine a Chinese engineer coming over to England and setting up house in the nearest cathedral because he couldn't find anywhere else that was up to his standards.

GOING OUT The most popular hangout that I found in Kunming is a trendy-looking café called Just Fruit. It's full of teenagers playing cards, drinking fruit shakes and smoking (something that to UK residents can now seem strangely exotic). Unlike nearly everywhere else in Kunming, they have some English on their menu (among these youngsters, speaking English was considered to be very 'cool'). The ice cream sundaes on the menu are particularly appealingly named. I was extremely tempted by 'The Heaven of Ice Snow' and 'Heart Deeply Drank in a Romantic Feeling' but eventually opted for 'Love to get Occulty with Black Forest'.

WHERE TO STAY I had meant to stay at the popular Cloudland International Hostel but got lost and ended up at another YHA instead (it wasn't one of those 'posh' Chinese hostels with doors on the toilet cubicles).

Chengdu

As the state capital of Sichuan (known for its spicy cuisine), Chengdu now has more than 15 million residents. On arriving at the train station in the early morning, it appeared that most of them were in the queue for the taxis. Having given up on that particular mode of transport, I then spend more than 15 minutes attempting to cross the road, so as to get out of the station. Having failed to even make it across one lane of traffic I was eventually propositioned

by an old man on a moped. After a quick glance at the map he assured me that he knew where I wanted to go, before zooming out in between the oncoming cars, trucks and buses. Some 40 minutes later he gave up, abandoning me at the side of the road, without even a landmark in view to try and establish my whereabouts.

Thankfully, although Chengdu as a whole is huge and sprawling, most of the main tourist attractions are actually located within quite a small area (and soon after getting lost I was offered a lift to my hostel by a friendly local family who had noticed me struggling with my map). Once oriented, it is possible to walk to most of the main sites, and most tourist hotels will offer affordable day trips to see the giant pandas.

THINGS TO DO Not far from the Jinjiang River is a pedestrianised tourist complex revolving around the Wenshu Temple. Hordes of Chinese tourists gather around the souvenir shops and stalls selling the Chinese equivalent of sticks of rock and 'kiss me quick' hats. The Buddhist Temple – the biggest and best preserved in Chengdu – is more than 1,000 years old, attracting crowds from all around the country to burn incense and sacrificial paper money in return for blessings (around AD960 Chengdu became the first place to widely use paper money). Inside the Scriptures Hall is a white-jade statue of Buddha from Myanmar, incantations in Sanskrit from India, and gold-plated scripture from Japan.

Chengdu is famous for its teahouses. The Chinese will sit around for hours while waiters wander around topping up their large white bowls of what appears to be a selection of twigs and garden clippings, with thermos flasks of boiling water. Tourists are usually directed to the 'superior' sections of the tea houses, which can cost up to 10 times more than the standard seating areas (although it will still cost you less than a cappuccino in any Western High Street).

Undoubtedly, the biggest attraction for most foreign visitors is the Chengdu Panda Bear Breeding and Research Centre. It is usually visited on a day trip that includes minibus transportation, a video presentation, and a tour of the visitor centre, as well as the obligatory photo opportunities. Less well known, and also there to see, are the red pandas – they're somewhere between a cat and a dog in size and look more like raccoons with a long bushy tail. Some scientists claim that they're closely related to giant pandas, while others quite confidently state that they're a completely different species. The fact that they look like totally different animals would seem to lend credence to the latter view.

GOING OUT A popular night out is a visit to the Shefengyayun Sichuan Opera House. Most Sichuan Opera repertoires are adapted from the Chinese classical novels, mythologies, legends and folk tales. The performances are highly stylised and often acrobatic.

WHERE TO STAY Highly recommended is Sim's Cozy Garden Hostel. It offers a wide range of affordable accommodation including unusually attractive dorm rooms, good-value tours to the Panda Centre and Sichuan Opera, and will even book your onward train tickets for a small fee.

Lanzhou

Lanzhou, situated roughly in the centre of China, was once a major stop on the Silk Road. It used to be known as the Golden City but is now one of the most polluted cities in China. Unlike Chengdu, it is not a major tourist attraction and I didn't see any other tourists when I was there.

Wenshu Temple, Chengdu



Giant panda, Chengdu



Water wheel, Lanzhou

Pictures: Getty, Thinkstock

THINGS TO DO If Lanzhou is famous for anything, then it is for its water wheels. Until the 1950s around 250 enormous water wheels were still being used for irrigation along the Yellow River that runs through Lanzhou (the invention of the irrigation water wheel had travelled up the Silk Road from Roman Syria). Not many have survived the Cultural Revolution but some working reproductions have been built for the Water Wheel Garden as a tourist attraction. The park extends for a kilometre or so along the Yellow River and, as well as a line of scenic water wheels, it also features an amphitheatre for public performances, a rock museum (yep, rock) and a set of bronze statues depicting Chinese workers.

Sometimes in the summer tourists are allowed to float across the river on traditional rafts made from inflated sheepskins. You probably wouldn't drown if you fell out as they make you wear life jackets, but I wouldn't fancy your chances if you accidentally swallowed anything.

Like many other hillside parks in China, Five Springs Park is a mixture of ancient temples, elegant gardens and gaudily painted amusement rides. A hike up steep rock-cut stairways will lead you to yet more temples, cut high up into the hillside, with views stretching out over the smog-ridden city, as far as the Yellow River.

GOING OUT Although all large cities will have the usual selection of restaurants, nightclubs and karaoke bars, there is little in Lanzhou that is aimed specifically at tourists. If you get bored, you can always head over to one of the large internet cafés and be surrounded by dozens of Chinese teenagers, all blowing up mythical monsters and evil foreign invaders as loudly as possible. The speed of any internet connection is extremely variable and most social media and many news sites are blocked. There is also a strong likelihood that online email accounts will be infected with the many unblocked viruses. On no account should you use Chinese internet café's to make any financial transactions!

WHERE TO STAY There is apparently a hostel on the other side of town to the train station, but just two minutes right of the train station I managed to find a nice budget hotel with a decent bathroom and satellite TV for less than the price of a private room in a backpacker's hostel.

Dunhuang

The Dunhuang train station is surprisingly grand and modern, but around 12km out of town. It looks like an alien spaceship that has been abandoned in the desert.

Having caught a minibus into the central market area of Dunhuang, I was struck by just how untypically Chinese both the city and the people look: there seem to be more mosques than Buddhist temples, many of the residents look more Central Asian than Han Chinese, and the whole atmosphere is very different to the large cities further east.

Dunhuang, in Gansu province, used to be one of the most important cities in ancient China. The city was founded by Emperor Wudi of the Han dynasty in 111BC at the crossroads of two trading routes of the Silk Road. Today, it is a highly popular holiday destination among China's large numbers of camera-happy domestic tourists.

THINGS TO DO minibuses can easily be caught from the centre of town to the hugely popular Thousand Buddha Caves of Magao. According to local legend, the temple caves were first dug out in AD366 by a Buddhist monk called Le

Temple at Crescent Lake, Dunhuang



Zen who had a vision of a thousand Buddhas. The number of the temples eventually rose to more than a thousand, many of which were painted with elaborate murals by pilgrims passing along the Silk Road. These murals were intended as aids to meditation and as mnemonic devices but, perhaps more importantly, they had acted as teaching tools to inform illiterate Chinese of the ideas and philosophy of the Buddhism that had spread into China along the Silk Road. The price of the admission ticket includes the services of an English-speaking guide.

The other major attraction at Dunhuang is the Mingsha Shan National Park, situated in one of the most scenic regions of the vast Gobi Desert. Most visitors opt to ascend the Echoing Sand Mountains on the back of a Bactrian camel, stopping only at the peak to slide down the sand on a sled, before snaking back around the epically proportioned dunes to the Crescent Moon Lake – formed in the shape of a half moon by a natural spring in the desert.

The story goes that these dunes got their name after an army that was resting at this oasis was taken by surprise by a massive sand storm that completely submerged them, and that the sound you can sometimes hear echoing from the dunes is the screams of the still-buried soldiers. Others think that the sound has something to do with the wind and the shifting sand dunes but I prefer the first explanation.

GOING OUT As a major domestic tourist attraction, the city centre features the usual entertainments for Chinese holidaymakers but little is aimed at foreign visitors.

Urumqi

The Uyghur people from around Urumqi in Xianjiang province are really more Central Asian, in both appearance and culture, than they are Han Chinese. Like Tibet, it is a highly contested region of China. The recent rise in Uyghur nationalism and the demand for an independent state of Uyghurstan, or East Turkistan, is considered a great threat to the Chinese state. Apart from anything else, Xinjiang is rich in natural resources such as oil and natural gas that have yet to be anything like fully exploited by the national government.

Strangely, there isn't yet a direct connecting train from Dunhuang's ultra modern new station to Urumqi, so you have to get a bus or shared taxi to Liuyan, around an hour's drive from Dunhuang City. If you wish to carry on further along the Silk Road from Urumqi, then you can either catch a 24-hour bus to Kashgar, in the direction of Pakistan, before crossing over into Kyrgyzstan, or take the night train or bus to Almaty in Kazakhstan.

THINGS TO DO Most of Urumqi's attractions are found on Red Hill. As with most of the scenic temple and pagoda sites in China, a selection of rickety-looking fairground rides have been planted into the hillside. If all the reverence and spirituality become a bit tiresome you can always cheer yourself up with a ride on a big wheel or get spun around in a revolving teacup. It's difficult to imagine this happening in other parts of the world – perhaps a ghost train should run through Canterbury Cathedral? Or a big dipper could be bolted onto the roof of the Blue Mosque?

GOING OUT I recommend trying out one of the plentiful Uyghur restaurants, featuring a cuisine closer in style to Turkish than to traditional Chinese. There is also a good food court at the shopping mall just along from Peoples' Park.

WHERE TO STAY I would recommend the White Birch YHA, just across the road from the Regional Museum, and backing on to another large park which is particularly popular with the enthusiastic fliers of large and colourful Chinese kites.

You can read more in Tom's book, *Tearing up the Silk Road*, tomcoote.net/tearing-up-the-silk-road.html

WHERE TO STAY Most independent travellers opt to stay at Charlie Zhong's Guest House. It is situated a few kilometres out of town, right next to the sand dunes, but it is easy enough to catch a local minibus there or even to get a free lift from Charlie Zhong's Café (run by the friendly owner's wife) or Shirley's Café (run by Charlie's brother in law).



View from Red Hill, Urumqi