



Sunset on the Sher Dor Madrasa, the Registan, Samarkand

# The Silk Route

a road less travelled

**ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST JOURNEYS**, the Silk Route has long attracted travellers and adventurers keen to discover this most ancient of trade routes. Originally, traders spent months travelling the length of it, braving thieves, bandits and vagabonds to transport exotic goods from east to west. These days the bandits have disappeared and transport and infrastructure are much improved but this is still not a part of the world for everyone. Accommodation is functional and roads can be a little bumpy. However, in return visitors can expect stunning scenery, fascinating history and the joy of discovering some little-visited countries long hidden behind the iron curtain.



*Elders in Bukhara, Uzbekistan*

## History and Culture

The Silk Route is a complex network of ancient trading routes that snake from Xian in China through the high passes of Central Asia into Persia, Arabia and Europe. These are journeys that have inspired travellers and scholars for centuries and until ocean trade routes opened up, they were the main arteries for the exchange of goods and information between east and west.

The Chinese first learnt how to produce silk around four thousand years ago and having developed and refined their techniques they were understandably protective of them. Successive emperors went to extraordinary lengths to safeguard their lucrative knowledge and technology and effectively created a monopoly on silk production.

As the popularity of silk grew, it became one of the most important trade items in the pre-industrial era and led to the development of the many trade routes which are collectively known as the Silk Route. Though silk was one of the most important commodities transported along this route, many other goods were traded in both directions including perfumes, jewels, glassware and spices.

For modern day travellers though, it is the fascinating mix of diverse cultures, breathtaking landscapes and the region's intricate history that makes for some of the most rewarding travelling in the world. Vast deserts, ancient ruins, towering mountains, imposing architecture and bustling markets all await the adventurous traveller along the ancient Silk Route.



*Buying bread, Kerben market, Kyrgyzstan*



*Samarkand, Uzbekistan*



*Karakol, Kyrgyzstan*



## ► Highlights of the Silk Route

### 1 Xian, China

China's ancient capital, Xian, is famous as the home of the Terracotta Warriors but was traditionally seen as the start of the Silk Route. Over the years the city's many visiting traders brought not just goods, but ideas, with them and little by little Islam spread eastwards eventually making it as far as Xian. The city still has a significant Muslim population and the colourful Muslim quarter is a hive of activity.

### 2 Dunhuang, China

Moving west from Xian, the oasis town of Dunhuang was a significant staging post, providing much needed provisions for traders crossing the mighty Gobi Desert. Here you will find some of the highest sand dunes in the world as well as some impressive Buddhist art in the Mogao 'Thousand Buddha' caves.

### 3 Kashgar, China

Kashgar, in China's far west, is naturally one of the crossroads of Asia and has been one of the key Silk Route cities since time immemorial. A real melting pot of a place, its vibrant old town is full of interesting faces and characters and its famous Sunday market attracts traders from neighbouring Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

### 4 Kyrgyzstan

Remote and mountainous, Kyrgyzstan is a scenic treat. One of the highlights of a visit is the opportunity to stay with local nomadic herders on the Kyrgyz plateau. At an altitude of 3000 metres and beyond the reach of electricity or infrastructure, a night in a yurt by the side of a pristine lake offers a sense of tranquillity and isolation that makes a wonderful contrast to the bustling cities elsewhere on the Silk Route. The night skies are especially impressive and for walkers, a hike into the hills provides breathtaking views of the valleys below.

### 5 Khiva, Uzbekistan

The ancient walled city of Khiva is a monument to Uzbekistan's Khanate past and is today a superb 'open-air museum'. A couple of mosques in the city are still in use but other buildings are now open to visitors. Most of all however, Khiva is a beautiful and relaxing place to spend time taking in the architecture and soaking up the atmosphere of a charming old trading post.

### 6 Bukhara, Uzbekistan

For those arriving from Khiva, the minarets of Bukhara gradually appear on the horizon after the drive through the desert, and it's easy to imagine what a welcome sight this must have been for travellers in centuries past. This is Uzbekistan's religious centre and the city is dotted with mosques. The historic old town is beautifully laid out and a delightful place to stroll around in the evenings.

### 7 Samarkand, Uzbekistan

In comparison to the small size and timid pace of Uzbekistan's other cultural centres, Samarkand actually feels like a proper city with leafy boulevards and chaotic streets. The superb Registan (the city's spectacular main square) is the major architectural draw and is hugely impressive, while the markets here are enjoyable places for browsing and bargaining.



Uighur men, Kashgar Sunday market, China



Herders at Song Kol Lake, Kyrgyzstan



Bukhara, Uzbekistan



Burana Tower and Balbals, Kyrgyzstan

## In a nutshell

### Do go if you

- ▶ enjoy great journeys.
- ▶ have an interest in history.
- ▶ enjoy fantastic scenery and don't mind some bumpy journeys.

### Don't go if you

- ▶ don't like your plans to change unexpectedly – hotels in this part of the world can have a somewhat cavalier attitude to reservations.
- ▶ are looking for luxury and high levels of comfort.
- ▶ dislike long journeys.



Market spices, Bishkek

## FACT file

Unless you have unlimited time it's best to visit just a section of the Silk Route. Here our specialists suggest how to plan your time.

**Two weeks:** Focus on Uzbekistan and take in the main Silk Route cities of Khiva, Bukhara and Samarkand. A 12 day itinerary in this area costs from £2,500 per person. For those with a little more time, neighbouring Kyrgyzstan can be added for a more varied trip.

**Three weeks:** Take the 21 day classic Silk Route trip which includes Xian, Dunhuang and Kashgar in the west of China, along with visits to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and costs from £4,990 per person. For those looking for a real adventure, it's possible to extend the journey into Turkmenistan and Iran or on as far as Istanbul, from where goods were traded into Europe

For more information please call Chris Moore on 01993 838 213.

**Escorted group tour:** We also have a group tour, Along the Silk Route, departing on the 16th May 2011. This 21 day tour starts in Beijing and finishes in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and costs from £3,995 per person.

For more information please call Chris Moore on 01993 838 213.

## WEB plus

Find out more about the Silk Route on our website.

[www.audley.co.uk/traveller/winter2011](http://www.audley.co.uk/traveller/winter2011)



## NEW China, Russia & Central Asia brochure

The Silk Route features in our new China, Russia & Central Asia brochure. Six months of hard work in the making, the brochure showcases some of our favourite places in these parts of the world. To order a copy please call 01993 838 200 or visit [www.audleytravel.com/brochures](http://www.audleytravel.com/brochures)



Karakol elders, Kyrgyzstan