

NIGHT
TRAIN
TO
TURKISTAN

Modern Adventures

Along China's

Ancient Silk Road

STUART STEVENS



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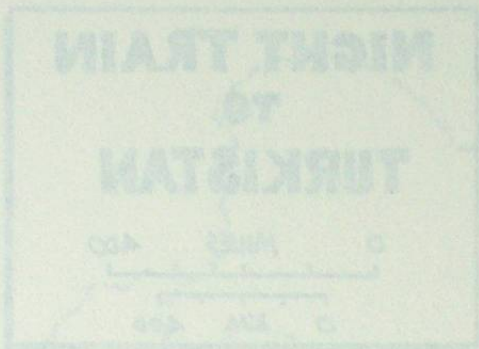
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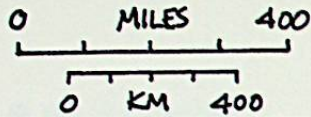
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*To my family,
intrepid travelers in their own way,
and C.A.N.*

NIGHT TRAIN TO TURKISTAN



U.S.S.R

MONGOLIA

Beijing

Stevens' Route

Urumqi

TURPAN
DEPRESSION
Kashgar

AKSU
CHINESE TURKISTAN
TAKLA MAKAN
Fleming's Route

Kashgar

QUILLIAN SHAN
GAI DAN BASIN
Huang
Golmud
Dulun
Yanhu
Koto No
Xinming
Lanzhou
Xi'an

CHINA

TIBET

Lhasa

INDIA

AFGHAN

PAKISTAN

The use of traveling is to regulate imagination with reality and, instead of thinking how things might be, to see them as they are.

to Turkistan
DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON

Prologue

Everyone talked about the snow. It had been coming down for four days straight; such extremes shocked Geneva, a city boastful of its moderation.

I had seen a lot of snow. Kashgar was covered and more fell in Beijing the morning I boarded the Trans-Siberian. Mongolia and Siberia were white, and Moscow had been a blizzard.

But I welcome the Geneva storm. It quieted the city and made it easier for me to concentrate on eating and sleeping. In brief bouts of wakefulness, I roamed out from my hotel in the old city to devour huge meals. I ate everything. Except lamb. It would take a while for that taste to come back.

"There's still a pile of snow out front on the walk, but I think you can make it through. I'm on the fifth floor, just come on up." Her voice was firm, tinged with a trace of laughter. She didn't sound eighty-three.

Her apartment wasn't far, a half-hour on foot, just beyond the boundaries of the old city. Walking over, I reveled in the familiarity of the Swiss scene—the yellow PTT buses, the policemen in their pillbox hats, the army of snow shovelers in their bright orange jump suits. I had once lived in this country and though it wasn't really home, it now felt predictable and comfortable and just what I needed. Even the way pedestrians and drivers rig-

idly obeyed traffic signs, a little thing that used to drive me crazy, was now pleasantly reassuring.

The elevator in her building was an old-fashioned iron cage rising through the center of a marble staircase. "Mlle. Ella Maillart," read the card on the oak door.

"I've come all the way around the world just to see you," I'd explained on the phone and we'd laughed, if only because it was true. Now I was nervous. I knew why I wanted to see her but I wasn't sure what I would say.

She held herself canted slightly to the left, a small woman with seeping gray hair and bright eyes. Her left hand came out for a firm shake; her right was bandaged in thick guaze.

"I've been looking at some pictures," she said, pulling me into the apartment. It was two sunny rooms crowded with antiques. "Why didn't you plan better?" she asked.

"Plan better?"

"Here look . . ." She pointed to a worn map of China. A black line snaked from Beijing to Kashgar.

"Was this the map you carried?" I asked.

She laughed. "Of course not! This is a Communist map!"

I looked closer. All of the lettering was in French. Kashgar was located in the "Region Autonome Ouigoure du Xin Jiang." This struck me as funny.

"But tell me," she asked, "why did you not penetrate to the Takla Makan?" Her finger traced the oblong brown section of the map outlining the great desert of Western China.

"But we did. Here, I'll show you." We pulled up chairs, sat down at the large coffee table, and quickly got lost somewhere out in Chinese Turkistan. Mostly she talked and I listened. It grew very warm in the bright, small room. I was still in the habit of wearing four or five

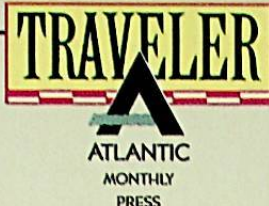
layers of clothes. The idea of heated rooms was an adjustment I hadn't made.

We talked about places like Golmud and Xinning, Hotan and Kashgar. Once they had just been odd-sounding names in her book and on a map. But now they meant something to me, had become a part of my past as well.

After a couple of hours, she stood suddenly and announced, "I've talked too much. Let's go to lunch in a little place I like around the corner and I can hear more about what you saw and how it has changed in fifty years.

"But tell me again, why is it you wanted to do such a thing?"

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"From the beginning, it was a silly idea. This, of course, I liked."

So begins **NIGHT TRAIN TO TURKISTAN**, Stuart Stevens' irreverent, irresistible Chinese travel tale. In the late fall of 1986, Stevens, a young political consultant and writer, invited three friends to join him on an unlikely 5,000-mile quest along China's Ancient Silk Road. Their goal was to retrace the steps of a famous journey made in 1936 by Peter Fleming, an eccentric British writer/traveler who, like his brother Ian Fleming, had a flair for exceptional adventures.

Stevens' choice of companions is more amusing than useful—a triathlete and closet good ole boy, a kung fu expert from Yale, and a six-foot-tall female rower in Lycra stretch gear. Only one of them—Mark Salzman, author of the acclaimed *Iron & Silk*—had ever been to China before and Salzman is profoundly unsure he likes being back. Together this improbable foursome sets out from Beijing determined to follow Fleming's route on the Silk Road to Kashgar, the fabled capital of Chinese Turkistan. Closed to all foreigners in 1949 and only recently reopened, Turkistan (or Tartary as it has been known for centuries) is one of the wildest, least populated regions on earth, dominated by the fierce Takla Makan desert, a name which translates into "you go in, but you do not come out."

In the unbelievable cold of a Chinese winter, Stevens & Co. rumble across China in trains, donkey carts, bicycles, and some of the more memorable buses in recent literature. Often trapped in monolithic Russian-built hotels, they battle, bluff, and plead their way through the mazes of Chinese bureaucracy, surviving on such delicacies as lamb fat and cold noodles.

Crammed with memorable characters and unforgettably funny scenes, **NIGHT TRAIN TO TURKISTAN** is a rare, high-spirited romp across a country where travelers are greeted with "Comrades, we welcome you to your journey. Please do not spit everywhere..."

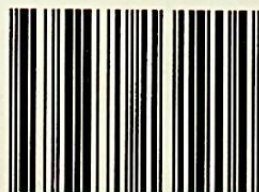
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