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SILK ROUTE BY RAIL

**DOMINIC
STREATFEILD-JAMES**

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A note on prices in the CIS

The author and publisher have endeavoured to ensure that this guide is as up-to-date as possible. However, things are changing fast in Central Asia, particularly in the CIS. Rapid inflation means that it would be pointless to give prices in roubles in this book. Since the US\$ is now the unofficial second currency in this region we've shown prices in dollars but indicated where payment should be in the rouble equivalent.

A Request

If you notice any changes that should be included in the next edition of this book, please write to Dominic Streatfeild-James, c/o the publisher (address on p2). A free copy of the next edition will be sent to persons making a significant contribution.

Front cover: Camels were the main means of transport across the lowlands of the Silk Route because of their strength, resilience and ability to survive for prolonged periods with little or no water. This one is pictured in Khiva (see p129).

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INTRODUCTION

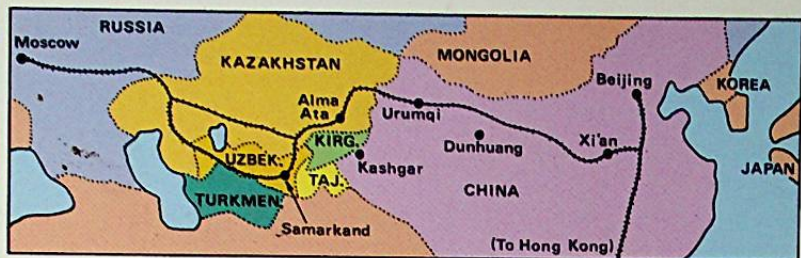
Mention the Silk Route and most people immediately think of China. This is perfectly natural - silk was first made in China and it was from here that it was originally sent west. Until recently, however, latter-day Silk Route travellers have been unable to penetrate further than Xinjiang Province in the north-west of China, for the border between Xinjiang and the USSR was closed to foreign visitors. From 1986, the Karakoram Pass offered an alternative, so that journeys could be continued south into Pakistan but, in fact, the majority of the Silk Route traffic did not head this way: it went directly west. The gradual disintegration of the USSR and 'opening up' of the CIS have now created new travel opportunities. Further, completion of a rail link from Alma Ata in Kazakhstan to Urumqi in China has, for the first time ever, made the journey from Central Asia (formerly Soviet Central Asia) into China accessible to the average traveller. This means that Marco Polo aficionados can not only trek their way across China, but can also cross the border and continue west to visit some of the most famous cities of the ancient world. In the last two centuries Western poets and dreamers alike cast their minds eastwards to Samarkand, Bukhara and Xanadu knowing, or at least suspecting, that they would never see the great mystical cities of the East. The trek was just too dangerous; it was not possible. Now it is.

The Silk Route stands for everything that is exciting and exotic about the Far East and some of its stops still maintain the sights which made them famous (or notorious). From the walled city of Khiva, where the trade in human slaves ceased only in 1917, the modern traveller moves to the Kalyan Minaret in Bukhara, known as the Tower of Death; skirts some of the greatest deserts of Asia; takes in the natural beauty of the Lake of Heaven near Urumqi; passes the western end of the Great Wall at Jiayuguan; stops at the astonishing decorations of the Mogao Thousand Buddha Caves at Dunhuang....the list goes on.

The new (June 1992) rail link between Alma Ata and Urumqi will undoubtedly become a - if not the - major route across Central Asia to the East. More than offering simply an alternative to the Trans-Siberian railway, it offers the opportunity of a really challenging, informative trip from west to east and back, for the routes across this part of the world are loaded with historical significance. Currently it is not possible to buy a through ticket from Moscow to Beijing via Kazakhstan but, even if it were, the traveller who did not stop off for a look at some of the cities along the way would be foolish. Virtually every stop suggested in this guide could conceivably constitute the highlight of another trip. Here they are strung together conveniently in the order that they would have been encountered by the former Silk Route travellers.

It is particularly exciting to travel this way at the moment. Mainstream tourism has not yet had any contact with Central Asia, so the opportunity still exists to visit these ancient sites without encountering truckloads of package holiday devotees. This is particularly so with the great Eastern cities of Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva, which seem likely to be the next additions to the wealthy jet-set's 'been there' lists.

Throughout history, political upheaval has severed the Silk Route repeatedly but it has always recovered. It is currently more accessible than ever before.



The greatest trade route of all time

Traversing some of the most inaccessible lands on earth, the Silk Route stretched some 5000 miles west from the ancient Chinese capital, Chang'an (Xi'an), all the way to the Roman Empire. Countless travellers, including Marco Polo, experienced its dangers. Many never returned.

A unique travel opportunity

Travel on this route is no longer dangerous but it is no less of an adventure. In 1992 a passenger service was inaugurated on the recently-built rail link between Alma Ata in Kazakhstan and Urumqi in north-west China. It is, therefore, now possible to travel by rail between Moscow and Beijing on a new route stopping off in Samarkand, Bukhara and many of the other cities on the Silk Route. This guide shows you how to arrange your trip independently or with a group.

- Practical information – planning your trip and buying tickets
- Extensive history sections on China, the CIS and the Silk Route
- Kilometre-by-kilometre guide (with strip maps in Russian, Chinese and English) for the whole route from Moscow to Beijing
- Comprehensive guides and plans to 16 cities along the route: Moscow, Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Alma Ata, Urumqi, Kashgar, Turfan, Dunhuang, Jiayuguan, Lanzhou, Tianshui, Xi'an, Luoyang and Beijing
- 36 maps and 30 colour photographs

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