

# TEARING UP THE SILK ROAD

*A modern journey from China  
to Istanbul, through Central Asia,  
Iran and the Caucasus*

Tom Coote

[www.tomcoote.net](http://www.tomcoote.net)



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his visit to the Silk Road and read his travelogues.  
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## INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as *the* Silk Road. There were actually many Silk Roads that shifted and twisted through Asia, Europe and Africa over hundreds of years. The best known starting and end points were Chang'an (Xian), the old capital of China, and Byzantium (Constantinople/Istanbul), but many Silk Roads would bypass those cities all together. They didn't even carry mainly silk. About 30 per cent 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.

Many consider the Silk Road to have been the Information Superhighway of its time. It can be seen as the first real instance of globalization, and to have laid the foundations of the modern world. It acted as a bridge between all the major civilizations – Egypt, China, India, Persia, Arabia, Byzantium and Rome – for over a thousand years and acted as a catalyst in their development. It wouldn't be until the sixteenth century, when new maritime trade routes opened up, that the Silk Road would begin to decline in importance.

Very few traders would ever travel the whole of the Silk Road – they would usually specialize in one particular section before passing their goods on to other merchants with the necessary skills and knowledge to extend the trade. To travel the entire Silk Road would have taken many years and been full of dangers. In 2010 I decided to make this journey from China to Istanbul, through Central Asia, Iran and the Caucasus, using only public transport. I tore through in nine weeks.

## *A modern epic journey from East to West along ancient trade routes*

Formed around 206 BC during the Han Dynasty, the Silk Road expands from China to central Europe, passing through India, the Middle East and North Africa along the way. This network of roads was the first trade route to connect East and West, and enabled the formation of great civilizations, such as the Persian Empire and Ancient Rome. Its position today, both culturally and geopolitically, is no less significant, as the region struggles to forge its own identity, distinct from the consumerism of the West, and the traditional values of the East.

In *Tearing up the Silk Road*, Tom Coote chronicles his journey along this ancient trade route, and allows the reader to glimpse at the true cultures of the people and places he visits, presenting an alternative, 'unofficial', viewpoint, which usually remains hidden from Western eyes. By bus, train and battered car – through deserts, mountain ranges, rapidly expanding megacities and ancient ruins – Tom meets, befriends and argues with an epic range of characters. From soldiers and monks, to pilgrims, travellers and modern-day Silk Road traders; all are striving for something more and most dream of being somewhere else.

Again and again Tom finds himself at the front line of a desperate war for hearts and minds. In an increasingly interconnected world, archaic conceptions of race, ethnicity and nationalism are becoming obsolete. Instead, new forms of identity are emerging, founded more upon shared cultural preferences and aspirations than on the remnants of tribal allegiance. The greatest clash of civilisations, however, seems to be between the few who have so much, and the masses now uniting to demand so much more.

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