

crept in. Cigarette smoking became so widespread that the Agha Khan, the revered spiritual leader of the Ismaili sect of Islam to which the Hunzakuts belong, issued an edict forbidding it. Social and economic change will, no doubt, accelerate with the influx of foreigners en route to China.

There is much to explore in the region around Hunza. A geologist showed us the exact spot where the subcontinent met with the Asian mainland 40 million years ago. Over time, friction between the two land masses produced the Himalayan mountains. The actual line can still be clearly seen.

The 16,000 foot high, 85-mile long Khunjerab Pass on the Karakoram Highway is the gateway to China. When we approached the border post at the end of the pass herds of yaks were grazing in the snow-covered fields and nomads wearing sunglasses against the glare greeted us with their big friendly grins. These people are the Tajiks who are linked to their neighbours, the Hunzakuts, by culture and religion.

The nomadic Tajiks live in round tents called *yurts* and made an extraordinarily picturesque sight leading their two-humped Bactrian camels over the windswept terrain and through the customs checkpoint, along with the buses and trucks.

Private vehicles are not allowed in China, so individual travellers must take public transportation. Tour groups are transported in comfortable new Toyota Landcruisers, a necessity since the surface of the highway becomes gravel after the border. This is the Roof of the World. Here three great mountain ranges meet: the Karakoram, Pamir and Kunlun. The Himalayas, Hindu Kush and Tien Shan all end not far away.

Tourists usually break their journey in Tashkurghan, a small, quiet town two hours along the road nestled among the snow-capped mountains. Known to ancient Silk Route travellers as the Gateway to China, it is now officially called the Tajik Autonomous Country. The name means Stone Tower, and



Tashkurghan is in fact dominated by a ruined fortress.

The next day after passing breathtaking mountain scenery, including the famous 24,700 foot Muztaghata, "Father of Icebergs," we slowly descended into the balmy Kashgar oasis. After miles of rugged terrain with only snow and mountain rock it was a shock to see greenery again: lush fields, tall poplar trees and mud-walled houses decorated with geometric designs. We had left the Pamir area and moved into Chinese Turkestan, inhabited by the Uighurs (pronounced weegur), a Turkic people.

Much of the Uighur culture is still evident. Traditional dress is worn, with the men in the distinct embroidered Uighur hats and women of all ages in colourful dresses.

The Id Kah Mosque, painted yellow, dominates the main square with its restful shady courtyard. But to get a real feeling for traditional Central Asian life, a visit to the lively main bazaar, which begins across the square from the Mosque, is essential.

Kashgar's bazaar has been an important one since ancient times due to the town's central position on the Yipek Yoluth, or Silk Route. One can find everything from pelts of the rare snow leopard and magnificent fox hats (about US\$7 with skillful bargaining) to the famous inlaid Kashgari daggers and long jade green and amber coloured raisins from Khotan. Kebab sizzles and children sell purple and red hard-boiled eggs.

Herbalist shops do a business in special healing herbs native to Xinjiang, the traditional Uighur me-

dicine still predominantly used. The most popular stall also displays a complete range of desiccated armadillos, bats, scorpions, and dried lizards pinned up in a neat row.

Life would seem little changed from a thousand years ago except at night the locals now gather around an outdoor TV set in the bazaar to exchange stories. In the same way they have gathered around teahouse storytellers by candlelight for centuries. The lack of contact with the outside world is especially apparent in the bazaar. Even bottled soft drinks and plastic bags haven't made it here yet. Bargaining over prices in the shops is carried out by the two sides taking turns writing in fountain pen on the vendor's hand.

There is a warmth, genuineness to be found here and, as elsewhere in China, curiosity. Any foreigner who stops on the street is surrounded by concentric circles of onlookers with necks craned and hands folded behind their backs staring to their heart's content. I was curious about them in turn.

Efforts to communicate are made. At a teahouse, a white bearded old man nodded sagely when he heard I was from California. "Stockton?" he immediately asked. When I said no, San Francisco, he looked puzzled and pulled out a Chinese map of the world to locate this unfamiliar city. After sitting thoughtfully for a while, he came over to present a piece of paper on which he had written in the Uighur Latin script previously used, "Amerika, Kalipurneya."

One of the most interesting ways to spend a relaxing afternoon in Kashgar is to sit on the second floor balcony of the most popular teahouse, an ornate blue and white building with arched colonnades. There is a Brueghellike scene of activity in the street below:

donkey cart traffic jams, two turbaned old men in traditional striped robes greet each other by bowing with hands over their hearts, a group of schoolgirls with brightly coloured scarves giggling together on their way to class... and the wise old faces that have so much character, etched by time on the path of the Silk Route.