

4 – TURFAN



Wednesday, 10 May

After a good night's sleep I rose at about 8.30 and, while Gordon slept soundly, I gave myself a good wash. I then tiptoed out of the room and walked to the small museum near the roundabout. Although this turned out to be reasonably interesting, it did not take long to see all the exhibits. Afterwards I went into a few shops, where I tried to buy a book on the Mogao Caves, but the prices for us foreigners were far too expensive. In one shop the price was marked ¥25 but the members of the staff insisted that it was ¥60. I turned my back on them and walked out in disgust.

I then sat on a seat in the middle of the roundabout, as I could not find a teahouse with seats outside, and wrote some postcards. After I had written a few, I went to a nearby post office to buy stamps and post them.

Next, I went off in search of food and bumped into Gordon, who had surfaced by now and was now in a bar, drinking. I joined him for a soft drink and, after he had said goodbye and left, I wrote postcards to the girls from Xi'an and Lanzhou. I got the young woman behind the counter to write out the Chinese characters clearly, then check them after I had written them on the cards. Once again I went off in search of food and found a place where I got a basic meal. As usual, the members of the staff were quite friendly and curious about me.

I then returned to the hotel, collected my luggage and footed it to the bus station, where I met Rita once again. Like me, she was now heading for Turfan in Xinjiang province. Turfan (or Turpan, *Tulufan* in Chinese), which is situated in a depression, is known as the hottest region of China; the temperature can reach as high as 49° C in summer. The bus left at three o'clock and went bumping across the desert to the small town of Liuyuan. The scenery was bleak and the journey was unremarkable except for the presence of a rather elderly and eccentric Japanese man who would occasionally lean over the seat in front of us to say a few words in very poor English. On one occasion he spent a considerable time consulting his pocket dictionary and eventually turned around, clutching something in his hand. With a look of triumph in his eyes he boldly articulated the words, 'Japanese sweet!' and handed each of us a sweet from his bag.

The town of Liuyuan, as the guide books had warned, was particularly drab and dirty. As usual, Rita had everything arranged well in advance and immediately trotted off to the CITS office to find a Mr Fan, who apparently had organized a soft sleeper compartment on the train that we were about to board. A French couple now joined us. As the Mr Fan could not be found, we walked to the grubby train station, only to discover that the ticket office was closed and would not be open until later. I volunteered to stay with the luggage in a noisy and dirty waiting room while the others went off again in search the elusive Mr Fan. I passed the time writing my diary and, when Rita and the others returned later, we bought our tickets. Leaving the Japanese man in charge of the luggage, we went to a nearby restaurant and had a rather indifferent meal. As usual, the meat was very fatty.

Back in the waiting room I found that Rita and her luggage had disappeared. Relieving the Japanese man, who went off to eat, I sat on a hard wooden seat and continued writing my diary. The train was supposed to leave at 8.32 p.m. but was delayed firstly by three hours and then by four. Later I discovered that Rita and the others had gone to the first-class waiting room. The Japanese man and I joined them and found ourselves among an obnoxious group of American tourists, whom we had encountered once before. However, it was more comfortable in this waiting room.

The train finally pulled in at around midnight and we clambered aboard. As the others had bought soft sleepers at the inflated price of over ¥90 FEC, I separated from them and went to the hard seat compartment. There I went to the conductor and asked if there were any hard sleepers. Unsurprisingly the answer was, '*Méi yǒu*' ('No'). Overhearing this, a soldier took me to one side and asked me to give him ¥20 FEC. This I did and he returned shortly afterwards with a ticket. I only had to pay an extra ¥7.50 RMB and received my change in RMB. The soldier had got his FECs, I had got my hard sleeper at the 'right' price, albeit in FECs, and so both of us were happy.

Off I went to a darkened carriage, where I climbed up to a top bunk and soon fell asleep.

Thursday, 11 May

This morning the American tourists trooped through the carriage, in undisguised disgust of their surroundings, on their way to the dining car for breakfast. When I reluctantly went to join them a little later, I found the kitchen staff loading trolleys with packed breakfasts and so I decided to wait and eat a little later. I was glad that I had done so, for once again I had met some pleasant people in another carriage. One was a Muslim air force pilot who spoke a little English and claimed that he was a communist. I was then joined by two Chinese chaps who had been in America for a while and who spoke very good American English. When I eventually returned to my own carriage, I chatted to the people in Chinese. One lad was keen to learn some English and so I taught him a few words, which I wrote down for him. A Uighur man wearing an embroidered cap winked at me; somebody got me to wear his cap and took a photo of us. As usual, everybody was very curious to find out something about me.

Because I was talking to people all the time, I saw very little of the scenery, some of which was quite dramatic. We were now travelling westwards through the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, an area originally known as East Turkestan. Xinjiang, meaning 'New Frontier', occupies an area slightly larger than Western Europe; much of it consists of desert. The dominant culture here is Uighur, though there are other ethnic minority populations. The Uighur people are Muslim and they use a modified version of the Arabic script to write their Turkic language. They have had a long history of armed opposition to Chinese rule, both before 1949, when China was under Nationalist rule, and after, when the Communists took over. When five leaders of the Soviet-backed East Turkestan Republic were to negotiate with the Chinese about their sovereignty in 1949, their plane crashed in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, resulting in the impetus towards a separatist state being lost. The region was subsequently and systematically settled by native Han Chinese people, which had the effect of watering down any nationalistic impulses that the Uighurs might have had.

At around midday, the Americans passed through the carriage once again on their way to the dining room. Like them, I wanted to have lunch, but the people I was with did not seem to want me to go. I waited for a lunch trolley, but no food appeared. Consequently, when we got off the train at the scruffy town of Daheyan, I had eaten nothing. Rita, the Japanese man and I were offered a lift in a minibus to Turfan and, when we had negotiated the price, we set off with a young female soldier, who sat in the front. Turfan turned out to be quite a long drive away, across a sandy wasteland.

Although it was very hot here, it was a very dry type of heat and therefore not uncomfortable.



A grapevine-lined road in Turfan and the Turfan Guesthouse

We finally arrived at the oasis city. As I had been expecting wonderful things of this place, my first impressions were not very favourable. The Uighur people, especially the women, were dressed far more colourfully here, but the city looked like any other modern city except for the Arabic script alongside the Chinese. I saw none of the characteristic grapevine-lined roads until we reached the street where the Turfan Guesthouse was located. This turned out to be a bit of a dump, except for a courtyard shaded by grapevines behind a building at the front. The hotel consisted of several buildings scattered around a compound. We entered a door marked 'Reception' and booked in. Rita took an expensive all mod cons room, but the Japanese man and I paid just ¥8 for a bed in a dormitory. When we went to the room, we found a Japanese girl there. As she was somewhat taken

aback and I was sure that there must have been a mistake, we returned to the reception desk to check. The lady in charge brought us back to the dormitory and confirmed that this was where we would sleep. I had thought that there was strict segregation of the sexes here in China, but the rule seemed to be different for us foreigners. The girl seemed to be as eccentric as the elderly man: she was quiet, serious, and was inclined to mutter to herself. I concluded that the man could not have been enjoying the best of health, for he seemed to be having trouble with his stomach. I had noticed that he walked in a very erratic manner. He now stripped down to his vest and long johns (in this hot climate!), lay down on his bed and fell fast asleep.

Once I had got myself organized, I set about washing some clothes. I did this outside in the yard, which was full of young Westerners – it felt strange being surrounded by so many of them once again. As I felt that they were not exactly my type, I kept my distance from them at first.

Later I had a shower and spruced myself up. As dinner in the hotel restaurant would not be served until much later and I was quite hungry by now, I wandered outside in search of something to eat. Once again I was struck by the blandness of the place. Keeping to the shade, I walked to the next street that ran parallel to the one that I had left, and found a little stall where one could order bowls of cold noodles and cups of tea. I devoured some noodles, drank some tea, and felt a good deal better afterwards.

I then wandered back to the hotel, stopping to look into a shop or two. In the courtyard I bought a cool drink, sat in the shade and returned to writing my diary. I also chatted to some of the people. It was pleasantly relaxing here and not at all noisy.

I filled in the time until nine o'clock (official Beijing time, not local time, which must have been at least one hour behind) and then went to the dining room for dinner. The food was mediocre but plentiful, and was good value at only ¥3.50 RMB. During the meal I chatted to some of my new young companions.

After the meal came an entertainment of songs, music and dancing for the American tourists who were staying here. As it looked good and sounded interesting, I fetched my camera and snapped some photos. The dancers were dressed very colourfully and the local music was fascinating – not at all like Chinese music. Despite it being a rather touristy form of entertainment, I thoroughly enjoyed it. As I snapped away, I became aware that there seemed to be more than 36 pictures on the film. Suspicious, I opened the camera and discovered that the film had not been loaded correctly. I rectified the fault and took some proper photos before the entertainment finished (though they turned out to be of poor quality).

The performance ended with the dancers inviting the tourists to join in, which I thought was rather silly. I then approached the musicians and asked

to see one of the vertically-held fiddles, which was very decorative. This was a *rijak*: it had four metal strings and was played with a modern fiddle bow. Another *rijak* looked much less elaborate. A girl whom I had spoken to earlier tried playing this second instrument and, because she played the cello, found it quite easy. She asked where she could buy one and was shown a very plain one, which was for sale.

As it was late by now, I went to bed, for we would be going off on a tour of the local sights tomorrow morning.

Friday, 12 May

I was up early this morning and at the gate at 8 o'clock with Rita and a young Austrian couple. Some other people were supposed to come with us but, as nobody had appeared by 8.15, we decided to go on our own, despite the fact that we would have pay about double the amount agreed.

We climbed into the back of a little covered truck and set off along the dusty roads, leaving the town and driving out into the desert. With the Flaming Mountains to our left (though they were not 'flaming' at this hour of the morning), we travelled along a straight road, then took a turn to our right along a tree-lined road to an oasis. All of a sudden the little vehicle came to a graceful stop. The stupid driver had not filled his tank and now we were out of petrol! The petrol gauge was probably broken. We cursed when the driver set off across the arid landscape to a nearby village and left us waiting. We filled the time by chatting and walking in the shade. There was little or no traffic on the road, except for two military vehicles and a couple of donkey carts. After a while a taxi came along; in it were the Japanese man and a companion doing their conducted tour. A little later a minibus arrived and out hopped our driver with a can of petrol. It took a long time to start the vehicle but at last, after a delay of about an hour, we set off again.



The ruined city of Gaochang (Karakhoja), near Turfan

Shortly afterwards we passed the taxi and drove to the ancient ruined city of Gaochang (formerly Karakhoja). At the gate, our driver blew his horn furiously until some people appeared and opened the gate to let us in – for a small fee. A small group of elderly Uighurs climbed into the back of the vehicle with us and we drove in and along the dusty road. We stopped near the ruins of a large building and climbed to the upper storey, from which we had a good view of what remained of the city. It was a pity that we had no English-speaking guide to tell us about the place, for there was little to see. All the ancient buildings had been reduced to vague shapes by erosion.

According to my guide book, Gaochang was the most extensive of Xinjiang's 'lost cities' – ancient Silk Road centres that were abandoned due to the shifting sands of the great Taklamakan desert that now covers most of the central part of Xinjiang. The city was originally established by the Chinese in around 200 B.C. as a military garrison, and later it became a powerful independent khanate. There were Buddhist, Manichaeian and Nestorian temples in the city and the ruins yielded important finds of Manichaeian documents.



Camels in Gaochang, near Turfan

As camels could be hired for riding here, the local people who had come in with us were now amusing themselves by being led around in circles on them until we were ready to leave. We then drove back the way that we had come and stopped at the Tang dynasty Astana tombs. For just one yuan we were able to see three of the tombs. One of them contained the bodies of an official and his wife; their hair, skin and teeth were preserved virtually intact by the extreme dryness of the climate. The other two tombs contained very Chinese-looking painted murals.

We were then driven back towards the Flaming Mountains, but now took a turn to the right, passed what must have been the caves at Shengjinkou,

and then turned up into the mountains themselves. We soon arrived at the ancient city of Bezeklik, a name that had always fascinated me as it sounded so unusual. It was quite hot when we clambered out of the little vehicle and our bottoms were sore after all the bumping. The Austrian lad, who was not feeling very well, stayed put.



The ruins of Bezeklik, near Turfan

Again, we paid a small entrance fee and walked into the archaeological site, which was situated in a long gorge. Although it was an interesting place, there was little to see. After wandering around little alleyways, which led down the side of the mountain to a river below, we stupidly paid ¥1.50 to see just two of the fifty-seven cave temples. One of them contained a shop and little else, and the other contained the bare remains of some Buddhist murals. Most of the contents of the caves here had either been destroyed by Muslims or removed by Western archaeologists.



The Imin mosque in Turfan

Glad to have seen the place, despite the fact that it had been something of an anti-climax, we now drove back down to the desert and returned to Turfan. Before we reached the hotel, we stopped to take a look at the Imin mosque and minaret. The minaret was an unusual brick structure, built in 1779, which I had seen in photographs. The mosque, however, was very plain both outside and inside. We were allowed to climb up to the roof, from where we got a good view of the city.

We then returned to the hotel for lunch. Instead of eating there, I walked around the corner to a little restaurant that had been recommended to me, where I had a good meal. The lady who cooked the food came out to talk to me in Chinese. She spoke very clearly and told me that she did not like this place – hardly surprising, as she was Han Chinese and all the people here were Uighur and Muslims.

Our little group met again at four o'clock for the afternoon tour and left without the sick Austrian chap. As Rita wanted to travel by bus to Kashgar tomorrow (the next bus would be leaving in four days' time), she was anxious to go to the bus station first and buy her ticket. We explained this to the driver, who seemed to understand, but according to Rita, he set off in the wrong direction. She insisted on sitting beside him and giving him directions to the bazaar, which we walked through briskly. No doubt the driver had been planning to bring us a different way that would have saved us the walk! It was very obvious that Rita was a very headstrong lady.

We reached the grubby bus station and entered its dark interior. I took off my new – and expensive – light-sensitive sunglasses and we bought our tickets within minutes as there was no queue. Even though we had to pay in FECs, the cost was very reasonable for three days' travel.

Outside again, I suddenly discovered that my sunglasses were missing from the side of my camera bag. Ignoring Rita's impatience to return to our vehicle, I went back inside but the sunglasses were nowhere to be seen. I suspected that the ticket seller had stolen them, as there had been nobody else around, but he told me that he could not find them. I asked about contacting the public security bureau (the police), and he directed me to a telephone. A man who was about to use it ran off to help me, but never returned. The ticket seller then suggested that I ask our driver to bring me to the police station. However, when I returned to our vehicle, the driver told me that if I did not know who stole my sunglasses, there was no point in going to the police. As nobody else in our group showed any sympathy, I had to admit defeat and give up my search for the culprit.

We now drove out of the city to the ruined city of Jiaohe, where we were joined by a group of Uighur girls, though one of them looked as though she might have been Han Chinese. As this place was as bleak as Gaochang, there was little to be seen. There were lots of other Uighur girls here and so,

as well as photographing the ruins, I also photographed them. One group asked me to post them my photograph of them and one of the girls wrote down an address in English. Although they were good-humoured, they lacked the grace and good looks of the Han Chinese girls. As the Uighurs seemed to be a rather rough lot by comparison, I could not make up my mind as to whether I actually liked them or not.



A karez (water channel) in the desert near Turfan

After the ruins of Jiaohe, we drove off again and stopped to look at one of the underground water channels around Turfan known as *karez* – an interesting irrigation system similar to what had been used in ancient Persia. Water is channelled from the snows of the nearby Tian Shan mountain range down into the desert, where it can be accessed by horizontal wells. In this way, water can be gathered to harvest the grapes grown in the region. I followed two of the girls who had joined us, and scrambled into an underground tunnel, only stopping before it got too dark to see anything. I photographed it and then returned to our vehicle.

We now returned to Turfan, where we stopped at a small mosque. This time the girls did not join us. The building was only mildly interesting and not very elegant. There was little to see inside apart from an open-air area used for praying, which we were not allowed into.

When we returned to the hotel, the girls hopped off and we waved goodbye. As we would be leaving tomorrow, I set off immediately for the

bazaar with my camera, where I took some photographs. Afterwards I had a look in some of the shops – most of them dark and with poor quality goods – and bought another cassette tape of the local music.



Uighur women in the bazaar, Turfan

Back in the hotel I had a shower and later had dinner in the dining room; this time the food was better. After the meal I chatted to some young Australians. One of the girls was very lively and good-humoured. When I sat down outside later to write my diary, I espied one of my motorbiking friends. I spoke to him briefly and his pal appeared with a girl. Although another song and dance show was being held in the hotel, I ignored it this evening, sat in an area that was lit, and wrote some postcards. Then, after talking to some people, I retired to my dormitory, where I organized myself for the next morning's journey tomorrow, and went to bed.