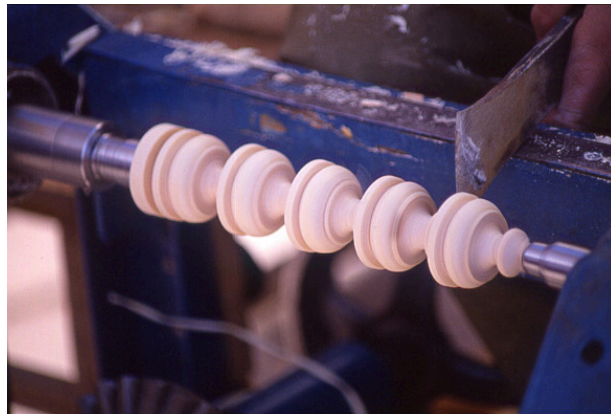


7 – KASHGAR

Friday, 19 May

I woke at a reasonable hour this morning and went off for a quick wash. When I returned, I found Nicole sitting in semi-lotus position on the veranda outside, deep in meditation. I tiptoed out and stood beside her, wallowing in the peace that seemed to emanate from her, and gazing at the fine panoramic view of the old town quarter, now bathed in early morning sun. I very much wanted to place my hands gently on Nicole's shoulders, but desisted from doing this with great difficulty.

When she had finished her meditation, she went out to get some breakfast and returned with two small circular pieces of fresh, warm bread and a bowl of curds. We sat on the veranda, dipped the bread in the curds, and shared my mug of tea.



A carpenter's workshop, old quarter, Kashgar

When we had finished our simple meal, we left the hotel and went off to hire a couple of bicycles. We started to walk to a hotel where bicycles were available, but as it was too far away we retraced our steps via the old quarter to a bicycle-hire place that we had seen yesterday evening. As we were in no particular hurry, we took our time, stopping to photograph the various tradesmen and street vendors, all of whom did not mind being photographed. I was particularly fascinated by a carpenter using a lathe and also a musical instrument shop, in which a young man demonstrated the various instruments and told me their names. Nicole took great care with composing her photographs; she later told me that Fujichrome had given her fifty rolls of film as she planned to publish her photos.



Musical instrument shop, old quarter, Kashgar

Back in the main street we searched for the bicycle-hire place and, after a little confusion, found it. The bicycles were kept at the back of an outdoor

cinema and were hired from a nearby shop. Mine was big and heavy; Nicole's was a little lighter, though the saddle had to be tied up in order to stop it moving around.

Having obtained the bicycles, we now set off in search of the Public Security Bureau, as Nicole wanted to obtain an official permit to enter Tibet. We went into a place down the road that we had tried the previous evening, but were now referred to another place nearby. We reached this, feeling hot and thirsty, but once again we were told to go elsewhere: to a police station close to our hotel! At least we managed to get a drink of boiled water from the staff.

Off we cycled again and finally reached the police station. Two young ladies, who both spoke English, informed Nicole that she could not go to Lhasa from Kashgar or Khotan in Xinjiang province, but via Xining and Golmud in Qinghai province. She would be able to get official permission in Golmud and would have to fly from there to Lhasa. I was rather surprised to hear this; flying would certainly be an expensive option for Nicole.

Reasonably satisfied, we left and now headed for San Xian Dong, the 'Three Immortals' Buddhist caves that Nicole wanted to see. As the caves were some ten kilometres from Kashgar, the trip was a long, uphill cycle. Following the directions given to us by the staff of the police station, we headed for the airport and found ourselves out in the scorching hot desert, heading back along the road along which I had travelled into Kashgar by bus. Because Nicole's bicycle was lighter than mine, she easily outstripped me.

Seeing mountains ahead, we finally stopped at a roadside refreshment booth to eat and – more importantly – drink something. It was nice to sit in the shade. It was just as well that we stopped here, for when the owner of the booth showed us which way to go, we discovered that this was where we had to leave the road and continue by following a river. As this meant making our way along an almost dry river bed, we had to abandon the bikes and continue on foot. At this point I removed my socks and walked in my sandals, for we frequently had to wade through water. Nicole managed to make the journey barefoot. Not only did we have to negotiate water, but also rocks and soft mud; the going was quite tough. We chatted and I turned the conversation to France, its fine countryside and cities, and its wonderful art galleries and museums. At this, Nicole's attitude and demeanour changed imperceptibly and she became a little wistful; wondering what she was thinking, I stretched out my arm and gently caressed her bare shoulder.

We slowly made our way to a small oasis that had been pointed out to us and, as we did so, passed three small openings in the cliff on our left. Later I began to think that these might be the caves, though they were about twenty metres up and quite inaccessible.



San Xian Dong and oasis, near Kashgar

We finally reached the oasis, picked our way through some fields to a tiny hamlet, and asked a man where the caves were. I pointed to the picture on the map and he in turn pointed back to the caves that we had passed. We asked if it was possible to walk up to them, but he said no. All this for nothing! Exhausted and thirsty by now, we sat in the shade and asked for something to drink. The man disappeared and returned with a bowl of tea and a hard hunk of naan bread. I split the bread in two and we dipped it in the tea to soften it. Although very basic, the snack was refreshing. Before we left, I took some photos of the place and some of the local men who had come to stare at us. As they were expecting instant photos, I had to explain to them that I would post the photos from my country. A young lad fetched a pen and wrote his address in the Arabic script.

We then left and walked back to the elusive caves. I put the telephoto lens on my camera and used it like a telescope. We could just about discern

the remains of a painting on the ceiling of one of the caves; apart from this, there was nothing else to be seen. Somewhat disappointed, we walked back to the bicycles by an easier route and, after some quick refreshment at the little booth, cycled back to Kashgar, this time downhill.

At one point, when passing a military checkpoint, a bearded man stopped us and asked us if we had had any difficulty getting through it. He had set off on a cycle run from Lanzhou to Kashgar, but had been stopped some forty miles outside Aksu by the police and was ordered to put his bike on top of the bus that had been stopped here for no apparent reason. He hoped to return to Aksu and start again!

Back in Kashgar we returned the bicycles, paid a ridiculously small fee for them, and then walked to our hotel via the old quarter. In our room we relaxed, chatted to Brenda on the veranda over a welcome cup of tea, and then the three of us set off for something to eat. Brenda led us to a scruffy but interesting Muslim restaurant in the old quarter, where we ordered noodles with meat and vegetables. An elderly man with a very wrinkled face was having a good look at us all, and eyeing the girls with relish. He was eating a revolting concoction: a greasy hunk of mutton placed on a circular piece of naan bread soaked in gravy. We were told that this was what the locals ate.

When we were given tea towards the end of the meal, Nicole wondered if I could ask for some sugar. I called the waiter and requested some 'táng' (the Chinese word for sugar). I was puzzled when he removed Nicole's cup and shortly afterwards returned with a bowl of 'tāng' (soup). Realizing that the words were so similar, I had taken great care to emphasize the rising intonation of the word 'táng', but to no avail. Just as I began to repeat my initial request to the waiter, Nicole stopped me and told me not to bother.

After our meal, which cost us very little, we wandered around the darkened streets under a full moon, and slowly made our way back to the hotel by a circuitous route. By now I was really beginning to soak up the atmosphere of this ancient city and enjoy it; I felt that I would miss it when leaving on the following day.

Back at the hotel we showered, then Brenda disappeared. In our room, Nicole asked me if she could read my Collins guide to the Silk Route and to take notes from it. Because I no longer had any need of the book here, I offered it to her and, only after a great deal of persuasion, she accepted it and promised to post it back to me when she returned to France. I was only too glad to help her.

As Nicole would be leaving tomorrow morning, we exchanged addresses before wishing each other good night and preparing for bed. It had been a slightly fruitless day, but an enjoyable one none the less.

Saturday, 20 May

This morning I was woken by Nicole, who was busily preparing to leave on the hitch-hiking trip that hopefully would bring her to Lhasa. She was a very brave young lady and I had tremendous admiration for her. When she was ready to leave, she enacted a curious little ritual before me while I was still in bed. Joining her hands together as if to pray, she bowed her head down and up quickly, took a step forwards, repeated the bow, stepped forward again, and bowed one more time. She then approached me and we kissed three times on the cheeks in the French manner. She then tousled my hair, thanked me *en français* for everything, then turned her back and headed for the door. Before she closed it, I blew her a farewell kiss and she reciprocated, smiling as she did so. When the door closed, the room suddenly seemed to be very empty and I felt quite upset at the thought that I would no longer be able to enjoy her company. She had been an utterly charming companion.

I then got up, washed and breakfasted; like the previous day, I just had bread, curds and tea. Before leaving, I washed some clothes. Brenda had returned late last night and was still fast asleep when I crept out.



The Abakh Hoja tomb, near Kashgar

I now walked to the Seman Hotel, where I hired a small, light bicycle and headed off for the Abakh Hoja tomb, some three kilometres north-east of the city. En route I stopped briefly at the bank, which was full of Pakistanis. Despite my inadequate and inaccurate map, I somehow found my way out of the city and cycled along the straight road towards the tomb. When I stopped briefly to take a photograph, I met the Austrian couple whom Rita and I had met in Turfan. We chatted for a while and caught up with the latest news. Afterwards I continued my journey by turning left and cycling along a pleasant country road. This finally brought me to the tomb of the saintly

Abakh Hoja, where I had to pay a small entrance fee. Although there were stalls outside where one could buy souvenirs, there were few tourists about.



The Abakh Hoja tomb near Kashgar

The exterior of the main building was dazzling in the strong sunlight; inside, where various tombs were to be seen, it was quite stunning. All the tombs were highly ornamented in the Central Asian Muslim style. I wandered around this peaceful and beautiful spot for a while, then returned to the bicycle.

On my way back to the main road, I stopped at a house to photograph a child's colourful wooden cot, and used up my film taking shots of the mother, daughter and baby boy.



Child's wooden cot

I then returned to the Seman Hotel, where I left back the bike, paid for the use of it, and then sat down in the delightful outdoor restaurant of the hotel, where I met the Austrian couple yet again. Sitting in the shade, I ate a good meal, finishing with a large and delicious bowl of fruit salad – the first I had eaten here in China!



Old quarter, Kashgar

I relaxed afterwards, chatting to the Austrians and some Germans who joined us, then ambled back to my humble hotel. I had made various plans for the afternoon, but as the time had flown by, I just repacked my rucksack, tidied myself up and, shortly after six o'clock, set off for the airport. I managed to get a donkey cart to the CAAC office for just ¥2. I asked the driver to stop at the bank, and there I joined the queue of Pakistanis. After a long, nerve-racking wait, I finally changed some money and returned to the donkey cart. We just arrived at the CAAC office in the nick of time and I jumped on the airport bus, which left immediately, just before seven o'clock.

Soon we reached the busy little airport, where I checked in my luggage and sat down to write some more of my diary. Shortly afterwards a plane landed and a group of well-dressed Chinese passengers walked over to the terminal building. When I studied them closely, I guessed that they were from Taiwan. One of the girls sat down beside me and said, 'Hi!'. She spoke English quite well and confirmed that she was Taiwanese. She was an attractive girl with a winning smile. We chatted together for a while and she got a friend to photograph the two of us together. Before she left, we exchanged addresses. Another Chinese friend!

Soon it was time for me to go through the security check and board the plane. Next stop: Ürümqi!