

## 8 – ÜRÜMQI AND TIAN CHI



Saturday, 20 May continued

On board the plane to Ürümqi I sat beside a Uighur lady and her mother, both of whom were rather nervous of flying and giggled for most of the journey. The flight, which lasted about one and a half hours, was uneventful; the scenery was uninteresting until we crossed some mountains towards the end of the flight. Soon we were flying over the city of Ürümqi.

At the airport I was set upon by minibus drivers, who were offering transport to the city centre. I was now joined by the French couple whom I had met several times before, and the bothersome Japanese man, whom I thought I had finally shaken off!

We reclaimed our luggage, got into a woman's minibus and set off. Mercifully the woman, who had been talking incessantly earlier, now lapsed into silence. She left the Japanese man and me at the large Kunlun Hotel, which turned out to be full 'because of a meeting'. As the lady at the reception desk was not at all helpful, I left, disgusted. Fortunately two men in a car outside offered us a lift to the Hongshan Hotel, which did not take too long to reach. Here we managed to get two beds in a room for four, at ¥16.50 each – not too bad. The hotel was typically Chinese; it looked and felt like a cross between a hospital and a prison, and was extremely noisy.

I escaped from the place later and wandered up the road. A Chinese fellow who spoke good English invited me into his restaurant, where I had a good meal of tomato, egg and rice. I had a good chat with the fellow as he was quite friendly. Later a few young men came in with bottles of beer and offered some to me.

When I finally left, it was late and the hotel door was locked. I managed to get somebody's attention and the door was opened. When I went to bed, my head was reeling; was it the beer or could it have been a combination of the beer and some pills that my crazy Japanese companion had earlier insisted that I take for my cold? I had no time to think about it, for I fell asleep instantly.

Sunday, 21 May

This morning I was woken early by the Japanese man shuffling around and making a great deal of noise. When he discovered that I was awake, he shouted across the room, 'Harō! Rake!' I had to think about this for a moment; obviously what he was trying to say was, 'Hello! Lake!', referring to the nearby Tian Chi (Heavenly Lake) which I was planning to visit. However, as I was in no mood for this at the moment, I asked him to be quiet. Shortly afterwards he stumbled out of the room, presumably to visit the famous lake. As I was feeling so sleepy, I remained in bed but soon had to use the loo, where I discovered that I had the runs once again. I took an Imodium tablet immediately and rested. Two other men in the room left shortly afterwards and I was on my own.

After a while, I finally managed to get up, dress and venture outside. Very slowly I made my way to the CAAC office along the modern streets. The city did not look as bad as various people had made it out to be; indeed, it seemed to be quite a pleasant place. I should have gone to the Sunday bazaar, but I was far too short of energy for that.

I found that the CAAC office was open but, because it was Sunday, they were not selling plane tickets. I was annoyed that I had wasted so much time and effort getting here, but there was nothing that I could do but turn around and make my way back to the hotel, where I climbed back into bed. I spent the rest of the day in a state of delirium, constantly drifting in and out of sleep and dreaming a lot of nonsense. Fortunately the noise in the corridor did not disturb me.

I eventually began to come to in the evening and, feeling hungry once again, I rose, dressed and walked to the nearby restaurant, where I was greeted by the young man. I ordered a good meal and made short work of it. Once again the waiter and I chatted, and I gave him an impromptu English lesson. After the meal I fetched my Chinese-English phrasebook and showed

it to the young man. He made a note of several words in connection with food and was very grateful to me.

When I wandered back to the hotel later, I was stopped by a man who wanted to speak English to me. He turned out to be a pleasant young policeman. Another man appeared and joined in the conversation; his English was excellent. Afterwards I left my things in the hotel and went for a walk around the nearby Hongshan Park. I now found myself among many of the local people, who had come to the park for their Sunday evening stroll. Under the trees and away from the roar of the traffic, it was pleasantly relaxing here – just what I needed. Here I saw plenty of sophisticated and well-dressed Chinese girls.

At the far end of the park I came across a group of rough-looking young Uighurs sitting on the grass. The lads were singing to the accompaniment of a guitar and the girls were eyeing me. One girl dared another to ask me over and she did. I gingerly sat down near her and found the others all winking and smiling both at me and at the girl. One of the fellows offered me a plastic container of rice wine and I accepted it. Nuts and seeds were then put before me. The guitarist struck up and the lads sang a loud, lusty song. They invited me to dance with the girl, but I declined, for I had no idea how to dance a waltz (which seemed to be all the rage here). Instead, another couple got to their feet and danced. At first there was a total lack of communication as the conversation and jokes were all in Uighur, but when they discovered that I could speak a little Chinese, they began to ask me all sorts of questions. The girls continued to eye me and one looked at me so intensely that I had to look away. They were a fiery lot of females! Later I discovered that the girl sitting beside me, and who seemed to fancy me the most, was wearing a wedding ring. I teased her about it; at first she looked a little confused, then laughed.

Shortly afterwards the party broke up and we said goodnight. I returned to the hotel where I found my room still empty, and prepared to go to bed. By now I felt a good bit better.

Monday, 22 May

This morning I rose at an early hour and asked where the showers were. I found them at the back of the hotel and discovered that they would be closed until 9 a.m. I wrote a couple of postcards and returned later to join a queue. True to form, the showers were of poor quality but better than the broken ones in Kashgar. After I had given myself a good wash, I returned to my room to write some more postcards.

Later I left and walked to the CAAC office to buy a plane ticket and found the place full of local people shouting and pushing. A blonde German girl in front of me only intended to make an enquiry but, like me, had to wait for a

considerable time as the service was so slow. She told me that she had just checked out of hospital, where she had been treated for scarlet fever; now she found it difficult to hear properly. She wanted to fly to Canton and, like me, was planning to travel to Tian Chi (Heavenly Lake) tomorrow. As it was obvious that she was feeling rather down and lonely, I suggested that we go together and she readily agreed to my plan. I now learned that her name was Sophie.

When she eventually got to the desk, I had to shield her from all the pushing and shoving from all sides by encircling her with my arms and anchoring them on the desk in front of me. I shouted to the people nearest to me, '*Tā bìng le!*' ('She's sick!'). She enquired about her flight and discovered that she did not have enough money with her to pay for it. However I was more successful; I got a flight to Chengdu, which cost me a little over ¥500 FEC, which I thought was reasonable for a three-hour journey.

I finally emerged from the building and walked up the road, where I bought a carton of fruit juice and a banana: my breakfast. I ambled back to the CAAC office, where I rejoined Sophie who now had enough money. We had to wait quite a long time while her ticket was prepared. She, like me, would be flying on Friday morning.

When she finally received her ticket, we walked back to the hotel, stopping at the 'taxi service' hatch at the entrance of the nearby park to buy bus tickets for the following day's journey to the lake. The man told us that we could buy tickets in the morning at 8.30, and that the bus would leave at 9.00. As I knew that other people had managed to buy tickets in advance, I was annoyed about this, but there was nothing we could do.

At the hotel I left Sophie, wrote to the girls in Chengdu and, as I had by now written all my postcards, walked to the nearby post office. Inside, I could find nowhere to buy stamps. A man brought me to the international telex and telegram office, where a young lady spoke English. She told me that I would have to go to the old building next door for stamps. I asked her how long it would take for a postcard to get to Chengdu; as she was not sure, I decided to send a telegram to one of the girls. I wrote my message down clearly, calculations were made, and the form was brought to another counter for payment. The cost came to just ¥2.10.

I then went to the old building, bought stamps, and posted all the cards. I walked back to the hotel but stopped in a little Muslim restaurant for a bowl of noodles. I could not understand what the people were saying there.

Back in the hotel, I collected my diary and headed off for the park, stopping on the way to have another go at buying tickets for tomorrow's bus journey. Once again I got the same answer. In the park I found a quiet spot and sat down on a bench to write my diary. After a while people came to

stop and stare at me. Later a middle-aged Chinese and a young Uighur man started to talk to me. The older man was interesting and I could get the gist of what he was saying as he used a lot of helpful gestures. After a while he left and the Uighur lad stayed. Soon he became rather tedious and embarrassing. He and a pal wanted to buy a £20 Irish note from me for ¥20 RMB (about £4), but I snatched the note from him, said goodbye and marched off.

I then returned to the hotel, where I caught up with an American girl whom I had seen this morning. She and I sat down and chatted for half an hour; she told me about her impressions of China and the people, and informed me that I could buy a ticket for tomorrow's journey after 5.30 p.m. today. I stayed in the hotel, trimming my untidy beard, and sauntered out once again at the appointed time. I now found a lady at the ticket office in the park, who sold me two tickets and gave me two complimentary ornamental fans.

Happy at last, I marched up to room 440 in the hotel where Sophie was staying, and gave her one of the tickets, a fan, and some stamps that she had requested. An English girl, whom I had encountered earlier, was sharing the room with her. We chatted until the English girl's 'other half' arrived and the pair of them left for their evening meal. I stayed chatting to Sophie, sitting beside her on the bed. She seemed to be quite an interesting young lady, though she lacked the radiant charm of Nicole. Later, the couple returned and seeing us sitting together, jokingly warned me about catching scarlet fever from Sophie.

I left shortly afterwards and returned to the nearby restaurant for a good meal. As the waiter had lost some of the notes that he had written during the previous evening, I gave him my phrase book and he scribbled notes for all his worth. I told him to keep the book until I returned on Thursday evening. He was delighted with this. As there was too much food, I could not finish it all. Later his brother called me over to another table. He put down a big bowl of cooked chicken feet and vegetables, then produced rice wine and three tiny cups. As I was full and the feet consisted mostly of fat, I just picked at some of the vegetables and sipped a little of the wine. This was their way of showing their appreciation and I was quite touched by such a kind gesture. It was quite late when I said goodnight to them and returned to the hotel.

Tuesday, 23 May

At 8.30 this morning I put my rucksack into the storeroom and met Sophie. We walked to the park entrance and, after a short delay, boarded the bus bound for Tian Chi, which set off at about 9.15. There were only about six Westerners aboard; the rest of the passengers were Chinese.

The journey was tedious at first as we passed through ugly industrial areas dotted across a plain. The high mountains that we were heading for could be seen in the distance, to our right. We stopped somewhere for half an hour for no apparent reason, then drove towards the mountains. However, as it was a dull and cloudy day, the mountain scenery failed to impress; it was like a poor imitation of Austria or Switzerland. Nonetheless, the Chinese people got quite excited and peered out of the windows in order to see the mountains and valleys all the more clearly. By now Sophie and I were inclined to fall asleep, especially as the bus was now travelling so slowly in its effort to negotiate the steep gradients.



*Tian Chi in the Tian Shan mountain range*

At last, having risen to an altitude of 2,400 metres above sea level (according to my guidebook) and wound our way through a narrow gorge, we suddenly arrived at the famous lake. It was nothing special – it looked like any other lake in the world. The bus then stopped at a very touristy and tatty village. The so-called 'chalets' belonging to the local hotel looked run down and in need of some paint; down below, on the water, boats were available for hire. We were now immediately surrounded by local people offering accommodation in 'traditional' Kazakh yurts (similar to the ones used in Mongolia). A couple of young Westerners told us that this form of accommodation, in fact, was the best on offer and suggested that we follow 'the leader'. We agreed to this and, as a result, had to hang around for half an hour. We spent the time looking at the view, which was not too bad after all when one ignored the ugly concrete buildings. Sophie bought a bag of 'cookies' in a shop and gave me an orange. We therefore were able to have a makeshift meal while waiting.



Finally 'the leader' appeared, and he and four of us set off together. The other two people were a young American chap and his Japanese girlfriend; they spoke Japanese together. As they walked slower than we did, we soon left them behind. The 'leader' merely showed us the path around the side of the lake, then promptly disappeared. Later he and a friend passed by on horses which, of course, they expected us to ride. We let them pass and go on ahead. Taking it nice and easy, for the path was very rough in places, we made our way along, stopping now and then for rests. Sophie was tired and her ears were still giving her trouble. At one point, when we stopped to rest, I put a comforting arm around her shoulder.

The farther we got away from the tourist resort, the more beautiful and peaceful the lake and scenery became. It was such a delight not to be in a noisy Chinese city but out in this fine mountain paradise. It was difficult to believe that we were still actually in China.



*The far end of the lake, with the yurts in the distance*

After a while the path almost totally disappeared and we found ourselves scrambling and climbing over rocks. I now took off my sandals and changed into my shoes. It took us a fair amount of time to reach the small collection of 'tourist' yurts at the far end of the lake. At the end of the journey we discovered that we had to cross a rushing river, but the 'leader' came to our rescue with a couple of horses, which we mounted; they splashed through the water without any bother. On dry land again, we were shown to a very empty-looking yurt, which we would share with three other people. It looked comfortable enough.

We were then invited into a wooden building next door for lunch. I recognized the Japanese girl and the two men I had shared my room with in

Ürümqi. Sophie greeted two German girls who had been in the hotel. Sophie only drank some tea, but I enjoyed a good bowl of noodles. We chatted over the meal, laughing and joking, then broke up afterwards.



*Traditional yurts and the river nearby, Tian Chi*

I spent a pleasant afternoon sitting in the sun, bringing my diary up to date. It was very relaxing to sit by the nearby river and to hear nothing but the sound of the water. I was now taking a welcome break from my holiday!

Later, when I had written enough, I went for a stroll towards the mountains. As it began to turn cool, I returned to the yurt, joined the Japanese girl, and settled down to write some more of my diary. Some local Kazakh women arrived with a baby and looked in; we communicated with them in Chinese. The baby was charming and full of fun.



Next we were called for supper. We all huddled around the table in the darkened room and dived into hot bowls of rice and vegetables: basic food, but filling. An oil lamp was lit, which helped a little. Once again we sat around chatting as before; this time I talked to an Australian man.

Later I washed my teeth and then, following the example of the others, prepared for bed. I arranged the mattresses, pillows and duvets on the beds, and we settled down for the night. I lay down on a bed beside Sophie's. Once everyone was comfortable, it was blissfully quiet and I had no trouble dropping off to sleep.

Wednesday, 24 May

After an excellent night's sleep, I was woken by the Australian man, who was packing and about to leave; everyone else was sleeping soundly. Later, I sat up and finally managed to bring my diary right up to date. We were then called to breakfast, which consisted of unusual-looking noodles and vegetables. Afterwards I washed my teeth, then sat down beside the river to write a long letter to a friend at home. The weather was beautiful this



*Wild flowers, Tian Chi*

morning, the scenery was spectacular, and the grass around me was carpeted with colourful wild flowers. I felt as though I could happily stay here for weeks. I took a few photographs and went with the others for lunch. We were now joined by three German girls and an English chap named Nigel; most of the conversation around the table was in German and there was little that I could understand. Earlier I had learned from these newcomers that there had been some serious trouble with the protesting students in Beijing, Xi'an, Shanghai and some other cities. By now the students in Beijing had gone on hunger strike, the workers had decided to support them, and

the military had made an ominous appearance in tanks. This did not sound good at all.



*The Tian Shan mountains near Tian Chi*

After lunch I set off with my camera for a walk up the mountains. Just a short distance ahead I came to a couple of genuine yurts that housed real Kazakh people. I was invited into one of these simple, yet fascinating, dwellings and sat down, looking at everything inside. I chatted a little to a couple of young men in Chinese then, seeing somebody outside, I popped out and spoke to a good-looking English girl. She and her two companions were staying here and liked it. She asked the Kazakh lady if I could stay here and she said yes. I was delighted.

I then followed the three girls along the path; a little Kazakh girl, who was full of smiles and good humour, was bringing some cows up to a field and wanted the English girls to come with her. We ended up in a beautiful wide meadow strewn with buttercups and other alpine plants. From here we looked over a magnificent panorama of mountains, some of them covered with tall pine trees, others bare and snow-capped. No wonder this range was given the name Tian Shan, 'Heavenly Mountains'! I relaxed here for a while with one of the girls, then met the American and Japanese couple.

After speaking to the American chap briefly, I continued walking. The scenery continued to be delightful, but climbing uphill in the heat was tough going. I went as far as I could; then, as the path began to disintegrate, I turned back and made my way to the river, where I bathed my feet in the icy water and relaxed. It was exceptionally peaceful here and I felt it wonderful to be on my own for a while. Finally I retraced my steps – the going was so much easier downhill – and chatted again with the American fellow. I also spoke in Chinese to a Kazakh chap who was sitting beside him, and did some translating so that the American could understand him.

As I walked down to my new accommodation, I sympathized with my Kazakh companion regarding the uneasy situation that he and his people were now experiencing, for more and more Chinese people were settling here and steadily outnumbering the local population. He told me that there were fifty-six minority groups in China.

I left my camera and jumper in the yurt and walked back to where I had stayed the previous night. I said goodbye to the others and told them about my new place. The German girls said that they would go there tomorrow. I paid up, returned to the new yurt with my belongings, and settled myself into it. I joined the English girls, who gave me some tea and a hunk of bread, but was then called in to eat. By now a small fire had been lit and a kettle was boiling. I was given a bowl of Kazakh tea with milk, which was quite palatable, and as much bread as I could eat. Because the English girls were probably eating their noodles, which were being prepared outside their yurt nearby, I thought that this was all I was going to get.

At this stage, one of the little girls came running in, crying; her thumb had been badly bitten or cut and was bleeding. I gave the mother a paper handkerchief to stem the bleeding and ran to the other yurt, where one of the English girls gave me a length of bandage. By now the girls were eating their noodles; the woman in charge indicated that I would get some too. I returned to my yurt, where I put some antiseptic cream on the wound and wrapped a length of bandage around the child's thumb. The little girl immediately stopped crying and was very proud of her bandage, which she proceeded to show to everyone in the family.



*Inside a Kazakh yurt, Tian Chi*

A bowl of noodles was then put in front of me; while I ate them, I was joined by a boy who spoke a little English quite well. He showed me a

notebook full of comments about the place written by foreign guests. I promised to write something in it as well.

It was a fascinating experience to sit beside the fire, in a real yurt, with my new Kazakh companions. Along the circular walls hung colourful carpets, although they were not as new and bright as the ones in the girls' yurt. In general, everything was very neat and reasonably clean. A guitar was handed to me and I was asked to play, but like the one I had used in Ürümqi, it was very much out of tune and the tuning pegs were broken.

After the meal I returned the roll of bandage to the girls and chatted to them. Two of them left to get some spring water, which they drank on their return. I offered to get some more and went off to where the cows were drinking. I filled their water bottles and mine, then returned to my yurt and joined the girls, who had moved in temporarily as they were feeling cold in their yurt. The lady was now cooking more food: this time it was rice with slivers of potato. Bowls of this unusual concoction were handed to the girls and me; as I was full by now, I just ate a little and drank some more tea. As the girls' beds had by now been made up in their yurt, they said goodnight and departed.

I now sat by the fire, strumming the guitar or just listening to the general chatter, which I could not understand. Earlier I had asked one of the chaps for some words in Kazakh. Although the language, like Uighur, was akin to Turkish, I found the sounds very difficult to distinguish and imitate.

Later the lady put out the fire, swept it away, and made up the beds. When we finally settled down for the night, the little girl was already fast asleep.

Thursday, 25 May

I spent most of the previous night tossing, turning and coughing; the cold draught from the opening at the top of the yurt did not help matters. I could see a very bright moon outside. My Kazakh companions occasionally snored or made noises in their sleep. Eventually I fell into some semblance of slumber and was brought to my senses by some of the people stirring at about eight o'clock. The fire was lit; some of the men ate a hurried breakfast and left. The lady got up, but signalled to me to stay put. Lying on my stomach, I managed to write the previous day's diary.

The diary entry finished, I got up with some of the others at about nine o'clock. Breakfast consisted of tea with milk and hunks of the rather hard and (by now) stale bread. Afterwards I went out to wash my teeth and met two of the English girls, who were going off to fetch some water. As I was planning to do this for them, I popped into their yurt to give them the water that I had not used. One of the girls was upset because her spectacles had gone missing. A big search got under way, but when the others returned, the

spectacles were discovered in one of their bags. Curiously, the lady of the yurt now got quite upset and began to cry.

As it was another fine morning, I decided to take a walk. This time I made my way down towards the lake and, turning right, passed an ugly Chinese military barracks (a most unwelcome intrusion) and followed a path up into the mountains. Although it was pleasant here, it was not as spectacular as the scenery that I had seen on the previous day. However, it was delightful to observe the tiny alpine flowers and watch the colourful butterflies flitting about in the breeze. As most of the path lay under the shade of the trees, it was comfortably cool and I could move at a brisk pace. Away from the river, this place was much quieter. At one point I came across the narrow tongue of a glacier between the trees; water dripped from the ice and formed a little rivulet. I cooled myself by putting my hands on the ice and letting the water trickle over my fingers.

After resting, I climbed up higher; when I felt that I had gone far enough, I espied a ridge ahead. It was a tough job scrambling up it, but I was rewarded with a dramatic aerial view of the valley and the surrounding mountains.

Because of the time, I went down quickly and returned to the yurts. When I found the lady collecting water from the river, I paid her for my accommodation. After I had helped her lift the pails of water, she hitched them on to a yoke and carried them over to the yurts. The English girls had just returned from a horse ride and told me that they had enjoyed it. We were then all invited into my yurt, where we were given more bread and tea.

Afterwards I walked to the other yurts, where I met Sophie and Nigel (the English chap), and together we set off for the bus back to Ürümqi. Nigel strode on at a brisk pace, and soon Sophie and I lost him. Then, when I stopped now and then to take some photos, I lost Sophie. I then met two English girls who had arrived by bus and were taking a quick walk before returning. They returned almost as soon as I had left them and together we walked back, chatting. I found them quite interesting. They told me that they had discovered a common practice among Chinese women when using a shower: three of them would go into the one shower, wash each other thoroughly and take quite a long time to complete their ablutions. I wondered if the men did the same.

We reached the pier in good time and the girls went on to board their bus, which was parked a little distance away. After I had bought some biscuits and something to drink, I wandered down to the lake, where I plunged my dirty feet into the water to wash them, then changed into my sandals. From here I walked to where the bus had stopped on Tuesday, but there was no sign of it. I asked the driver of a minibus where to go, and he pointed to where the two young ladies had gone. As I walked on quickly a



minibus approached me; familiar faces looked out of the windows and it stopped beside me. The English girls and Nigel then appeared in another minibus and joined me on the bus that had stopped. I had no idea of what was going on. The little bus was so crowded that Nigel gave out to the driver in rapid Chinese. I sat with some silent girls from Hong Kong. Later I was able to join Sophie when the seat beside her became available.

The journey back to Ürümqi was uneventful and unusually quick – probably because we were heading downhill. At Hongshan Park I said goodbye to the English girls and walked to the hotel with Sophie. After a frustrating wait I managed to get a bed in a dormitory for ¥11; Sophie and the two German girls had to wait much longer, but eventually were also given beds in a dormitory.

Up in my room I met the Australian man and a Dutch fellow who had been with us at Tian Chi, and then I left immediately for the showers. While I waited in the queue, I chatted to a pleasant English girl from Stratford-upon-Avon. Both of us were astonished at the slowness of the Chinese people. I was finally let in after the girl.

Later, at nine o'clock, one of the two German girls tapped on my door and together we went down to the local restaurant for dinner. It was nice to eat a proper meal once again! At first we ate with the Australian and Dutch lads, then on our own. Afterwards the two of us returned to the hotel. I went into the girls' dormitory, where we found her companion and Sophie. I chatted to them for a while, got my guidebook back from Sophie, kissed them goodbye and left.

I now returned to my dormitory, where I prepared for tomorrow morning's flight southwards to Chengdu, then prepared for bed. I was delighted to have visited the lake and stayed in a genuine yurt.