Tour Code
WC10

ADVENTURESABROAD

WESTERN CHINA

Where Empires Met the Desert

13 days

Created on: 12 Nov, 2026

Day 1 Arrival in Xi'an

Welcome to Xi'an — ancient capital of thirteen dynasties and the city where China's Silk Road began.

Few cities carry a name so weighted with consequence. It was from this Wei River valley that the First Qin Emperor unified China in 221 BC, and it was from here that the Han Dynasty emperors, two centuries later, first dispatched camel caravans westward into the unknown. That decision — to reach beyond China's borders toward Central Asia and the Mediterranean world — would shape the movement of goods, faiths, and ideas across Eurasia for the next thousand years. Xi'an was the starting point of all of it.

This evening we gather with fellow travellers for our first meal together.

Overnight in Xi'an.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Xi'an: Terracotta Warriors, Great Mosque & Tang Dynasty Dinner Show

The discovery that announced Xi'an to the world happened almost by accident. In 1974, farmers digging a well in Lintong County struck terracotta. What they had found was the funerary army of Qin Shi Huangdi — an estimated 8,000 life-size warriors, each individually modelled, arranged in battle formation to guard the emperor into eternity. We visit pits 1, 2, and 3 in sequence, moving from the sheer scale of the main chamber to the more intimate detail of the command figures. Two millennia underground have done nothing to diminish their authority.

Returning toward the city, we stop at the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, a Tang Dynasty Buddhist tower built in 652 to house scriptures brought overland from India by the pilgrim monk Xuanzang — one of the great journeys of the ancient world, and an early reminder that Xi'an was always a place where ideas arrived from elsewhere.

This afternoon we visit the Great Mosque in the heart of the Muslim Quarter. Founded in AD 742 and expanded across successive dynasties, it is among the largest mosques in China — built entirely in Chinese rather than Arabic style, with tiered pavilions and moon gates replacing domes and minarets. It stands as eloquent evidence of the Silk Road's deeper legacy: not just the movement of goods, but the transplanting of faith.

This evening we attend the Tang Dynasty Dinner Show — Xi'an's celebrated combination of dumpling banquet and classical performance, where dozens of dumpling varieties arrive alongside music, dance, and costume that brings the cosmopolitan splendour of Tang-era Chang'an vividly to life.

Overnight in Xi'an.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Xi'an - Fly to Kashgar

This morning we fly direct from Xi'an to Kashgar — roughly four and a half hours that compress what the Silk Road's camel caravans measured in months. The window seat earns its keep: the Wei River valley gives way to the Gobi's corrugated emptiness, then the Taklamakan opens below, the largest shifting sand desert in the world, its dunes arranged in patterns that from altitude resemble nothing so much as the surface of another planet. The name means "you go in, you don't come out." The merchants who skirted its edges knew exactly what they were avoiding.

Kashgar appears at the desert's western rim — a green smudge resolving into minarets and poplar trees as we descend. We are met on arrival and transferred to our hotel. The air is different here, the faces are different, the script on the shopfronts is different. Xi'an and Kashgar are both Chinese cities, technically. The four and a half hours between them cross a greater distance than that.

Overnight in Kashgar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Kashgar: City Tour

Kashgar is the pivot point of the entire journey — the place where China gives way to Central Asia so completely that the transition feels less like crossing a border than crossing a continent. For centuries this oasis at the junction of at least four Silk Road branches was the point where caravans from China, India, Persia, and the Russian steppe converged to trade, rest, and resupply. The surrounding geography explains why: the Tian Shan mountains to the north, the Pamirs and Karakoram to the south, the Taklamakan to the east. Every route through this part of the world passed through Kashgar.

We begin at the Tomb of Abakh Hoja, an unusual piece of Islamic architecture on the edge of the oasis — its tiled dome and courtyard more Samarkand than Shanghai. Buried here alongside the 17th-century Sufi leader is a woman known to Chinese legend as the Fragrant Concubine, said to have been brought — or taken — to the court of Emperor Qianlong, where her origins on the empire's western edge made her both exotic and political.

We continue to the Id Kah Mosque, the largest in China, and into the labyrinth of the old bazaar quarter, where coppersmiths, woodworkers, and cobblers still occupy the same narrow lanes their predecessors worked for centuries. We also visit a local family in their home — a door into daily Uyghur life that runs to rhythms quite distinct from the China we left behind in Xi'an.

Overnight in Kashgar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Karakul Lake & the Karakoram Highway

This morning we head south from Kashgar on the Karakoram Highway — one of the great mountain roads on earth, climbing toward the 4693 m/15,397 ft Khunjerab Pass and the Pakistan border beyond. We stop first at Baisha Lake, a serene high-altitude pool set against the first dramatic rise of the Pamirs, before continuing to Karakul Lake — a glacial basin at 3600 m/11,811 ft whose deep blue surface reflects the massive cone of Muztagh Ata on the opposite shore. At 7546 m/24,757 ft, Muztagh Ata — "Father of Ice Mountains" — is one of the highest peaks in the world accessible without technical climbing, and from the lake shore its scale is simply difficult to process. Kyrgyz herders have grazed their flocks on these shores for centuries, their yurts still pitched at the water's edge in the grazing season.

After so many days moving through the layered human history of the Silk Road — the warriors and mosques and cave temples and merchant cities — Karakul offers something the itinerary has not yet provided: the physical world that made all of it necessary. The mountains visible from this shore are the same barriers that forced ancient caravans to find passes, oases, and waypoints. Every city we have visited exists because of geography like this. We return to Kashgar in the late afternoon.

Overnight in Kashgar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Kashgar Livestock Market - Fly to Urumqi

This morning we make our way to the outskirts of town for the Sunday livestock market — and this, emphatically, is the real thing. Uyghur farmers arrive before dawn from across the Kashgar oasis, driving sheep, goats, horses, and cattle through the dust to a sprawling open-air ground that operates on principles unchanged since the Silk Road era. The famous "sleeve trading" still happens here: buyers and sellers reach under each other's jackets to negotiate prices in tactile silence, a system that kept transactions private in the days when every deal carried risk. Food stalls around the perimeter sell lamb skewers, flatbreads, and pomegranate juice to the crowds. It is noisy, dusty, pungent, and completely absorbing — one of the few places left in Xinjiang where the commercial DNA of the ancient world is still plainly visible.

This afternoon we board our flight to Urumqi, tracing our route back east across the Xinjiang basin.

Overnight in Urumqi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Urumqi Touring

Urumqi — "beautiful pastures" in Mongolian — sits at 900 m below the snow-capped Bogda Peak of the Tian Shan range, a modern Han-majority city that serves as Xinjiang's administrative capital. We have a full day here before continuing east, and it rewards the time.

We begin at Hongshan Park, the red sandstone hill at the city's heart whose summit pagoda offers the best panoramic view of Urumqi — the Tian Shan range spread across the horizon to the south, Bogda Peak's glaciated crown presiding over everything. From here we visit the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Museum, which houses one of the most remarkable collections in China: the celebrated Tarim mummies, extraordinarily well-preserved Bronze Age figures recovered from the desert with distinctly non-Chinese features, their existence in the heart of Central Asia a vivid reminder that this region has always been a place where worlds collide. The ethnographic galleries document the astonishing cultural diversity of Xinjiang's fifty-plus ethnic groups with equal depth.

This afternoon we explore the Grand Bazaar — one of the largest in Central Asia, its covered halls selling Uyghur textiles, dried fruits, spices, and crafts in an atmosphere that connects unmistakably to the markets we encountered in Kashgar.

Overnight in Urumqi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Urumqi to Turpan: Jiaohe

This morning we drive southeast through the desert to Turpan, one of the Silk Road's most improbable settlements: a city below sea level, in one of the hottest and driest places on earth, sustained entirely by an ancient engineering marvel.

A short drive west of Turpan brings us to Jiaohe, whose name means "confluence of rivers" — the two channels that carved the plateau on which this city stands. The ruins are Tang Dynasty at their most visible, though the settlement is far older: streets, residential compounds, watchtowers, and a Buddhist monastery complex emerge from the dusty plateau in the late afternoon light, a ghost city that was simply abandoned rather than destroyed, its mud-brick structures slowly returning to the earth from which they were raised.

Overnight in Turpan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Turpan: Emin Minaret, Karez System, Gaochang & Grape Valley

Turpan's population is predominantly Uyghur, and the city's identity is inseparable from the grapes grown in the surrounding oasis — the raisins produced here are among the finest in the world, dried in distinctive ventilated brick towers whose latticed walls appear throughout the landscape.

This morning we visit the Emin Minaret and Sougong Ta Mosque, located at the oasis edge among vineyards and cornfields. Built in 1778 and rising 37 m from a base of plain mud brick, the minaret's elegant tapering form is pre-Safavid in style, its origins in Iran — a direct line connecting Turpan's architecture to the Persian cultural world that the Silk Road made accessible.

We also visit the ancient karez irrigation system — over 1600 km of hand-dug underground channels that carry snowmelt from the Tian Shan down to the oasis without losing a drop to evaporation in the desert heat above. It is the karez that makes the Grape Valley possible: a lush corridor of vines threaded between the desert hills, where we visit local families drying their harvest in the traditional airy brick houses that have served this purpose for generations. Turpan grapes have been famous along the Silk Road since the Tang Dynasty — the raisins that leave these drying houses today travel the same routes as their predecessors.

This afternoon we visit the Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves, cut into the cliffs above the Mutou Valley — and here the Silk Road's religious story takes a turn that Dunhuang will complete. These caves were active Buddhist sanctuaries from the fifth to the fourteenth century, their murals depicting donors, deities, and narrative scenes in a style that blends Chinese, Indian, and Central Asian influences. But unlike Mogao, Bezeklik tells a story of faith in retreat: as Islam advanced along the Silk Road from the west, Buddhism receded eastward. Many figures were defaced by later inhabitants; others were removed by early twentieth-century expeditions. What remains is fragmentary but affecting — a civilisation caught mid-transition.

We continue to the ruins of Gaochang, once the capital of a kingdom that sat astride the Silk Road, its monasteries drawing Buddhist pilgrims from across Central Asia before the city was abandoned to the encroaching desert.

Overnight in Turpan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Turpan to Dunhuang by High-Speed Rail & Road

This morning we board the high-speed train at Turpan North Station, trading the old overnight ordeal for a comfortable daytime run west along the Lanxin corridor. The journey to Liuyuan takes approximately four hours, the desert landscape scrolling past the window — an experience the Silk Road merchants would have found incomprehensible, crossing in hours what took their caravans weeks.

At Liuyuan we transfer to road transport for the final 2.5 hours to Dunhuang — a drive across the Gobi that provides its own orientation. The oasis appears gradually: first a darkening on the horizon, then the distinctive poplars and cultivated fields of a desert settlement that has been welcoming exhausted travellers for two thousand years.

Dunhuang — "Blazing Beacon" — was the westernmost Chinese garrison town on the Silk Road, the last outpost of empire before the routes diverged toward India, Persia, and Rome. That its name means what it does suggests how keenly the Chinese felt its position at the edge of the known world.

Overnight in Dunhuang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Dunhuang: Mogao Caves, Crescent Lake & Shazhou Night Market

Early this morning we visit the Mogao Caves — and here, at the far western edge of our journey, the Silk Road's deepest story reaches its most extraordinary expression.

The caves were begun in AD 366 when a monk named Le Zun had a vision of a thousand Buddhas shimmering in the cliff face above the Dachuan River. Over the next thousand years, successive dynasties of merchants, monks, and pilgrims funded the excavation and decoration of cave after cave, filling them with murals and sculptures that document Buddhist cosmology, Chinese court life, Central Asian musical traditions, and the daily reality of Silk Road travel. The result is the greatest repository of Buddhist art on earth: 492 decorated caves, 45,000 square metres of murals, more than 2,000 painted sculptures. The thread that led us here from Xi'an's Great Mosque, from Kashgar's Id Kah, from Turpan's Persian-styled minaret, finds its resolution in these painted caves: the Silk Road was always, underneath the commerce, a corridor of belief.

This afternoon we drive to the edge of the oasis where Mingsha Shan — the Singing Sand Mountain — rises abruptly from the desert floor. Nestled at the dune base is Yueyaquan, the spring-fed Crescent Lake, whose survival amid the surrounding desert has been considered miraculous for two thousand years. Camel rides into the dunes are available for those who wish to experience something of the Silk Road's original mode of transport.

This evening the Shazhou Night Market draws us in — the liveliest gathering in the northwest, its stalls selling dried fruits, jade, silk, and Uyghur flatbreads as the temperature drops and the stars appear with the particular clarity reserved for desert skies.

Overnight in Dunhuang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Dunhuang: Yumen Pass, Han Great Wall, Western Thousand Buddha Caves & Yardang Geopark

An early start today as we head northwest into the open desert, where the Han Dynasty's effort to hold and define its western frontier is still visible in the landscape.

Yumen Pass — the Jade Gate — was the official western exit point of China for two thousand years. Silk went out through this gate; jade, glass, and the first Buddhist texts came in. The rammed-earth watchtower that marks the site today is among the oldest surviving structures in China, its mud-brick construction maintained against the desert's patient erosion for more than two millennia. Nearby, the remains of the Han Great Wall extend across the Gobi in a line of eroded earthworks — older than the stone wall we know from Beijing, less photogenic, and considerably more affecting for it. We also visit the Western Thousand Buddha Caves, smaller and less frequented than Mogao but preserving murals of considerable beauty and intimacy.

We continue to the Yardang National Geopark — and here the landscape produces its final, most disorienting surprise. Wind erosion over millions of years has sculpted the desert floor into a city of forms: towers, ridges, and hull-shaped masses that resemble a fleet of ships frozen mid-voyage across a stone sea. We time our arrival for the late afternoon, when the descending sun draws extraordinary colour from the formations and the shadows deepen between the ridges. The Chinese name — "Devil City" — reflects how travellers have always experienced this place after dark, when the wind through the rock produces sounds that defy easy explanation. In the dying light it is simply one of the strangest and most beautiful landscapes on earth.

Overnight in Dunhuang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Departure from Dunhuang

Departure from Dunhuang.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast