

DIARY NOTES

Chasing Dust Across the Road: Crossing the Taklimakan

I am not sure why I developed an interest in deserts, but they have long fascinated me. Whether as a teenager growing up in the vast Canadian prairies, where it was so flat we joked about watching the dog run away from home for 3 days, or because I spent every Sunday afternoon of my youth watching the dust blow across the flat, empty main street of my small prairie town. Maybe because of my fear of heights or my lack of familiarity with oceans, but the emptiness and solitude of a desert has always brought me comfort. It was reported that during the war the sailors from the prairies had no trouble staying out on the ocean, with its flat surface and long visible horizon, for weeks on end; whereas fishermen from the coast were comfortable at sea for only the first few days.

Over my years of travel I have crossed all the major world deserts; the Sahara, Gobi, Atacama, Nubian, Australian, Kalahari, and Sinai. Lots of smaller lesser known regional deserts, but never my last and the second largest sifting sand desert....the Taklimakan in western China. Like a baseball card collection I had wanted to complete my 'desert series' but jobs, family, finances and life always provided an excuse. Finally in 2019 I saw a window open up and realized I could make this happen. I could actually complete the series, so I started planning my trip. First hurdle was realizing I would have to spend about one thousand dollars just to fly to the Chinese Consulate in Toronto to apply in-person, have an interview and provide finger prints, just to get a Chinese travel visa. Anyone over 14 years or under 70 years was required to appear. Having been to China many times, the country held no great fascination for me and I had no desire to give the Chinese a copy of my fingerprints. To spend money for a flight just for a visa was not going to happen...the plan scuttled, the series unfinished. Then Covid-19 hit and the world shut down. China closed all its borders so no-one was entering the country.

By 2023 China resumed providing travel visas and I was over seventy. I could now send my application via the mail. Second hurdle was if I should tell the Chinese Consulate that I was planning to cross the Taklimakan desert located in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. This is the home of the Muslim Uyghur and much of China's political unrest over the past 15 years. If I told them, then I could possibly require a special Alien Travel Permit (as I needed for Tibet 20 years previously) or they could just say 'no' and restrict me from that area, which would again scuttle the trip.

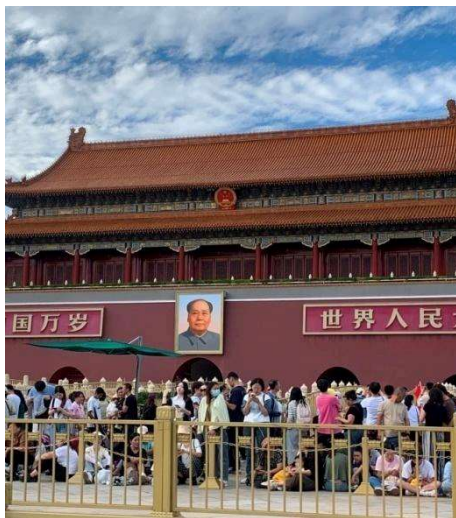
I was completely forthcoming in my itinerary as required with the visa application. I decided it was best for me, and them, to know now rather than to find out at some police checkpoint. I had screen shots of planned flights, hotels and trains with dates and points of interest. Anyone with time or interest would have seen from the itinerary there was no way I could visit all those tourist sights and points of interest in my three week window. However, it worked. My visa was issued with no restrictions in early August. The only question the Consulate asked was why I had been in Turkey the previous year as disclosed on my visa application. China has accused Muslim Turkey of supporting and financing the Uyghur independence movement creating some diplomatic tension and suspicions.

So with visa in hand I bought a round-trip ticket to Beijing, with the return flight to Canada from Dubai exactly 23 days later. The plan was to go over-land through China, cross the Taklimakan and exit China at the western most Qolima (Kulima) Pass border crossing into Tajikistan. I would then make my way to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, fly to Dubai and catch the 2:00am flight back to Toronto and home for my grand-daughters second birthday in four weeks. I packed my gym bag, grabbed my shoulder backpack and left in early September.

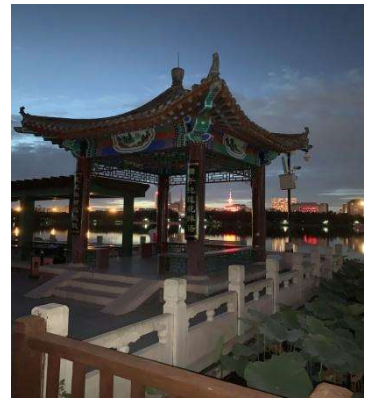
I arrived at Beijing's Capital International Airport (PEK) to find the rows of self-serve finger print machines were down due to technical issues. As I walked through the airport I realized with the number of cameras pointed at me there was no need for my fingerprints, I was already in their facial recognition system.



I had pre-booked my on-going train to Xi'an thru C-Trip (Chinese booking site) and a hotel for two nights close to the Beijing West train station. After a good night of catching up on sleep I headed into downtown and Tiananmen Square to relive old memories. As I got closer to the Square I noticed police security checkpoints at all entrances. I assumed it was because of the China-Africa Summit that was happening. I discovered that the police check-points with riot vehicles and cameras were now a permanent fixture of the area. No one got into the Square without notice, prior approval and a ticket. After the sixth time of pulling out my passport for scanning I decided to leave the area and meander through the new adjacent walking street shopping area. By 5:00pm I had enough of Beijing and its crowds, so I flagged a cab to fight rush hour traffic back to my hotel.



I spent the evening in the beautiful little Lotus Pond Park close to my hotel watching the locals jog and practice yoga. At the hotel I noticed some of my I-phone apps like Google Search, FaceBook and CNN were not downloading, I naturally assumed a poor or weak wi-fi signal. My Mandarin translation app and C-trip were still functioning so I booked a flight to Urumqi from Xi'an in two days.



Morning brought a bright blue sky and a quick cab ride to Beijing West train station. The trip to Xian was about 4 1/2 hours via my first ever bullet train. Impressive, but tricky trying to use a squatting toilet at 350 km/hour. I was amazed at the number of construction cranes building new apartment complexes that I saw in every town and city we past. Similarly, new infrastructure like roads, bridges, free-ways, telecommunication towers and agricultural terminals was shocking compared to my last time in mainland China fifteen years ago. Something was happening, there was a change and you could feel it.

I arrived in Xi'an, home of the famous Terracotta Warrior Army, around 3:00pm. Checked into the Ramada Bell Tower Hotel and started searching for information about getting to the archeological site the next morning. My Google Search and FaceBook were still not loading but I still had e-mail access, C-Trip and I saw numerous ATM machines. I found my credit cards were becoming useless as most facilities no longer used credit card machines or scanners. It was even difficult in some places to accept and make change in cash. All purchases in China were generally conducted via an app called WeChat. Similar to Apple Pay or Wallet it allows an immediate connection through ones phone between the establishments QR code and your Bank of China account. Of course all transactions are analyzed and tracked by Chinese authorities as part of their mass surveillance network.

I joined a small tour group of 5 other non-Chinese to visit the archeological site where the Terracotta Army was discovered and un-earthed in 1974. The Army is a collection of life-size terracotta statues buried around 200 B.C. depicting the armies of the first emperor of China. It is a form of 'funerary art' buried with the emperor to protect him in his afterlife. It is an amazing site to see, not only their size and detail but the vast numbers of these clay figures is mind



boggling. It had been twenty years since I was last there and the site had expanded considerably. While some European tourists were visible there were no noticeable North Americans. I had the pleasure of meeting one of the last remaining farmers who originally found the site when drilling for water. Nice old fellow who had quickly given up farming to become a tourism fixture in a local curios shop. On the way back to my hotel I asked the young English speaking guide about the numerous cameras everywhere. His 'party line' response was, "if you have nothing to hide then why be bothered", my response was 'then why have them'. We terminated the conversation when he suggested I thought like a western 'individualist' and I realized I should probably not ask the questions I was asking.

I spent the evening walking the old Muslim market area looking for the kiosk where I once bought a pair of gloves on a freezing winter night. The crowds were large and especially on a Friday night at the colorful old Bell Towers in central Xi'an. I noticed many Chinese women dressed in traditional Chinese outfits, a new trend in support of a newly embraced Chinese identity.



My flight to Urumqi on Jiangxi Air was 3.5 hours and cost about \$137.00 CAD, the bullet train was about \$125.00 and took 12-13 hours. My timing was becoming a concern because my travel logistics after Urumqi were quite uncertain



without Google search. Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Autonomous Region has a population of about 4 million (every city on a map of China will have a minimum 1-3 million population), it was a major trade stop on the ancient Silk Road, now a center of commerce and the largest in-land city between Beijing and Tashkent. In 2009 it was reported that about 200 Uyghur protestors were gunned down by the Chinese army in the main square. An additional 1,700 were injured in rioting that went on for months before martial law was initiated. I am in Uyghur territory.

I spent my first day in Urumqi visiting an ATM machine to replenish my dwindling stock of Chinese RMB (renminbi) and walking to the central train station to buy tickets, with cash, for trains I hoped to take in the next week. In the evening I went to the International Bazaar in the Uyghur section of town. Great place with lots of food kiosks featuring traditional lamb kabobs and naan. The security and riot vehicles, parked on every corner, had an additional feature of armed soldiers with Kalashnikovs and attached bayonets. This was more than just crowd control.



It became clear that a connection existed between the many street cameras (I counted 22 cameras in one block), police identity check points, riot vehicles, blocked apps and outside TV channels and the use of WeChat (that could monitor your constant presence and every purchase) that I was in an intense police state, a state of martial law. Visions of books like ‘Animal Farm’ and ‘1984’ immediately came to mind. I had travelled in police states before; Cuba, North Vietnam, Russia, and even China from 1998 – 2012, but nothing as intense and complete as what I now encountered. It made sense, if you have a controlled economy that plans 50-100 years into the future, building the type of infrastructure anticipated for that future, then you have to control all of the variables. People are the main variable.

The next morning I met Mr. Li, a water engineering consultant with the city. He stayed at the hotel, spoke English and had been to Quebec. He was kind enough to use his Chinese Search site to get me some travel information and download a few up-coming city maps. A life saver at a time when I was questioning whether it was wise to continue this trip because of my obvious lack and unpreparedness of advanced Chinese technology, and the noticeable lack of people who could, or wanted to, speak English. It was interesting that while the government required everyone to study and use Chinese, they could not force the Uyghur to speak it. My Mandarin translation app was useless and there was no download for Turkic.

I did a day trip to Turpan about 180 km. by train from Urumqi. The area is referred to as China’s Death Valley as temperatures can reach into the mid-fifties Celsius. I negotiated a cab for the afternoon to visit the Flaming Mountains and the



Karaz underground water system, an irrigation system that dates back hundreds of years and was crucial to servicing the caravans on the Silk Road. The Flaming mountain, though under-whelming, is the area where the legendary Buddhist monk Tangseng first entered China. The area is home to Jiaohe, the best preserved earthen city in the world.

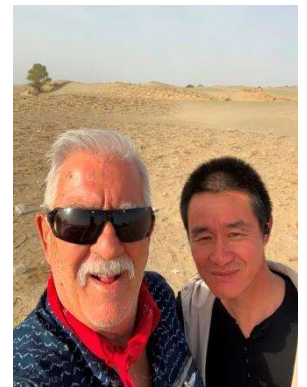
The next morning I decided to keep going west. Though I still had no definite information or plan on how to cross the Taklimakan, if I kept heading west to Kuqa (Kuche) I could still make the decision to abandon the desert crossing and just exit

China to Tashkent. I took the 10 hour train to Kuqa arriving around 9:00 pm. A young policeman stopped me as I exited the train station and asked for my passport and hotel information. He tried reading my passport upside down until finally giving up and waving me through. As I was checking into the hotel and asking for information with my Mandarin translation app, I was approached by a young Chinese fellow who spoke English. He and two friends were doctoral students from Beijing. They had done research in Alar (a small city on the northern edge of the desert) the previous year and contacted a friend in Alar for information. We sat in my room drinking tea and talking politics until 2:00am. They offered to download Chinese apps to my I-phone but I kindly declined. I didn't feel comfortable with Chinese coding on my phone. Canada and the U.S. restricting Huawei was a good decision. The students offered a very different perspective on the Chinese political situation.

In the morning over breakfast we arranged for me to make contact with their friend once I got to Alar. Prior to catching a bus later in the day I got more cash and bought a few treats and food for what was my unknown future. At 5:00pm I left for Alar with three others in an aged minivan on an old dirt road. As night set in I became a bit anxious but had something to eat and the driver seemed competent. We arrived late when I checked into the hotel I had booked earlier that day. All the hotels I booked in the \$40-\$45.00 CAD range were new, modern 4-star facilities. They all had the latest technology from room robots, built in digital wall coffee machines and Siri who greeted me as I entered, turned on the TV and opened the drapes. Other guests were older Chinese tourists in tour buses.



My contact in Alur put me in touch with Mr. Yu at the final truck stop before heading out across the Taklimakan on the new Route G580. While I found out there was a night bus that crossed the desert, it provided no sights or challenge, so we agreed on a minimal fare for me to hitch a ride in his truck to Hotan. We hit the road across the Taklimakan. It was 9:30 am on Friday the 13th of the month.





The temperature climbed into the 30's as we got further south into the desert and the day. The road was paved and a few single family vehicles were heading in the same direction. Sand, sand and more sand. The Taklimakan is the second largest sifting sand desert in the world covering about 337,000 km² (130,000 sq mi). The desert is part of the Tarim Basin, which is 1,000 kilometres (620 mi) long and 400 kilometres (250 mi) wide and surrounded by the Kunlun Mountains to the south, the Pamir Mountains in the west, the Tian Shan range to the north, and the Gobi Desert to the east. We saw a few wild camels meandering, lots of bronze statues of camels, horses and deer for the tourists and the ever present security van with cameras parked along the road for “show”. They looked abandoned, but if I had nothing to hide, who cared.

As Mr. Yu and I drove along sharing a lunch of boiled eggs, wantons and packaged buns I realized we were on a ‘road trip’ just like in the 70's across Canada or the same scene across the Sahara with Mohamed. I don't remember the radio being on, and when I offered to drive he pointed to the camera on the dash, aimed at the driver's seat, and shook his head. I felt very comfortable cruising down a straight road listening to the hum of the engine and occasional gust of wind. The horizon was flat and the series

was now complete. Dust was starting to blow across the street. In 500 kms we only saw a few wayside pull-offs, one food truck, two small tourist/truck stops (gas was sold at a separate guarded compound where passengers could not enter) and 3- 4 police check-points with large truck scanning equipment. Everywhere there was human litter, with garbage overflowing at every vehicle stop. I didn't know how to explain to Mr. Yu about him not throwing garbage on the road...so I never.

No desert is what you think it will be. First you get hills and large rocks that slowly turn to larger stones, maybe some low scrub brush or the odd tree, then you hit patches of gravel or pebbles, perhaps some drifts of uninterrupted sand dunes but not necessarily a lot. Here you had a lot of sand, as far as the eye could see. While it is said the world is slowly running out of good construction sand, I am sure

the Chinese are working on a way to use this sand to continue their massive building boom at a lower cost.

Engineers had tried a variety of techniques to stop or slow down the erosion of the asphalt by the blowing sand but were not always successful. Planted trees on the side of the highway lacked water, snow fences (as we know them) were expensive



and could not withstand the winds. The best solution seems to be a planted or inserted “dead grass” grid, with about 4-6 inches of stock showing. It is planted in a square pattern or grid to hold the sand next to the road. I noticed the odd water oasis but they went by too quickly for me to get a good shot. The sun was shining, the heat was constant and the dust was blowing. By 4:00 we were starting to see more activity around us, mainly construction of large facilities for what appeared as mining or warehousing. Finally by 5:00 we got to Hotan and Mr. Yu used his Chinese

Waze app to find my hotel and drop me off. We shook good-bye and smiled as we parted. It was a good day and I was on schedule.

The next morning when I tried to get a cab to the train station, the nice little girl at the reception desk said to follow her to her parked Mercedes, then whisked me to the station. Hotan is an ancient oasis desert town with a population of about one-half million. Of course because it is on the Taklimakan there is dust everywhere that blows and settles on everything. I was ready to leave this and head back into a more mountainous and fertile area. I had bought my ticket, in Urumqi, for the seven hours long, second-class ride to Kasghar (Kashi). We skimmed the western edge of the Taklimakan with a half empty train until we hit the city of Shache where it filled up to standing room only. You meet the nicest people on trains ...especially when they have never seen a North American.



Arrived at the GEM Hotel in Kasghar around 4:00pm. Got settled and headed into the ‘old town’ of Kasghar past the massive statue of Mao Tse Tung in People’s Park in the central Square. Had supper and enjoyed the picturesque Wustaubowie Street and Id Kah Mosque in the ancient city. Still intense police presence, and the

cameras. This would probably be my last Chinese city. Now that my goal was reached I needed a change from China. My Marco Polo days were over.

In the morning I went to the bus station to get information on the international bus from Kasghar to Osh, Kyrgyzstan. I originally intended to cross from China at the Qolima (Kulima) Pass border point into Tajikistan but realized that may be harder than I anticipated, because there was limited traffic, odd border crossing hours and no formal travel options. Given my time pressures I opted to take the more northern, but better travelled Irkeshtam Pass into Kyrgyzstan. I was surprised to learn there was only one bus a week going to Osh, and returning on alternate



days. The bus to Osh was tomorrow morning. Once assured that I could buy a bus ticket in the morning, I headed to the infamous Livestock Market. Farmers from around the area would bring their cattle and goats for sale every Sunday. It was massive with hundreds of animals and thousands of buyers, sellers and watchers.

Bargaining between buyers and sellers went on all day until finally a deal was reached and confirmed with a unique hand slap. It was chaotic with food stalls, farm supply kiosks, people and animals. Taxis were difficult because they all used WeChat and were not interested in taking hard currency or making change. I had planned to

stay in Kasghar for a couple of days and had booked the hotel for that time. After cancelling one night, I headed back to old town for supper and to hang out for the evening. Got ready for what I hoped would be my last night in China.

Up early for breakfast then to the Bus Station to buy my ticket for the China-Kyrgyzstan International Bus. About 25 passengers departed around 11:00 am on a new double lane free-way past a Free Trade Zone and industrial parks. About two hours to our first of six modern Chinese police border check points in a 5 km stretch. As the only non-Chinese I followed the pack and appeared innocuous as we always got out for inspection. No one leaves China without inspection, documents and approvals. The Kyrgyzstan border was one small mud shack high up in the Pamir Mountains. First time I pulled my heavy jacket out of my bag. We made the ten hour journey over narrow winding mountain roads and past vast plains of nothingness. Saw a few herds of wild horses



and scattered summer grazing huts. We arrived in Osh around 10:00 pm. Over the next nine days I made it through Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Andijon, Samarkand and eventually to Tashkent) to catch my flight to Dubai with connection on the 2:00am flight to Canada and home.

Once free of the cameras and police check-points I felt a certain comfort and freedom. The Chinese have given up individual rights and freedoms for a planned economy that is housing and feeding 1.4 billion people. A task our short term four year divisive political cycle and planning process could never accomplish. After President Xi made himself leader for life, he has definitely created a complex highly-technological security network with a re-born sense of Chinese history and cultural identity. While China has always been a tightly controlled society with a strong sense of social consciousness (whether because of emperor's decree, political ideology or historical norms and traditions) it now finds itself reliant on a changing 'laissez-faire' world economy that dislikes control and unrest. Unemployment in China is rising and the economy is slipping. Maybe my tour guide friend was right when he said I was thinking like a western 'individualist'.

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