

Desert Stars

The Lyddiatt family of the British School of Beijing, Shunyi backpack Xinjiang with a toddler in tow



Drawn by the mystique of exploring the old Silk Road in Xinjiang that meanders and undulates through some of the highest – and lowest – landscapes in China, my wife and I wanted to see if we could still travel as we used to, all backpack, bootstrap and adventure, now that our numbers have swelled to include a toddler.

Xinjiang is vast, and within all this epic vastness is incredible, at times record-breaking, geography. Lake Ayding is the lowest point in China, the fourth lowest in the world, and at 154 meters below sea level, the site of the highest ever recorded temperature in China, a scorching 49.7°C. In the Middle Kingdom's furthest west, where it borders Pakistan at some 5000 meters (the world's highest border crossing), sits the Karakoram Highway, which skirts around the foothills of K2, the world's second tallest mountain.

Problem is, these places are not particularly close to one another. Thus, we made our first concession to traveling with a toddler. We would base ourselves in Urumqi and Kashgar, and fly between the two.

We would still have a few long days of travel. The road from Urumqi to Turpan

(200km) would take us through valleys of sweeping plains filled, for mile after mile, with thrumming wind turbines, before descending down into the desert. Traveling from Kashgar to Lake Karakul, another 200 kilometers, would see us through valleys of blood-red cliffs that barely contained ice blue and mud-brown torrents of melted snow and natural spring water.

It was on this aforementioned part of the trip that I discovered a phenomenon I call the 'map fallacy.' Whatever math you do ($\text{time} = \text{distance} / \text{speed}$) based on anything you see on a map just won't work in Xinjiang. There is an infrastructure problem and, at points, we could not go faster than 10kmh. What the map can never tell you is that, in places, you are traveling down tracks hastily bulldozed through whatever fell down the last time it all tumbled down onto the road.

Concession number two: lots of toys, snacks, milk, stories and songs.

Once settled into our hotel in Turpan, we headed out into the market for some lunch. This is where we discovered how seriously the Muslim Uyghurs take the fourth pillar of Islam: fasting during Ramadan.

Food and drink were not as easy to come by as we expected. This was problematic as July temperatures in the Taklamakan Desert regularly climb over 40 degrees. Eventually we managed to get some lamb skewers and bread, and in doing so, we discovered that available here, as it is elsewhere in the Muslim world, is Jallab, a refreshing drink made from date syrup and rosewater.

After lunch, we headed into the desert to see the Flaming Mountains. If you like deserts, as I do, Taklamakan doesn't disappoint: the layered red-orange-brown mountains dissolve into the red-orange desert floor, with scorching desert winds offering the briefest of escapes from the burning sun above. You can walk, but not for very far before you realize that you have already finished the bottle of water you only opened a moment ago. Reaching the low forties, these are seriously dangerous temperatures, especially when you have a small child refusing to wear her hat. Ice cream bribery works, as does the promise of a camel ride.

Arguably, this trip was for my wife and I, and our daughter was being dragged along for the ride. In an attempt to make this

Not your **typical backpackers**



Different **culture**



A camel ride: concession number three in action



Travel Tips

Wear

Warm clothes—Xinjiang is a vast region with many patches of desert. It can get cold fast, particularly in the more mountainous areas.

Have

Patience. The infrastructure in Xinjiang is not quite up to the level of the more developed parts of China. It looks close on a map—but not in real life.

Camping in a **yurt**



The girls go for a walk



a trip for her as much as for us, at every opportunity we let her choose what she wanted to do. Concession number three: animals. In the desert there were camels and at Lake Karakul, where we slept in a yurt, there were horse rides and goats to feed. In Kashgar, our daughter would feed the white doves that collected there in the morning, playing happily with all the local children doing the same, communicating despite the language barrier (her Chinese was of no use here) as only young children really can.

The following day, we traveled to the ancient city of Jiaohe. Now abandoned, the roofless but otherwise intact buildings stand as testament to the significance of the Silk Road. Morphed, hewn and augmented by desert winds, it is breathtaking. Go early in the morning when it is utterly deserted to avoid heat and crowds.

Kashgar is said to have the largest bazaar in Asia, and historically it was a vital trading post along the Silk Road. Today, it feels a little run down. There is still much trading going on, and the livestock market we visited was enormous, but what you see on the streets is mostly aimed at the curious

tourist, of which there are many.

Kashgar, and really the entire region, is entirely unlike the rest of China. Whilst you can hear Mandarin out on the streets, it is drowned out by the slightly more angular tones of Kazakh. Equally important is Islam, which sees tiny mosques dotting the city and pork all but banished from restaurant menus.

Officially, Kashgar is in the same time zone as Beijing (unofficially, the city works on a two-hour delay). Iftar (the breaking of the Ramadan fast) started after ten o'clock, when dusk would settle on the grilling of whole lambs and goats. And because we were traveling with a toddler, we had to make concession number four: Bedtime is a guideline, not a rule.

Lake Karakul, at some 3,600 meters and surrounded on three sides by much higher peaks, is 200 kilometers from Kashgar. Looking at the map, it should have taken us a few hours, but the map fallacy meant that it took nearer to eight.

Which brings me to my final point about traveling with a toddler, not a concession so much as a requirement: you have to plan ahead. We were headed for an overnight

in the middle of nowhere, and from there to a small Chinese town where we had no idea if we would be able to get the things that small children need. Thus, we stocked up on nappies, milk and the kinds of treats that our daughter loves. We replenished the first aid kit and crossed fingers that we wouldn't need it. And we bought warm clothes to fend off the worst of the violent mountain winds.

It was worth it. Our daughter's name means star in Welsh, but living in Beijing, she had never really seen them. When night fell, we emerged from our yurt, blankets wrapped tightly around us, and looked up at the billions of stars twinkling above, so close that you felt that you could almost touch them. I have no idea whether she will remember those stars, but I will. Those few moments, sitting silently in awe at the scale and beauty of a universe I do not understand, and then sharing this wonder with my baby girl, will stay with me forever. ●

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