

TOP 7 SILK ROAD TRAVEL DESTINATIONS IN CHINA



With the first annual China Xi'an Silk Road International Tourism Expo on the way, Organized by the Shaanxi Provincial Tourism Administration and will be held from 19 to 21 September at the Qujiang International Conference & Exhibition Centre, more eyes are focusing on this historical route in 2014 as traders, tourism agencies and travellers all reconsider the cultural significance and potential of the area. The Silk Road has been a vital route through China since the first caravan set out in 138BC and later developments by the Roman Empire in 55BC ensured that it became a vital channel not just for China but for Asia and beyond. Today many of the key cities, forts and natural wonders along the Chinese portion of the route act as interesting and beautiful tourist attractions. Here are seven must-see Chinese stopping point along the route.

1. Xi'an

Naturally, a list of top sites along the Silk Road has to include Xi'an itself and this is not simply because it is one of China's Four Great Ancient Capitals or because it is the home of one of China's most famous attractions - the Terracotta Warriors. These warriors are a must-see attraction because of their age, artistry and general impact on archaeology but there are other interesting landmarks in the city that are also worth a visit. The city wall and Shaanxi Provincial Museum both have their charms for history buffs; the fallen bell, in its new, permanent home at the foot of its tower, is definitely an alternative oddity; and the nearby Huashan mountain should not be overlooked because of its status as one of China's five sacred mountains.

2. Luoyang

While the cultural significance of Xi'an will stand out to many international travellers because of the Terracotta Warriors, the historical significance of Luoyang - 200 miles east in the Henan Province - cannot be underestimated either. Like Xi'an, this is another of China's Ancient Capitals (the remaining two being Beijing and Nanjing), having been the capital of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, Eastern Han Dynasty and Tang Dynasty, and it is the home to some extraordinary monuments that still stand for visitors to enjoy today. Highlights in this city include the White Horse Temple and the Gunalin Temple, the former being full of Buddhist artefacts and the latter being a stunning monument to General Guanya of the State of Shu who fought during the Three Kingdoms Period.

3. The Jiayuguan Great Wall

The next inclusion on this list differs from all of the others because it is not a city along this trade route that can be explored for its numerous cultural benefits but rather a single object that acts as a great historical symbol along the Silk Road. This Great Wall was designed as part of a defensive system at Jiayu Pass to provide security between the two mountain ranges at the Gansu Corridor. The purpose and impressive fortifications are reason enough to stop by and take a look but the attraction also has the appeal of the extraordinary stories about its dangerous and greuling creation, such as the idea that the bricks were brought there on the backs of goat and that they had to traverse icy paths on the way.

4. Dunhuang

At Dunhuang, travellers find themselves at an ancient gateway to the Xinjiang Region where top attractions for modern tourists fail to mar the beauty offered by its history and landscape. It is widely regarded as one of Gansu's best tourist spots because of the chance to visit the Mogao Buddhist Grottoes - where the world's third largest, 1,700 year old Giant Buddha sits proudly in all the colourful glory of its creation - and the option of camel or quad biking treks on the musical Sighing Sand dune. What makes these dunes even more remarkable is that after all the activity has died down and the last tourist's footprint has been made, the sands shift back into their smooth shape as if they had never been disturbed.

5. Turpan

Moving along to Turpan we find a developing city that is still greatly in touch with its culinary delights, Uighur culture and natural beauty. This is a growing city that is being greatly modernised due to its status as an ideal Chinese model, with its population reaching 300,000 and great access in place with the highway and railway; however, the history and culture of its former residents can still be found in the numerous 2000-year-old sites - notably the ruined ancient cities of Gaochang and Jiaohe - and the local produce. No attempt at modernisation can detract from the beauty of the depression in which the city sits, the nearby Bogda and Flaming Mountains, the towering Emin Minaret or the fresh fruits that make the juices and wine.

6. Urumqi

Again focusing on the natural beauty that can be enjoyed along the Silk Road, the next highlight to be mentioned is the grand spectacle surrounding the city of Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in China's north-west. The aptly named Heavenly Lake is a tranquil body of water that perfectly reflects the mountains of the same name - from the grassy foot right up to the snowy peaks. The scenery is not just appreciated by human tourists and photographers, local livestock, such as horses, sheep and even yak, also make the most of the area by grazing in the wild flower covered fields and this can all be enjoyed just two hour drive away from the city.

7. Kashgar

The last stop on this list of Silk Road destinations is a remote border city where the historical, international route is still in effect via modern traders all these centuries later. Kashgar lies on the Chinese border near Pakistan, Kashmir and Kyrgyzstan and is notable for its remote location, lying 3,600 meters above sea level and being surrounded by mountains. It may be remote but it is worth the trip for the natural beauty and the unique experience of the Sunday Bazaar. Kashgar's location has led to a strong Muslim influence and a blend of cultures and it is famed for being a thriving marketplace with everything from local goods and livestock to the wares of the many Pakistani, Tajiki and Uighur traders.

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