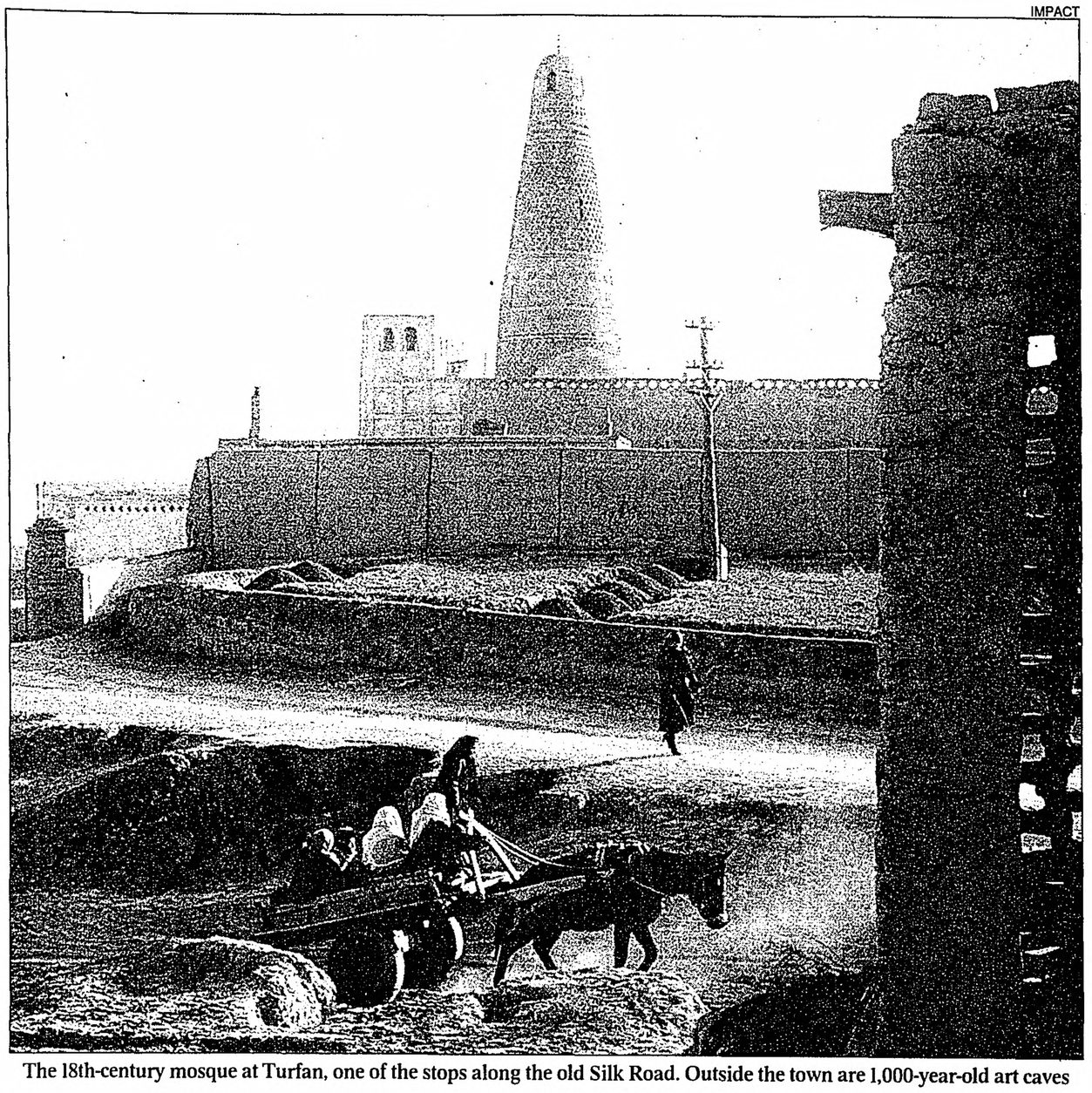
China: a journey of discovery from Dunhuang to Kashgar on the route that opened the country to the world

IMPACT



The 18th-century mosque at Turfan, one of the stops along the old Silk Road. Outside the town are 1,000-year-old art caves

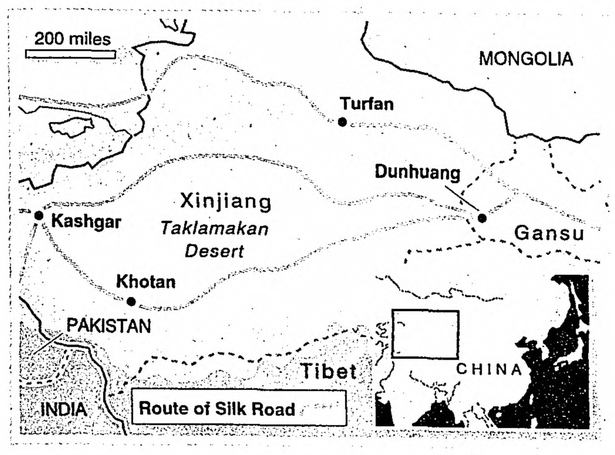
A few scorchers on the old Silk Road

What can explain the great Silk Road? What was it that tempted traders to leave the shelter of the Great Wall and journey through the deadly no man's land of desert and mountain that separated China from the rest of the world?

In the first century AD, the philosopher Seneca put it down to the decadence of Roman men wanting to dress women in clothes that would leave them "unable to swear that they were not naked". Historians subsequently said it had all been about profits. Today the Chinese Tourist Board prefers to attribute it to friendship and cultural exchange between East and West. There we have it: sex, money and culture.

I recently visited the first part of the Silk Road — in an area corresponding to today's Xinjiang and Gansu provinces in northwest China — in search of the details.

The journey started promisingly cultural. The first tourist site west of the Great Wall, the Mogao Caves, outside the town of Dunhuang, has one of the greatest displays of Buddhist art in the world. While the West was getting silk from China, China was getting Buddhism from India, and in the 4th century AD, local artists started carving out these caves and filling them with dazzling statuary and murals that would span a thousand years of history.



What is so delightful about the work is its openness to the world. Here, siphoned into a remote oasis, are the influences of India, Persia, Greece; a Eurasian pot-pourri.

The Mogao Caves today have a huge coach park, an exhibition centre paid for by the Japanese, and an entrance fee for foreigners that would bankrupt the average Chinese peasant. Even sex gets a look in, with some caves containing graphic depictions of Tantric union, though tourists were not allowed to see them.

I set off westwards again on a two-day bus ride through a black desert that seemed to have been worked over by a cosmic bulldozer.

My next stop was the oasis town of Turfan, today one of the Silk Road's most successful little earners. The locals have made it into a kind of resort by setting up thick, leafy, vine trellises over the streets and pavements. You can walk through green tunnels and sit in green, outdoor cafés while watching the grapes ripen. I liked John's Café best. The menu featured such delicacies as toast, coffee, apple pie and ice-cream, which well bespoke the spirit of international co-operation existing in Turfan. I cheerfully joined a one-day tour of the local Silk Road sights — scraps of 1,000-year-old Buddhist cave art and the ancient, ruined cities of Jiaohe and Gaochang, located in open desert where the shade temperature touched 45C. My incentive to go to these places was to earn my apple pie.

I needed those refreshments: my next trip was the 1,000km (625 miles) to Kashgar — another three days stuck to a molten bus seat. Not that I didn't enjoy it. Once you have crossed the uncrossable deserts, you have only the impassable mountains before you.

Kashgar is a stronghold of the Uigurs, the Turkic people who live scattered throughout Xinjiang and regard China as a distant colonial power. Walking its dusty streets I found kebabs sizzling, cauldrons boiling and disaffected Uigurs lounging sullenly on street corners. Even the Chinese were having a job passing this place off as a haven of cultural exchange, despite erecting a colossal statue of former chairman Mao Tse-tung in the middle of town.

Han Chinese are relatively few in Kashgar and, in contrast to the Uigur women who prefer head scarves and thick skirts, the local Han women barge around expressing their appreciation of history by wearing transparent skirts and showing the tops of their stockings. This was what gripped Roman men all those years ago.

Much of the local silk still comes from nearby Khotan. Riding in this direction from Kashgar along the southern rim of the Taklamakan desert I appreciated what a trip it must have been for the old caravans. One minute you are relaxing in one of the Silk Road oases amid trees, fields and vine trellises, the next you are in scorching desert.

In Khotan I had to share a hotel room with a latter-day Silk Road trader from Jiangshu Province, 3,000km away in eastern China. When he saw me enter, he started leaping joyfully about the room in his underpants, slurring his Chinese like a junk-bond dealer, pronouncing about money and goods and currency rates. I'm not sure the Chinese Tourist Board would have approved of him.

The real delight of Khotan, though, was seeing the silk production, from cocoons to strands to thread to fabric. Plenty of what is produced here is still carried along the old routes — these days by bus — to Central Asia or Pakistan.

Strolling around the farmsteads outside the city I found a couple of old Uigur women breeding silkworms as a sideline: fat, white caterpillars on trays in a dark shed, scrunching through layers of mulberry leaves. The process is so natural, yet so miraculously clever. Surely this is what the Silk Road was really all about.

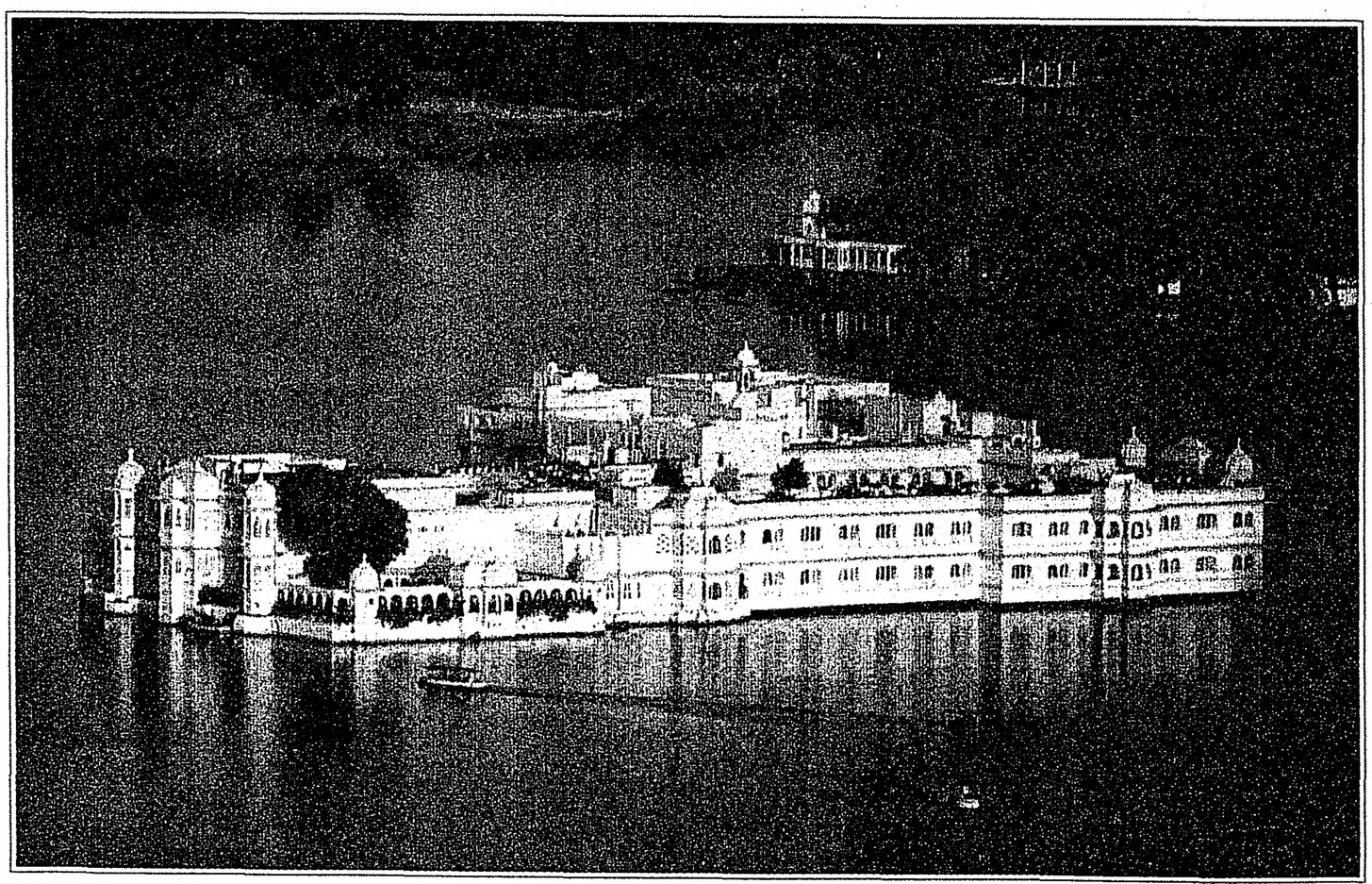
JEREMY ARTIYAH

When you stay at a grand hotel,

the exterior is elegant,

the interior is luxurious,

the ambiance is refined.



HOW TO GET TO DUNHUANG AND THE SILK ROAD

- UK tour operators who can arrange visits to the Chinese section of the Silk Road include Voyages Jules Verne (0171-723 5066) and Encounter Overland (0171-370 1482).
- Air China (0171-630 7678) flies London-Peking twice weekly from £485 one way, plus £10 tax. From Peking, you can reach Dunhuang and the Mogao Caves by air (about £200 one way) or by train to the nearby town of Liuyuan — a 2½-day trip costing about £40 for a "hard" sleeper. From Dunhuang, you can reach Turfan by bus or train, and Kashgar and Khotan by long and cheap bus journeys. Dunhuang, Kashgar and Khotan are also linked by air.
- In Khotan, you can visit the silk factory and buy silk cheaply in large quantites.
- Accommodation is plentiful in all the towns along the route. Hotels are best booked in the UK in advance through the China Travel and Information Centre (0171-388 8838).

MAGNUM

A Kashgar woman at work on traditional embroidery