

Can this really still be China?

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I was shielding from the desert sun in a narrow alley between mustard, mud-brick buildings. As I admired the arch over an entrance across the road, the wooden doors opened to reveal what looked like a mosque inside.

From a nearby house came the booming bass section of Arab-sounding pop music and, beside me, a man wearing a white skullcap was loudly trying to sell dried apricots. Two girls with blue eyes and bright silk headscarves giggled and looked down when I smiled at them.

As I bit into a sesame seed bagel so freshly baked it burnt the top of my mouth, I could no longer avoid the question that had been gnawing at me since I arrived that morning and

which confronts every visitor to Kashgar – could this really still be China?

Kashgar is one of those places I had always wanted to visit but was not quite sure why. The name held a hint of unspecified mystery – like Timbuctu, or Orinoco, or the places on the shipping weather forecast on the radio. The Middle Eastern sensuousness is the fruit of an exotic past. For several centuries the city was a prominent outpost on the Silk Road, the conduit of trade – and food, art and religion – between China and Constantinople, and from there to Rome. Kashgar became the starting point for the different routes through the mountain ranges of central Asia.

The city is in Xinjiang province in western China, a vast area originally settled by Muslim Uighurs, who speak a Turkic language, that China tried to control with varying degrees of success for several centuries, before cementing its position in the 19th century. Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, is a thronging boomtown, which has witnessed a rapid influx of Han Chinese in recent decades. Its streets share both the vitality of China's other big cities and their architectural blandness.

Communist planners have had a try at homogenising Kashgar, which boasts wide empty roads and a large People's Square, but the city has side-stepped the tidal wave of Chinese-style modernity. At every juncture, there is a sharp sense of difference – of language, of religion, of appearance, of rhythm of life. The focal point remains the Id Kah mosque at the centre of the old city. Around it are shops for tourists that sell daggers, musical instruments or banknotes with the face of Saddam Hussein, but down the quieter streets are kebab-sellers, barbers who shave their clients with long razors and an unusually high number of dentists. In most Chinese cities, the status symbol of choice is a BMW 5 Series: in Kashgar, it is a prominent gold crown.

The sense of detachment from the rest of China starts with the clocks. My plane ticket and hotel were on Beijing time, but the Uighur population have their watches two hours behind to reflect the path of the sun. Locals seemed to take pleasure in the confusion this causes, but Chinese visitors were sometimes disoriented. At dinner one night, while I was eating pilao, a rice dish with lamb, together with lamb kebabs coated in cardamom, a Han Chinese man at the next table started to complain loudly about the service. The waiter shrugged to imply he did not understand Mandarin Chinese. The man went to the air conditioner and grumbled about the temperature, fiddling with the knobs. He had the same patronising look of exasperation on his face that I had seen on a German tourist in Shanghai the week before who was trying to get the waiter to bring her sweetener. Amid the aroma of baking naan and roasting lamb, there is a whiff of empire in Kashgar.

In deference to the city's central Asian and Middle Eastern influences, visitors often feel an overwhelming desire to buy carpets. The hotel sent me to a large warehouse on the outskirts of town run by a state-owned company which, I was told, had brought modern commerce to the age-old business of haggling for carpets. My taxi driver was dubious and when we arrived he said that most of the carpets were made in eastern China.

The first room contained three looms being operated by Han Chinese women. A salesman insisted that I listen to a 15-minute explanation of the history of Uighur carpet-making, which I politely declined. The showroom was filled with several thousand carpets, piled 20-high. Every time I stopped, the salesman, a Han Chinese, launched into a long story about how the carpet was based on some ancient Uighur fable. After about 10 minutes, I could take no more of his pseudo-history and left.

I decided to try my luck in the throng of carpet shops around the main mosque. When I asked about prices at one, I was ushered inside. We went through three different rooms, ducking at the low doors, until we reached a back room. The exposed brick walls were almost obscured by the stacks of folded carpets. We sat on a floor also covered in carpets, tea was served and the negotiation began.

Except that we could not communicate. The owner of the shop, an old man in a square skullcap and a poker face, spoke no English or Chinese and I had not even bothered to learn "thank you" in Uighur. Help was needed. The owner's son ran out and brought back a man in a white kurta who, in immaculate English, told me he was a carpet-trader from Afghanistan. We eventually settled on the price for an exquisite rug of black and red checks that I was told was 100 years old and from Kazakhstan. My pleasure was diminished only by a moment of haggler's guilt: had I just been conned, or had I just spent 30 minutes bullying an old man over a sum of money that was trivial to me? As I went to leave, the owner thrust out his hand to shake mine and smiled broadly. It was quite dark inside, but I could clearly make out two large gold teeth.

If I were given a jigsaw of a map of central Asia, I would not be able to complete it, so flimsy is my sense of its geography. So I was surprised to be told that Kashgar was only about 500 miles to Islamabad – less than one quarter of the distance to Beijing. I had little chance of getting across the Chinese border with Tajikistan, where the road goes, but the idea was too intriguing to miss so I arranged a driver for the day.

We zipped along an immaculate new motorway through a series of small towns before beginning to climb the pass towards the Karakoram mountains. Apart from a couple of cement factories, staffed by Han Chinese working on a Sunday, there was no one in sight. The modest vegetation thinned out, giving way to striking peaks covered in red rock that were thrilling in the way that only truly bleak places can be. As the wind started to get up, the traffic came to a halt. An avalanche up ahead had closed the road for the day, modern engineering still sometimes fighting a losing battle.

Back in town, the highlight for most visitors is the weekend market. Actually, there are two markets, one a vast warehouse of small stalls with a photo of Mao Zedong at the entrance. It is famous for handicrafts but actually sells pretty much anything you can imagine. At one clothes stall, the elderly Uighur woman who owned it flipped up her skirts to put some cash inside thick wool tights.

The real attraction is the animal market on the city outskirts, where hundreds of farmers bring cattle to trade and catch up on gossip, a scene that seemed not to have changed for centuries. The diversity of the local population was on display with its mixture of squat Mongolian faces and angular Iranian features, but no one escapes the climate. All that alpine wind and desert sun had left the farmers' faces as tough as the desolate mountains around the city, the pension from a lifetime of rural grind. When I found myself beside some Spanish tourists, eagerly snapping these expressive faces, I could not help but reflect on the tourist's fetish for authenticity. We were attracted to these images because they seemed to express the timelessness of a place that has resisted the vulgarity and uniformity of the modern world. But being stuck in time comes with a price that we did not have to pay.

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A guide to Kashgar

The city is easier to reach than it was in the days of the Silk Road, when travellers leaving the

ancient Chinese capital of ChangAn (now Xian) faced several weeks of slog across deserts by camel. But it is still quite a long trip. There are eight flights a day from Beijing to Urumqi – which takes four hours – and five flights from Shanghai in five hours. From Urumqi, there are three flights a day for the hour and a half trip to Kashgar.

The city's hotel options reflect another episode in its colourful past, when Russia and Britain set up spying outposts in Kashgar as part of their battle for influence in the region that became known as the Great Game. Two of the best hotels are in former consulates: the Chini Bagh (144 Seman Lu, tel: +86 998-282 2103) is in a complex that used to house the British consulate, while the Seman Hotel (337 Seman Lu, tel: +86-998 255 2861) once hosted the Russians. Another good option is the Taxinan Barony Hotel at 242 Seman Lu (tel: +86-998 258 6888).

Inside the Chini Bagh buildings you can also find Abdul Wahab, an excellent English-speaking tour guide, whose extended family will take you anywhere in the province. You will find better Chinese food almost anywhere else in the country; stick to the Uighur cuisine. Orda on Renmin Dong Lu (tel: +86-998 265 2777) has a good atmosphere; locals recommend the Lao Chayuan Jiudian on Renmin Xi Lu (tel: +86-998 282 4467).

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