

I AM WEDGED TIGHTLY INTO A SMALL BUNK ON a sleeper bus. My destination is Kashgar, one of the remotest towns in China, a far-flung oasis at the western edge of Xinjiang Province. Even the name is enigmatic, and the journey there, to a point farther from the sea than almost anywhere else in the world, has its own kind of rough romance. To my right soar the Tien Shan, the 'Celestial Mountains', and to my left stretch the endless wastes of the Taklamakan Desert. But flying there, I had decided, was cheating.

Compared with the travellers of the past, today's visitor has never had it so easy. One is free to come and go, and there are such luxuries as hot showers, cafés and toast. I spent hours strolling down old Kashgar's maze-like streets lined by stalls selling pilau and offal, and ovens of samosa-like *samsa*, beyond which one enters a subdued, closed-off world of brick houses and tunnel-like passageways.

Marco Polo was probably Kashgar's first Western visitor in 1275, and after that the odd Jesuit missionary made it in over the centuries. More recently, a German explorer turned up in 1857, but the town proved to be a gruesome end to his road when he was murdered.

The first Englishmen to reach – and survive – Kashgar rolled up in 1869 and theirs is a strange tale of competition in the face of adversity. Robert Shaw, a tea merchant, was first to arrive. Hot on his heels came George Hayward, an ex-army officer sponsored by the RGS. Both were imprisoned for several months by Kashgar's ruler, Yakub Beg. Their ordeal may seem irrelevant now, but for many decades Kashgaria or East Turkestan – an outlandish region where Imperial Russia, Afghanistan, China and British India rubbed sharp shoulders – was of vital strategic importance.

Shaw and Hayward would have envied my freedom to roam. As John Keay writes in *When Men and Mountains Meet*: "The time-honoured custom of the Mohammedan cities of Central Asia was to welcome all comers indiscriminately but to show great reluctance in allowing them to leave."

Warlords and pork butchers

The Chinese have never had an easy time in the region. Their first contact was two thousand years ago when Kashgar became a trading post on the Silk Road. Marauding Huns in the 3rd century replaced the Chinese, and were ousted in turn by Genghis Khan and Tamerlane a thousand years later. The resented Manchus (Mongols from Manchuria) returned in the 1700s and, until 1949, power wavered between all of them and Yakub Beg (a despotic Islamic 'fundamentalist' from present-day Uzbekistan); a pork butcher (with his pawnbroker assistant); and various other maverick warlords.

It's no coincidence that the Chinese renamed the region Xinjiang ('New Dominion') after ousting Yakub Beg in 1877. But Islam more than anything sets the Uighurs (Xinjiang's indigenous people) apart from their rulers. Today, the muezzin call the faithful to prayer five times a day from Kashgar's Id-Kah mosque, one of the largest in China. And in the narrow lanes of the old quarter, they call from the parapets of neighbourhood mosques, the sound floating in the air like vapour.

By the 1860s, no corner of the unknown world aroused more interest than Kashgaria, or East Turkestan. The locals knew it as Altyn Shahr, Land of Six Cities, for six major oases



Above: Kashgar's great spectacle is its Sunday market which draws people from miles around. Here you can buy anything from a horse harness to a haircut
Right: life in the shadow of a mosque. The muezzin call the faithful to prayer five times each day

Chinese whispers

Xinjiang in Central Asia during the 1860s attracted an eccentric collection of international explorers and spies. Nowadays the region is under Chinese rule and may be on the verge of a new Great Game, this time with less gentlemanly rules.

Words and photographs by Amar Grover



ringed the mighty Taklamakan Desert. But this unmapped region was a mystery, something of an explorer's Holy Grail. As the Russian empire expanded east through Central Asia, the British in India came to view their physical closeness as a threat. So began what came to be known as the Great Game, a story of cat-and-mouse bravery involving cartographers, spies, political agents and explorers.

When George Hayward approached the RGS for sponsorship for an expedition to Kashgaria in 1868, he found vice president Henry Rawlinson to be a well-informed Russophobe. An expedition was speedily arranged, with the RGS providing £300 and some surveying equipment. Hayward set off from Leh in Ladakh disguised as an Afghan and travelled light, without even a tent. Coincidentally, the prickly Shaw had just struck out on this same route. They met up in a lonely valley and Hayward agreed to give his rival a head start.

In early 1869, both reached Kashgar – and the gilded custody of Yakub Beg. They were released in April, Beg deciding that his prospects lay in good relations with the British. Hayward was awarded the Society's Gold Medal in 1870; lagging behind Shaw, he'd made daring forays in wild mountain country en route. His report and map (for which the British Indian government paid £100) confirmed the feasibility of the Russian army marching across the high passes into India.

It never happened, but Britain and Russia did open consulates in Kashgar, and those buildings survive today. Russia's dates from 1882, and is now part of the Seman Hotel where I stayed. Behind an ugly modern wing is the old compound, containing the Seman's most expensive rooms and an immaculate dining-room, reputedly much as the Russians left it. The nearby Qiniwak Hotel is uglier, sadder; behind a blinding white-tiled tower stand the forlorn remains of the British consulate. Originally called 'Chini-bagh' (Chinese Garden) when it opened in 1890, what's left today is a weedy, almost forgotten compound.

Chini-bagh, one of Britain's most isolated diplomatic outposts, saw seven consuls up until 1948 and they lived through some eventful moments. The Russian consul sulked for two and a half years, refusing to speak to his British counterpart, while his Cossack guards intimidated everyone in sight. Local unrest provoked minor sieges and random shootings (one consul's wife was hit in the arm) but there were good times as well. By the early 1900s, when Western archaeologists were scrambling to unearth oases along the Silk Road, Kashgar and its consulates provided comfort and respite from their arduous journeys.

Fabled market

Since the Communist takeover in 1949, Kashgar's ancient walls and watch towers have been demolished, and the new city of dull concrete-and-tile architecture is still expanding. Yet few towns in China are as intriguing to roam. The bazaars are full of dried fruit, nuts and spices, melons and ice-cream, meat hooks, knives, pots and pans. Dusty lanes lined with poplars criss-cross the outskirts, while flat-roofed houses with compounds lie behind mud-brick walls.

Kashgar's one great spectacle is the fabled Sunday Market, when everyone for miles around turns up. Donkey-drawn carts deposit families and piles of produce. Merchants hawk farm implements and garish bolts of cloth, florid furniture and fur-lined hats. Wheeling and dealing goes on over fat-tailed sheep and long-haired goats. While young boys hack slices of sweet melon or dart about with trays of stodgy bread rolls, horses are run, camels inspected, and just when it seems hagglers might biff each other, deals are struck.

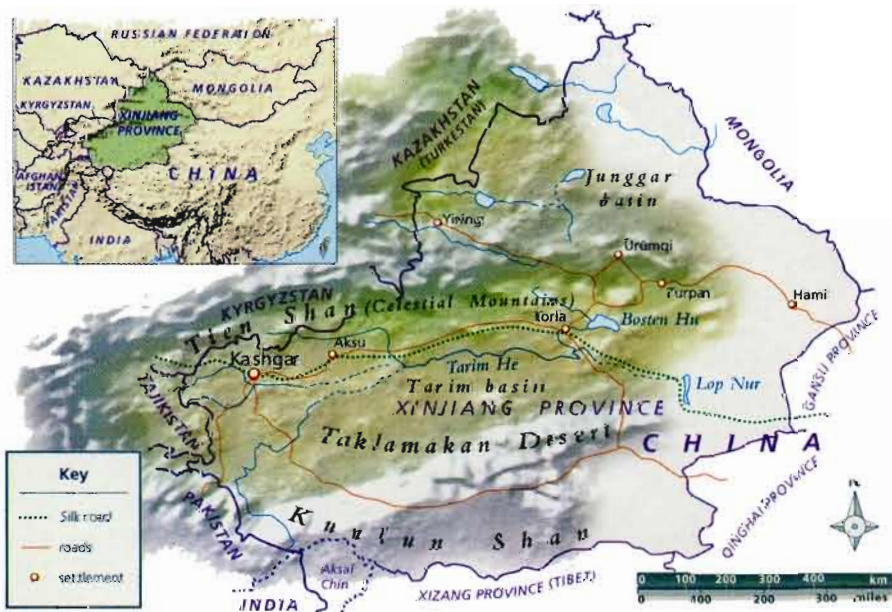
Winds of change

Modern Communist China has been in power here for 50 years, yet the people of Xinjiang – and of Kashgar in particular – are becoming restless. Even if the Chinese have hardly been the worst rulers they're increasingly unpopular. But in downtown Kashgar, a 20-metre high statue of Chairman Mao is as much a Communist proclamation as a piece of sculpture: "We are here – to stay!" One wonders if, on gloomy days when the town is sepia-tinged with dust like an old print and calls to prayer waft through the streets, the Chinese population find it reassuring, if not aesthetically pleasing.

On the horizon, however, are those newly-independent countries of the former Soviet Union. Other factors are the precious oil reserves in the Taklamakan and an unwelcome migration of workers from the east which threatens to become a flood.

Pakistani traders have been making summer trips to Kashgar since the Karakoram Highway opened in 1982. There was a certain novelty and Muslim "brotherhood" at first, but now, with the Taliban in Afghanistan and a more radically Islamic Pakistan, Beijing must ponder their relatively fluid borders. One senses the start of a new Great Game with less gentlemanly rules.

Below: the map highlights Kashgar's remoteness. It's located farther from the sea than almost anywhere in the world



This page: Families on their way into Kashgar. At market, stallholders offer fruit, fabrics and traditionally made noodles, while children cut slices of sweet melon

