

5 – TO KASHGAR



Saturday, 13 May

Day one of the three-day bus trip to Kashgar. I rose at about eight o'clock this morning and, together with the Japanese girl, checked out and walked to the bus station. Thanks to the usual confusion, we discovered that our bus would be leaving at ten o'clock Beijing time – not nine as printed on the ticket. We therefore had plenty of spare time at our disposal. As the Australian girl was waiting for her bus to Ürümqi, I chatted to her. A while later the Japanese girl and I discovered the whereabouts of our bus, walked over to it and joined a large group of Uighur people. We were quite surprised to discover that most of the women were sobbing. As some elderly ladies wore white veils over their caps, I assumed that this signified that they were in mourning. A local girl who could speak good Chinese asked some questions and we pieced together the whole story. A young girl, who looked as though she was in her early teens, was about to be brought off to Pakistan to be married. Because she would have to leave her people, her absence would be regarded as being 'as sad as death'.

A local dignitary, possibly an imam, now appeared on the scene and said comforting words to the girl's grandmother, who spoke to him in a very deferential manner. The sobs and tears continued as we boarded the old bus; I sat by a window and was joined by the imam and a mullah. As we prepared to leave, my two distinguished companions leaned out of the

window, extended their hands to various people, mostly men, wished them 'Salaam alaikum' ('Peace be with you'), and stroked their beards. By now the men were in tears and even I found it hard to control my emotions.



The bus to Kashgar and the scene of departure, Turfan

Finally the driver set off without any ceremony and we left, waving to the huge crowd that had gathered to bid farewell to the young girl. The women in the bus now dried up their tears, rearranged themselves, and we drove out of the city and into the desert. The journey had begun.

We now found ourselves out in the middle of nowhere, with little or nothing to see but sand and rocks. Because of our early start and the motion of the bus, most of the people, including myself, began to nod off. At some stage we passed through some dry, dusty mountains (probably part of the range known as Tian Shan or 'Heavenly Mountains'), where the scenery was quite dramatic. From here we descended to a scruffy town. During the day we made various stops for calls of nature and meals – generally desert for

the former and small towns for the latter. The food on offer was very basic: mostly bowls of noodles and bread. I had lunch with the Japanese girl; she was able to read the Chinese menu and select something decent to eat. In typical Japanese style, she organized the dishes and chopsticks on the table and poured tea into my cup. I was careful about what I ate as hygiene was probably not high on the list of priorities here.

It was obvious that this was a very poor part of the country; the locals were dirty and badly dressed. The people on the bus were good-humoured and very tolerant, especially the young children, but I found that I could not really warm to them as I could to the Chinese. They were quite different in appearance, dress and attitude. Most of the men looked shifty and I felt that I could not trust them. There were about five or six very devout men on the bus who said their prayers regularly; when no water was available for ritual washing, they used the sand from the desert. Five times during the day they withdrew themselves from the others, performed their ablutions, then prostrated themselves in the direction of Mecca. I never heard these men speaking Chinese.



The road to Kashgar through Xinjiang province

Occasionally some of the local music was played over the loudspeakers in the bus, which provided a little entertainment during the long journey. In between meals, the locals chewed hunks of bread, drank from their water bottles or ate various seeds and nuts, spitting out the husks on to the floor. Soon the bus was filthy. My cold, which had turned very thick by now, continued to bother me and I frequently had to blow my nose. The locals, when they did this, simply used their fingers and blew on to the floor. Added to this was the constant cacophony of hawking and spitting.

During the day we probably passed through the towns of Taksun and Komishi – which was which I had no idea, for nobody seemed to know and

anyhow all the towns looked the same. We finally arrived at Korla late in the evening. This was where the rail line finished. We followed the tracks after the station and they stopped in the middle of nowhere. Presumably they would eventually be extended to Kashgar. We were now dumped at a filthy hotel just beyond the town. While the locals paid only ¥4 for a bed, we were expected to pay ¥10. Two girls, one Portuguese and the other Australian, argued with the woman in charge, but to no avail. While some of us fetched sleeping bags to camp in the reception area, Rita got fed up and paid ¥10 for accommodation in a room with five beds. Later, when nobody noticed, we crept in and joined her. Most of us got into the beds except for an Australian couple, who spread their sleeping bags on the floor.

Needless to say, the door soon burst open and members of the staff came in, demanding that we leave. We refused to budge and said that we would only pay ¥4. When we were told that they would call the police, the Portuguese girl said, 'Call them if you wish'. This really upset the members of the staff, who already had lost enough face, for several of the local people on the bus simply could not afford the ¥4 and had decided to sit outside during the night. The hotel people went away, came back and asked for ¥5. This we quite happily gave them, and the Australian couple got a room to themselves. Hopefully we had taught these people a lesson – that it did not pay to rip off foreigners in such a dreadful dump. Although the place was exceedingly noisy, thanks to the locals, we did manage to get some sleep.

Sunday, 14 May

Up early this morning for a quick wash in the large communal washbasin at the entrance, which actually had hot water, and then off again in the old bus. As I had been disturbing the two men beside me when I wanted to get out yesterday, I now opted for the aisle seat. However, because there was less fresh air here and more petrol fumes, I felt even more groggy today and slept even more. The two men on my right were rather large, which meant that I now only had about half a seat to sit on – soon my right buttock became quite sore! In addition to this, there was very little legroom for the average Westerner – the unfortunate Australian chap had nowhere to put his long legs.

The scenery and towns that we passed today looked exactly the same as yesterday's. Between the towns we could see the Tian Shan mountain range on our right and the sand dunes of the mighty Taklamakan desert on our left. Occasionally we passed a lake.

At one stage we stopped for petrol, which meant that we all had to get off the bus. It was now spitting with rain – quite an unusual phenomenon in this region, I thought. Here I answered a call of nature and discovered that I

had now developed a dose of the runs – I had been feeling a little queasy earlier. Shortly afterwards I had to nip back to the toilet again.

Later, when we drove off, I had to ask the driver to stop. I hopped out into the hot desert to do my business. Feeling better, I climbed back on board, only to discover that the driver was relieving himself in the same manner! However, we were soon on the move again.

Nothing of note happened during the rest of the day. Instead of eating, I drank as much as I could. Everybody's medicine was in their bags up on the roof. The journey was now becoming quite tedious and uncomfortable.

We finally came to a stop at a sleepy little town and were brought to a most dreadful mosquito-ridden hotel. Seeing the lady writing out bills for ¥3, the driver told her to write down ¥10. We refused point blank to pay this amount, cursed the driver roundly, and marched off to a much better place with very few mosquitoes, where we only paid ¥2. The accommodation was very basic, in rooms containing three beds with mosquito nets, but it was quiet and comfortable enough. The bus driver, whom we had nicknamed 'Fat Freddy', was a nasty bit of goods; his main objective seemed to be to select the worst possible accommodation both for us and the locals, overcharge us and to cream off the profit for himself. We would be glad to see the end of him!

Monday, 15 May

Up at seven this morning, while it was still dark, and away on the bus at eight. Today I sat beside the Japanese girl. Shortly after setting off, we stopped at a mosque and all the locals got out in order to say their morning prayers. However, as before, only the small group of devout men said their prayers five times during the day, and the rest of the people did not bother.

As by now I had not eaten for some time, I felt quite weak. However, when we stopped at a little village at about eleven o'clock and woke up the locals by beeping the horn, I bought a hunk of naan bread and ate it all with some tea. We did not spend much time in this desolate spot, but set off again. We had been told that we would reach Kashgar at five o'clock this evening; this piece of welcome news greatly raised our spirits. Once again, meal times were erratic; we ate whenever we reached a suitable venue that had food. This morning's meal actually proved to be our last proper meal until we reached Kashgar.

After we passed a couple of large lakes, we arrived at Artush, which meant that we were only one hour from Kashgar. Shortly afterwards we stopped at a military checkpoint and then, in the outskirts of the town, turned into a petrol station. Once again, this meant that we all had to get out of the bus. We sat in the shade and the Australian girl produced a cheap Japanese recorder, on which she tootled a couple of tunes. Several of the

locals gathered around her. I asked to try the instrument and found that some of the fingerings were quite different from what I was used to. However, I managed to play a few Irish melodies and some other tunes.

Shortly afterwards it was time to clamber aboard the bus for the last time and drive off into Kashgar's town centre. By this stage I was not too surprised to find that it was a real dump of a place – certainly not what I was expecting, having read various descriptions of the town. It looked like any other scruffy Chinese city, except that there was a definite Muslim feel about the place because of the several mosques that we passed. On the way to the bus station, we passed a huge statue of Chairman Mao in the main square.



The main square in Kashgar, with a large statue of Chairman Mao

As soon as we got out of the bus, we were accosted by several donkey-cart drivers, all offering transport to the various hotels. Rita decided to go to the best hotel and, having negotiated a price, set off alone in her donkey cart. The Japanese girl went off on her own to the Chini Bagh Hotel – the place where I had planned to stay, but now, having been persuaded by others, I decided to try another and possibly cheaper hotel. I joined four people from the bus and somehow we and our luggage managed to fit into one donkey cart, though it was a tight squeeze. After a good deal of haggling, we managed to get the price reduced to just one yuan each. Off we went and seemed to go all round the world to reach the Pakistani-run hotel that we had decided on: the Noor Bish. We later learned that the circuitous route was taken in order to avoid meeting the police, who probably would not have allowed so many people in one cart.

Although I was not too surprised, the others were furious when we stopped at the Chini Bagh hotel. The driver looked rather bewildered when we insisted that he take us to the Noor Bish, even though we had asked to be brought there at the start of the journey. Now he did not seem to know

where to go. He had to ask directions and we turned up a narrow alley nearby. Fortunately the hotel turned out to be not far away. When we handed the driver the money that he had agreed upon at first, he gave out vociferously in the Uighur language, demanding more. We just left him ranting and raving, and entered the small hotel. In the courtyard, sitting around a table piled with bits of food and bottles of beer, were some rather spaced-out young people that I did not like the look of.

The price was cheap enough at ¥6 a night, but just as we were filling out the forms, the Japanese girl suddenly appeared, looked around and said that the Chini Bagh hotel was much better and that the price was the same. As I did not like the look of this place, I decided to move. The English and Portuguese girls also came with me. We walked to the Chini Bagh, a collection of various pleasant old buildings in a compound, and found our way to the reception desk. We discovered that the price was actually ¥6.50, but that did not bother us. I was led by a very pleasant Chinese girl to a five-bed dormitory near the entrance, in which I found two Japanese lads. They were quite friendly; one of them offered me a bun. Later, after I had washed myself with a some hot water (the showers would not be opened until nine o'clock), the two lads proposed that we go out to eat. We walked out of the complex and down the road a little until, after a little bit of confusion, we found a small and not particularly clean Chinese restaurant. The Japanese fellows were able to read the menu and choose some good dishes. The waitresses were friendly; a sunny smile from one of the girls suddenly brought back a flood of pleasant memories. The Uighur girls and women did not behave like this; although good humoured, they lacked the coquettishness of the Chinese girls.

After a good meal, we left immediately after we had finished eating and had paid up – a typically Japanese and Chinese habit. Back at the hotel, we made for the showers, which were now open to the guests. They were the worst that I had ever encountered. At least two of them were out of order; the spray nozzles were all missing, the doors were broken, and the place was filthy. In addition, the water (both hot and cold) kept coming and going. As I was tired by now and was in need of a good wash, I lost my cool and cursed loudly. However, I survived the ordeal and emerged clean.

Tuesday, 16 May

This morning I woke at a reasonable hour to discover that my nose was stuffed. As soon as I was washed and dressed, I breakfasted on a couple of buns that my Japanese companions had kindly left for me. I then wandered out and, using a map that the lads had given me, went in search of the CAAC office, for I wanted to fly out of here as quickly as possible. I walked along a narrow alley, passing the Noor Bish hotel, various stalls and

restaurants, and made my way to the main square where the much photographed Id Kah Mosque was situated. It certainly looked more impressive in the photographs that I had seen. At this hour of the morning, it was locked.



The Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar, Xinjiang province

I looked around for the CAAC office, but not being able to find it, I asked somebody, for my map seemed to bear little resemblance to the layout of the city. A helpful Uighur lad told me where to go and wrote the name of the place in the Uighur script so that, if I got lost again, I could ask one of the locals.

Off I went and soon discovered that the office was quite a distance away. I passed a park and a bus terminus, where I thought the place might be, but still unable to find it, I asked again and eventually found the building farther down the main street. The office was typically Chinese – dilapidated – and the members of staff seemed to be doing anything except selling tickets. Eventually I got a girl's attention and asked her about flights to Ürümqi. As Thursday's flight was full, I would have to wait until the next flight on Saturday 20th. I was a little bit annoyed to discover this, but there was nothing I could do about it. I paid her ¥378 FEC for a ticket, put it away safely and left.

Next I tried to find the long-distance bus station, for I had decided to fill in the time over the next few days by making a return trip to Tashkurgan up in the Pamir mountains, just a short distance from the border with Pakistan. As my map was useless and I could not find the bus station, I had to ask for directions once again. When I eventually arrived at it and asked for a ticket to Tashkurgan, I was told that I must buy it in the hotel where I was staying. No doubt this was a tactic for overcharging foreign tourists.

I left after this fruitless mission and headed for the post office, where I sent off some more postcards and purchased some stamps. Afterwards, I walked back towards the hotel, but stopped at the Chinese restaurant for something to eat. Finding it closed, I went into another little eating place nearby and had a reasonable lunch of noodles.



The old quarter in Kashgar, Xinjiang province

After I had eaten, I returned to the hotel and to the relative quiet of my room, which was now empty. After I had spruced myself up, I went to the reception area at four o'clock and asked for a bus ticket to Tashkurgan. I was asked to return at five. To fill in the time, I sat outside in the shaded square and began to bring my diary up to date. At 5.30 I returned to the reception desk and succeeded in buying the bus ticket from a rather reluctant young lady who seemed to be more interested in counting her money. People behind counters in this country, I discovered, never made any attempt to serve a customer – one had to shout for assistance. Either they were not

trained properly or they couldn't be bothered doing their job as the state would continue to pay them their weekly wages, regardless of their standard of work. Surprisingly, the ticket cost me about ten yuan cheaper than the advertised price: I paid about ¥34 FEC. I was told that the bus would leave the hotel at 10.30 a.m. tomorrow, Beijing time.

I then returned to the little square and continued writing until I had done enough. I then looked around a shop that had just opened and bought a couple of things for myself.

Later I sauntered down to the Chinese restaurant, where I ordered a meal with the help of my little notebook. Because of a misunderstanding, I ended up with a huge meal that I was unable to finish. The chicken, which I had specifically asked for and was looking forward to, turned out to be the worst dish: thin strips of meat attached to lots of bones and served with very spicy vegetables. Because of the size of the meal, it was expensive, but I did not mind. The staff showed great interest in me and the waiter wanted to look at my notebook. He corrected the characters for 'Tashkurgan', which I had transcribed from my big guide book – two of them were missing!

I paid up, said goodbye, and returned to the hotel, where I managed to wash myself without going near the filthy showers. I then pottered about until bedtime. Today's peregrinations around Kashgar had not altered my view of the city: it still looked like a dreadful dump. At least I would be able to escape up into the Pamirs tomorrow – an experience that I had been looking forward to as I had long been interested in this region.