

6 – TASHKURGAN AND KASHGAR



Wednesday, 17 May

I was up this morning at about nine o'clock Beijing time (seven o'clock local time). I did some repacking and, after I had eaten some breakfast, I washed and dressed. I then left my rucksack with the staff at the reception desk and checked out. Afterwards I sat outside and wrote more of my diary while waiting for the bus. There were two buses parked within the hotel compound; at 10.30 one of them drove off with nobody in it. Fearing that it might have been my bus, I returned to the reception building and asked again about the time. I was informed that as people bound for Pakistan would be travelling on it, they would have to go through customs and that this would take a long time. The bus I needed, however, would probably not leave until 1.30 p.m.! I now walked over to the customs building and spoke to one of the officials, who looked at my ticket and told me that it was not for Tashkurgan, but for Sost, the Pakistani checkpoint.

I footed it back to the reception building, where the stupid woman who had sold me the ticket simply crossed out 'Sost' and changed the destination to Tashkurgan. When I returned to the official, he was satisfied. He now indicated that I should wait with a large and noisy group of Pakistanis and some other people. While the Pakistanis pushed, shoved and heaved large suitcases about, I sat on my camera case and continued writing my diary. I

also chatted to some of the Europeans who were waiting with me. Later I went off to buy myself a large hunk of naan bread, which I ate by way of an early lunch.

Much to my surprise, the Pakistanis and their luggage then disappeared and just twelve people (all Westerners) boarded the bus, which set off at about 1.30 p.m.

The first part of the journey was not very interesting; we drove through the ugly outskirts of Kashgar along straight roads lined with trees. On the whole, the region looked more fertile than what we had been seeing so far, and in the distance could be glimpsed the outlines of the mighty Pamir mountains. Every now and then I was able to see people of different ethnic backgrounds working in the fields; although we were still in the Kashgar area, the influence from across the border was already noticeable.

Not long afterwards we stopped in a dusty one-street village for lunch. All that was available was bread, though there was a restaurant that served noodles. Acting on somebody's advice, I bought two very hard pastries filled with a tiny scrap of grisly mutton, and a can of beer. These I consumed as a supplement to my earlier lunch while wandering around. Although the driver had given us ten minutes to eat, it was a long time before we actually moved off.



The Pamirs

When we finally did, we now began to approach the mountains. Dark clouds shrouded the higher peaks and the weather looked threatening. Soon we were driving through valleys between brown rugged mountains; here and there a white snow-capped peak would shine brightly whenever there was a dazzling burst of sunshine. I took out my camera and began snapping some shots. I was now in my element, for here at last I was seeing what I considered to be proper scenery!



The Pamirs

The farther we went and the higher we climbed, the more dramatic the scenery became. At times the ground was sandy, and at other times it was green and lush. I was on the lookout for Mount Kongur, which should have been somewhere on our left; certainly there was a mighty mountain that reached up into the clouds. At one stage we entered a huge flooded valley, where the mountains looked most unusual, and we then swung around to the left. We now found ourselves crossing lush pastureland in which yaks, goats and sheep grazed. A huge mountain, possibly Muztagh Ata, towered above the scene.

We stopped at this heavenly spot for our evening meal. Most of us got out, stretched our legs and looked around, taking photographs. I spoke to an Italian lad who was a photographer; he said that he would return here tomorrow to photograph the scene as the sun was now in the wrong position. Only later did I venture into the dark and filthy restaurant, where I ate a big bowl of rice and vegetables: the meal was basic but filling.



Lake Kambul, Pamir region

We then set off again and then, a few miles farther on, passed two lakes: a small one on the right and then the large Lake Kambul on our left. Around the lakes stretched fertile pastureland, where we could see the locals' animals. It looked beautiful here.

Next we started a sharp climb up the side of a ridge by means of hairpin bends and reached a pass at about 16,000 feet – we could feel the temperature dropping. Far beneath us we could see a sandstorm, which eventually subsided. The bus picked up speed when we went hurtling down the other side of the ridge along a fairly straight road. Earlier I had to stop the bus in order to answer a call of nature; now I felt an urgent need to do the same again. I banged at the door of the driver's compartment, but he could not hear me because of the roar of the engine. Mercifully there was a military checkpoint ahead and so I was able to hop out. Just as I had feared, I had a dose of the runs once again. I returned to the bus feeling a little shaky and a French lady very kindly gave me an Imodium tablet.



Near Tashkurgan

Our journey now continued at a steady speed as the road headed downhill for most of the journey. It grew darker now, but at one point the light was magical when the evening sun peeped out from behind the dark clouds. This area did not look remotely like China. The last magnificent view before we reached Tashkurgan was of a bright moon shining from a dark blue sky between the mountains.

After this we suddenly took a left turn and found ourselves in a long and ugly-looking Chinese street, then stopped outside what I presumed was the Pamir Hotel. It was miserably cold here; although I had put on all the clothes that I had brought, I was still shivering. My sick stomach didn't help matters much. I asked two people what time in the morning the bus would leave; the bus driver said 10.30 Beijing time, and a Pakistani fellow told me it would leave at 5 a.m. Presumably he was referring to Pakistani time, which was four hours behind Beijing time.

The Italian photographer and I left and found a small, basic hotel where my companion had stayed once before. We paid ¥8 each and were brought to a small room containing three beds and a dusty table. I asked the fellow in charge where the toilet was, but he seemed to be unfamiliar with the word. I then asked him about tomorrow's bus, which he said would leave at 8 a.m., as my Italian friend had said. What a mix-up!

I found the toilet myself and, after a quick wash from a big tank of water, jumped into bed in order to keep warm. At this point my companion went out for a meal. As I did not feel warm enough under the thick duvet, I had to get up and put on more clothes. I finally drifted off to sleep.

Thursday, 18 May

When I got up at 7.30 this morning it was still dark. During the night I had seen a full moon shining from a clear sky, but now it was cloudy. I was not the slightest bit surprised to find the place lifeless and nobody at the bus stop. I returned to my room, drifted off to sleep again, and was woken just before nine by the hotel owner banging on the window and telling me that the bus to Kashgar was about to leave. This was the same young man who had told me yesterday that the bus would leave at eight!

In no hurry, I ambled back to the bus stop, where I found a large group of young people standing out in the cold. By now a series of loudspeakers attached to the street lights had burst into life with spirited military music. As in Qinghai province two years ago, the clock had been turned back some twenty years or more, and we were being reminded forcibly that we were in the People's Republic of China. The small town and its concrete buildings, illuminated by the harsh street lights, looked absolutely ghastly at this early hour of the morning.

As there was no sign of anything happening, I went with some friendly Pakistani lads into a little hut, where we sat around a smoking fire and chatted. Later I sat in a nearby restaurant and talked to some of the European travellers.

The bus finally turned up at ten o'clock, and there was bedlam as people boarded it and their luggage was put on the roof. As I did not know where I was supposed to buy a ticket, I went off with a man to purchase one. This time I was able to pay in RMB, though at a slightly higher price. When I went outside again, the bus suddenly drove off! The Chinese people nearby reassured me by saying, '*Mǎshang lái*' (literally 'On-horse come': 'It'll be back immediately'). 'Immediately' turned out, in true Chinese style, to be quite a long time, during which I shifted about in order to keep warm.

At last the bus returned and I clambered aboard, rejoining an English chap with whom I had been speaking. He told me that the bus had simply driven down the road and back!

We finally set off at 10.30 by my watch (regardless of what the local time might have been). Fortunately it felt a little warmer on the bus. Some Pakistani chaps sitting opposite, who seemed to be genuinely friendly, offered us some of their Chinese brandy, which they had bought here as alcohol was banned in their homeland. We accepted their kind offer and I gratefully sipped some for 'medicinal reasons', hoping that it might heat me up and settle my stomach.

The Pakistanis were typically noisy and boisterous, in contrast to a young lady sitting in front of us. At first I had taken little notice of her; because of her dark skin, the muted colours of her clothing, and the fact that she had drawn a black cotton shawl around her head to keep herself warm, I had assumed that she might be Indian or Pakistani. However, when she turned around to us and began speaking in a gentle but heavily accented voice, I realized that she was French. She explained that she had just entered China via Pakistan and wanted to go to Tibet through the 'back door' (via Kashgar or Khotan here in Xinjiang province). Although my English companion believed that Tibet had once again been opened to foreign tourists, I doubted very much that she would be let into the troubled region by this route. As she had very little money, no guide book, no map, no idea of how she would get to her destination, and could speak no Chinese, she began asking us for advice. Being such a gentle soul, I had no idea of how she would survive in China, even though she had managed to travel through India and Pakistan on her own. We did our best to answer her questions and I was determined to help her if I could.

As the bus slowly climbed up the slope to the pass, the weather turned positively wintry and it began to snow. What a change from the previous day! As the snow blocked the windscreen completely, the driver had to stick

his head out of his side window to see where he was going. Finally we reached the top of the pass and went tumbling down the other side of the mountain. The scenery that I had seen and admired the day before had now been totally transformed by the snow, though I did not pay too much attention to it today as I did not have a window seat. However, I did admire the mighty Muztagh Ata mountain, which could be seen from just about everywhere. I now realized that I could have mistaken it for Mount Kongur during the previous day's journey.

For some strange reason, we did not stop anywhere today for lunch, but just kept hurtling downhill. I nodded off to sleep for a short while. As today was more or less a repeat of yesterday, the scenery did not make such an impression on me. Soon we saw a patch of blue sky appearing; it increased in size as we dropped down and left the mountains behind. The temperature now began to rise, and when we reached the familiar desert area and the approach to Kashgar, the layers of clothing that we were wearing were quickly discarded. By now I was able to appreciate the classic beauty of my new French acquaintance, Nicole. I happily joined her and she explained that she was looking for the cheapest place to stay in Kashgar. She had found a hotel in somebody's guidebook, the existence of which I doubted as I had not seen it in the city centre. I tried to persuade her to stay at the Chini Bagh hotel with me and let me pay for her. At first she thanked me and declined my offer, but as she was tired by the time we arrived in Kashgar and not in the humour for a long walk to the other end of the town, she followed me to the reception area of the Chini Bagh. I booked a room and, despite Nicole's protestations, paid for us both. A young Chinese soldier appeared and brought us to a very comfortable room with three beds, which we discovered we would be sharing with a girl, who (I presumed) was English.



Chini Bagh hotel

When we arrived, the girl was sitting on a balcony overlooking the outskirts of the city, studying a book of the Uighur language. The room had

all the appearances of having been used by her for some time. She seemed to be a nice girl; she admitted to loving Kashgar and its people. All of a sudden, Kashgar did not seem to be such a bad place after all! It was delightful to sit down with her and Nicole on the cool veranda, sip tea and chat. I now learned that the girl was from New Zealand, had Irish connections, and that her name was Brenda.

As Nicole now began to tell us about herself, the reason for her kind and gentle nature soon became clear. She was an art teacher who had studied and embraced Buddhism. She had travelled to southern India to study at a monastery built for exiled Tibetans, and she had married a young Tibetan man, aged twenty-five, a short while after she had met him. By now she had been married for just one year. Her husband had not minded her going off and travelling on her own – no doubt he did not want to go to China and return to Chinese-occupied Tibet. Nicole's purpose in travelling to his home country was to see it for herself, meet some of his people, and convey messages to them. I feared that if she somehow managed to wriggle into Tibet, she would surely get herself into trouble. I now realized that beneath her almost frail exterior lay a very strong character, full of determination. I was fascinated by her and her attitude to life, which was quite different from mine.

Later we went off to have a shower, for we were filthy after our long journey. Afterwards I brought her to my 'local' eatery for a good meal. As the poor girl was obviously very hungry, she ate well and enjoyed her simple meal. Once again I was happy to pay for her, though she was reluctant to let me do so. She was most appreciative.



Kashgari children

Afterwards we went for a stroll through the old quarter, which I had not seen properly before and now found quite fascinating. We passed many local people selling their home-made wares – just about everything was

available here. We had a look at the mosque and then headed down towards the bus terminus to see if we could find the cheap hotel that Nicole had wanted to stay in. We searched around the area for a while, asking various people and enquiring about the prices in other hotels but, just as I had expected, our search was fruitless. Tired by now, we gave up and, deciding that the Chini Bagh was the best place to stay, returned to it, passing through various narrow laneways in the old quarter.



A Uighur man in Kashgar's old quarter

Back in our room, which we now had to ourselves, we discussed travel plans and routes. I gave her as much help as I could by consulting my guide book. We then began to write our diaries. Nicole proved to be a wonderful companion and did not mind me sitting close to her on her bed as we wrote and chatted to each other. We discussed all sorts of things, personal and general, and I learned quite a lot from her.

Later she excused herself and went to bed, sliding into her sleeping bag and undressing discreetly as she did so. I wrote my diary for a little longer and then, as it was late, I turned off the light and prepared to go asleep. Later Brenda returned with three friends who sat outside on the veranda, talking until the small hours of the morning. This dragged on interminably.

Finally the girls left noisily and Brenda, after she had undressed and got into bed, put on her headphones and listened to some noisy pop music that I could hear distinctly from my side of the room. After a while the music stopped and I fell asleep.