

The Xinjiang city is known for its remote beauty and friendly people

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At 4,000m above sea level, the sky takes on an otherworldly blue hue. Perched on the old fortress in the town of Tashkurgan, we could see the barren mountains give way to a veritable oasis.

Tashkurgan, sited on a plateau, is the last major town on the Karakoram highway before the Pakistani border. It is where the Tajik minority eke out an existence.

But our journey began, as many others have for centuries, 230km to the north-east in Kashgar, a city in Xinjiang whose name conjures up visions of the Silk Road and caravans of camels. The reality is, it is a city torn between its past and the ever creeping demolition ball of modernity. Xinjiang is in the far western part of China.

News of the old town's destruction is premature but no one seems able to give a definite answer as to how long it will remain.

The Id Kah Mosque, more impressive on the outside than inside, marks the heart of Kashgar, which itself marks the heart of Uighur culture. Here the names are more pious (they are usually Muslim and taken from the Quran, which is not the case in other parts of Xinjiang), alcohol abstention more strictly adhered to, and the prayers more solemn.

Wander down the streets surrounding the mosque and you will find yourself in a world of low-rise adobe back alleys. Stallholders hawk dried fruit, nan (bread) and girde nan (bagels).

While it is possible to easily spend many happy hours getting lost in the labyrinth, it is perhaps more educational to go on a tour. There are two areas of the old town that charge a 30 yuan (\$6) admission and provide an English- or Mandarin-speaking guide. They are not tourist traps. There are no souvenirs for sale or restaurants. What you get is a look into some people's homes.

The High Platform Old Town, whose oldest home dates back about 400 years, overlooks the Tuman River and is home to about 4,000 people.

My guide explained how to stop getting lost: Hexagonal stones on the path indicate through lanes, whereas normal bricks point to dead ends.

I also learnt that the low doors on buildings are to stop heat escaping in winter and to make people bow to the angels upon entry.

As elsewhere in Xinjiang, the Kashgar people are incredibly friendly. Children in the old town, on seeing a person with a camera, ask to be photographed and then crowd around excitedly looking at the result on the LCD screen.

A red banner towering above the road welcomes you to Kashgar Old City in the other area with an admission charge. Once the site of a palace in the Karakhan dynasty in the 10th century, it is now home to about 10,000 people.

In the 2 sq km area, there are no fewer than 15 mosques, all of them still being used. The area is also home to the oldest house in Kashgar at about 500 years old. Many of the residents keep pigeons for both racing and food purposes.

In addition to visiting the old town, tourists usually go by the busload to the Sunday market, where these days you are more likely to hear the Mandarin warning of "dao che qing zhuyi" (vehicle reversing, please be careful) from a reversing mechanised cart than the "posh" (Uighur for "coming through") of a farmer on a donkey cart.

Despite its name, the market operates every day. But in recent times, it has declined in popularity - do not expect any action before even 11am Beijing time. This is the place to buy tourist trinkets and Uighur knives. The livestock market is now outside the city and operates only on Sundays.

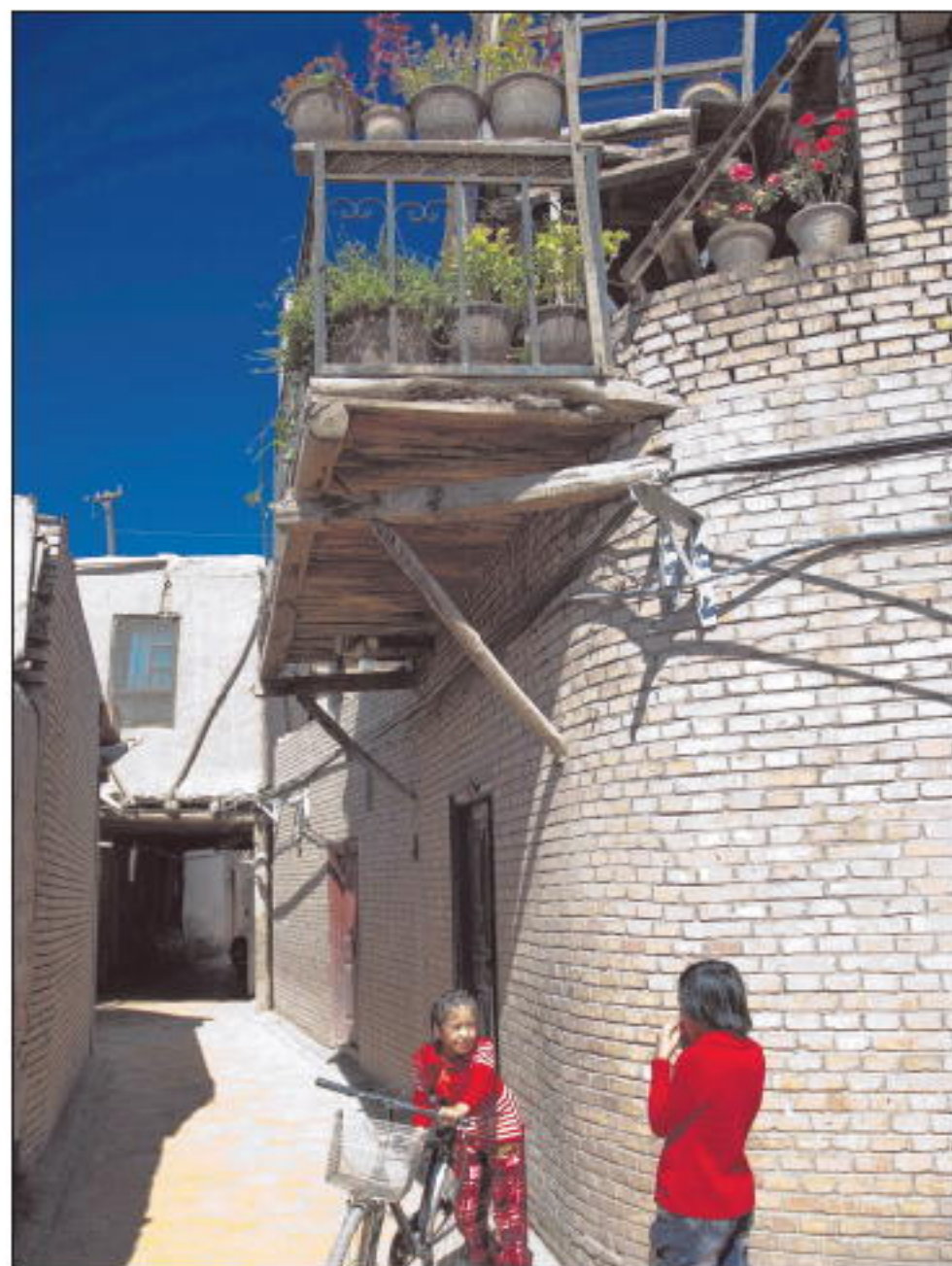
Apak Khoja's tomb on the outskirts of the city is well worth a visit. A powerful ruler in the 17th century, he had descendants who played an important role in shaping the area and the hegemony over it via competing powers such as Qing-dynasty China, Russia and Britain.

The tomb itself is ornately decorated with green, blue and brown tiles and on its grounds is one of the biggest mosques in Kashgar.

The tomb is also supposedly the resting place of Apak Khoja's granddaughter, known to Uighurs as Iparhan and to the Chinese as Xiangfei (fragrant concubine). In Uighur legend, she is a figure of resist-



An hour's drive from Bulungkul, Lake Karakul (above) is like a huge mirror for the Kongur (in the background) and Muztagata peaks. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MARK ANDREWS



The old town in Kashgar (above), where a palace in the Karakhan dynasty was sited, is now home to 10,000 people.



Id Kah Mosque (above) marks the heart of Uighur culture.

Getting there

There are no direct flights from Singapore to Kashgar. Take a flight to Beijing, Chengdu, Chongqing, Guangzhou, Shanghai or Xi'an. Then transfer to a flight that takes you to Urumqi. Full fares range from 2,040 yuan (\$416) to 2,840 yuan. Once in Urumqi, you can fly one hour 45 minutes to Kashgar (five flights a day, 1,490 yuan) or take a 25-hour train ride (two trains a day, up to 529 yuan for the most expensive "soft sleeper" ticket).



ance to the Qing emperor, Qianlong. Chinese stories, though, cast her as a figure of unity.

When leaving Kashgar along the Karakoram Highway, the route to take to go to Pakistan, the journey starts off surprisingly flat before lurching into the Pamir Mountain range. Camels graze the sides of near barren hillsides and are joined higher up by yaks. The traffic comprises mostly of freight and tourists.

Along the way, you pass Bulungkul, which means "lake in the corner" in Uighur. The two-lane tarmac road, in surprisingly good condition, hugs one shore as the other side gives way to a sand mountain towering over its reflection in the lake.

Lake Karakul (Black Lake), about an hour's drive from Bulungkul, offers hiking opportunities and a huge mirror for the Kongur and Muztagata Peaks. These mountains tower over 7,000m and have a permanent snow covering.

Unless someone is going on to Pakistan - the Pakistani border town of Sust is 120km away - for most people, Tashkurgan marks the end of the road on a route which traces the ancient Silk Road.

Most of the traffic across the border is freight and the road is closed during winter. If you are a tourist without a visa for Pakistan, you are unlikely to go farther. Moreover, this area is sparsely populated and Tashkurgan is the last major town before the border.

Looking out from the stone fortress that dominates the landscape and gives Tashkurgan its name, and over the green valley with its meandering stream, you, too, can feel that you have made a long trek.

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5 things to do

1 Do know that although Xinjiang officially runs on Beijing time, most Uighurs operate on Xinjiang time, which is two hours behind.

2 Do learn a few words of Uighur. The population is around 93 per cent Uighur and some cannot speak Mandarin or English.

3 Do be

prepared for the possible effects of altitude sickness if you are travelling up to Tashkurgan (above).



4 Do carry your passport at all times. The political situation in Xinjiang can be tense and you will often meet checkpoints or be asked on the street by police to show identification.

5 Do try the pomegranate juice, which costs 4 to 5 yuan. This super fruit has many supposed health-giving properties. Sugar is often mixed into the slightly tart juice.

2 don'ts

1 Don't take any photographs of the police or military in Xinjiang. You may find your pictures being examined.

2 Don't be too intimate in public. Kissing and holding hands are frowned upon in conservative Kashgar.



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