# Go West Easy Riders Go West

## FROM BEIJING IN THE EAST TO KASHGAR IN THE WEST, THREE CANADIANS TRAVEL ACROSS NORTHERN CHINA ON THE ROAD TRIP OF A LIFETIME

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAMERON DUECK

Wei hopped out of the back of a coal truck wielding a shovel and attacked the muddy hillside, trying to **carve out a path for our motorcycles**. We threw lumps of broken asphalt, bricks and stones into the soupy sludge—**anything to keep us out of the quagmire**.

**Our makeshift bypass was intended** to skirt a muddy pit that was more than a metre deep in the road we were travelling on. Semi-trucks, sunk past their axles and pushing mud with their bumpers, were being pulled through it by giant yellow earthmovers. The trucks were lined up for kilometres on either side of the scene, awaiting their chance to hitch themselves to the safety chain. Men stood in groups on the hillside, smoking and shouting into mobile phones, some trying to keep their shoes dry as they tiptoed through the mess, others dirty up to their chins as they manhandled the chain and worked to get traffic moving. Eventually we wrestled our bikes over an embankment and into a sheep pasture, where the mud was more manageable.

We were four days into a three-week, almost 6,000-kilometre trip across China that began in Beijing, the nation's modern seat of power in the East, and was to end in Kashgar, the ancient desert city on China's northwestern border, riding a road that snaked through the rolling hills of the Inner Mongolian grasslands.

Wei, Neil and I, all Canadians, had bought cheap Chinese-made 250cc street bikes in Beijing, and set off with few plans other than to ride west until we reached the end. But after the first few smooth days along National Highway 109, a key artery of our journey that was now taking us through Shanxi Province and Inner Mongolia, we hit the pit—the tarmac of the 109 was broken, and heavy rains had melted the road bed. "How long does this mess last?" we asked a man from a nearby village who had seized the opportunity to sell overpriced noodles to stranded drivers. Some of the truckers had been waiting now for five days, and the road was littered with empty soup containers, cigarette packs and beer bottles. "Oh, it gets much better in a few kilometres," the farmer-come-hawker promised us.

True to his word, a few kilometres later we were back on hard, dry road. That is, until the next bend when the 109 disappeared again, leaving us to drag our bikes through more knee-deep mud. In places, our path became so treacherous that each bike had to be moved individually, with one person on a bike and the other two steadying him and pushing forward with all their might. At one point the mud became so sticky that my front tire stopped turning entirely, and my bike went sliding out from under me, landing the whole of me in muck.

We weren't the only ones struggling. Standing on the side of 109 we met Tian Erxiao, an aged, frustrated farmer whose village of about a hundred families was left stranded without an access road. He told us the government tore the highway apart some seven months earlier, with a plan to improve and rebuild it. But the work was never completed, and he was adamant the government had been pressured to abandon it by a company who wanted traffic diverted to its parallel toll expressway. Tian, his voice raspy and high-pitched with anger, begged us to tell someone about the injustice.

However, many of the villagers who live along the 109 didn't seem to know where the highway ultimately led. "West," they would say, when we'd ask where it would take us. Many had never travelled outside their own county, and at times I had the feeling China's highways were criss-crossing a country bigger than they could imagine.


**OPENING SPREAD:** Tian Erxiao, a farmer living beside the destroyed portion of 109 highway, airs his complaints to Wei. **THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:** Wei scouts ahead for a path through the quagmire; Children with the author in Aksay, Gansu.

**China's highways are not all muddy** cow paths. We rode routes that were so new they had no name, signs, lines on the asphalt or even on-ramps. We'd spot them from afar while bumping along over rough gravel roads, or when truckers pointed them out as an alternative route. A short-cut over desert sand or a ditch, and we'd be back on asphalt that was glistening black and empty in front of us. Our maps were useless.

Our journey soon fell into a rhythm of highways and country roads, followed by spasms of urban congestion. Each night we left the open road to seek a hotel in a city or town, and experienced the jolt of urbanity that millions of Chinese farmers likely do when they leave fields to chase dreams in the city. In Datong, Shanxi Province, entire blocks of apartment towers rise to welcome people to urban life. And in Erdos, Inner Mongolia, a hardscrabble mining town until just a few years ago, neon-lit, five-star hotels appear by the streetful.

But as we travelled west, the welcome we received in each town was warmer and more elaborate every day. In one hotel, the manager brought us platters of fresh fruit to our room, excitedly shaking our hands. On another night, the young woman at the front desk gave me a ripe pomegranate and fistful of roasted chestnuts. In Qi Pan Jing, a mining town on the border of Inner Mongolia and Ningxia Province, a hotpot restaurant came to a standstill when we entered. Mr. Han, its owner, came to our table for toast after toast, first with red wine, then with baijiu, the potent liquor served across China. We learn that we are the first foreign diners ever to grace his restaurant, and he beams with excitement. His staff delivers platters of fruit, moon cakes and extra dishes to celebrate the mid-autumn festival.

Han is not the only one surprised to see foreign travellers in Qi Pan Jing. After dinner, our bellies full of baijiu and beer, we go looking for entertainment. First the taxi takes us to a karaoke lounge popular with the local coal bosses, but the entrance fee is out of our budget. We stop in front of a ramshackle building topped by a garish neon sign. The grimy door is ajar, and we open it to find two young women facing us. One girl covers her face and, peaking through her fingers, asks, "Are you really a foreigner?" Following our reply, she shrieks. "Heavens!" As soon as we're past the door it becomes clear we've entered a brothel. Behind the girl at the front desk I can see rumpled, sweat-stained beds and a small television. The air is sour and dank. A man stands in a doorway, buckling his belt. We thank them for their kind welcome, and head back to our hotel for an early night.

**From Qi Pan Jing we cut across Ningxia** Province, where we make a gamble and steer our bikes west onto the G30 freeway. Riding the freeway on a motorcycle is illegal in China, but the only other option is hundreds of extra kilometres on rough secondary roads, and we need to cover some ground. I am nervous the first time we speed toward a tollgate, weave around it and gun the engines in escape. The gate attendant comes running out of his booth, shouting and waving his arms, but we're long gone. We push our bikes hard to match the speed of traffic on the highway, exhilarated to see the kilometres fly by.

After a few hours of carefree speed, we turn off in search of fuel. As we try to slip through another tollgate, we're stopped by the police. Instead of issuing tickets or asking for bribes, the officer in charge tells us what we're doing is illegal—then suggests we stay on the freeway anyway, since it's the only good road in the area. He won't let us go without making us serve a purpose though, and asks us to pose next to a sign that lists a myriad of acts illegal on the G30—from having picnics to chasing sheep. As we pose beside the sign, rubbing our chins thoughtfully while pointing at it, he snaps away with his camera, then sheepishly asks if he can have his photo taken astride my bike. Though small by western standards, our bikes are considered powerful highway cruisers in China.

China's roads are choked with trucks. At first they frighten us as they push us to the side, roaring by without a hint of regard. But soon they become just another obstacle to dodge, and instead of warily watching their bumpers I begin to take note of their teams of drivers, sitting three abreast behind dirt-speckled windshields. I survey the truck brands, colours and loads. Dong Fengs were almost always blue or green, and mostly hauled coal. JACs were most often red, sometimes loaded with bleating, pungent sheep.

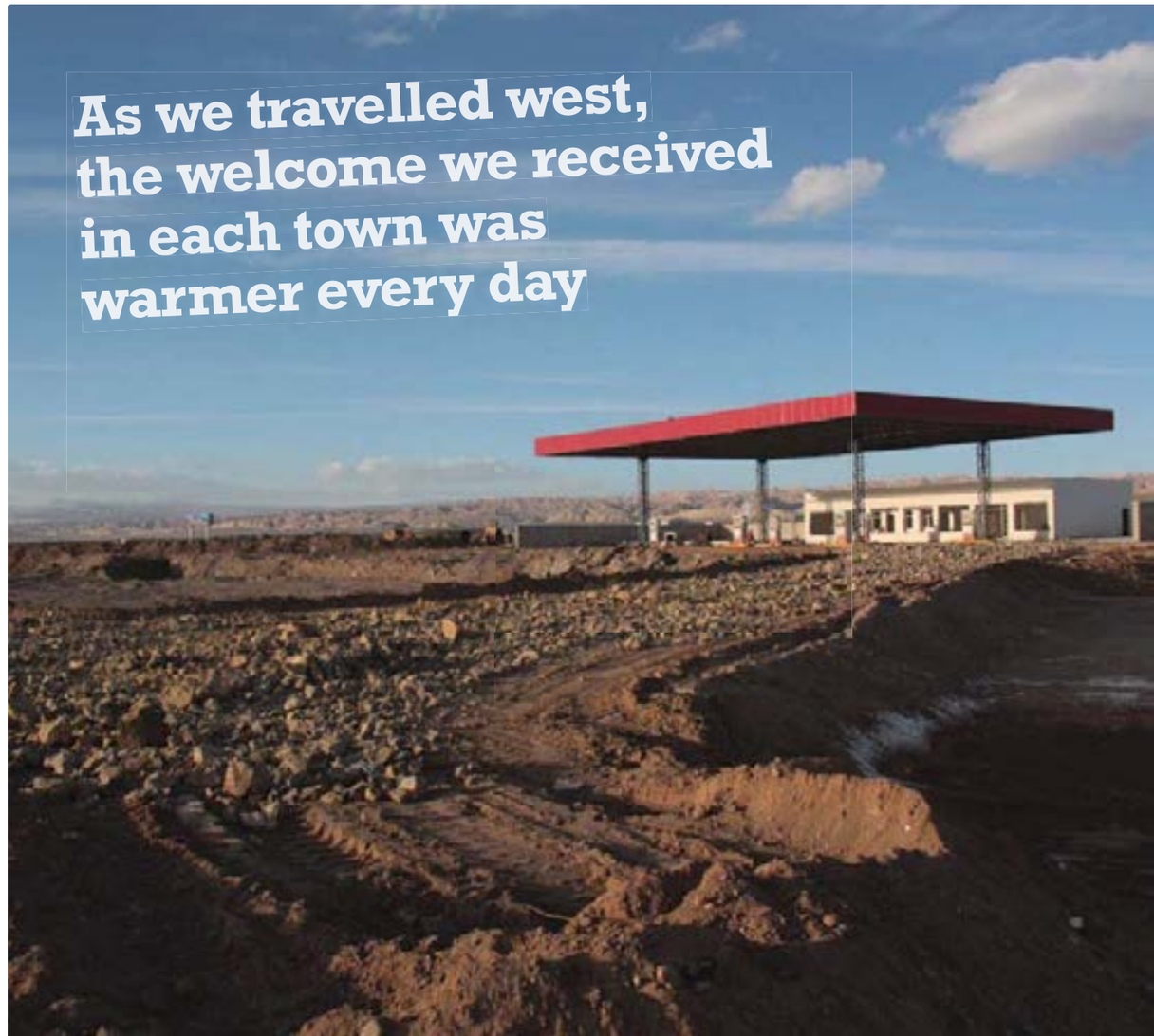
But many don't make the journey without a hitch—broken-down trucks litter the highways. As I roared by I saw drivers sprawled on the pavement in a bed of wrenches, staring at the guts of their beast and surrounded by dark puddles of oil. Never alone, teams of men would be standing around, puffing on cigarettes with blackened hands. Sometimes there were half a dozen men but only one truck, and I wondered where they all came from.

The G30 has taken us into the heart of the Hexi Corridor, a wide valley that leads northwest from the Yellow River toward Central Asia. The corridor was once marked by oases that ran along the northern side of the Tibetan Plateau, but its main feature now is a wide highway that skirts the Gobi Desert, and cuts through the Qilian Shan mountain range. The overcrowded cities of eastern China seem a world away; I can no longer imagine bumping elbows with anyone. The mountains are dun-coloured and devoid of vegetation, but the valleys are filled with farms. At a distance the sharp mountain ridges stand out against the sky, but then the G30 seems to veer toward them like it's about to attack, giving me a better look at their rocky flanks.

Save for the occasional blast of air and noise as trucks overtake us, the highways we ride on are often empty. Except for the road sweepers. Almost always women, road sweepers wear blaze orange jump-suits and bright head scarves, the only colours on an otherwise drab landscape. They sweep the highway with giant straw brooms, swinging left, right, left, right as they slowly walk, often alone, down the open road. The scale of their task, with the highway disappearing into a mirage in both directions, leaves an unnerving feeling.

But then the Great Wall surfaces, reminding me of what human toil, if commandeered in enough quantities, can achieve. It rises out of the desert floor just east of Zhang Ye, in Gansu Province. We knew it was there, often nearby, but we didn't seek it out. And then suddenly it

**THIS PAGE:** Shepherds moving their flocks to pasture at dawn in Southern Xinjiang.
**OPPOSITE:** One of thousands of new petrol stations along China's rapidly expanding highway network.



appeared, running parallel to the G30. The wall races us west, swooping through the same valleys and struggling up the same hillsides we ride on. A worn, adobe ridge that fades into the land, and then reappears, like a wavering ancient tune in the wind. There is no similarity here to the grand, rebuilt Great Wall that sits north of Beijing and attracts tour buses in droves. Here, it is stooped with age and stands only four or five metres tall. In places it has been knocked down to make room for development, including a gaping hole to allow the G30 to roar through.

Riding the highway has become trickier. I'm often in the last position, behind Neil and Wei. We've been stopped several times for illegally riding our bikes on the highways, so at one point we turn onto a rutted gravel road, dodging potholes and struggling to keep our bikes upright among fist-sized rocks and hairpin turns. First I wipe out after taking a corner too fast; then Wei follows suit, coming to rest on the side of the road in a cloud of dust. Darkness falls, and we discover that both Wei's and my headlamps are broken. Neil takes up a position behind us, and Wei and I drive in the light cast by his lamp, slowly creeping along the dust-choked road. Every passing truck pushes us to the side, leaving us in a thick puff of yellow dust. After 130 kilometres—30 of which we are feeling our way in darkness—we reach the small town of Yumen in Gansu Province, and find a hotel for the night.

Now we are exhausted and angry with each other. Wei, the only one fluent in Mandarin, has been navigating, and is now tired of playing tour guide to Neil and my constant badgering for information. "What does the sign say? What does it say on the map? Ask this guy if he knows where this road leads."

At first he entertained our requests, dutifully translating each exchange. Now we're met with silence, and Neil and I have blindly followed Wei's lead, unsure of where we're going or what he's planning. That night at dinner, as we pass around the dishes of lamb and noodles, the silence ends; there's a barrage of accusations and arguing, startling the waitress when she comes to the table. But we're exhausted, and after an hour of heated debate we make amends, then turn to bed.


**By our tenth day, we're riding along** the edge of the Gobi Desert, where Gansu and Qinghai provinces border Xinjiang, the large autonomous region in northwest China. The Gobi, with its blue sky and sand to the horizon, is the fifth largest desert in the world, larger than the nearby Taklamakan.

I am low on fuel and worried I won't make it to the next town. We pass a farmer and his son as they putter down the highway on a rusty tractor. The father is driving and his son is dozing in a trailer pulled behind. We slow down to ask how far away the next fuel station is but the farmer has no idea. We suspect the town of Dunhuang, which straddles the border between the Gobi and Taklamakan deserts, is only 50 to 60 kilometres away, but that's further than my fuel will carry me. It's late in the afternoon as we set off again, hopeful eyes scanning the horizon.

It's not long before my bike sputters and slows, the tires crunching on the gravel as I roll to a stop on the side of the road. All is silent except for the ticking of the hot engine. Soon Wei and Neil come back for me, and we agree they will ride on until they find fuel. In seconds the roar of their engines has died, and I am alone in the hot, dry Gobi.

It is searing hot as I peel off my helmet and heavy riding clothes. Wei has left me with a bottle of water. I take a few thirsty gulps, then stop—not sure how long I'll be here so best to save. A truck thunders by, filling the void, then my world hums again with silence. I check my watch. Only two hours till sunset. Nearby is a concrete signpost marking 117 kilometres—to where, or from where, I'm not sure. I position the bike so I can sit in its shade, pull out a book, and try to relax and enjoy the solitude. But soon I hear the chugga-chugga-chugga of the tractor we had passed earlier. Now the son is driving and the old man is bouncing on the bed of the trailer, his arm thrown over his eyes for shade. I scramble to remember how to ask for petrol in Mandarin, but they drive by without slowing. I take a careful sip of water, eye the remainder and tighten the bottle cap.

Then, thankfully, I hear the hum of an engine. Soon Neil is visible as he speeds toward me, his tires floating above the hot pavement. We pour the fuel into my tank and are off. As my bike winds up I look around me, and marvel at how the desert once again seems benign and beautiful.

Dunhuang sits on the eastern edge of the Taklamakan, and is the site of the Mogao Caves, or the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. The first caves are believed to have been dug in AD 366 as sites for meditation and worship; over the next millennium wealthy patrons, stopping in Dunhuang before setting off across the desert, paid to have them filled with statues and murals telling of their ancestral story. They also became a repository for manuscripts varying from mundane financial and court records, to ancient spiritual texts.

**ABOVE:** Farmers drying their chilli crop under the desert sun near Zhangyi, Gansu.
**RIGHT:** Man drives motor tricycle down Khotan streets.

The caves came to the attention of anthropologists and western adventurers in the early 1900s. Aurel Stein, a Hungarian-British archaeologist, travelled to Dunhuang and befriended the Buddhist monk guarding the Mogao Caves, convincing him to sell the bulk of the manuscripts for 220 pounds sterling. Stein's ability to buy such treasure sparked a mad rush for what remained in the caves. It's a fascinating story, one best told by Peter Hopkirk in his book, Foreign Devils on the Silk Road, which I read as I made my own way west.

Everyone from local treasure hunters to farmers and even Russian soldiers played a role in the pillaging of the caves over the centuries. Though the paint of the murals that remain is still brilliant after almost 2,000 years, they are marred with English and Chinese graffiti, while the statues are caked with dust after centuries of desert storms.

The Taklamakan itself is littered with ancient Buddhist cities that were built around desert oases. When water sources feeding the desert dried up, the cities were buried by its shifting sands, and have now been hidden for centuries. Stories and myths about the lost cities were passed on through generations, with little evidence to give them validity. Hsuan-tsang, the 7th-century Buddhist pilgrim, wrote of a city that succumbed to the sand after its inhabitants failed to carry out their religious duties.

This is where the famed Silk Road splits, with one route going north of the Taklamakan via Turpan and Urumqi, while the other goes south of the desert through Khotan to Kashgar. Once a key overland link between China, Europe, Persia, Arabia, northern Africa and Ancient India, the Silk Road was a spidery network of routes used by camel trains that ferried goods across continents, with traders playing an elaborate game of buying and re-selling relay. Everything from famed Chinese silk to jewels, tea and spices were passed along, and with the trade came an interchange of culture, ideas and religion.

As our own journey continues west along the Silk Road, we are among the few choosing the narrower road to the south of the Taklamakan.

**Just before noon on our 12th day of** riding, we enter the town of Aksay in far western Gansu Province, searching for a mechanic to fix Wei's leaking radiator. The bike shop is next door to the White Swan restaurant, and we're soon invited to a Uyghur wedding taking place there.

Most of the world's nine million Uyghurs live in Xinjiang, with a scattering in other nearby provinces like Gansu. A Muslim, Turkic people, the Uyghurs have long sought more independence from China, causing friction between them and the Han Chinese. In recent decades their region has seen an influx of Han Chinese from the east.

The wedding tables are laden with mutton, roasted vegetables, noodles and sweets. A team of men carve mounds of greasy, succulent lamb. The men wear three-piece suits with fedoras or beaded hats, and the women are wrapped in brightly coloured silks. The three foreign guests are dressed in motorcycle gear, clumsily trying to hide their mud-caked boots under the table.

The bride and groom are brought out, dressed in beaded red costumes. The bride is entirely hidden inside a tall, peaked veil. All that is visible are lithe brown hands, nervously toying with a corner of the veil. The groom gazes across the room with startled, wide eyes.

There are a few short ceremonial motions between the couple and the elders before the couple are led away. Then the party begins. Women throw candy into the air, and one lands in my soup, turning the broth a lurid pink. Soon the reception has hit full stride, with guests taking the microphone to croon love songs and

recite poetry.

Then our host appears, telling Wei our turn is next, as soon as the woman with the warbly voice finishes. We look at each other in alarm. Sing? Us? Wei is most worried about making a required speech before we are to sing, a duty that, thankfully, falls on him! I tell him he should describe our motorcycle journey, then explain that all three of us are single. We're impressed by the lavishness of the wedding, and we've noticed how beautiful the Uyghur women are. Tell them we plan to return home and earn some money, then return to get married ourselves. Wei raises his eyebrows. "Are you sure I should say that?" he asks. "They'll think it's funny," I reassure him, taking note of how far our bikes are from the back door.

Now for a song. The woman is in her final refrain and our time is coming. We each name the pop songs we know, but there's no overlap. We hear the last note of the woman's song and suddenly it's our turn. "Oh, Canada!" Wei suggests. "They won't recognize it." Hundreds of pairs of eyes are upon us. Wei makes his speech, interrupted only by gales of laughter and clapping from grandmothers. Then we pitch into the Canadian anthem; after a shaky first line, our voices strengthen and we find the right key. We're smiling broadly and standing tall—proud Canadian boys, in the Chinese hinterland.

**We have entered the oil country of** Qaidam Basin in Qinghai Province. The salt flats glitter in the sunshine, hinting at the riches buried under the sand. Nodding pump jacks stand out against the horizon. At night their neon lights create a garish blaze in the otherwise dark desert.

Mangnai Zhen is a rough-and-ready oil refining town full of migrant workers. It has garlands of oil and gas pipelines that run from refining plants to storage tanks. Everything is covered in a gritty film of dust. The only streets not dusty are those that are muddy. Chained dogs by the dozen growl and bark at the passing traffic. Grimy, dark-faced men walk the streets wearing red boiler suits; women teeter down in high heels and tight jeans, waving gaily at men.

Most of the workers are farmers from the northeast. "There are no jobs at home. Here there is work," says a young woman from Henan, as she works a petrol pump. She also wears a boiler suit, but dresses it up with blue eye shadow and red polish on her fingernails.

China officially operates on one time zone, known as Beijing time. But in Mangnai, and in every town to the west, they ignore officialdom and operate on local Xinjiang time, which is two hours earlier. When we attempt to check out of the hotel at 6:30 a.m. Beijing time, the receptionist is asleep, the parking attendant in a drunken slumber, and there are no restaurants open to serve us breakfast. The sun is also on local time, and we ride out of town in the dark, shivering in our saddles until the sun rises.

Two weeks after leaving Beijing we finally enter Xinjiang. The cars that crowded the roads in the east have given way to three-wheeled utility vehicles and creaky donkey carts. The roadsides are filled with sheep, broken trucks and men at prayer who throw down a carpet and turn toward Mecca, their heads dangerously close to the passing bumpers as they bob up and down in fervent ritual.

This is also the beginning of the Taklamakan Desert. Sven Hedin, one of the first Europeans to cross it, famously described it as "the worst and most dangerous desert in the world." In Uyghur, the name means "you go in and never come out."

The only road through southern Xinjiang is the 315. And, as we discover, if the 315 is out of commission for whatever reason, everyone waits. We are near Yutian when we come to a washed-out bridge, where we learn traffic has been backed up for four days. Actually, we have arrived just as a new temporary bridge is nearing completion, with workers having slung a short steel span over a river still raging with rain that fell in the mountains a week earlier.

Roaring machines move earth by the bucket-load, as people with orange vests hurry to and fro. Important people wearing suits are led to the scene, advisors explaining the situation with gestures and serious faces. Trucks loaded with rock manoeuvre around tight corners, trying to avoid the makeshift camp that has sprung up next to the bridge. Fruit sellers, grills loaded with smoking meat, and men with boxes of bottled water are capitalizing on the captive market. We wait for hours, chatting with the other travellers, smoking the cigarettes they give us, and waving off offers of marriage from women in the village.

The festivities come to a quick end when a man hurries up the embankment and waves us toward the bridge. "It's ready. Go, go!" Trucks, buses and cars all start their engines and edge toward it. We've made friends during the wait, and as we roll through the crowd people pound our backs and push us to the front of the queue. On our side of the bridge people are encouraging us to cross, but as soon as we're in the middle of it we have to stop, the workers on the other side shouting and waving us back so they can complete their job. We sit on our bikes and wait, watching the brown water swirl below the sparse steel framework of the new bridge. Finally the way is clear and we gun our engines, spinning gravel and dirt as we climb the embankment back onto the highway.

Our next stop is the ancient Buddhist capital of Khotan. Today, it is the centre of commerce for Xinjiang. We arrive in the morning and the streets are a flurry of donkey-drawn carts, buses, trucks, pedestrians and motorbikes.

As we enter the city a pedestrian steps in front of my bike, and I brake and swerve to avoid him. The man steps back into the crowd beside the road. Moments later he leaps out into the road again, this time in front of Neil, who crashes into him. I turn around as fast as I can amid the heavy traffic, and race to where Neil and his bike lay on the street. A crowd has begun to gather. "Are you okay?" I ask Neil. He groans, but reassures me he'll be fine. "That guy jumped on my bike. I swear he was trying to get hit," Neil says through gritted teeth.

I'm kneeling on the ground, and as I look up I see a crowd of faces staring down. No one is smiling and the air is thick with tension. I visualize the situation through their eyes: three wealthy foreigners run over some poor luckless pedestrian, as they roar through town on their shiny motorbikes. I know that's not the truth of it—we were driving slowly and the man was being careless. "Get up and go check on the other guy," I tell Neil. "Look, really sorry, but we could be in trouble here." I guide him to the injured man and we put our hands on his shoulder to show concern. Still, the faces around us are glaring, dark eyes narrowed, and the crowd has continued to grow. By now Wei, who was riding ahead of us, has arrived back at the scene. Neil has bruised his shoulder, torn his clothing and scratched up his bike, but is on his feet.

Few in the crowd here speak Mandarin, much less English, so a taxi driver translates as Wei tries to negotiate a settlement. Soon the crowd is divided over how much we should pay, with some of them demanding large sums of money. Others try to calm the crowd, saying we are visitors and that the man should have been more careful. The man himself is not badly

**ABOVE:** Coal seller in Khotan bazaar.
**OPPOSITE:** The author runs out of fuel, left sitting in the shade of his bike until help arrives.

hurt. He has cut a finger and bruised his leg, and we begin to suspect he's faking pain in hopes of a payout.

He waves Wei's money aside, and says he needs to go to the hospital. "Alright, let's call an ambulance," Wei says, pulling out his mobile phone. "We'll take you to the clinic and pay all the expenses. But then we won't give you any compensation." Hearing this, the man quickly changes his mind. Wei comes to me, and I discreetly slip him money to sweeten the offer. The crowd continues to argue, and soon angry words turn to flying fists. Now we're stuck in the middle of a pitched street battle, and we're not sure who's on our side and who's against us.

"Let's get out of here!" Wei shouts, sprinting for his bike. But Neil and I are stuck in the middle of the crowd, and as soon as we start our bikes they pounce on us, seizing Neil's key. Wei, looking back, sees we can't escape and comes back to resume negotiations. After more haggling the man finally accepts the money we offer, and we retrieve the key to Neil's bike. No time is wasted in driving away.

**Khotan's bazaar is a roar of** braying donkeys and loud music spilling from tinny speakers. The air is laden with dust and the smell of wool, sweat and a hundred barbecue grills. Throngs of traders have gathered here for millennia, calling out their wares in the same words that now fill my ears.

The city exists primarily because of the Yurungkash and Karakash rivers—the White and Black Jade rivers—which still irrigate the area's extensive agriculture. Two thousand years ago, Khotan was an essential stop on the Silk Road, a meeting place and trading post for the caravans of China, India and Central Asia. Today, the city's sense of time and culture remain a mix of east and west, of ancient history and modern reality. The sea of faces shows a mingling of Indian, Kazak and Chinese genealogy. Green eyes, strong noses and light-coloured hair. Here, Islam has followed Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, each leaving their mark.

The bazaar is the lifeblood of the city, attracting farmers and traders from afar. Men sweat in their suits and giant sheepskin hats. Women are modestly wrapped head to toe in brilliant silks. Age-old trading customs have been honed to perfection over centuries of bartering, and the men stand facing each other with broad smiles, slapping each other's hands as they attempt to drive home a deal. "Ten yuan!" one man shouts, emphasising his offer with a sharp slap into his adversary's palm. The seller responds with "Fifteen!" and an echoing clap. Negotiating tests a man's mettle, and is carried out with the friendly rivalry of an arm wrestle.

Here you can buy everything from Band-Aids by the dozen to a sack of live pigeons. Woollen hats are displayed next to chunks of fresh camel and horse meat, hanging bloody and fly-ridden in the street. One alley was overflowing with cheap, mass-produced clothing, while the next contained rows of axes, knives and spades glinting in the sun. On one side of the street a coal-peddler worked, his eyes shining out of a blackened face, while metres away a woman hawked steamed buns and pomegranate juice.

It is in Khotan where Wei finally solves his radiator problem. It has continued to leak, fizzle, piss and steam for thousands of kilometres, despite repeated attempts to seal it. Now Wei resorts to less logical measures. First he adds a fistful of ground black pepper to the water, hoping the bits will swell and plug the tiny fissure. They don't. His next remedy is to crack several eggs into the radiator. As we ride west out of Khotan, he trails a fragrant vapour of hard-boiled egg and pepper…but, the radiator stops leaking.

**Our last day on the road dawns cool** and dusty, with the Pamir and Karakoram mountain ranges floating high in the sky to our left. The snow-capped peaks look refreshing compared to the dusty roads we've ridden, yet after three weeks of driving they're still out of reach. At least the highway signs are now listing Kashgar as a potential destination, showing it first to be 500 kilometres away, then 250, then 100.

Kashgar, our final stop, is more accessible than Khotan, and is one step closer to Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang region. It is still a frontier city, still the cultural centre for the Uyghur people. But it's now also booming with Chinese investment. Neon lights, new cars and cranes atop high-rise buildings, are all common sights. Motorbikes have been replaced by electric scooters, and KTV lounges trump tea houses.

As soon as we arrive we begin looking for buyers for our motorbikes. We bought the bikes cheaply, and shipping them home would cost more than they're worth. We also suspect we've collected a few tickets as we've whizzed by speed cameras, which would have to be paid before we can transfer the Beijing license plates. Here, however, far from Beijing traffic cops, the registrations can be fudged and tickets left unpaid. We find a dealer and begin to haggle, quickly falling victim to the buyer's negotiating skills, a product of hundreds of years of Silk Road trading. Eventually, we accept a slightly smaller stack of 100 Yuan notes we had hoped for, and set off to explore the city by foot.

Little of Kashgar's Old City remains. This was long considered one of Central Asia's best-preserved examples of a traditional Islamic city, but in 2009 the Chinese government began bulldozing its ramshackle, mud-brick maze, deeming it overcrowded and unsafe for residents. What's left has been turned into a museum, complete with entry fees, though some homes are still inhabited. The destruction continues, with a jumble of broken down walls spread around the small cluster of Old City that remains. Nearby stand gleaming new glass and steel buildings, a sign of China's vision for the ancient city.

**ABOVE:** Jiayu Pass, or Jiayuguan, is the most westerly pass, or gate, of the Great Wall. Located in Gansu Province, surrounded by the Qilian Mountains at the narrow western mouth of the Hexi Corridor. The pass was a key waypoint of the Silk Road.

I entered Xinjiang travelling east to west, the same direction as modern Han Chinese influence. But in truth that influence ebbed away with every kilometre we drove, until it felt as if we'd left China completely, and were instead in ancient Central Asia. The Uyghur culture shares far more with the populations of neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan than with the Han Chinese in the east.

Yet Kashgar is also a rapidly growing city; and now, with its daily international flights and flood of new business, it's beginning to look a lot more like the rest of modern China, with a large Han population. My route, although unwavering in its push westward (according to the map!) has actually taken me along a giant cultural loop.

Here and there are small reminders that this city has not always been Chinese, hinting at the historical richness of all this ancient land. Like the old Uyghur farmer, his white beard falling to his chest as he rattles past on his donkey-drawn cart. I've seen where he came from and think I know where he's going.

**CAMERON DUECK** is a Canadian writer and adventure-lover, based in Hong Kong.

## OUR TRIP ESSENTIALS

**Buying a made-in-China motorbike is a cheaper option to importing a foreign one. It also means most small towns along your journey will have available parts and mechanics familiar with your bike. Most bikes in China are 125cc, a smaller model. Neil and I were riding Suzuki GN250 bikes, which are similar to the smaller model, making for easy maintenance along the way. Wei rode a Regal Raptor 250, pictured here.**

## MORE OF WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- **Most motorcycle shops can advise on registration.**
- **Foreigners are unable to get a motorcycle driver's license, and foreign licences are not recognized in China. (We were not asked to produce licences at any point.)**
- **Good-quality Chinese-made riding clothes, helmets and boots can be bought in China significantly cheaper than in Canada.**
- **Motorbiking in China is dangerous, and riders must be more alert and defensive than they would be on Canadian highways.**
- **Chinese maps may not be helpful due to the rapid construction of new highways. It's essential to be able to ask for, and understand, directions in Chinese.**
- **Officially, most hotels in China are for Chinese nationals and won't accept foreign guests. However, most towns have at least one 'international' hotel licensed to accept foreigners.**
- **Truck drivers are the best source of info on road conditions, directions and fuel supplies.**

# Outposting China


**FULL NAME:** People's Republic of China **LOCATION:** Eastern Asia, bordered by the Yellow Sea, South China Sea, East China Sea, Pacific Ocean, and 14 other countries including Mongolia, Russia, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan **CAPITAL:** Beijing **AREA:** 9,596,960 sq. km **POPULATION:** 1.3 billion **ETHNICITY:** More than 90% Han Chinese; ethnic minorities include Zhuang, Manchu, Miao, Yao, Hui, Uyghur, Tujia, Yi, Tibetan, Buyi, Dong, Mongol and Korean **LANGUAGES:** Mandarin Chinese (official language); Yue (Cantonese), Wu (Shanghainese), Minbei (Fuzhou), Minnan, Xiang, Gan, Hakka dialects; minority languages **RELIGION:** Officially atheist; some groups practice Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism and Islam **CURRENCY:** the Yuan (¥) **TIME ZONE:** UTC/GMT + 8:00 **CLIMATE:** Due to its vast size, China's weather is varied, from warm conditions in the south to sub-arctic in the north. Rainfall is heaviest in the southern coast regions. In general, temperatures are warmer from north to south, but July is usually the hottest month, January the coldest. **NATURAL HAZARDS:** Typhoons, floods, earthquakes, though occasional.

## When to Go

Generally the winter months are cold and arid, but the temperature between the north and south can vary by 40 degrees during winter, depending on the region. The summer sees less variation, with warmer temps everywhere. Precipitation can fluctuate from 1,500 mm in the southeast, to less than 50 mm in the northwest. In north China, where our writer travelled through, it can get very cold, so best time to travel is during the milder seasons of autumn (September–October) and spring (April-June). Just beware the blowing sands of the great Gobi; and the national holidays, when millions of Chinese hit the road for their own inter-country experience.

## Getting There

Air Canada and Air China offer non-stop flights to Beijing. The Beijing Capital Airport was renovated for the 2008 Olympic Games, meaning it's now a bustling landing centre that can accommodate masses of people. The airport is also generous in its English usage, with both signs and announcements. Just know that upon arrival paperwork formalities need to be completed, which can include customs and health declarations.

## Getting Around

Navigating around China can be quite a task, especially if you don't know the language. China's airlines connect all major cities including Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong. Lines of taxis at the airport can ferry you where you want to go—just beware drivers that approach you first, as many are unregulated. Taxis in the metropolis are easy to get, and fairly priced. China is also host to a great rail system that provides a safe, reliable way to see the country firsthand. Some form of bus service is available in most towns as well, if you're on a budget. Check if your hotel offers bike rentals (many do), if you prefer the foot-pedal express.

## What to See and Do

China is so diverse in culture, history and atmosphere it offers unending wonders to see and do. Among many historical sites in its capital, Beijing, are the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square. A short bus ride will also get you to the Great Wall of China. Inter-city travel is easy by subway—though be prepared for millions of commuters!—and Beijing offers both great local and international cuisine, as well as a hopping nightlife.

Inner Mongolia, in northern China, was also on our writer's itinerary. Here, you can trek the grasslands, camel ride into the Gobi, or celebrate the Naadam Festival. The region also offers city life in its capital, Hohhot. Be sure to visit the Five-Pagoda Temple, famous for its 1,563 detailed carvings of Buddha on its outer walls. It's also home to a Mongolian map of the cosmos based on Buddhist belief and carved in stone. Kashgar, home to China's Uyghur people and the final stop in our story, is so far northwest travellers are just beginning to discover it. See the remnants of the Old City before more of it is officially demolished. And be sure to head to its famed open market on Sunday, southeast of the city, where you'll find thousands of people buying and selling and haggling.

TEXT: SARAH STONE, WITH FILES FROM KATE DOYLE; MAP ILLUSTRATION: ELIZABETH DISILVESTRE