When travelling the length of China along the ancient trade routes of the Silk Road, the only real way to do it is by train.

Up until the 16th century, when new maritime routes opened up, the Silk Road had acted as the bridge between all the major civilisations – Egypt, China, India, Persia, Arabia, Byzantium and Rome – for more than a thousand years. Around 30% of the trade was made up of silk, but these routes would also carry fruit, plants, paper, art, compasses, jewels, gold, gunpowder – and the Black Death. More importantly, they carried ideas, skills and DNA.

The best-known start and end points of the Silk Road are Chang’an (Xian), the old capital of China, and Byzantium (Constantinople/Istanbul), but many Silk Road trips bypass those cities altogether. I began my journey along these ancient trade routes by travelling up from Luang Prebang in Laos by sleeper bus to Jinghong, before spending another night in a cramped bunk on a bumpy bus to arrive at Kunming. From then on, however, it is possible to travel all the way across China, to Kazakhstan and beyond through Central Asia, using the far more comfortable sleeper trains. They may cost a little more than the night buses but are reliable, far cleaner than they used to be, great value for money by European standards, provide you with a plentiful supply of hot water for instant noodles and tea, and will save you the cost of a night’s accommodation in a hostel or hotel. I’ve also always found that I sleep very well on trains, so unlike with the night buses – whose narrow bunk beds are often just a little too short for many Westerners – you don’t waste half the next day shuffling around like a sleep-deprived zombie.

Kunming

Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, is home to more than five million people. It was once a gateway to the Silk Road and acted as a crossroads for trade between India, Myanmar and Tibet. According to the tourist brochures, Kunming is also ‘the city of Eternal Spring’. On exiting the night bus from Jinghong on a chilly March morning, wearing only the shorts and T-shirts I’d been getting away with for months on South-East Asia, I was shivering so hard that I couldn’t even hold up my badly photocopied map of the sprawling metropolis.

THINGS TO DO

The large parks in all major Chinese cities are always popular with the locals who are often forced to live in large, grey tower blocks. As in many of these mega parks, Green Lake Park in Kunming features a large boating lake surrounded with pedal boats, scenic tea houses, giant
As the state capital of Sichuan (known for its spicy cuisine), Chengdu now has more than 15 million residents. On arriving at the train station in the early morning, it appeared that most of them were in the queue for the taxis.

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As the only Western tourist in the temple complex, I edged between the incense-lighting worshippers and tried to avoid walking into too many holiday snaps. I tried not to make a nuisance of myself and nobody seemed to mind me wandering around their holy place. Not all Western visitors have been so well tolerated. At the beginning of the 20th century, one of the French engineers who was working on the Kunming to Vietnam railway project set up house in the temple’s main building. There weren’t many nice places for foreigners to stay in Kunming at the time, so he selected the Wenshu Temple as his place of residence. This didn’t go down too well with the locals who still wanted to be able to get into the temple to pray and burn incense sticks. It took a few months but they eventually managed to chuck him out. It would be difficult to imagine a Chinese engineer coming over to England and setting up house in the nearest cathedral because he couldn’t find anywhere else that was up to his standards.

Giant panda, Chengdu

WHERE TO STAY

I was offered a lift to my hostel by a friendly local family who had noticed me struggling with my map). Once oriented, it is possible to walk to most of the main sites, and most tourist hotels will offer affordable day trips to see the giant pandas.

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Temple at Crescent Lake, Dunhuang

Zen who had a vision of a thousand Buddhas. The number of the temples eventually rose to more than a thousand, many of which were painted with elaborate murals by pilgrims passing along the Silk Road. These murals were intended as aids to meditation and as mnemonic devices but, perhaps more importantly, they had acted as teaching tools to inform illiterate Chinese of the ideas and philosophy of the Buddhism that had spread into China along the Silk Road. The price of the admission ticket includes the services of an English-speaking guide.

Dunhuang The Dunhuang train station is surprisingly grand and modern, but around 12km out of town. It looks like an alien spaceship that has been abandoned in the desert. Having caught a minibus into the central market area of Dunhuang, I was struck by just how unperturbable Chinese both the city and the people look: there seem to be more mosques than Buddhist temples, many of the residents look more Central Asian than Han Chinese, and the whole atmosphere is very different to the large cities further east. Dunhuang, in Gansu province, used to be one of the most important cities in ancient China. The city was founded by Emperor Wudi of the Han dynasty in 111BC at the crossroads of two trading routes of the Silk Road. Today, it is a highly popular holiday destination among China’s large numbers of camera-happy domestic tourists.

THINGS TO DO Minibuses can easily be caught from the centre of town to the hugely popular Thousand Buddha Caves of Mogao. According to local legend, the temple caves were first dug out in AD366 by a Buddhist monk called Le

WHERE TO STAY Most independent travellers opt to stay at Charlie Jhong’s Guest House. It is situated a few kilometres out of town, right next to the sand dunes, but it is easy enough to catch a local minibus there or even to get a free lift from Charlie Jhong’s Café (run by the friendly owner’s wife) or Shirley’s Café (run by Charlie’s brother in law).

Urumqi

The Uyghur people from around Urumqi in Xinjiang province are really more Central Asian, in both appearance and culture, than they are Han Chinese. Like Tibet, it is a highly contested region of China. The recent rise in Uyghur nationalism and the demand for an independent state of Uyghuristan, or East Turkistan, is considered a great threat to the Chinese state. Apart from anything else, Xinjiang is rich in natural resources such as oil and natural gas that have yet to be anything like fully exploited by the national government.

Strangely, there isn’t yet a direct connecting train from Dunhuang’s ultra modern new station to Urumqi, so you have to get a bus or shared taxi to Liuyan, around an hour’s drive from Dunhuang City. If you wish to carry on further along the Silk Road from Urumqi, then you can either catch a 24-hour bus to Kashgar, in the direction of Pakistan, before crossing over into Kyrgyzstan, or take the night train or bus to Almaty in Kazakhstan.

THINGS TO DO Most of Urumqi’s attractions are found on Red Hill. As with most of the scenic temple and pagoda sites in China, a selection of rickety-looking fairground rides have been planted into the hillside. If all the reverance and spirituality become a bit tiresome you can always cheer yourself up with a ride on a big wheel or get spun around in a revolving teacup. It’s difficult to imagine this happening in other parts of the world – perhaps a ghost train should run through Canterbury Cathedral? Or a big dipper could be bolted onto the roof of the Blue Mosque?

GOING OUT I recommend trying out one of the plentiful Uyghur restaurants, featuring a cuisine closer in style to Turkish than to traditional Chinese. There is also a good food court at the shopping mall just along from People’s Park.

WHERE TO STAY I would recommend the White Birch YHA, run by an enthusiastic flier of large and colourful Chinese kites.

You can read more in Tom’s book, Tearing up the Silk Road, tomcoote.net/tearing-up-the-silk-road.html