



Fertile start of the Hexi corridor.

HEXI CORRIDOR

– PASSAGE TO THE NEW FRONTIER

by **Robert Watt**

The Hexi corridor is a fertile, 1000 km long, narrow passage between the hostile environments of the Tibetan Plateau, and the Gobi desert. The ancient Silk Road passes along this narrow pass which for centuries has been the only route between China and the west. The importance of the road and the cultural confluence of the traders that travelled along it, leaves the region rich with the relics of history, religions and Arabic influences, all set against a dramatic landscape.

Zhangye

From Lanzhou, the high speed train enters the first part of the Hexi corridor. It's practically a subway, so much is underground. Not because the track has delved down, but because the land has risen up and we must burrow through its thick folds. Soon, we emerge into the Hexi corridor where the land is divided into fields of green

crops, bright against the red mountains behind. A brilliant blue sky overhead gives a world of colour, made more vivid, after the long darkness of the tunnels.

Later, the Qilian mountains rise and their bases darken to a sooty rock, their summits white capped with snow. There are fields of golden wheat, or lush grass flecked with sheep. The train must have climbed too, as at one point the snow line is almost at track level, but when we arrive in Zhangye, it's warm and the sun fierce.

The area is famous for the Danxia geographical park. We hire a taxi for the day at 350rmb. First visit is to the section famous for its strange shaped rock formations. There are few visitors. We climb the steep, sturdy routes to see spectacular views of a rugged landscape. Weird pillars extend towards snowy peaks, floating on the horizon. The beautiful panorama is only marred by the constant accompaniment of piped music and a phone mast that dominates the valley.

Further on, the constructed pathway ends in a narrow twisting canyon. Here the mood music stops and you're finally free to enjoy the unspoiled beauty in perfect silence.

The Second section is famous for the rainbow coloured rocks and is much busier, full of noisy coaches and even noisier tourists. Once again there is piped music at each vantage point, it adds to the raucous babble of voices and grumbling diesel engines. The bands of swirling colours are remarkable to see, but the arid emptiness demands a calm



Camels waiting at Dunhuang oasis.



Extraordinary geology of Danxia.

silence to appreciate its starkness. This time, the crowds and noise are unescapable and I leave with no feeling of the place beyond the remarkable images.

Jiayuguan

The following morning we continue our train journey. The Hexi corridor has become broader as it follows the mountains to the south. The plain stretches into the distance; dry, flat, semi desert. Where there is water, fields of maize, or wheat, spring up around villages of mud. But mostly it's barren of all but brown clumps of grass and telegraph poles.

Jiayuguan's attractions are; the start of The Great Wall, a Fort that once protected the pass and the Signal Beacon. You must buy a ticket for all 3. The Beacon is little more than a weathered mound of dried mud that could easily have been seen driving past on the road. Instead, you must take a shuttle bus from a distant gate and include a poor museum. The view over the river cutting through the plateau is a highlight, invisible from the road, but it hardly justifies the time.

The fort guarding the pass and the entrance into China is big and new. There is an interesting exhibition of photographs of the same sections of wall taken 100 years apart. You can also climb up to the battlements and gaze out over the desolate landscape that was once the start of the uncivilized world beyond China. Today, China's modern civilization spills out of the gate below, into the foreground, for selfies and camel and dune buggy rides.

The start of the Great Wall, once made of rammed earth, has been reconstructed. Its mud finish already crumbling away, to reveal

the modern brickwork beneath. You can ascend a long stairway for a view over the black mountains and understand why, being sent beyond the wall, was once a punishment.

Dunhuang

It was a relief to arrive in Dunhuang – the ancient desert oasis. After 5 days of noisy stations and pushing crowds of tourists, this clean, quiet and orderly city is still a pleasant refuge. The main reason to visit, is the attractions of the Sand Dunes around the Crescent Lake and the Mogao caves.

The Dunes dominate the edge of the city, towering above the houses. Once inside the gate the scenery is free, but no opportunity is missed to extract money for shoes, phone and camera covers, camel, helicopter, dune buggy and sledge hire, all accompanied by a never ending loop of mystic music. The Whispering Dune and The Thundering Dune, named for the sounds made by the wind passing over them, are unable to be heard above the cacophony. If you walk beyond the first dune, I'm told, it's peaceful and you'll be alone. But, after days of climbing, I haven't the stamina for a hike over the fine loose sand.

The Mogao caves is a massive collection of Buddhist statues and art, carved and painted into the rock, by travellers on the Silk Road, two centuries ago. The UNESCO site only allows 40,000 visitors a day, so tickets must be purchased ahead. The tour starts with an entertaining film on the history and an explanation of some of the artwork. They're useful, as only a few caves are accessible, opened by an officious guide who chaperones us in and out.

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In the evening, the night market here is a lively, atmospheric street of restaurants with outdoor seating, ending in stalls selling dried fruit and pashminas. They all offer a similar range of BBQ food and beer until late. On the second night, we took in a live show on the history and myths of the Silk Road. It's an extravagant display of lights, dance and music set against the backdrop of the desert. A good way to relax, on our last night in the old middle kingdom, before entering Xinjiang – meaning new frontier.

穿过河西走廊，一路走向新前沿

河西走廊是一条长约1000公里的长条堆积平原，它位于祁连山以东，合黎山以西，乌鞘岭以北，甘肃新疆边界以南，自古以来就是富足之地，也是兵家极其重视的一块沃土。古老的丝绸之路，沿着这条狭窄的通道，几个世纪以来成为连接中国和西方的唯一途径。作为中国东部通往西域的咽喉要道，这个地区不仅历史悠久，底蕴丰厚，还是各宗教文化的交汇点，为后人留下了宝贵的自然财富。

乘着驶往兰州的高铁，我们开启了西北行的第一站—张掖。张掖丹霞地质公园因其造型奇特，色彩斑斓，气势磅礴的丹霞地貌而出名。丹霞指的是红色砂砾岩经长期风化剥离和流水侵蚀，形成的孤立的山峰和陡峭的奇岩怪石。

次日早晨，旅程继续前进。河西走廊随着山脉的走势，越往南走就变得越加宽敞。平原一直延伸到远方，干燥、平坦、半沙漠化。有水的地方，可以看到玉米、小麦，但大多数的地方依然是杂草丛生，一贫如洗。嘉峪关的著名景点有：天下第一雄关、万里长城起点、以及长城第一墩。所谓第一墩，它是明代万里长城从西向东的第一座墩台，是明代长城的西端起点，是嘉峪关长城防御体系的重要组成部分，担负着传递关南及祁连山诸口军事信息的任务。天下第一雄关，即嘉峪关，雄据万里长城西端终点，新中国成立后，曾多次维修加固，至今保存完好。你可以爬到城垛上去凝视荒凉的景观，也可以到城门外边感受骑骆驼和沙滩车的爽快。

经过5天喧闹的火车旅途和拥挤的游客群，我们来到了敦煌。这是一座安静，干净，秩序井然的城市。敦煌可看的景点有：月牙泉、莫高窟。莫高窟又称“千佛洞”，位于敦煌县城东南25千米的鸣沙山下，因地处莫高镇而得名。它是最大、最著名的佛教艺术石窟。现存石窟492个，壁画总面积约45000平方米，泥质彩塑2415尊，是世界上现存规模最大、内容最丰富的佛教艺术圣地。莫高窟每天接待游客的数量有限，想要参观，游客们都需提前购票预订。