

Silk Road

hot flat bread comes out of large coal-fired clay ovens. When in doubt about restaurant fare, we ate the delicious Foccacia-like bread, called Naan.

The nine-day tour began for us in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital city of more than two million. Worth visiting is its museum, which houses the 3,800 year old "Beauty of Loulan" and other well-preserved mummies.

I loved the chili-pepper red 600 cc Chinese Jialing dual-sport fresh from the factory that Edelweiss offered me. It was fuel-injected, liquid cooled and seemed to relish the time we spent together on gravel roads. To me, riding a Chinese bike, instead of a German one, seemed the appropriate way to experience the Silk Road's sights, sounds and smells.

We met up with the Taklamakan while heading to Turpan our the first day. This Silk Road stopover is nicknamed "the oven," since it's below sea level (the fourth lowest place on earth, according to Wikipedia) and warms to 135 degrees F. in summer. On the way, we paused at a monument marking the furthest place

on earth from any ocean. Standing there, at the center of the Asian continent, I felt far away from anything Western.

The intense heat in Turpan helps produce grapes, melons and other fruit so sweet you're warned to brush your teeth after eating it. A "Karez" system of underground channels with more lines than the Manhattan subway delivers water to the crops. Being Moslem, Uigher farmers focus more on growing grapes than bottling wine. Many have built lattice-like rooms for drying grapes on top of their houses. The green raisins I tasted were as sweet as M&Ms, hence their nickname: green diamonds.

Visiting Turpan in May allowed us to walk in relative comfort – mid 90 degrees – through the ruins of a Silk Road city. Jiaohe was built on top of a hill in 2 A.D. to keep its residents safe from invaders. Buddhism was practiced in these parts until about 700 A.D. and nearby caves have numerous painted images of the Buddha still visible on walls and ceilings.

Spaced about 250 miles apart, the Silk Road towns of Korla, Kuqa and Aksu were our next three overnight stops. At each town, you can count on finding a Uigher open-air market and plenty of

friendly smiling people who wanted to cluster around our big motorcycles.

As the highway loomed ahead of me each day and the dust obscured all scenery, I had time to think. How did the ancient caravan travelers survive the harsh conditions? Perhaps the traders slept by day and traveled by night through the desert, because that's eventually what we did. To avoid the heat, we began leaving before 6 a.m.

Guided by instinct and faith, we sped west through the darkness. Our companions were trucks lumbering like dinosaurs with loads of flattened bicycles, cardboard, metal pipes or other scrap on their backs. Then, as though she were undressing after the night shift, the desert would miraculously unveil in the pale dawn twilight. Her harsh features – abandoned workers' housing, electric power lines, refineries, factories and infinite barren acres – became briefly soft and attractive in the gauzy grayness.

Near Kuqa, we made a short detour to view a remarkable 2,000-year-old signal tower made of rammed earth and timber. Called the Beacon Tower, it is the last remaining watch tower of what may have been many along the route. Sadly, this

14,000 ft. elevation, can't breathe, cold, but in heaven on the Karakoram Highway.

