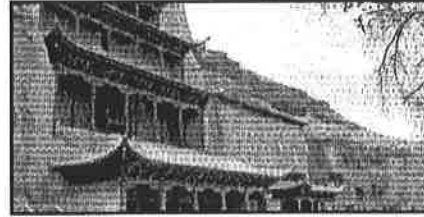


## Traveling the Silk Road: Chang'an to Dunhuang



Steppe land  
© Hermine Dreyfuss



Exterior of Mogao Grottoes  
© Yao Ziyuan

The easternmost point of the Silk Road was the city of Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an). Leaving Chang'an on the way to Dunhuang, travelers followed the Wei River for some 250 to 300 miles, then went slightly northwest through the Huang (Yellow) River Valley. Most of this route cut through steppe land, a type of terrain typical along the Silk Road. Steppe land is very dry and flat, somewhat similar to prairie, and covered with some shrubs. This dry, flat land was easy to cross. The climate was not too hot, water was plentiful, and there was grass for the camels to eat. Several major cities and villages were located on these steppe lands.

After following the foothills of the Nan Shan (Southern Mountains) for over 200 miles and passing the Great Wall of China, travelers arrived at Dunhuang. This city was nicknamed "the City of the Sands" because it sits at the intersection of two deserts: the Gobi and the more dangerous Taklamakan. Great dunes of sand covered the area for more than 1,500 miles beyond Dunhuang. The Gobi Desert itself is not made of sand; it is a desert of millions of rocks, some the size of a fist and others the size of a person's head. Still, as a desert, it had little for camels to eat and few sources of water.

Dunhuang is the site of one of the most popular tourist attractions on the Silk Road, the Mogao Grottoes, famous caves with beautiful art painted on their walls. Long ago, merchants on the Silk Road hired artists to decorate the caves as a way of giving thanks for a safe crossing through the Gobi Desert or to receive good luck in crossing the dangerous Taklamakan Desert. Travelers traded in Dunhuang or rested before attempting to cross the Taklamakan as they continued westward.

## Traveling the Silk Road: Dunhuang to Kashgar (Southern Route)



Taklamakan Desert  
© Al Dien



Kashgar  
© Hermine Dreyfuss

Dunhuang is an oasis town situated between two deserts: the Gobi to the east and the more formidable Taklamakan to the west. At Dunhuang, the Silk Road divided into two main routes—a southern route that skirted the south of the Taklamakan Desert to the towns of Cherchen, Khotan, and Kashgar—and a northern route.

The southern route was more dangerous to travel than the northern route. This route followed the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert at the foothills of the Kunlun Mountains. Unlike the Gobi, the Taklamakan is a typical desert, and many who attempted to cross it never made it out alive. The desert is very hot and dry, and the towering sand dunes made travel slow. Some sand dunes are as high as 300 meters, although the ones travelers crossed were usually only 50 to 80 meters high. Sandstorms were a serious threat. Most travel occurred in the evenings because the daytime temperatures were unbearably hot, and the scarcity of water made traveling under the scorching sun dangerous.

There were several oasis cities along this route, but between these cities, travelers had to camp in the open, and water was always in short supply. Some people preferred to travel during winter so that they could bring along blocks of ice to use as water. At the western end of the desert, caravans reached the large market town of Kashgar, where they traded and rested before tackling the next challenge on their journey.

## Traveling the Silk Road: Dunhuang to Kashgar (Northern Route)



Taklamakan Desert  
© Al Dien



Tian Shan  
© Hermine Dreyfuss

Dunhuang is an oasis town situated between two deserts: the Gobi to the east and the more formidable Taklamakan to the west. At Dunhuang, the Silk Road divided into two main routes—a northern route that skirted the north of the Taklamakan Desert to the towns of Hami, Turfan, and Kashgar—and a southern route.

The northern route was more comfortable than the southern route, but bandits hid along this route, ready to rob and attack traders and their caravans. Furthermore, most of the route traversed the feared Taklamakan Desert. Unlike the Gobi, the Taklamakan was a typical desert, and many who attempted to cross it never made it out alive. The desert is very hot and dry, and the towering sand dunes made travel slow. Some sand dunes are as high as 300 meters, although the ones travelers crossed were usually only 50 to 80 meters high. Sandstorms were a serious threat. Most travel occurred in the evenings because the daytime temperatures were unbearably hot, and the scarcity of water made traveling under the scorching sun dangerous.

As travelers advanced along the northern border of the Taklamakan, they passed the southern portion of the Tian Shan (“Celestial Mountains”). Travelers would first reach a well-watered oasis town called Hami, then go on to a rich farming oasis called Turfan. Near Turfan, they passed along a section of the mountain range that the local Uighur people call the “Flaming Mountains” because they glow a brilliant red. When the sun shines down on them they shimmer and move as if on fire. Indeed, the surface temperature of these mountains can reach 176° F—hotter even than the desert!

Following the foothills of the Tian Shan for over 600 miles, travelers proceeded through several large oasis centers before reaching the large market town of Kashgar at the western end of the desert. Travelers traded and rested here before moving on.

## Traveling the Silk Road: Across the Pamirs



Pamir Mountains  
© Hermine Dreyfuss



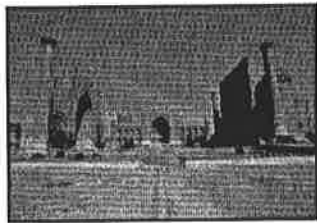
Ferghana Valley  
© Hermine Dreyfuss

This section of the Silk Road began in Kashgar, an important market town at the foothills of the foreboding Tian Shan and Pamir mountain ranges. After Kashgar, the Silk Road traveled west through its most dangerous leg, the passes of the Pamir Mountains. At 14,000 feet high or more, these passes were sometimes referred to as “the roof of the world” because the mountains are so high and steep. The Uighurs called these mountains the “heavenly mountains” or the “mountains of the spirits” because they are so high. Two of the peaks are higher than 23,000 feet.

In the mountains, the temperatures dropped very low, and caravans often traveled through snow. Many of the paths through the Pamirs were slippery with ice. The many frozen rivers that crossed the terrain provided added danger as travelers froze to death, slipped, or even fell through the ice. Caravans faced more than just the natural dangers of treacherous snow-covered trails and ferocious wind and snowstorms: they also faced bandits who often lay waiting to ambush them and steal their goods.

As travelers descended the Pamirs to the west, they could glimpse a fertile valley in the distance. This was their reward for surviving the dangerous mountain crossing: the Ferghana Valley, where the most prized horses in the world grazed on fields of alfalfa. This was a place for much-deserved and much-enjoyed rest.

## Traveling the Silk Road: Ferghana Valley to Merv



Samarkand  
© Hermine Dreyfuss



Ruins of Merv  
© Hermine Dreyfuss

After the caravans made it safely down the high passes of the Pamir Mountains, they first stopped in the lush Ferghana Valley. Alfalfa, the favorite fodder of Ferghana's famous horses, grew in the fertile plains. Travelers were now roughly at the halfway point of the Silk Road, firmly in Central Asia and far removed from China.

Continuing on, the caravans passed through the steppe land common along the Silk Road. Steppe land is very dry and flat, somewhat similar to prairie land, and covered with some shrubs. This dry, flat land was easy to cross. The climate was not too hot, water was plentiful, and there was grass for the camels to eat. Major cities and villages dotted the steppe due to the welcoming conditions.

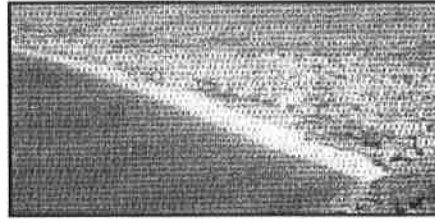
Two of the leading trade centers in Central Asia were on this route, Samarkand and Bukhara (in modern-day Uzbekistan). Upon reaching these two cities, traders of many different cultures exchanged goods and information from the lands they had visited before. Part of this route also crossed the Karakum Desert, but the arid conditions were not as harsh as those in the Taklamakan Desert to the east.

After crossing the Karakum, travelers arrived at Merv, a major oasis city known for its rich soil and vineyards. As one of Central Asia's cultural and religious centers, Merv hosted worship sites for several religions. It was also a major commercial hub and thus served as an important destination for caravans.

## Traveling the Silk Road: Merv to Antioch



Steppe land  
© Hermine Dreyfuss



Mediterranean coast  
© Nil Unerdem

At Merv, the caravans passed into Persian territory. The Persian Empire stretched from Merv in the east to Antioch in the west. The Persians brought the caravans across steppes that ran parallel to the Elburz Mountains (in modern-day Iran). Steppe land is very dry and flat, somewhat similar to prairie land, and covered with some shrubs. This dry, flat land was easy to cross. The climate was not too hot, water was plentiful, and there was grass for the camels to eat. Several major cities and villages thrived in the welcoming, mild terrain.

The route became more difficult as caravans crossed the Zagros Mountains, but these mountains were much easier to cross than the Pamirs to the east. Upon descending from the Zagros, travelers returned to flat land and stopped in Baghdad, one of the Middle East's great centers of commerce and culture.

From Baghdad, travelers followed the northern edge of the Syrian Desert to Antioch. This desert was full of hard, sandy gravel; large loose stones; and small hills. Water was found easily in this area, though it was often muddy or full of algae. Most of this route also cut through steppe land.

Travelers emerged on the Mediterranean Sea, which marked a distinct climactic and cultural change from Central Asia. This marked the western endpoint of the major Silk Road land routes. From here, ships carried goods in both directions across the Mediterranean Sea to Rome, Venice, and Genoa (all in modern-day Italy).