

Routes of the Silk Road

Chang'an was the starting and ending point of the Silk Road. Caravans of soldiers and merchants assembled in Chang'an. They packed their goods on Bactrian camels.

Native to Asia, this breed of camel has two humps and can carry heavy loads for 30 miles a day. Camels are called the "ships of the desert." Their eyelids and lashes protect them from sandstorms, their feet are perfect for walking on sand, and they can go for many days without food or water.

From Chang'an, the caravan route went northwest. It took travelers



Silk Road caravans were often in danger from attack. This wall painting shows Mongolian horsemen chasing Chinese foot soldiers.

at least 18 days before reaching the next major stop, Lanzhou.

On the banks of the Yellow River, Lanzhou was a major trading city. Goods flowed to and from Tibet (to the west), Mongolia (to the north), and central China (to the south). Goods were also sent on rafts (made of inflated animal skins) to and from Chinese cities on the Yellow River.

From Lanzhou, the Silk Road went northwest to Wuwei, at least 10 days away. From Wuwei, caravans moved toward the Great Wall. Emperor Shi Huangdi had built the Great Wall to stop the Mongolians from invading. The wall also protected travelers on the Silk Road from fierce Mongolian groups that lived on the high, grassy plains to the

Pronunciation Key

Anxi (ANN she)
 Damascus (duh MASS cuss)
 Khotan (KOE tawn)
 Lanzhou (LON joe)
 Pamirs (puh MEERZ)
 Taklamakan (talk luh muh KON)
 Tian Shan (tyen shon)
 Wuwei (woo way)

northwest of China. Riding horses, the groups were always on the move, searching for grasslands where their sheep, goats, and cattle could graze. They preyed on travelers along the Silk Road.

Wuwei was in the middle of pastureland. The people raised horses and grew crops. Horses were often traded along the Silk Road. Everyone wanted horses—from the nomads who attacked China to the Chinese army. The Silk Road continued on northwest for 30 days through towns leading to the Great Wall.

The Choice—Northern or Southern?

Once past the Great Wall, the Silk Road climbed to Anxi, on the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. Taklamakan means "Go in and you won't come out." This huge desert—about 125,000 square miles—was too harsh to cross. So the caravan had to go around it. At Anxi, the Silk Road split into two roads—the northern route and the southern route around the desert. Neither route was easy. Sandstorms, sometimes with winds over 100 miles an hour, could bury an entire caravan. Bones of animals and people littered both routes. The sandstorms were usually worse on the southern route. But Mongolian groups threatened the northern route.

The Northern Route—Anxi to Kashgar

On the northern route from Anxi, the caravan traveled northwest 300 miles to the oasis of Hami. It took two weeks to reach Hami. There was little hope of finding water on the way. Winds blew fiercely.

From Hami, the northern route of the Silk Road went west. It cut a path between the Taklamakan Desert on the south and the Tian Shan Mountains on the north. Streams from the mountains fed the oases. From Hami, it was another 300 miles to reach the next stop, Turpan, known as the Land of Fire. It was located in a basin 500 feet below sea level. The red-sandstone cliffs surrounding the basin were called the Flaming Mountains. The temperature in summer soared above 100 degrees. In winter, it fell below freezing.

From Turpan, the route started climbing. It was 300 miles to next major town, Korla. Although it was 3,000 feet above sea level, it still had a desert landscape. Outside Korla was the Iron Gate Pass. This was a narrow pass and was often fought over. The route was narrow and difficult and had frequent dust storms. The route kept climbing. It was 800 more miles until the route reached Kashgar, the last stop around the Taklamakan Desert. Kashgar was more than 4,000 feet above sea level.

The Southern Route—Anxi to Kashgar

The other way around the Taklamakan Desert was the southern route. It also began at Anxi and ended at Kashgar. The first stop was Dunhuang ("Blazing Beacon"), a fortress city just three days west of Anxi. The rest of the trip was traveling from one oasis to another. Caravans on the southern route went through the foothills of the Kunlun Mountains. These mountains ran along the southern border of the Taklamakan Desert. Streams from the mountains fed the oases. Along much of this trip, 25-mile-an-hour winds blasted constantly. Blinded by sand, travelers told stories of hearing voices coming from the desert and of people wandering off after the voices, never to be seen again.

It was 900 miles from Anxi to Khotan. The area around Khotan was a major source of jade for China. (Jade is a gem stone used for jewelry and carved objects.) The Khotan River was dry part of the year. It had two branches, the White Jade River and the Black Jade River. When the rivers dried, the people searched the riverbeds for jade.

From Khotan, the Silk Road wound northwest 300 miles to Yarkand. This huge 1,200-square-mile oasis produced grain, cotton,

and fruit. The area raised camels, horses, and sheep.

Yarkand was a major intersection on the Silk Road. One branch of the Silk Road left Yarkand for India. The other branch climbed 250 miles north to Kashgar, where the southern and northern routes joined.

Kashgar and Beyond

Kashgar sat at the foot of the Pamirs Mountains. All the towns and cities mentioned on the southern and northern Silk Road are today part of China. But these Central Asian places were ruled by many different peoples throughout history.

Kashgar was a major crossroads of the Silk Road. It was where caravans traded camels for horses, mules, and yaks (long-haired oxen). The desert part of the trip was over. One branch went to India. Other branches led from Kashgar through the Pamir Mountains. These steep, dangerous routes went to other cities in Central Asia and on to the Middle East and Europe. Kashgar was the halfway point to Europe.

One branch went to the Central Asian city of Kokand, famous for horses so powerful that they "sweated blood." Many Chinese emperors sought these large, strong horses. The horses did not sweat blood, as was believed, but

bled from parasites that infested their skin. This branch went on to Samarkand, one of the oldest and greatest cities in the ancient world. From Samarkand, this branch of the Silk Road traveled to Persia (modern-day Iran).

Another branch from Kashgar went directly to Persia. From there, the road split for the last time. One route went to Antioch and the other to Damascus, both in Syria. From these two cities, goods could be sent throughout the Mediterranean.

For Discussion

1. Where did the Silk Road go? Why was it called the Silk Road?
2. What do you think were the five most important stops on the road? Why?
3. What were the pros and cons of taking the northern route around the Taklamakan Desert?
4. What were the pros and cons of taking the southern route?