

Xīnjiāng 新疆



Xinjiang means 'New Frontier' and the province's far-flung geography has placed it in the bull's eye of competing powers for centuries. Fiercely independent, the people of the region have never really *been* independent. Today, Xinjiang 'belongs' to China, having been inextricably tethered to the Middle Kingdom for centuries in an endless push-pull relationship, one which China today maintains in strict form.

Xinjiang is like a whole other country enclosed within China's borders. Here the language is not just a different dialect, it's a completely different linguistic family; and it's no longer about whether you dip your dumplings in soy sauce or vinegar, it's how you want your mutton cooked.

What lies within such desolate lands that motivates faraway Beijing? A thumbnail sketch: it's larger than Alaska (one-sixth of China's territory); hyper-rich with Silk Road history; populated by a mixed salad of nearly 50 ethnic minorities; geopolitically crucial, as it borders eight nations; and encompasses a geographical palette of shimmering desert aquarelles, taiga pastureland dotted with flocks of sheep and grand mountain ranges. Oh, and it sits atop 30% of China's oil reserves.

It's also woefully underappreciated by most of the tourists hopping off planes in the friendly invasion that is the modern Grand Tour of China. But this is quickly changing, as China ramps up the region's infrastructure and tourism PR. The ultimate goal, far down the line, for Běijīng, is to reestablish 'caravans' of travellers along the old Silk Road.

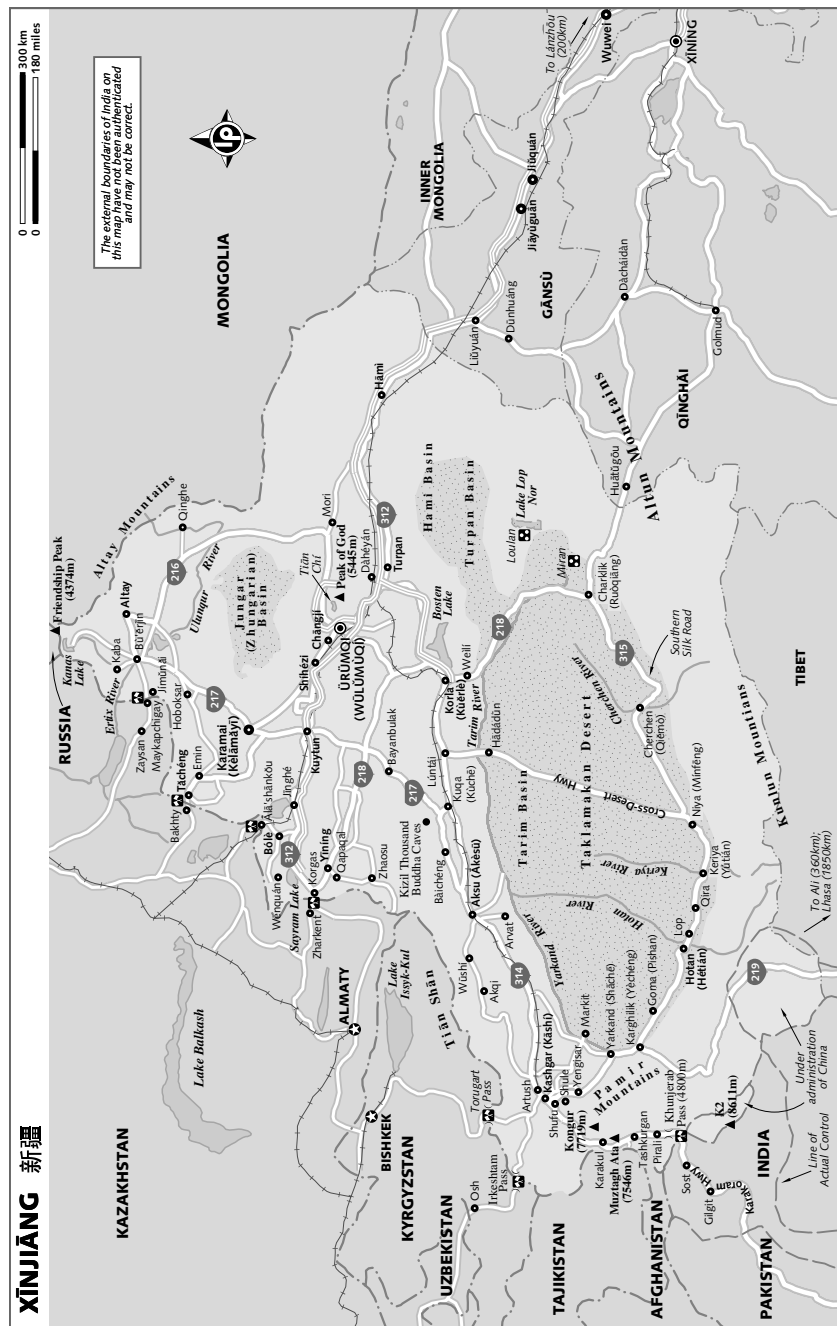
HIGHLIGHTS

- Trade a camel for a bus (or donkey cart) and hit the **Silk Road** (p839) or the preternaturally lovely **Karakoram Hwy** (p838)
- Intoxicate yourself with alpine air and hunt for China's Nessie at **Kanas Lake** (p844)
- Haggle happily and munch kebabs in **Kashgar** (p836), one of Asia's greatest crossroads
- Sing campfire songs around a Kazakh yurt at **Tiān Chí** (p827)
- Sweat your soul out at the **Flaming Mountains** (p830) around Turpan; munch grapes afterwards



■ POPULATION: 20.3 MILLION

■ www.xinjiang.gov.cn



History

NOMADS & OASIS DWELLERS

To grasp Xinjiāng, begin with the region's two principal groups: the pastoral nomads, north of the Tiān Shān range, and the sedentary oasis dwellers, skirting the Tarim Basin. The original nomads were the Xiongnu, while the earliest known oasis dwellers were an Indo-European group generally referred to as the Tocharians. Over millennia, the ethnicities comprising these two groups have changed; however the groups themselves remained the basis of human civilisation in Xinjiāng.

SILK & HORSES

Although evidence of Hotanese jade in China indicates that trade must have existed as far back as 7000 years ago, significant mention of the western regions doesn't appear in the Chinese annals until the Han dynasty.

In the 2nd century BC, in the hope of ending the devastating Xiongnu raids along their borders, the Chinese sought an alliance with the far off Yuezhi. Zhang Qian, the Chinese envoy charged with completing the mission, set out in 138 BC into the hitherto unexplored west. He was immediately taken prisoner and held for 10 years by the Xiongnu, but he did succeed in discovering the northern and southern routes around the Taklamakan Desert and into Central Asia, as well as the exceptional Ferghana horses.

While other goods were imported into China during this time, none took on the importance of the superior Central Asian steeds. By the end of the 2nd century BC, the Han had pushed their borders further west, military garrisons were established along the trade routes and silk flowed out of the empire in return for the 'Heavenly Horse'.

BUDDHISM

Along with goods from the west came ideas and languages, and by the 3rd century AD Buddhism had taken root throughout the Tarim Basin. A number of powerful Buddhist city-states arose, chiefly in Hotan, Kuqa and Turpan, leaving behind beautiful artwork that blended Kashmiri, Persian, Indian and even Greek styles.

In the 7th century, the Tang dynasty reasserted the imperial rule that had been lost following the collapse of the Han, and Chinese influence was once again felt in Xinjiāng.

THE UIGHURS, ISLAM & THE MONGOLS

Records are scant but it's fairly certain that the sway of the Tang dynasty was never absolute. The Uighurs held quite a bit of control throughout the 8th century, and the An Lushan rebellion (AD 755–63) sapped the imperial strength even more.

It was during Kharakhanid rule in the 10th to 12th centuries that Islam took hold in western Xinjiāng; the religion didn't penetrate the eastern areas until the 14th century.

Yīlí (Ili), Hotan and Kashgar fell to the Mongols in 1219 (whose rule was the only period when the Silk Roads were controlled by a single, albeit factious, power), and Timur, coming from the west, sacked Kashgar again in the late 14th century. The area was under the control of Timur's descendants or various Mongol tribes until the Manchu army marched into Kashgar in 1755.

THE STRUGGLE FOR TURKESTAN

During the 1860s and 1870s, a series of Muslim uprisings erupted across western China, and after Russian troops were withdrawn from a 10-year occupation of the Yīlí region in 1881, waves of Uighurs, Chinese Muslims (Dungans) and Kazakhs fled into Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

In 1865 a Kokandi officer named Yaqub Beg seized Kashgaria, proclaimed an independent Turkestan and made diplomatic contacts with Britain and Russia. A few years later, however, a Manchu army returned, Yaqub Beg committed suicide and Kashgaria was formally incorporated into China's newly created Xinjiāng (New Frontier) province. With the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, Xinjiāng came under the rule of a succession of warlords, over whom the Kuomintang (KMT; the Nationalist Party) had very little control.

The only real attempt to establish an independent state was in the 1940s, when a Kazakh named Osman led a rebellion of Uighurs, Kazakhs and Mongols. He took control of southwestern Xinjiāng and established the Eastern Turkestan Republic in January 1945. The KMT, however, convinced the Muslims to abolish their new republic in return for a pledge of real autonomy.

Following the 1949 communist takeover, a Muslim league opposed to Chinese rule formed in Xinjiāng, but, oddly, a number of its most prominent leaders subsequently died in a plane crash on their way to hold

THE BEGINNING OR THE END?

Uighurs have, with good reason, always viewed Han Chinese as invaders, and relations between the two nationalities have never been good. However, ties have become far more strained since the early 1950s, when communist China began bolstering the Xinjiang population with Han settlers.

Although China has invested a fair amount of money in developing Xinjiang's economy and infrastructure, Uighurs frequently argue that real opportunity – economic or otherwise – is reserved for Han Chinese. Little Han-Uighur interaction is apparent, although there is some in the capital, Ürümqi.

This long-simmering Uighur resentment saw several riots in the early 1990s; tensions boiled over in February 1997 when Muslim separatists in the northern city of Yining started serious riots that led to a swift crackdown by Chinese security forces. At least nine people died and nearly 200 were injured, making the protest the most violent to date, according to the Chinese media.

Hundreds of Muslim residents were arrested for their roles in the riots; three were executed on the day of their trial, the rest given life sentences. In response separatists blew up three buses in Ürümqi, killing at least nine passengers and wounding many others.

The violence returned to Yining in April 1997, when a mob attacked prison vehicles transporting some of the convicted February rioters. Again, several people were killed or wounded.

In 2001 Chinese secret police raided a number of Uighur underground mosques in Korla; one prominent leader and a handful of others were tried and executed.

And this was before 9/11. Běijīng took full advantage of the events following 9/11 to further crack down on Uighur nationalism by locking up or executing thousands of suspected 'Islamic terrorists' – with, ultimately, Washington's tacit approval (and the rest of the world's cacophonous silence).

Since 9/11 Běijīng has tightened its stranglehold on reporting of Uighur relations, no doubt due to its quixotic hope to develop Xinjiang into a Xi'an-esque tourist hotspot and, more importantly, a world leader in oil production.

talks in Běijīng. Organised Muslim opposition to Chinese rule collapsed, although the Kazakh Osman continued to fight until he was captured and executed by the communists in early 1951.

Since 1949 China's main goal has been to keep a lid on ethnic separatism while flooding the region with Han settlers. The Uighurs once comprised 90% of the Xinjiang population; today that number has dropped below 50%. China's Develop the West campaign, launched in 2000, is ongoing. Han Chinese are being enticed to migrate to western provinces by social and economic incentives. Běijīng has funnelled nearly US\$100 billion to build infrastructure (as much to exploit vast oil and natural gas reserves as anything) in Xinjiang.

Climate

Like its geography, Xinjiang's climate is one of extremes. Turpan is the hottest spot in the country (it gets up to 47°C from June to August), and the Tarim and Jungar Basins aren't much better at those times. As daunting

as the heat may seem, spring (April and May) is not a particularly good time to visit, with frequent sandstorms and clouds obscuring the landscape and making travel difficult. Unless you're up in the mountains or in the far north, the one thing you won't have to worry about is rain. Winters (December to February) see the mercury plummet below zero throughout the province. Late May through June and September through mid-November (especially) are the best times to visit.

Language

Uighur, the traditional lingua franca of Xinjiang, is part of the Turkic language family and thus fairly similar to other regional languages you might come across such as Uzbek, Kazakh and Kyrgyz. The one exception is Tajik, which is related to Persian.

Notice the bilingual signs in Chinese and Arabic. In fact, the Arabic script (used phonetically – Uighur has no similarities to the Semitic languages) wasn't reinstated until the era of Deng Xiaoping. From 1969 to 1983, Uighur was written with a Roman

alphabet – phased out, it's said, because of the advantage this gave Uighurs in learning English. This may sound far fetched, until your neighbour on the bus leans over your shoulder and starts pronouncing the words in your book far more accurately than the average Chinese student.

Many Uighurs can't, or won't, speak Mandarin. Some ethnic rivalry, sure, but the main reason is that as of the early 21st century, more than 70% of Xinjiang's schools taught strictly in Uighur. Whether this was because of ethnic pride or because they simply couldn't find qualified teachers (arguably true, given that an elementary school teacher in rural Xinjiang earns less than a shepherd) remains debatable.

Learn a little bit of Uighur to travel more easily (and make dear friends for life). Lonely Planet's *Central Asia Phrasebook* is a good place to start.

Getting There & Away

Domestically, you can fly to Ürümqi from virtually everywhere.

New international flights are constantly being proposed (though not necessarily finalised). You can fly to Ürümqi from a number of Central Asian cities, including Almaty (Kazakhstan), Bishkek and Osh (Kyrgyzstan), Islamabad (Pakistan, via Kashgar), Novosibirsk (Russia), Moscow, Baku (Azerbaijan) and Tashkent (Uzbekistan). There's also continued talk of new flights to Lahore (Pakistan) and Punjab (India); seasonal flights go to Seoul. Linking Tashkent and Lahore with Kashgar has been debated forever.

There are overland border crossings with Pakistan (Khunjerab Pass), Kyrgyzstan (Irkeshtam and Torugart Passes) and Kazakhstan (Korgas, Ālāshānkǒu, Tāchéng and Jímǔnǎi). Apart from Ālāshānkǒu, China's rail link with Kazakhstan, all of these borders crossings are by bus, though you can generally get a bike over.

Remember that borders open and close frequently due to changes in government policy; additionally, many are only open when the weather permits. It's always best to check with the Public Security Bureau (PSB; Gōngānjú) in Ürümqi for the official line, or Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree to see what other travellers are saying. A new crossing, the Kulma Pass to Tajikistan, may open to foreign travel in the coming years.

Heading back into China, the obvious route is the train running through Gānsù. More rugged approaches are along the southern Silk Road from Charklik to Qīnghǎi, and Karghilik to Ali (Tibet).

Getting Around

The railway coming from Gānsù splits in two near Turpan, with one branch heading west through Ürümqi to Kazakhstan, and the other going southwest along the Tarim Basin to Kashgar. More rail work includes a new rail line to Altay, which should be finished by 2008. Apart from this, travel around Xinjiang involves a lot of bus-sitting.

Bear in mind that although flying around the province may seem like a time-saver, flights are sometimes cancelled due to 'bad weather' (read: no passengers). This is decreasing, happily, but days-long sandstorms are also all too common.

CENTRAL XINJIANG

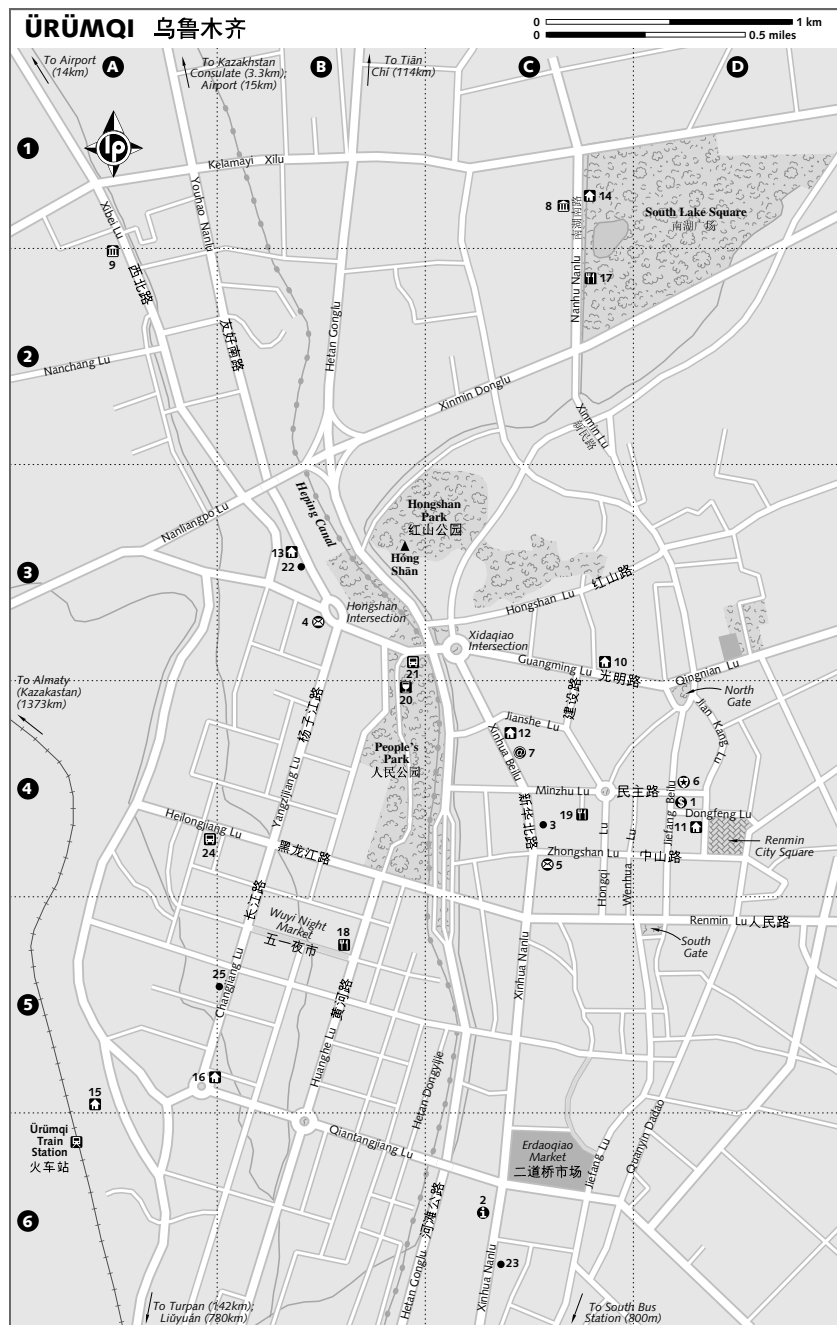
ÜRÜMQI 乌鲁木齐

☎ 0991 / pop 1.54 million

Ürümqi's Silk Road history does dominate the perceptions. Travellers disembark half-expecting oasis tents and hawkers bellowing their kebab quality. With all that cartographical earth-tone indicating desert nearby (trivia alert: it's the furthest place in the world from an ocean – 2250km), perhaps they also expect the odd camel or two chewing contentedly. Thus, many are not a little bit surprised when they find it a modern and relatively efficient city. With a few kebab sellers.

Its Mongolian name, Ürümqi (Wulumùqi or Wūshi in Modern Standard Chinese), hints at a place of fertile pastureland. Those halcyon days have said bye-bye in this teeming city, jump-started in the late 1990s by the Chinese government's efforts to relocate skilled Han here to solidify it as a strategic and economic bulwark of China's west (read: oil exploration and extraction). Its skyscraper quotient may be modest compared to eastern megalopolises, but the city definitely has a hotwired economy fast becoming a Central Asian hotspot.

Apart from the provincial museum and nearby Tiān Chí, Ürümqi is basically a practical hub, from where you can make all the necessary preparations for various trips through Xinjiang, Central Asia or back into China.

**INFORMATION**

Bank of China 中国银行..... 1 D4
 CITS 中国国际旅行社..... 2 C6
 Ecol Travel 生态旅行社..... (see 10)
 Foreign Languages Bookshop
 外文书店..... 3 C4
 Main Post Office 邮局..... 4 B3
 Post Office 邮局..... 5 C4
 PSB 公安局..... 6 D4
 Tóngxīn Wǎngluò
 同心网络..... 7 C4

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Ürümqi City Museum
 乌鲁木齐博物馆..... 8 C1
 Xinjiang Autonomous Region
 Museum 新疆自治区博物馆..... 9 A2

SLEEPING

Bógédá Bīnguǎn
 博格达宾馆..... 10 C3
 Hǎidè Jiùdiàn
 海德酒店..... 11 D4
 Jīngǔ Dǎjiùdiàn
 金谷大酒店..... 12 C4
 Kǒngquè Dàshà
 孔雀大厦..... 13 B3
 Silver Birches International
 Youth Hostel
 白桦林国际青年旅舍..... 14 C1
 Xiāngyǒu Jiùdiàn
 湘友酒店..... 15 A5
 Xīnjiāng Fāndiàn
 新疆饭店..... 16 A5

EATING

Carrefour 家乐福..... 17 C2
 Kraman 可拉曼餐厅..... 18 B5
 Vine Coffeehouse 德曼咖啡屋..... 19 C4

DRINKING

Fubar..... 20 B4

TRANSPORT

Buses to Tiān Chí 去天池的汽车..... 21 B3
 China Southern Booking Office
 南方航空公司..... 22 B3
 Kazakh Train Booking Office..... (see 15)
 Kyrgyzstan Airlines/Huaqiao
 Bīnguan 华乔宾馆..... 23 C6
 North Bus Station 长途汽车站..... 24 A4
 Siberian Airlines/Ramada Inn
 屯河华美大酒店..... 25 B5

Orientation

Ürümqi is a sprawling metropolis and you'll need to take taxis or buses to get around. The city centre revolves around Minzhu Lu, Zhongshan Lu and Xinhua Beilu, where government offices, fancy hotels and department stores are located. Not far apart are the Xidaqiao and Hongshan intersections, both of which are transport hubs. The train and long-distance bus stations are in the south-west corner of the city.

Information**BOOKSHOPS**

Foreign Languages Bookshop (Wàiwén Shūdiàn; ☎ 10.30am-8.30pm) On Xinhua Beilu, just south of Minzhu Lu.

INTERNET ACCESS 网吧

Tóngxīn Wǎngluò (Xinhua Beilu; per hr Y2) This is an enormous internet café directly to the right of the China Merchants Bank.

INTERNET RESOURCES

<http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad> One of the best online resources concerning the Silk Road. Of particular interest is the virtual art exhibit and related timeline.

www.silk-road.com Covers history, travel and culture along the Silk Road.

www.silkroadproject.org Focuses on the musical heritage of the Silk Road.

www.uygurworld.com Comprehensive introduction to the Uighur, with interesting links and an English-Uighur dictionary.

MONEY

Bank of China (Zhōngguó Yínháng; cnr Jiefang Beilu & Dongfeng Lu; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat

& Sun) Can handle most transactions and was planning a new ATM here (and at other branches) that, one hopes, should finally work. Other travellers have had success at the China Merchants Bank next to Tóngxīn Wǎngluò internet café, or China Construction Bank locations; not us.

POST

Main post office (yóujú; Hongshan intersection; ☎ 9.30am-8.30pm) The main branch handles all international parcels.

PUBLIC SECURITY BUREAU

PSB (Gōngǎnjú; ☎ 281 0452, ext 3456; Jiefang Beilu; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri) Not much hassle renewing visas here.

TOURIST INFORMATION & TRAVEL**AGENCIES**

China International Travel Service (CITS; Zhōngguó Guójí Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 282 1428; www.xinjiangtour.com; 38 Xinhua Nanlu; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 4-7.30pm Mon-Fri) Not far from Erdaoqiao Market and the Huáqiáo Bīnguǎn (Overseas Chinese Hotel), this office has information on Kazakhstan visas and other Central Asian issues.

Ecol Travel (☎ 886 1578; Bógédá Bīnguǎn gate) This agency has the best rates around for trips to Kanas Lake.

Dangers & Annoyances

In addition to petty theft around the bus and train stations, there have been reports of solo female travellers being sexually harassed in Ürümqi.

Sights

Apart from the major museum below, the city sports its own new museum – **Ürümqi City Museum** (Wūlǔmǔqí Shì Bówùguǎn; Nanhu Nanlu) – at the time of writing not yet open to the public.

WHICH TIME IS IT?

Xinjiang is several time zones removed from Běijīng, which prefers to ignore the fact. While all of China officially runs on Běijīng time (*Běijīng shíjiān*), most of Xinjiang runs on an unofficial Xinjiang time (*Xinjiāng shíjiān*), two hours behind Běijīng time. Thus 9am Běijīng time is 7am Xinjiang time. Almost all government-run services such as the bank, post office, bus station and airlines run on Běijīng time. To cater for the time difference, government offices (including the post office and CITS) generally operate from 10am to 1.30pm and from 4pm to 8pm. Unless otherwise stated, we use Běijīng time in this book. To be sure, though, if you arrange a time with someone make sure you know which, as well as what, time.

XINJIANG AUTONOMOUS REGION MUSEUM

The provincial museum (Xinjiāng Zìhìqū Bówùguǎn; ☎ 453 6436; 132 Xibei Lu; admission Y25; 🕒 10am-1.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm) has finally finished a massive US\$13 million renovation (ten spanking-new halls were built and English captions are being put up – hurrah!) and is a must for Silk Road aficionados. Desert-mummified bodies include the ‘famous’ old ‘Loulan Beauty’ of Indo-European ancestry, who became something of a Uighur independence symbol in the 1990s. The lost cities of Xinjiang – for example Niya, Loulan, Astana and Jiaohe – can basically only be studied here as they’re now all either bare or off-limits (in particular Loulan, near one of China’s nuclear test sites). New exhibitions include Buddhist frescoes from the Kizil Caves (p832) and an introduction to grasslands culture (indeed the museum does a much better job of representing all of the province’s minorities now). From the Hongshan intersection, take bus 7 for four stops and ask to get off at the museum (*bówùguǎn*).

PEOPLE’S PARK & HONGSHAN PARK

There are two major parks in the city. **People’s Park** (Rénmín Gōngyuán; admission Y5; 🕒 7.30am-dusk) is the city’s green oasis while **Hongshan Park** (Hóngshān Gōngyuán; admission Y10; 🕒 dawn-dusk) is more of an amusement park, though it does have better views. Both have north and south entrances.

ERDAOQIAO MARKET

This former Uighur market (Èrdàoqiáo Shìchǎng) is no better than a Chinese-run tourist trap these days, but the streets to the north are still the centre of Ürümqi’s Uighur community.

Sleeping**BUDGET & MIDRANGE**

Silver Birches International Youth Hostel (Bàihuáilín Guójī Qīngnián Lǚshè; ☎ 481 1428; syb-2000@sohu.com;

28 Nanhu Nanlu; 南湖南路28号; dm/tw Y35/100; 📍) What the city really needed has finally arrived with this brand-new place, helmed by an exceedingly friendly and helpful staff (although only the manager speaks much English)! Rooms and facilities are clean and there’s a good common area. Getting here is a pain, however: you have to make your way to the North Gate, from where you take bus 73 heading north and get off at South Lake Square (*nánhú guǎngchǎng*).

Xinjiāng Fàndiǎn (☎ 585 2511; 107 Changjiang Lu; 长江路107号; s/d without bathroom from Y60, with bathroom from Y80; 📍) A ten-minute walk from the train station through a maze of cloverleafing roadways brings you to the best budget option in the south of town. The usual applies – the lobby looks better than the rooms and the desk staff (but not the floor staff!) can be grumpy, but overall it’s a good option.

Kōngquè Dàshà (Pea Fowl Mansion; ☎ 988 7777; 71 Youhao Nanlu; 友好南路71号; tw Y170-260, tr Y180-285; 📍) This modern tower is a bit disconcerting at first – entering, it seems to be a modest office building. Not much in the way of services but rooms and (harried) staff are up to snuff.

Jīngù Dàjiùdiàn (☎ 235 5336; fax 283 3613; 84 Xinhua Beilu; 新华北路84号; tw Y280-380; 📍) This place has improved its attitude to match its well-kept rooms (and was planning some makeovers). At a recent check it was offering steeper discounts than most.

Xiāngyóu Jiùdiàn (☎ 585 6699; dm/tw from Y380; 📍) This place attached to the train station complex used to be called the Yà’òu Bīnguǎn and has recently renovated itself into mid-range level accommodation; most everything works here! Twins are quite nice, but you simply must negotiate a discount.

Bógédá Bīnguǎn (☎ 886 3910; fax 886 5769; 10 Guangming Lu; 光明路10号; tw Y388; 📍) The Bógédá has pleasant three-star twins that generally come

with a 40% discount in the low season. The staff don’t speak much English but are at least fairly used to foreigners. The travel agency here comes recommended.

TOP END

Hàidè Jiùdiàn (Hoi Tak Hotel; ☎ 232 2828; www.hoitak hotel.com; 1 Dongfeng Lu; 东风路1号; tw Y1200-4180; 📍) A crackerjack staff, splendidly detailed rooms and five-star facilities and services make this Hong Kong establishment *the* place to stay in Ürümqi. Winter rates drop as low as Y518.

Eating & Drinking

Ürümqi’s dining is unpredictably cosmopolitan. Regional Chinese cuisine is good here; Jianshe Lu has the largest selection of restaurants, ranging from Uighur staples to affordable Cantonese. During July and August, markets are awash in fresh fruit.

Kraman (Kèlāmàn; Huanghe Lu) This casual but spiffy (and spacious) place is among the top

choice for locals looking for that special night out. The speciality is *polo*, or rice pilaf (*zhuāfān*), accompanied with pickled salad, yoghurt and fresh fruit. Two can eat well for Y30.

Vine Coffeehouse (Démàn Kāfēiwū; ☎ 230 4831; 65 Minzhu Lu; from Y18; 🕒 1.30-11.30pm, closed Mon) Run by a how-did-he-get-here head chef from Curaçao, this fine café brings you savoury West Indian cuisine in a Caribbean atmosphere. It’s down a side street on the left. Wannabe English speakers come for the fun English corner.

Fubar (☎ 584 4498; 1 Gongyuan Beilu) This pub is the only foreigner-owned establishment in Xinjiang. Expect drinking, socialising and plenty of music (audiophiles will like the music collection) here, the expats’ home away from home. Free wireless internet and a good source of travel information.

The animated night markets with shish kebabs and handmade noodles are also worth a gander. The most thriving by far is the **Wuyi night market**; bus 902 runs nearby between the

UIGHUR FOOD

Uighur cuisine includes all the trusty Central Asian standbys such as kebabs, *polo* (pilaf) and *chuchura* (dumplings), but has benefited from Chinese influence to make it the most enjoyable region of Central Asia in which to eat.

Uighurs boast endless varieties of *laghman* (pulled noodles; *lamiàn* in Chinese), though the usual topping is a combination of mutton, peppers, tomatoes, eggplant and garlic shoots. *Suoman* are noodles fried with tomatoes, peppers, garlic and meat. *Suoman gush siz* are the vegetarian variety. *Suoman* can be quite spicy so ask for *laza siz* (without peppers) if you prefer a milder version.

Kebabs are another staple and are generally of a much better standard than the ropey *kawaps* of the Central Asian republics. *Jiger* (liver) kebabs are the low-fat variety. *Tonor* kebabs are larger and baked in an oven *tonor* – tandoori style.

Nan (breads) are a particular speciality, especially when straight out of the oven and sprinkled with poppy seeds, sesame seeds or fennel. They make a great plate for a round of kebabs. Uighur bakers also make wonderful *girde nan* (bagels).

Other snacks include *serik ash* (yellow, meatless noodles), *nokot* (chickpeas with carrot), *pintang* (meat and vegetable soup) and *gang pan* (rice with vegetables and meat). Most travellers understandably steer clear of *opke*, a broth of bobbing goat’s heads and coiled, stuffed intestines.

Samsas (baked mutton dumplings) are available everywhere, but the meat-to-fat ratio varies wildly. Hotan and Kashgar offer huge meat pies called *daman* or *gosh girde*. You can even get *balyk* (fried fish).

For dessert try *maroji* (vanilla ice cream churned in iced wooden barrels), *matang* (walnut fruit loaf), *kharsen meghriz* (fried dough balls filled with sugar, raisins and walnuts) or *dogh* (sometimes known as *durap*), a delicious, though potentially deadly, mix of shaved ice, syrup, yoghurt and iced water. *Tangzaza* are triangles of glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo leaves covered in syrup.

Xinjiang is justly famous for its fruit, whether it be *uruk* (apricots), *uzum* (grapes), *tawuz* (watermelon), *khoghun* (sweet melon) or *yimish* (raisins). The best grapes come from Turpan; the sweetest melons from Hami.

Meals are washed down with *kok chai* (green tea), often laced with nutmeg or rose petals. Uighur restaurants usually provide a miniature rubbish bin on the table in which to dispose of the waste tea after rinsing out the bowl.

train station and Xidaqiao intersection (tell the driver 'Wūyī yèshì').

In Erdaoqiao Market and near Silver Birches International Youth Hostel are Carrefour centres – great for fresh fruit; both have cafeterias for tasty freshly-made (and cheap) food.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Ürümqi has international flights to neighbouring Central Asian countries. Destinations include: Almaty (Kazakhstan), Bishkek and Osh (Kyrgyzstan), Baku (Azerbaijan), Hong Kong, Islamabad (Pakistan), Novosibirsk (Russia), Moscow, Dushanbe (Tajikistan), and Tashkent (Uzbekistan). Some of these are seasonal and many are suspended for no real reason, especially in winter. Other flights are constantly being discussed; currently, it's a flight to Punjab (India).

There's also continued talk of new flights to Lahore (Pakistan) and Punjab (India); seasonal flights go to Seoul and possibly Istanbul. Linking Tashkent, Islamabad and Lahore with Kashgar (starting here) is debated incessantly.

Domestic flights connect Ürümqi with Běijīng (Y2330), Chéngdū (Y1370), Chóngqīng (Y1630), Lánzhōu (Y1190), Guǎngzhōu (Y2840), Shànghǎi (Y2800) and Xī'ān (Y1600), among others.

Destinations within Xinjiang include Altai (Àlètài), Hotan (Hétián), Kashgar (Kāshí), Kuqa (Kūchē), Tǎchéng and Yíning. Kanas Lake will have an airport by 2008.

China Southern has a booking office next to the Kōnggué Dàshà, but hotel travel agents will consistently get you better prices.

There are two primary international airline offices in town: **Siberian Airlines** (☎ 286 2326; Changjiang Lu) in the Ramada Inn, and **Kyrgyzstan Airlines** (☎ 231 6333; Xinhua Nanlu) in the Huáqiáo Bīnguǎn (Overseas Chinese Hotel).

BUS

Two long-distance bus stations in Ürümqi serve northern and southern destinations. The north bus station (*chángtú qìchēzhàn*) is on Heilongjiang Lu and has sleeper buses to Tǎchéng (Y112 to Y142, 11 to 12 hours), Yíning (Y120 to Y150, 11 to 14 hours) and Bù'ěrjīn (Y127 to Y137, 13 hours). If you have a Kazakh visa, you can also go to Almaty in Kazakhstan via a sleeper bus to Korgas (Y133, 14 hours). From Korgas it's another 12 hours

to Almaty. A longer but more pleasant trip would be to travel to Almaty via Yíning. Bus 2 runs from the train station to Hongshan, passing Heilongjiang Lu on the way.

The south bus station (*nánjiāo qìchēzhàn*) is south of the city and has frequent departures for Turpan (Y35, 2½ hours), Kuqa (Y106 to Y165, 10 to 17 hours), Kashgar (Y192 to Y212, 24 hours) and Hotan (Y220 to Y410, 19 to 26 hours), the latter crossing the Taklamakan Desert. Bus 1 runs between Xidaqiao and the south bus station, bus 109 will get you there from Hongshan intersection, and from the North Gate bus 104 will take you almost all the way (a ten-minute walk beyond the Xinjiang University stop).

TRAIN

The province is building several new rail lines, one of which is slated to serve Altay. Numerous trains serve Lánzhōu; the T296 (see table below) is the best choice. The schedule of direct daily departures from Ürümqi follows:

Destination	Train	Duration	Departs
Běijīng	T70	45hr	2.19pm
Chéngdū	1014	54hr	10.47pm
Kashgar	N946	23hr	3.49pm
Kuqa	N946	14hr	3.49pm
Lánzhōu	T296	25hr	6.47pm
Shànghǎi	T54	48hr	2.55pm
Xī'ān	1044	53hr	8.52pm

Trains depart Ürümqi twice a week for Almaty, Kazakhstan, on Monday and Saturday at midnight. The journey takes a slow 32 hours, six of which is spent at both Chinese and Kazakh customs. Tickets start at around Y480 and can only be purchased in the lobby of the Xiāngyóu Jiùdiàn, at the **booking office** (☎ 10am-1pm & 3.30-6pm Fri & Sat). You will need a visa for Kazakhstan.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is 16km from the Hongshan intersection; a taxi costs about Y40. An airport bus (Y10) runs straight south through town to the train station.

BUS

Useful bus (Y1) routes include 7, which runs up Xinhua Lu through the Xidaqiao and Hongshan intersections, linking the city

centre with the main post office; and 2, which runs from the train station through the Hongshan intersection and way up along Beijing Lu. Bus 1 goes from the south bus station through the city centre to Xidaqiao. Bus 8 runs from the train station along Heilongjiang Lu to the Minzhu Lu traffic circle.

TIĀN CHÍ 天池

Two thousand metres up in the Tiān Shān mountain range is **Tiān Chí** (Heaven Lake; admission ¥90), a small but long, steely-blue lake plonked below the view-grabbing 5445m Peak of God (Bógédá Fēng). Scattered across the stunning spruce-covered slopes are Kazakh yurts and a heck of a lot of sheep. Tourists are multitudinous, yet there's plenty of backcountry out there. You can also take horse treks up to the snow line, although these get mixed reviews. While there, perhaps read Vikram Seth's wonderful China/Tibet travelogue *From Heaven Lake*.

In late May Kazakhs set up yurts around the lake for tourists (Y40 per person with three meals); Rashit is the best-known host. The yurts near the ticket office are authentic and take boarders (Y10); unfortunately you'll need to hitch a ride the rest of the way up. Alternatively, you can camp out.

Buses to the Tiān Chí car park leave Ürümqi from 9am to 9.30am from the north gate of People's Park and return between 5pm and 6pm. (In the low season they may not run at all.) The return fare is Y50 and the trip takes about 2½ hours. The drivers may annoyingly charge you Y50 even if you plan on spending the night.

From the car park, there's a chairlift (Y15 return) or bus (Y15 return) or you can hoof it an hour uphill. The path starts left of the chairlift.

Regardless of the temperature in Ürümqi, take warm clothes and rain gear, as the weather can be unpredictable.

DÀHÉYÁN 大河沿

Fifty-eight kilometres from the Turpan oasis is Dàhéyán (marked Tūlǔfān on schedules), the nearest train station. Minibuses run from here to Turpan (Y8, one hour) once every 30 minutes throughout the day, starting at 6.30am. Shared taxis are Y10 per person or it's Y50 for the whole thing.

Most travellers need trains heading east or west, since people going to Ürümqi usually

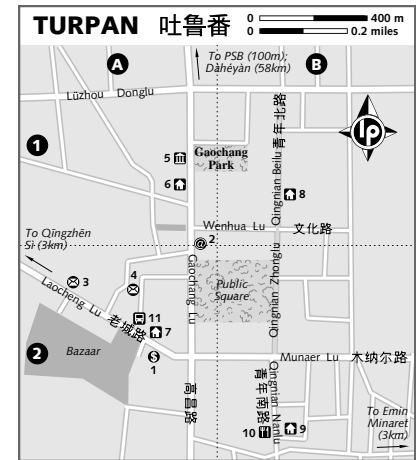
take the infinitely faster bus. There are daily trains to Běijīng, Chéngdū, Lánzhōu (Y375, 22 hours), Xī'ān and Kashgar (Y360, 21 hours). Eastward trains pass through Dūnhuáng (eight hours) and Jiàyùguān (11 hours).

You can buy tickets at the station or through a travel agent in Turpan. Going east it can be difficult to get a hard sleeper.

TURPAN 吐鲁番

☎ 0995 / pop 57,100

In Ürümqi you'll likely grouse about the heat. Leaving, things are pleasant enough. Vast wind farms give way to salt lakes; the road knifes its way through cliffs. Then the wind stops dead as the descent into the Turpan Basin begins in earnest. The driver flicks



INFORMATION

Bank of China 中国银行	1	A2
CITS 中国国际旅行社	(see 7)	
Internet Café 网吧	2	A1
Main Post Office 邮局	3	A2
Post Office 邮局	4	A2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Turpan Museum 吐鲁番博物馆	5	A1
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SLEEPING

Gāochāng Bīnguǎn 高昌宾馆	6	A1
Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn 交通宾馆	7	A2
Oasis Hotel 绿洲宾馆	8	B1
Tūlǔfān Bīnguǎn 吐鲁番宾馆	9	B2

EATING

John's Information Café	10	B2
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TRANSPORT

Long-Distance Bus Station 长途汽车站	11	A2
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on the air-con thereabouts for good reason: disembark from your bus and the heat will practically throw you to the ground.

Worry not. Turpan (Tūlūfān) is a legendary oasis; its various settlements have long been a stopover on the northern route of the Silk Road. At 154m below sea level, it's even better known as the second lowest depression in the world (after the Dead Sea) and the hottest spot in China – the highest recorded temperature here was 49.6°C! Today they're redirecting attention toward its delectable grapes.

Ah, those grapes. Some streets here are really pedestrian zones covered with grapevine trellis, a visual treat and a godsend in the fierce heat of summer. Given the oven-like temperatures, nobody really rushes around here. Good idea, because the sights are all out of town, in even hotter environs.

History

Settlements in the Turpan Basin predate the Han dynasty; the inhabitants have ranged from Indo-Europeans (possibly Tocharians related to the mummies in Ürümqi's museum) to the Chinese and Uighurs.

In the mid-9th century, the ancestors of the Uighurs were forced from their homeland in Mongolia, with one group eventually settling in Gaochang (Khocho). The city was the Uighur capital until 1250, and saw the Uighurs transform from nomads to farmers, and from Manicheans to Buddhists (they eventually converted to Islam in the 14th century).

Information

The **Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Yínháng; Laocheng Lu; ☎ 9.30am–1pm & 4.30–8pm) can change cash and travellers cheques. West down the same street is the **main post office** (yóujiù; ☎ 10am–8pm). A couple of **internet bars** (per hr ¥2) are just north of the main square on Gaochang Lu.

CITS (Zhōngguó Guójì Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 852 1352; ☎ 8am–9pm) has a branch in the Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn and can help book train and plane tickets, as well as arrange tours.

The **Public Security Bureau** (PSB; Gōngānjú; Gaochang Lu) is north of downtown and will likely refer you to the capital.

Sights

EMIN MINARET 额敏塔

Emin Hoja, a Turpan general, founded this splendid Afghan-style mosque and **minaret**

(Émín Tǎ; admission ¥23; ☎ dawn-dusk) in 1777. Also known as Sūgōng Tǎ (named after one of his sons), its 15 simple brick motifs including flowers and waves leap from the structure. The azure sky and lush green of the grape fields outside provide a wondrous photo backdrop. You can climb to the mosque's roof, but cannot enter the minaret.

Biking or strolling the 3km to get there is half the fun, the dusty, tree-lined streets an evocative – and fascinating – glimpse into 'old' Turpan.

CITY MOSQUE 清真寺

Several other mosques (Qīngzhēn Sì) are in town. The most active of them is on the western outskirts about 3km from the town centre.

TURPAN MUSEUM

Outside of a mummified Tang dynasty dumping, there's not a whole lot in the local **museum** (Tūlūfān Bówùguǎn; Gaochang Lu; admission ¥20; ☎ 9am–7.30pm) other than some small exhibits from Astana and Gaochang.

Sleeping

Tūlūfān Bīnguǎn (☎ 852 2301; lfhan-tl@mail.xj.cninfo.net; 2 Qingnian Lu; 青年路2号; dm/tw ¥40/380; ☎) One of Turpan's original decent hotels, this place still holds up. Staff are friendly and helpful, and the doubles are good value, although it has bumped up dorm prices and cut back on bed space. Evening performances are popular here.

Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn (☎ 853 1320; 125 Laocheng Lu; 老城路125号; s/d ¥50, tr ¥100, standard/tw ¥160; ☎) Despite its location near the noisy bus station, this spruced-up hotel is a good option, with solidly clean facilities and a travel service within.

Gāochāng Bīnguǎn (☎ 852 3229; 330 Gaochang Lu; 高昌路330号; tw ¥180–388; ☎) While not at the heart of the action, the Gaochang has seen an upgrade in quality (and price). Rooms aren't flash in the least but decent, though what it charges in high season is a bit much.

Oasis Hotel (Lǚzhōu Bīnguǎn; ☎ 852 2491; www.the-silk-road.com; 41 Qingnian Beilu; 青年北路41号; tw ¥308–728; ☎) The Oasis incorporates local aesthetics into its hotel design, including Uighur motifs on the wall trim and *khan* beds (padded brick beds – better than it sounds!). Service has always been good and rooms are approaching good value status (if a discount is factored in).

Eating

For Uighur cooking, nothing beats the food court at the **bazaar** (Shì Mào'yi Shìchǎng), though finding the stalls – not the handful on the main alley – requires a bit of patience. The fresh 'pull noodles' (*sozoup laghman*) are excellent.

In addition to the lively market action surrounding the public square, dinner choices also include a string of hybrid Uighur-Chinese restaurants that set up tables under the trees on Qingnian Lu. *Laghman* and Chinese dishes run from ¥5 to ¥10.

John's Information Café (Qingnian Nanlu; dishes from ¥10; ☎ 7am–10pm) This place serves Western and Chinese meals in a shaded courtyard. The menu is in English, prices are fair and you can even get cold drinks with ice (much appreciated in Turpan's heat!).

Entertainment

A traditional Uighur music, song and dance show is staged at Tūlūfān Bīnguǎn in the courtyard nightly at 9pm in the high season (¥20). They're fun nights that usually end up with some of the audience being dragged out to dance with the performers.

Getting There & Away

The nearest train station is at Dàhèyán (p827), 58km north of Turpan. Minibuses to Dàhèyán (¥8, one hour) run approximately every 30 minutes between 7.30am and 8pm.

Buses to Ürümqi (¥33, 2½ hours) run every 20 minutes between 8am to 8pm. There is one daily bus at 10am to Kashgar (¥147, 26 hours) via Kuqa (¥69, 15 hours).

Getting Around

Public transport around Turpan is by taxi, mini-bus or bicycle. Bicycles (about ¥25 per day), available from John's Information Café, are most convenient for the town itself. Or, John can line up a donkey cart for a local tour.

AROUND TURPAN

Some of Turpan's surrounding sights are fascinating and others are a waste of time. The only way to see them is on a tour – local drivers will find you and these generally work out best as you can choose what you want to see. For four people, figure on paying between ¥50 and ¥70 per person. The CITS minibus is a reliable ¥60 for seven or eight sights, but you're locked into the standard programme.

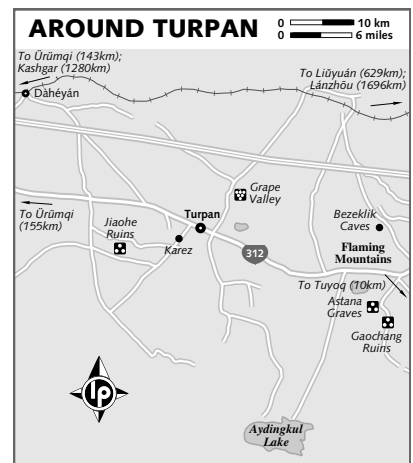
You can bypass the **Astana Graves** (阿斯塔那古墓区; Āsītānà Gǔmùqū; admission ¥20) and the **Bezteklik Caves** (柏孜克里克千佛洞; Bózikèlìkè Qiānfó Dòng; admission ¥20), both essentially empty. The latter is infamous for having many of its distinctive murals cut out of the rock face by German archaeologists in 1905. Some buses may stop at **Grape Valley** (葡萄沟; Pútáo Gōu; admission ¥45) for lunch, but outside of the September harvest – when it's spectacular – it's underwhelming.

Two possible additions to tours include a **karez** (坎儿井; kǎnrǐjǐng; admission ¥20) – though if you're travelling through Xinjiang, you'll have other opportunities to see less touristy ones – and **Aydingkul Lake** (艾丁湖; Àidīng Hú), the second lowest lake in the world. Be forewarned that it's more of a muddy, salt-encrusted flat than a lake.

You'll be gone for the day, so don't underestimate the desert sun. Hot – damn hot. Essential survival gear includes a water bottle, sunscreen, sunglasses and a hat.

Tuyoq 吐峪沟

Set in a green valley fringed by the Flaming Mountains, this tiny grape-producing **village** (Tūyùgōu; admission ¥30) is an excellent place to explore traditional Uighur life and architecture. Tuyoq has been a pilgrimage site for Muslims for centuries, and the devout claim that seven trips here equal one trip to Mecca. The *mazar*, or symbolic tomb of the first Uighur Muslim, is the object of pilgrimage, and is within the earthen walls on the hillside above the village.



Up the gorge are a series of Buddhist caves dating back to the 3rd century AD.

Tuyoq is not yet on the standard tour, and private drivers may raise their prices slightly to include it.

Jiahe Ruins 交河故城

During the Han dynasty, **Jiahe** (Jiāohé Gùchéng; admission ¥40) was established by the Chinese as a garrison town. Also called Yarkhoto, it's one of the world's largest (6500 residents lived here), oldest, and best-preserved ancient cities. If you only visit one desert city, make it this one: the buildings are more obvious than the ruins of Gaochang, and you can walk through the old streets and along the roads. A main road cuts through the city; at the end is a large monastery with Buddhist figures still visible.

The ruins are 7km or 8km west of Turpan and stand on a loess plateau bound by two small rivers. During the cooler months you can cycle out here.

Gaochang (Khocho) Ruins 高昌故城

Originally settled in the first century BC, **Gaochang** (Gāochāng Gùchéng; admission ¥30) rose to power in the 7th century during the Tang dynasty. Also known as Khocho, or sometimes Kharakhoja, it became the Uighur capital in AD 850 and a major staging post on the Silk Road until it burned in the 14th century. Texts

in classical Uighur, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan have all been unearthed here, as well as evidence of a Nestorian church and a significant Manichean community – a dualistic Persian religion that borrowed figures from Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Today, though the earthen walls of the city (once 12m thick) are clearly visible, not much else is in good condition other than a large Buddhist monastery in the southwest. To the north, adjacent to an adobe pagoda is a two-storey structure (half-underground), purportedly the ancient palace.

Flaming Mountains 火焰山

Around Bezeklik and Tuyoq are the **Flaming Mountains** (Huǒyàn Shān), whose midday appearance is aptly compared to multicoloured tongues of fire. The Flaming Mountains were immortalised in the Chinese classic *Journey to the West* as a mountainous inferno that the monk Tripitaka had to pass through. Thankfully for Tripitaka, Sun Wukong (Monkey) managed to obtain a magic fan with which to extinguish the blaze. It's far removed from the actual life of the Tang pilgrim Xuan Zang, who journeyed some 5000km to India and back in search of Buddhist scriptures, but the legend's genesis isn't surprising.

Compare it to the Uighur version, in which a hero slays a child-eating dragon living within the mountains (its blood, hence, is the colour-

ing) and slices it into eight pieces which each represent a valley here.

You can clamber around in places (steps now lead up), but only in the early morning – and don't forget your fan.

KUQA 库车

☎ 0997 / pop 69,200

Grimy strip-mall-modern meets traditional donkey carts amid dusty poverty in Kuqa (Kùchē), a former Buddhist city-state and oasis on the ancient Silk Road. Here Kumarajiva (AD 344?–413), the first great translator of Buddhist sutras from Sanskrit into Chinese, was born to an Indian father and Kuqan princess, before later being abducted to Dūnhuáng and then Cháng'ān to manage translations of the Buddhist canon. When the 7th-century monk Xuan Zang passed through, he recorded that two enormous 30m-high Buddha statues flanked Kuqa's western gate, and that the nearby monasteries held over 5000 monks.

Orientation & Information

The main thoroughfare that connects the new and old parts of town is Tianshan Lu/Renmin Lu (new town/old town). The bus station is east of town on Tianshui Lu, and the train station a further 5km southeast.

The **Bank of China** (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; ☎ 9.30am–8pm) is at 25 Tianshan Donglu. **Liántōng Wǎngbā** (Youyi Lu; internet per hour ¥2) just south of Wenhua Lu has internet access on the second floor.

Sights

BAZAAR & MOSQUE 巴扎、清真寺

Every Friday a large **bazaar** (Lǎochéng Bāzā) is held about 2.5km west of town, next to a bridge on Renmin Lu. Nothing to rival Kashgar's, of course, but neither will you see a tour bus anywhere. About 150m further west from the bazaar is a small **mosque** (Qīngzhēn Sì) where large crowds of worshippers congregate on Friday afternoon. North of here through the old town is the Great Mosque (Qīngzhēn Dài), though it's less animated than its smaller counterpart.

To get here from the new town, take buses 1 or 3 from Tianshan Lu.

QIUCI ANCIENT CITY RUINS 龟兹故城

These **ruins** (Qiūcí Gùchéng) are all that is left of the capital of Qiuci, one of several ancient feudal states. They are on the main road,

about a 20-minute walk northwest of the main intersection where Tianshan Lu forks in two. Expect, well, not much.

Sleeping & Eating

Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn (交通宾馆; ☎ 712 2682; 87 Tianshan Lu; s & tw ¥50–120; ☺) Overlook the grim concrete floors and you'll be fine. More expensive twins have air-con and hot water after 8pm.

Kùchē Bīnguǎn (库车宾馆; ☎ 712 2901; 76 Jiefang Lu; 解放路76号; tw ¥240–388; ☺) Kuqa's main hotel has airy, bright and fairly spacious rooms, and the grounds are the closest thing to leafy you'll get around here. It also has multi-person rooms, but probably not for you. The hotel is near the city centre and it easiest to catch a motorcab here.

The best place to get a bite to eat is under the shaded awnings at the **vegetable market** (菜市场; cài shìchǎng) south of the Youyi Lu and Tianshan Lu intersection. There are the usual kebabs, noodles and *samsas* (mutton dumplings) available for a few yuan.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport east of the city theoretically has daily flights to Ürümqi (Y590), but they rarely happen. A taxi there costs ¥10.

BUS

The bus station has always been – and still is – an exercise in frustration. Expect some puzzled wandering to find a Samaritan helper. Heading east are a variety of sleepers to Ürümqi (Y106 to Y165, 10 to 17 hours) and five daily buses to Lüntái (Y13, 1½ hours), from where you can take the cross-desert highway to Hotan. For Kashgar (Y128, 16 hours) you have to wait for a sleeper from Ürümqi to pass and hope that it has berths.

Once the snow melts (mid-May), there is also a daily bus to Yining (Y148, 22 hours), a spectacular trip crossing the Tianshan range. You can try to get off at the Mongolian village of Bayanbulak, the mid-way point, but the area's PSB doesn't like foreigners nosing around.

TRAIN

Moving on to Ürümqi or Turpan (Y175, 14½ to 16 hours) is generally not a problem. If you're going west to Kashgar (slow/express train Y44/91, nine to 10 hours), however, sleeper tickets are not available – you'll need

KAREZ

The *karez* is a peculiarly Central Asian means of irrigation that can be found in Xinjiang, Afghanistan and Iran. Like many dry, arid countries, Xinjiang has great underground reservoirs of water, which can transform otherwise barren stretches of land – if you can get the water up. This subterranean water is often so far underground that drilling or digging for it, with primitive equipment, is virtually impossible.

Long ago the Uighurs devised a better way. They dig a *karez*, known as the 'head well', on higher ground, where snowmelt from the mountains collects (in Turpan's case, the Bogda Mountains). A long underground tunnel is then dug to conduct this water down to the village farmland. A whole series of vertical wells, looking from above like giant anthills, are dug every 20m along the path of this tunnel to aid construction and provide access. The wells are fed entirely by gravity, thus eliminating the need for pumps. Furthermore, having the channels underground greatly reduces water loss from evaporation.

Digging a *karez* is skilled and dangerous work and the *karez-kans* are respected and highly paid workers. The cost of making and maintaining a *karez* was traditionally split between a whole village and the *karez* was communally owned.

The city of Turpan owes its existence to these vital wells and channels, some of which were constructed over 2000 years ago. There are over a thousand wells, and the total length of the channels runs to an incredible 5000km, all constructed by hand and without modern machinery or building materials.

to try your luck with an upgrade. Bus 2 runs along Tianshan Lu to the train station.

Getting Around

Taxi rides are a standard Y5 per trip, while motorcabs, tractors and donkey carts are generally Y1 to Y3, depending on the distance you want to travel.

AROUND KUQA

Kizil Thousand Buddha Caves

克孜尔千佛洞

In the field of Central Asian studies, the **Kizil caves** (Kèzīěr Qiānfó Dòng; admission Y35; ☎ daylight hrs), 75km northwest of Kuqa, are an important site, a wondrous hodgepodge of Central Asian art and religion from six centuries. Begun in the 3rd century, the patterns and motifs are strikingly different to what you see in the Mogao Caves at Dūnhuáng (see p866). They also predate them by a century and contain no Chinese influence whatsoever.

Unfortunately, of the more than 230 caves here, only eight are open to the public, and these are in pretty poor shape. One cave was stripped by Western archaeologists and is entirely bare, while the others have been defaced by both Muslims and Red Guards.

More interesting than the caves is the hike through the desert canyon to the spring Qiānlèi Quán. If you forgo the caves, admission is only Y5, but it's a long way to drive just to go hiking. A roundtrip taxi will cost around Y160 and takes 1½ hours.

Ancient City Ruins 苏巴什故城

There are several ruined cities in the Kuqa region, but these consist of no more than a few crumbling walls. The most famous is **Sūbāshī** (temple admission Y15, city admission Y15; ☎ daylight hrs), 23km northeast of Kuqa, while 20km to the south is Wushkat. A taxi to Sūbāshī and back costs about Y40.

LÚNTÁI 轮台

Lúntái is a homonym for the word 'tyre', apt indeed as the town stands amid oil fields near the start of the Cross-Desert Hwy (p842) and is the link between Kuqa and Hotan. To Kuqa (Y12, 1½ hours) there are buses every half-hour starting at 9.30am. If you're interested in crossing the desert from the north, you'll either need to hitch to the crossroads (40km away) or take a share taxi for around Y10 per person. Buses from Ürümqi pass by at night,

so you won't see too much of the desert. If you get stuck here, the dependable Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn next to the bus station has dorms (Y15) and twins (Y100).

SOUTHWEST XINJIANG – KASHGARIA

Kashgaria, the rough-but-mellifluous sounding historical name for the western Tarim Basin, is the heartland of the Uighur. Although isolated even today, Kashgaria was a major Silk Road hub and has bristled with activity for over 2000 years. A ring of oases lined with poplar trees and centred on weekly bazaars remains a testament to the mercantile tradition.

KASHGAR 喀什

☎ 0998 / pop 340,000

Kashgar (Kāshī) is the end of China's New Frontier, itself the end of China. The first intrepid Chinese traders and emissaries must have envisioned themselves at the end of the earth as they approached this readymade oasis for the first time, millennia ago. (Considering it's 1000km through a desert furnace and its varmint brigands from the site of modern Ürümqi, they were some brave souls.) Its strategic crossroads location has seen it at the epicentre of cultural conflict and cooperation for over two millennia.

But modernity has swept in like a sandstorm. A paved Silk Road preceded an airport and in 1999 the Iron Rooster arrived, along with a ton of Han Chinese. Donkeys have mostly given way to taxis and motorbikes, and sadly, much of the old architecture is giving way to new.

Then again, Kashgar has seen it all before and despite the tutting from some about the 'death' of 'traditional' Kashgar, in many ways it is the same as it ever was. The great (times five) grandsons of craftsmen and artisans still hammer and chisel away in side alleys in the old quarter; everything sellable is hawked and haggled over boisterously; and the donkey to taxi ratio is still equal parts furry in some areas. And that Sunday market – now that's a blast from the past, no matter how many tour buses roll up.

Kashgar was globalised before globalised was grammatical. A Babel of negotiation – Kazakh, Urdu, Tajik and more mixed with

Uighur in a business stew – still goes on in shops and in hotel lobbies. Jets and buses have replaced camels (usually), but Kashgar is the nexus of a Central Asian high-tech Silk Road. Kashgar redux.

So soak it in for a few days, eat a few kebab, chat with a local medicine man in the back alley, and prepare your trip along the Southern Silk Road to Hotan, over the Torugart or Irkeshtam Passes to Kyrgyzstan or south up the stunning Karakoram Hwy to Pakistan.

Orientation

Official (Chinese) street names are given here. The town centre is a Tiānānmén-style square north of Renmin Park, dominated by a statue of Mao Zedong. The Uighur old town lies just north of here, bisected by Jiefang Beilu.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS 网吧

Internet bars (Y2 to Y4 per hour) are ubiquitous but the PSB mandates they register you. One is opposite the Chini Bagh Hotel.

LAUNDRY

There is a cheap laundry service (*gānxǐ diàn*) next to the Caravan Café.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Health Clinic (under the CITS bldg, Chini Bagh compound) Can administer first aid and medicines. Some staff speak English.

People's Hospital (Rénmín Yīyuàn; Jiefang Beilu) North of the river.

MONEY

The **Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Yínháng; main square; ☎ 9.30am-1.30pm & 4-7.30pm) can change travellers cheques and cash; ditto with the branch west at 239 Renmin Xilu. You can also sell yuán back into US dollars at the bank's foreign exchange desk if you have exchange receipts; this is a good idea if you are headed to Tashkurgan, where the bank hours are erratic. Staff also swear they're putting in a *working* ATM, but they've said this before. Some travellers have gotten money from a China Construction Bank ATM at the north-west corner of Jiefang Beilu and Renmin Xilu; we didn't.

POST

Post office (yóujú; 40 Renmin Xilu; ☎ 9.30am-8pm) The second floor handles all foreign letters and packages.

PUBLIC SECURITY BUREAU

PSB (Gōngānjū; 111 Youmulakexia Lu; ☎ 9.30am-1.30pm & 4-8pm) You can extend your visa here.

TOURIST INFORMATION & TRAVEL AGENCIES

The **Caravan Café** (p836) and **John's Cafe** (p836) both organise bookings, transport and excursions, and can link you up with other budget-minded travellers to help share costs.

Elvis (elvisablimit@yahoo.com), otherwise known as Ablimit Ghopur, is a local Uighur whose main business is buying and selling carpets (ask his advice if you're considering a purchase). He also takes tourists on offbeat tours of the old town and lines up desert treks. A proud connoisseur of *muqam* (Uighur traditional music), he can help you sample it. He operates out of the Old City Restaurant across from Sèmán Bīnguǎn (p835).

The main office of **CITS** (Zhōngguó Guójí Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 298 3156) is up one flight of stairs in a building just outside the Chini Bagh Hotel.

Dangers & Annoyances

Travellers have lost money or passports to pickpockets at the Sunday Market and even on local buses, so keep yours tucked away.

Some foreign women walking the streets alone have been sexually harassed. The Muslim Uighur women dress in long skirts and heavy stockings like the Uighur women in Ürümqi and Turpan, but here one sees more female faces hidden behind veils of brown gauze. It is wise for women travellers to dress as would be appropriate in any Muslim country, covering arms and legs.

Sights

SUNDAY MARKET & LIVESTOCK MARKET

星期天市场、动物市场

A Uighur primer: '*Boish-boish!*' means 'Coming through!' You'd best hip yourself to this phrase, or risk being ploughed over by a donkey cart or tuk-tuk at the **Sunday Market** (Yengi Bazaar; Xīngqītiān Shìchǎng). At sunrise, the otherwise somnolent town is invaded by about a bazillion bleating and whinnying animals, along with a 100,000-strong (so it is said) 'army' of friendly shepherds, traders, farmers, artisans, nomads and itinerants, as well as the curious, a pickpocket or two, and what seems like an equal number of tourists furiously clicking shutters, overwhelmed by the sheer lovely madness that is this market.



The market is actually open daily and a little less crowded on weekdays. This is where you'll find carpets, clothing and boots, hats and Uighur knives (along with a ton of touristic junk).

Southeast of the city is the **Livestock Market** (Mal Bazaar; Dòngwù Shìchǎng), with an equal livestock-to-people ratio. (Here you may get ploughed over by a Uighur 'test driving' a horse!)

A taxi to the Sunday Market is Y5, and to the Livestock Market Y10. Otherwise, bus 16 runs to the Livestock Market from the main square.

Kashgar's Sunday Market can get fairly touristy, but don't be discouraged, there are plenty of other lesser-known markets to visit.

For starters, try the Sunday market at Hotan (p841), the Monday market in Upal (p838), the Tuesday market in Charbagh (p840) or the Friday market in Kuqa (p831).

OLD TOWN

Sprawling on both sides of Jiefang Lu are roads full of Uighur shops and narrow passages lined with adobe houses right out of an early-20th century picturebook. The old town is much smaller than it once was, but is still one of the most fascinating places in Xinjiang; better – tourism will likely preserve what's left.

Be warned that the residential area far to the east has been transformed into a monymaker – you have to pay Y10 just to enter!

At the eastern end of Seman Lu stands a 10m-high section of the former town walls, which are at least 500 years old.

ID KAH MOSQUE 艾提尕尔清真寺

The yellow-tiled **Id Kah Mosque** (Ài Tígǎ'ěr Qīngzhēn Sì; admission Y30), which dates from 1442, was once on the outskirts of town (atop a cemetery, it is said), but now is the heart of the city – and not just geographically. Enormous, its courtyard and gardens can hold 20,000 people during the annual Qurban Baiyram celebrations.

Non-Muslims may enter but Fridays are usually a no-go. Local women are rarely seen inside but Western women are usually ignored if they're modestly dressed (arms and legs covered and a scarf on the head); this goes for men as well (that is, no shorts and T-shirt). Take off your shoes if entering carpeted areas and be discreet when taking photos.

ABAKH HOJA TOMB 香妃墓

On the northeastern outskirts of town is the **Abakh Hoja Maziri** (Xiāngfēimù; admission Y40; ☺ daylight hrs), covered in splendidly mismatched glazed tile and best known among Uighurs as the resting place of Abakh Hoja, one of Kashgar's more popular rulers. Purportedly among others interred is Ikparhan, his granddaughter. Known as Xiang Fei ('Fragrant Concubine'), she led the Uighurs in revolt, was defeated and ended up Emperor Qianlong's concubine.

There are/were other tombs scattered throughout Kashgar, but many of these now sit under housing complexes. The only ones remaining, such as the **Tomb of Yusup Has**, are in a state of disrepair.

KASHGAR REGIONAL MUSEUM 喀什地区博物馆

This **museum** (Kāshí Dìqū Bówùguǎn; 19 Tawuguzi Lu; admission Y6; ☺ 7.30am–noon & 4–8pm) is on the eastern edge of Kashgar. Despite half-hearted attempts to liven up the exhibits here, most travellers come away underwhelmed.

HA NOI RUINS & MOR PAGODA

罕诺依古城、莫尔佛塔
At the end of a jarring 35km drive northeast of town are the ruins of **Ha Noi** (Hǎnnuòyī Gùchéng), a Tang-dynasty town built in the 7th century and abandoned in the 12th century. Little remains but a solid pyramid-like structure and the huge **Mor Pagoda** (Mù'ěr Fótǎ).

CITS will take you to Ha Noi for Y200 per 4WD or you can hire a car from the CITS for Y70 per person. John Hu, at John's Cafe (see p836), charges Y350 per car.

Tours

Both the Caravan Café and John's Cafe organise multiday trips. Some of the more popular destinations for trekking around Kashgar include the K2 base camp, Muztagh Ata and camel tours through the Taklamakan Desert. If you're looking for a challenge, you can also consider biking the Karakoram Hwy.

Sleeping

Accommodation can be tighter on the days preceding the Sunday Market than afterward. In low season you should be able to coax out some discounts.

Tiannán Fāndiàn (☎ 282 4023; 27 Renmin Donglu; 人民东路27号; dm Y20, tw Y238) Across from the long-distance bus station, the multi-building Tiannan is a convenient place to lay your head if you've just jumped off an interminable, dusty bus ride. Virtually all the dorm rooms have been renovated into standard doubles, but for the nonce some cheap beds exist. It doesn't see many foreigners and this actually kinda tickles 'em.

Semán Bīnguān (☎ 258 2129; fax 258 2861; 337 Seman Lu; 色满路337号; dm Y20-30, tw Y60-680; ☺) A labyrinthine complex with a variety of rooms and quality. Dorms are decent, but the toilets/showers apparently haven't been cleaned since the Tang dynasty. Around the back is the former Russian consulate, with seven (somewhat gaudy) rooms for the well-heeled Great Game aficionado.

Chini Bagh Hotel (Qīníwǎkè Bīnguǎn; ☎ 298 2103; fax 298 2299; 93 Seman Lu; 色满路93号; dm Y35-40, tw Y180-380; ☺ ☺) The Chini Bagh, situated on the grounds of the former British consulate (now a restaurant), remains the best all-around choice. Dorms are clean and they have private bathrooms. The three-star International Building is, yuán for yuán, the best value in town.

Kāshí Gǎěr Bīnguǎn (☎ 265 2367; fax 265 4679; 57 Tawuguzi Lu; 塔吾孜孜路57号; tw/stc Y288/888; ☺) If you're looking for a quiet place to stay, this is it. Set in spacious gardens 3km east of the centre, the rooms here were renovated in 2004 and are the most comfortable in Kashgar. A taxi to the main square is Y5.

Eating UIGHUR

Intizar (Yintizäer; Renmin Xilu) A jam-packed Kashgar favourite, the classic dish here is *tohu gangpan* (*jirou mifan*), spicy chicken and potatoes with rice (Y5).

Another good spot to sample Uighur cooking is at the food stalls at the night market opposite the Id Kah Mosque (and other individual stalls in the vicinity). Vendors sell noodles, chickpeas, poached eggs, kebabs, breads and boiled goat heads; bring your own fork. For dessert there is watermelon by the slice, *tangzaza*, *kharsen meghriz* or simply a glass of hot milk and a pastry. In restaurants, *suoman*, *suoman gush siz* and *polo* are all recommended. See the boxed text on p825 for more about Uighur food.

For good views of the old town street life, make sure you pay a visit to the rickety second-floor teahouse (*chai hanna*), north of the music shop.

CHINESE

Chinese fast-food stalls serve oily but cheap lunches in an alley off Renmin Xilu, behind the Bank of China. This is a good option for vegetarians. Just point and pay; a tray of ready-cooked food costs about Y5. Go at noon when the food is hot.

WESTERN

Indy's Café (Kūnlún Yizhàn; ☎ 283 8989; Paheta Baza Nanlu; coffee Y15) South a block or so off Renmin Xilu, this is a real haven for genuine coffee and tea with tastefully appointed interiors. Internet access is available.

Caravan Café (☎ 298 1864; www.caravancafe.com; 120 Seman Lu; mains from Y15; ☎ 9am-9.30pm Apr-Oct) Next to the Chini Bagh Hotel, it serves scrumptious light Western food and is extraordinarily clean, and these days is just as popular for its travel services.

John's Cafe (☎ 258 1186; www.johncafe.net; mains from Y10) In Sēmān Bīnguān courtyard, this is another popular hang-out, offering both (pricy) Western and (cheaper) Chinese dishes.

Shopping SOUVENIRS

The citizens of Kashgar have been selling things for 2000 years, so be ready to bargain. For serious shopping go to the old town; but beware, Sunday Market prices tend to be higher. Hats, teapot sets, copper and brass

ware and Uighur knives are among the souvenirs you'll find around town.

CARPETS

Most carpet dealers display their wares at the Sunday Market pavilion. The rugs here are made out of everything from silk to synthetics, so do your homework if you plan on buying. The brightly coloured felt *shyrdakhs* from Kyrgyzstan are a good buy – don't pay more than Y350 for a large one. The best regional carpets were once made in Hotan; however, the quality of a Hotanese rug today is dubious.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

The family-run **Uighur Musical Instrument Factory** is on the street north of the post office. Here you'll find long-necked stringed instruments running the gamut from souvenirs to collectors' items. If any traditional performances are on, Mohammed (the owner) will know where to find them.

Getting There & Away

It's imperative when you buy tickets in Kashgar to verify what 'time' the person who's selling the tickets has set their watch to. Officially it's Běijīng time, but unsurprisingly, this isn't always the case.

AIR

There are three daily flights to Ürümqi (Y1230), which are sometimes cancelled due to poor turnout or sandstorms. It's possible to fly to Islamabad (Pakistan); another route to Lahore (Pakistan) hasn't yet started (and possibly never will). The **Civil Aviation Administration of China office** (CAAC; Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎ 282 2113; 95 Jiefang Nanlu; ☎ 10am-1pm & 4.30-8pm) will have more information.

BUS

To Kyrgyzstan

There are two passes into Kyrgyzstan: the Torugart, which leads to Bishkek, and the Irkeshtam, which goes to Osh. Getting to Osh (US\$50, two days) is straightforward, with a bus leaving the **international bus station** (*guoji qichezhàn*; Jiefang Beilu) on Monday (and perhaps Thursday if demand warrants it) at 10am. Another option is to hire a taxi up to the border, which should work out to be a similar price. Crossing the Torugart Pass, however, is a different matter (see opposite). For the record, a Chinese bus runs twice weekly

OVER THE TORUGART PASS

Officially the Torugart Pass is a 'second grade' pass and therefore for local not international traffic. Except, of course, that it is. What you require on the Chinese side is a *xūkèzhèng* permit from the PSB entry-exit section in Ürümqi. Most agents in Kashgar can get this (CITS claim in three working days), though no one will arrange a permit without transport. The most popular option now is with the Caravan Café's travel service (www.caravancafe.com) in Kashgar (see below for prices).

The hitch is getting into Kyrgyzstan without booking Kyrgyz transport. Officially the Chinese won't let you leave the arch without onward transport into Kyrgyzstan and Chinese travel agencies are reluctant to take you without booking onward transport. But it looks likely that the Chinese guards will let you cross if you can find a lift from the border gateway to the Kyrgyz border post. If you do manage to get to the Kyrgyz border post you will need to find onward transport to Naryn or Bishkek – though be forewarned, you could be in for a long wait. In the event there are taxi sharks at the crossing, they may open the bidding at US\$200 or more to Bishkek (and may lead you to think that's for the vehicle, then later tell you it's per person), though US\$50 for the car is a more realistic amount.

There are public buses to Kyrgyzstan over the Torugart Pass, but at the time of writing foreigners were *still* not allowed to take these services. Without a permit, you'll most likely be thrown off the bus at the customs post. You must already have a Kyrgyzstan visa.

from the international bus station to Naryn (US\$25) and Bishkek (US\$50).

To Pakistan

Buses to/from Sost (Y270 plus Y2 per bag, two days) in Pakistan leave the international bus station daily at 10am. The 500km trip stops overnight at Tashkurgan. Bring water, snacks and warm clothes as nights can be cold all year. Sit on the left for the best views.

Customs procedures are conducted at Tashkurgan.

If buses have stopped for the season but you're desperate to cross the border, Pakistani traders may have space in a truck or chartered bus. You can also hire a taxi or a 4WD from one of the tour outfits.

Other Destinations

Other buses use the **long-distance bus station** (*kāshī zhàn*; Tian Nanlu). There have been instances of theft at the bus station, especially in the early morning crush.

Making the 1480km trip to Ürümqi are nonstop coaches, soft-seat or sleeper (Y192 to Y212), that take about 24 hours. They leave frequently between 7.30am and 7.30pm.

Local buses to Tashkurgan leave daily at 10.30am (Y44, six hours) and charge the full fare to drop you off in Karakul.

There are seven buses for Hotan (Y65 to Y85, seven to 10 hours) between 9am and 9pm, but it is more enjoyable to stop off in Yengisar (Y7, 1½ hours), Yarkand (Y22, three

hours) or Karghilik (Y29, four hours). Buses to these last three towns run hourly.

For information on buses to Tajikistan see p963.

CAR

You can hire 4WDs (four to six passengers) and minibuses (eight to 12 passengers) from the Caravan Café, John's Cafe, or CITS. At the time of research, rates for a 4WD to meet/drop you off at Torugart averaged around Y1000, plus Y200 per person to arrange the requisite permits (minimum two-day wait though three is more likely). Food and lodging are extra, and the driver pays for his own.

HITCHING

You might be able to hitch a lift to Tashkurgan, but from there to Pakistan you'll probably have to wait for an empty seat on the bus. There are plenty of trucks crossing the Torugart Pass to Kyrgyzstan but you'll likely have problems getting past the customs post.

TRAIN

Daily trains to Ürümqi depart at 9.30am and 2.50pm and take 30 and 23 hours, respectively. Middle-berth sleeper tickets on the faster train are Y360.

Getting Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is 12km northeast of the town centre. A bus (Y5) leaves from the CAAC

ticket office 2½ hours before all departures, and one bus meets all incoming flights. A taxi there should cost the same price.

BICYCLE

A bike is the cheapest and most versatile way to get around Kashgar. One-gear clunkers can be hired by the hour or the day (Y20) at John's Cafe.

BUS

Useful bus routes are buses 2 (Jiefang Lu to the airport), 10 (Renmin Lu to the Kashgar Hotel and Abakh Hoja Tomb), 9 (international bus station to the Chini Bagh and Sēmān Bīnguān), 16 (main square to the Livestock Market) and 28 (main square to the train station). The fare is Y1.

TAXI

Taxis seem to breed here and were set to be metered at the time of research.

KARAKORAM HWY 中巴公路

The **Karakoram Hwy** (Zhōngbā Gōnglù) over the Khunjerab Pass (4800m) is the gateway to Pakistan. For centuries this route was used by caravans plodding down the Silk Road. Khunjerab means 'valley of blood', a reference to local bandits, who took advantage of the terrain to plunder caravans and slaughter the merchants.

It took nearly 20 years to plan, push, blast and level the present road between Islamabad and Kashgar, and more than 400 road-builders died in the process. Facilities en route are being steadily improved, but take warm clothing, food and drink on board with you – once stowed on the bus roof it's unavailable.

Even if you don't go to Pakistan, the trip up to Tashkurgan is worthwhile. From Kashgar, you first cross the Pamir Plateau (3000m), passing the foothills of 7719m-high Kongur Mountain (Gōnggǔ'ér Shān) and nearby Muztagh Ata Mountain (Mùshītǎgē Shān; 7546m).

The journey continues through stunning scenery – high mountain pastures with grazing camels and yaks tended by yurt-dwelling Tajiks. The last major town on the Chinese side is Tashkurgan at 3600m.

Officially, the border opens on 15 April and closes on 31 October. However, the border can open late or close early depending on conditions at Khunjerab Pass. Travel for-

malities are performed at Sost, on the Pakistan border; the Chinese border post is located at Tashkurgan.

You'll need to get your papers in order ahead of time, as China doesn't let anyone out of the country if they don't have an onward visa, and you can't get one in Kashgar. If you're coming in from Pakistan, make sure you have enough cash on hand – the bank in Tashkurgan doesn't change travellers cheques.

Kashgar to Karakul Lake

If you'd like to see the Karakoram Hwy, Karakul Lake, a glittering mirror of glacial peaks, makes for a good destination. Like Tiān Chí, it can get crowded here during the day, but evenings and mornings you'll have the place to yourself, and you can hike up into the hills or circumnavigate the lake. Most settlements as far as Karakul are Kyrgyz.

An hour from Kashgar is **Upal** (Wùpǎ'èr in Chinese), where the Kashgar–Sost bus normally stops for lunch. There's a great weekly market here every Monday.

Two hours from Kashgar you enter the canyon of the Ghez River (Ghez Darya in Uighur), with wine-red sandstone walls at its lower end. Ghez itself is just a checkpoint; photographing soldiers or buildings here can result in confiscated film. Upstream, the road is cut into sheer walls or inches across huge boulder fields. At the top of the canyon, 3½ hours above the plain, is a huge wet plateau ringed with sand dunes, aptly called Kumtagh (Sand Mountain) by locals.

The bus will drop you off after five or six hours next to the lake, ringed by magnificent ice mountains. One hotel has yurts (Y40) and rooms (and a restaurant). Camping is possible but not recommended; travellers have warned of strong-arm tactics from local leaders who 'control' the area (they also don't like foreigners staying with locals in yurts though some do anyway). There is now an entrance fee of Y50.

One bus daily leaves the long-distance bus station at 10am, takes five to six hours and costs Y45. The bus to Sost from the international bus station also stops off here. It's supposed to leave at 10am but noon isn't unheard of! Day-trippers can rent a taxi for as little as Y400 (return). The official price is double this, but someone is always ready to bargain.

SOUTHERN SILK ROAD

The Silk Road east of Kashgar splits into two threads in the face of the huge Taklamakan Desert. The northern thread follows the course of the modern road and railway to Kuqa and Turpan. The southern road charts a more remote course between desert sands and the huge Pamir and Kunlun ranges. The ancient route is marked by a ring of abandoned cities deserted by retreating rivers and encroaching sands. Some cities, like Niya, Miran and Yotkan, remain covered by sand; others, like Yarkand and Hotan, remain important Uighur centres.

While there are no spectacular sights, the journey takes you about as far into Uighur heartland as you can get. It's possible to visit the southern towns as a multiday trip from Kashgar before crossing the Taklamakan Desert to Ürümqi, or as part of a rugged backdoor route into Tibet or Qīnghǎi.

YENGISAR 英吉沙

The tiny town of Yengisar (Yīngjīshā), 58km south of Kashgar, is synonymous with knife production. There are dozens of knife shops here (though prices are not much better than in Kashgar) and it's sometimes possible to visit the knife factory (小刀厂; xiǎodāochǎng in Chinese; *pichak chilik karakhana* in Uighur) in the centre of town to see the knives being made. Each worker makes the blade, handle and inlays himself, using only the most basic of tools. From the main highway walk east past Yīngjīshā Bīnguān (英吉沙宾馆) then turn left to the bazaar. The factory is just west of the bazaar. Try not to visit between the noon to 4pm lunchbreak.

Getting There & Away

Buses pass through the town regularly en route to Yarkand (Y13, 1½ hours) and Kashgar (Y7.5, 1½ hours). There's no bus station per se; ask a motorcab to take you to the drop off point (Y2).

YARKAND 莎车

Yarkand (Shāche), Samarkand, Kashgar – put this town on the list of those beckoning to bygone Silk Road days. At the end of a major trade route from British India, over the Karakoram Pass from Leh, Yarkand was for centuries an important caravan town and centre for

Hindu tradesmen and moneylenders. Today it's important because a branch road leads north to Aksu.

The town is known for the dead. Tombs honouring royalty are the primary draw; the most famous of which is the tomb of Ammanisahan, a Uighur queen and musician famed for her work collecting the Uighur *muqam*.

Sights otherwise really means the alleys of the intriguing old quarter, where craftsmen still work their wares – noisily and sweatily – with ball-peen hammers and grindstones.

Orientation

Modern Yarkand is split into a Chinese new town and an Uighur old town. Heading right out of the bus station will bring you to the main avenue. Take a right here, and flag down any public bus (Y0.50), which will take you past the Shāchē Bīnguān, the Altyn Mosque and the old town.

Sights

Getting to the old town is slightly tricky – the best way to find it is to use the **Altyn Mosque complex** (阿勒电清真寺; Aqindian Qingzhen Si; admission Y10) as a landmark. The complex is on a smaller street off the main avenue. To get to the old town, take a left off the main avenue as if heading to the mosque, then take the first right down a dirt lane and keep going. To visit the town's sprawling, overgrown cemetery and *mazar* (pilgrimage site), take a left off this lane after five minutes. There is no charge to enter the complex.

Other **tombs**, most for Altun kings, located out of town include Hajim Deng Mazar, Sud Pasha Mazar and Hayzi Terper Mazar. There is plenty of scope here to take many interesting walks around the surrounding countryside.

Yarkand also has a **Sunday Market**, untouristed but smaller than the markets at Kashgar (p833) or Hotan (p841). The market is held a block north of the Altyn Mosque.

Sleeping & Eating

Finding a place to stay can be a problem in Yarkand.

Shāchē Bīnguān (莎车宾馆; ☎ 851 2365; 4 Xincheng Lu; 新城路4号; tw/tr Y280/240) You will be led to this blah place because the PSB won't let others accept you (though what the heck – give the bus station cheapies a shot).

The old town has tempting noodle shops with patrons sitting on *kangs* instead of chairs.

Getting There & Around

Buses leave half-hourly for Kashgar (Y22, three hours), Yengisar (Y14, 1½ hours) and Karghilik (Y6, one hour). There are two daily buses at 11am and noon to Hotan (Y29, six hours), and five daily to Ürümqi (Y170 to Y190, 24 hours).

From the bus station it's about 1.5km to Shāchē Bīnguǎn and the same again to the start of the old town.

KARGHILIK 叶城

Karghilik (Yèchéng) is a convenient place to break the long trip to Hotan. There are decent places to stay and you could enjoyably spend some time exploring the old town. Karghilik is also of importance to travellers as the springboard of legendary highway 219, the Xinjiang–Tibet highway that helped ‘open’ Tibet. Considering the long overland trip to Ali in Tibet? Be sure you understand the dangers to you and any drivers who take you (see right).

The main attraction to take in here is the 15th-century **Friday Mosque** (Jama Masjid) and covered bazaar out front. The traditional adobe-walled backstreets of the old town spread south behind the mosque.

The town of **Charbagh**, located 10 minutes’ drive towards Yarkand, has a large market on Tuesday.

Sleeping & Eating

Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn (交通宾馆; ☎ 728 5540; 1 Jiāotōng Lu; 交通路1号; dm Y40, tw Y80–100) Right by the bus station, you may be pressured to stay here (the PSB again, hoping to corral foreigners, all of whom they assume are sneaking into Tibet), but that’s OK as it’s the best place anyway.

There are busy Uighur eateries outside the Friday Mosque and 24-hour food stalls across from the bus station.

Getting There & Away

There are buses to Yarkand (Y6) and Kashgar (Y25, four hours) every half hour until 8.30pm and six buses to Hotan (Y24, five hours) between 10.30am and 8.30pm. There are also five daily sleeper buses to Ürümqi (Y173 to Y182, 25 hours).

TO TIBET

The 1100km-long road to Ali, in western Tibet, branches off from the main Kashgar–Hotan road 6km east of Karghilik. Tibetan Antelope buses make the trip, but were only running thrice monthly at the time of writing, so you may have to hitch a ride with a truck. Ticket prices fluctuate wildly according to the severity of recent PSB crackdowns; count on paying anywhere between Y400 and Y1000, for either the bus or a truck. This is a very tough road with some passes over 5400m, and several foreigners have died, either from exposure or in traffic accidents. You should come equipped with warm clothes, enough food for a week (even if the trip to Ali can take as little as three days) and as a safety precaution, something to fend off nomads’ dogs. Although this road is officially closed to foreigners, a number of travellers have been making it around the checkpoints in recent years – but not everyone. You may be fined upon arrival in Ali (Y300), or you may be booted out entirely, and will need to pick up a Y50 permit. See Lonely Planet’s *Tibet* guide for more details.

HOTAN 和田

☎ 0903 / pop 104,900

You can call it a real ‘Jade Gate’. Archaeologists have locally unearthed jade artefacts from around 5000 BC, proving that Hotan (Hétián; also known as Khotan) and its jewel trading preceded by a large chunk of time the horse-trading that later spurred Chinese trade routes westward.

Hotanese also uncovered the secret of Chinese silk by the 5th century AD – thus the famed road names hereabouts – and later established themselves as the region’s foremost carpet weavers.

But Hotan today is certainly no Kashgar and the silk, carpets, and jade exist, but mostly in highly touristic fashion. Visits to carpet and silk factories are interesting for some, but what may make the 500km-long slog from Kashgar worthwhile is the fantastic Sunday Market, the largest and least visited in Xinjiang.

For those setting off on the infrequently explored southern Silk Road, via Keriya (Yútián), Cherchen (Qiēmò), Charklik (Ruòqiāng) and on to Golmud, this is the last place to take care of important errands like changing money, stocking up on supplies or extending your visa.

Orientation

Beijing Xilu is the main east–west axis running past the enormous main square (Tuánjiē Guǎngchǎng). The bank and PSB are to the southwest of the square, while the hotels and bus stations are north from here. The Jade Dragon Kashgar River runs several kilometres east of town.

Information

The **Bank of China** (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; ☎ 9.30am–1.30pm & 4–8pm Mon–Fri) at the corner of Urumqi Nanlu and Beijing Xilu cashes travellers cheques.

Situated cross the street is the **PSB** (Gōngānjú; 22 Beijing Xilu; ☎ 9.30am–1.30pm & 4–7.30pm Mon–Fri), which will (if they like you) process visas in one day.

There’s an internet café a few minutes north of the Hétián Yíngbīnguǎn.

CITS (Zhōngguó Guójí Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 202 6090; 23 Tamubake Xilu, 3f), located to the south off Wulumuqi Nanlu, can arrange tours of the silk factory as well as expensive excursions with a car and guide to the ruins at Yotkan and Melikawat.

Sights

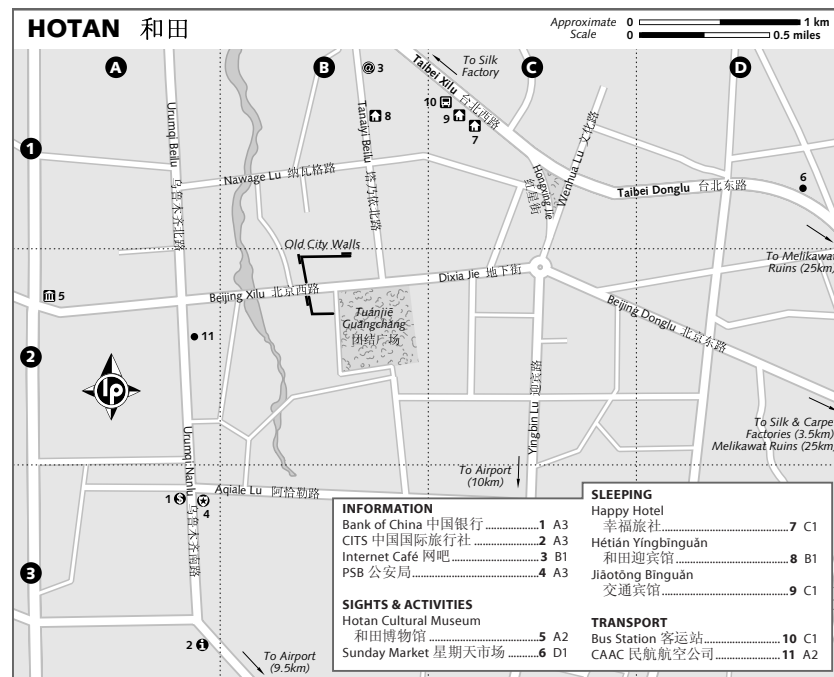
You can check out the local selection of jade, supposedly pulled from the muddy Jade Dragon Kashgar River, at the rows of stores and stalls along Beijing Lu.

SUNDAY MARKET 星期天市场

Hotan’s most popular attraction is its traditional weekly **market** (sometimes on Friday as well), which rivals Kashgar’s in both size and interest. The colourful market swamps the northeast part of town and reaches fever pitch between noon and 2pm Xinjiāng time. The most interesting parts to head for are the *gillam* (carpet) bazaar, which also has a selection of atlas silks, the *doppi* (skullcap) bazaar and the livestock bazaar.

CARPET & SILK FACTORIES 地毯厂、丝绸厂

On the eastern bank of the Jade Dragon Kashgar River is a small **carpet factory** (*gillam karakhana* in Uighur). Even with up to 10 people working on the large looms, one square metre in a wool carpet takes 20 days to complete. The tour is interesting, although Kashgar is a far better place to shop. To get here, take



minibus 2 heading east, which leaves from the main crossroads downtown, and then change to minibus 3 or walk 20 minutes over the bridge.

Past the carpet factory is the small town of Jiǎyáxiàng, a traditional centre for atlas silk production. You can look around the fascinating **workshop** (atlas karakhana in Uighur; admission Y10) to see how the silk is spun, dyed and woven using traditional methods. A round trip in a taxi to the carpet and atlas factories costs Y30.

Hotan Silk Factory (Hétián Sīchóu Chǎng; ☎ 9am-1:30pm & 3:30-7:30pm Mon-Fri) uses a less traditional form of silk production, employing over 2000 workers. Staff at the office will give you a tour of the plant to see the boiling of cocoons and spinning, weaving, dyeing and printing of silk. If you don't speak at least some Chinese, you are better off arranging a visit through CITS. No photos are allowed in the factory. To get there, take minibus 1 from outside the bus station to the end of the line and then walk back 150m.

HOTAN CULTURAL MUSEUM 和田博物馆

In new digs but quite a hike to the west of town on Beijing Xilu is the regional **museum** (bówùguǎn; admission Y7; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm). The main attractions are items from ancient city ruins around Hotan, including two Indo-European mummies, a 10-year-old girl and 35-year-old man, both of whom are now over 1500 years old. It was still being reorganised and stocked with artefacts at last check. Take buses 2 or 6 from the town centre to get here.

ANCIENT CITIES 古城

The deserts around Hotan are peppered with the faint remains of abandoned cities. Ten kilometres west of town are the **Yotkan Ruins** (Yuètǎgān Yízhǐ; admission Y15), the ancient capital of a pre-Islamic kingdom dating from the 3rd to 8th centuries AD, much of it now submerged in a swampy morass.

The **Melikawat Ruins** (Málikèwātè Gùchéng; admission Y10) are 25km south of town, and there are some temples and pagoda-like buildings a further 10km to the south. Hiring a taxi should cost about Y30 to Yotkan and Y75 to Melikawat. It's an additional Y5 to take photos.

Other ruins such as the Rawaq Pagoda and city of Niya (Endere) are currently off limits; though you can always check with CITS if you're interested.

Sleeping & Eating

Happy Hotel (Xīngfú Lúshè; ☎ 202 4804; Taibei Xilu; 台北西路; bed Y30) The name of this basic-but-clean Uighur-style alternative certainly befits the owners, a wondrous Ma and Pa Uighur couple who are pleased as punch to have foreign guests.

Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn (☎ 203 2700; Taibei Xilu; 台北西路; tw Y80-180; ☎) Next to the bus station, the Jiāotōng has somewhat tired rooms, although they're still worth the lower end of the price range. There are cheaper rooms, but you'll need all your bargaining skills to get in.

Hétián Yíngbīnguǎn (☎ 202 2824; fax 202 3688; 4 Tanaiji Beilu; 塔乃依北路4号; dm Y20, tw Y90-180; ☎) The main building here is likely the nicest place to stay in Hotan, and the cheaper rooms in the old wing aren't bad either (though they may not let you in those). To get here, take a taxi (Y5) from the bus station.

Uighur staples are found throughout the town but otherwise Hotan is throwing up fast food places faster than you can blink.

Getting There & Away

AIR

In theory, there are daily flights between Hotan and Ürümqi (Y1250); if they leave, it's always late in the evening. The **CAAC office** (☎ 251 2178; Urumqi Nanlu) is west of the main square. The airport is 10km west of town; a taxi there costs Y15.

BUS

There are seven buses from Hotan to Kashgar (Y65 to Y85, seven to 10 hours) from 9.30am to 4pm, including 'expresses' that are a labelled a bit optimistically. These buses also pass through Karghilik (Y30, five hours) and Yarkand (Y37, six hours).

The station was planning to institute rides into Sichuan; you'll be directed to an office on the second floor, though no English is spoken.

CROSS-DESERT HWY

The 500km trans-Taklamakan highway was originally built to facilitate the extraction of oil from beneath a desert whose reputation, up until recently, was one of certain death. Grids of planted reeds are all that keep the rippling ocean of sand from constantly blowing over the road, and the slightest bit of bad weather can stop traffic for days. Before you

even reach the desert, you'll see dust devils erupting in the distance like yellow geysers, and the snowy Kunlun Mountains towering forebodingly over the gravelly plain.

Sound good? The earliest bus to Ürümqi leaves at 11am (Y220, 25 hours) or the express at 1pm (Y330, 20 hours) to make the most of it. There are six other buses throughout the day, which cross the desert at night. If you're interested in going to Kuqa, you can get off near Lúntái (Y130, 15 hours); buses also pass through Korla. Drivers work in shifts, so it's not a bad idea to reiterate your destination. Bring plenty of water and food in case of breakdowns or storms.

Getting Around

Bus 10 runs from the bus station past the bazaar to the east bus station. Taxis in town cost a flat Y5; cycle rickshaws are Y2.

HOTAN TO GOLMUD 和田至格尔木

To continue east along the southern Silk Road, you'll need to catch the 8.30am bus to Cherchen (且末; Qiè mò), 580km away. The one-very-long-day trip costs Y78 and goes via the Uighur towns of Keriya (于田; Yútian) and Niya (民丰; Mínfēng); obviously, this often stretches into two days. Buses leave from the east bus station (东站; dōng zhàn) in Hotan; bus 10 runs here from the main bus station. Cherchen/Qiè mò has cheap hostels (Y10) and a small erstwhile manor-cum-museum.

From Cherchen/Qiè mò, three buses a week continue another 320km east to Charklik (若羌; Ruòqiāng); a nice hotel (Y50 double) is next to the bus station. The trip takes anywhere from 13 to 16 hours under good conditions, and tickets are Y60. From Charklik you may be able to get a bus to Golmud, though it's more likely you'll have to resort to a combination of private jeep and minibus services to get you the nine hours to Huatùgōu (花土沟; from Y150 to Y200). From here you can reportedly catch a public bus to Golmud (Y140, 17 hours) or, usually, Xíníng (Y198, 24 to 28 hours).

This route requires a few overnight stops, and roads in this area are plagued by washouts and landslides, so don't go this way if you're in a hurry.

The completion of the railway to Lhasa would also theoretically allow one to hop aboard that train in Golmud – presuming,

naturally, that foreigners are allowed to do so at that time.

NORTHERN XINJIANG

Until the 1990s, this region of thick evergreen forests, rushing rivers and isolated mountain ranges was a quiet backwater, closed off to foreigners due to the proximity of the Russian, Mongolian and Kazakhstan borders. The highlight of the area is beautiful Kanas Lake (Hànāsī Hú) and the surrounding valleys.

BÙ'ĒRJĪN 布尔津

☎ 0906 / pop 60,000

Bù'ěrjīn, meaning 'dark green water' in Mongolian, is named after the nearby Bu'ěrjīn River, which is a tributary of the Ertix River, the only river in China to flow into the Arctic Ocean. Bù'ěrjīn, 620km north of Ürümqi, marks the end of the desert and the beginning of the grasslands and mountains to the north. The town's population is mainly Kazakh (57%), but there are also Han, Uighurs, Tuva Mongolians and Russians.

There isn't much to see in Bù'ěrjīn, but you may need to stay here if you're headed to Kanas Lake.

Orientation

Bù'ěrjīn's main street is Xingfu Lu, bisected by Wenming Lu. One block to the west of Wenming Lu is Xiangyang Lu, with the PSB, and further south, the night market.

Information

You can't change travellers cheques in Bù'ěrjīn, but the local Industrial & Commercial Bank (ICBC) can change major currencies. Should you need a permit for a closed area, the PSB is on the corner of Xiangyang Lu and Xingfu Lu.

Sleeping & Eating

Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn (交通宾馆; ☎ 652 2643; Wenming Lu; 文明路; dm/tw Y10/90) It's at the old cheap and convenient bus station, and there is often no hot water, but the staff are helpful (though English is nonexistent).

Jiākèsī Jiǔdiàn (嘉客思酒店; ☎ 652 1716; Huancheng Nanlu; 环城南路; tw Y120-280) This place has nice rooms right by the night market (at the corner with Xiangyang Lu), with hot water in the evening. Friendly staff, if a bit inept.

For a hearty bowl of beef noodle soup, make a beeline for the **Yinchuan Huimin Fandian** (银川回民饭店; Wenming Lu). It's at the corner on the end of Wenming Lu. Opposite Jiakèsi Jiùdiàn is a tiny night market specialising in grilled fish and fresh yuhurt.

Getting There & Away

There are two buses to Ürümqi (Y120 to Y137, 13 hours) at 11am and 8pm, and Jimūnǎi (Y12, two hours) at 11am and 6pm.

You could also take a bus to Altai (Ālètài, Y15, 1½ hours) and try from there. Altai also has an airport with daily flights to/from Ürümqi (Y450). At the time of writing a new rail line was also being constructed from the capital to Altai. Buses run to/from the city hourly (Y15, 1½ hours) between 9am and 7pm.

KANAS LAKE NATURE RESERVE

哈纳斯湖自然保护区

Travellers rave about the splendid alpine scenery at R&R-perfect Kanas Lake, a long finger of a lake found in the southernmost reaches of the Siberian taiga ecosystem. The forests, dominated by spruce, birch, elm and Siberian larch, are spectacular in autumn; semi-nomadic Kazakhs love to meet travellers.

Many come hoping to see a cameo by the Kanas Lake Monster (it deserves a more poetic moniker), a mythical beast – yes, yes, China's Nessie – that has long figured in stories around yurt campfires to scare the little 'uns. Apparently he/she reappeared in 2005 and again in 2006, bringing tons of journalists and conspiracy hounds (puzzled Chinese scientists insist it's just a big school of salmon-like fish).

Big changes are coming. The government is simultaneously trying to draw oodles more tourists here – it's swarming already in summer – and do it with less of a footprint. All lodging and restaurants are slated to be removed from the area and rebuilt elsewhere, probably at Tuva, 18km away.

A great day-hike is to the lookout point, Guanyu Pavilion (观鱼亭; Guānyú Tíng; 2030m). It's a long, ambling walk from the village (tons of steps); from the top are superb panoramas of the lake, Friendship Peak and the nearby grasslands. It's possible to return to the village via a circuitous scenic route down the eastern slope by following the dirt road, a loop that takes a lazy five hours. If you're short on time, a bus (Y30 return) drives to

the Guanyu Pavilion steps from outside the village.

There are similar landscapes in the neighbouring valley of Hemu Kanas (Hémù Hānāsī) and the Bai Kaba (Báihābā) village. You may be able to hire a taxi from Kanas Lake to the village (Y150) or if hiring a taxi from Bù'ěrjīn to Kanas Lake, you may be able to negotiate a detour on the way.

Eighteen kilometres past the entrance to the **reserve** (Hānāsī Hú Zīrán Bǎohùqū; admission Y100) is a Tuva village, which now serves as the tourist centre. The area is only accessible from mid-May to mid-October, with ice and snow making transport difficult the rest of the year.

Sleeping & Eating

Remember that bit above about closing all facilities at the lake.

Officially, the only options for accommodation are the log cabins and wooden yurts around the village school (学校; xuéxiào). The going rates per bed are: yurts Y30, dorms Y60 and twins Y80. During the peak summer months, there are nightly barbecues accompanied by Kazakh and Mongolian dancing and a roaring bonfire.

While camping is off-limits, it's unlikely that anyone will come out looking for you – just remember the area is still unspoiled, so stay low impact. No matter where you sleep, food is extremely expensive and monotonous. Bring your own supplies.

Getting There & Away

This is the hard part. During July and August there should be tourist buses (Y50) that head to the lake from Bù'ěrjīn's bus station. Unfortunately, it's impossible to count on them, because most tourists come up here with a tour group from Ürümqi. Your best bet is to hire a taxi to make the four-hour, 170km trip. The bidding starts at Y400, with Y250 being a reasonable target (one way).

You might also consider doing a tour. The four-day trip out of Ürümqi with Ecol Travel (p823) in the Bógédá Bīnguǎn is an excellent deal. For Y580 you get an air-con minibus (only 10 hours to Bù'ěrjīn), two nights in Bù'ěrjīn, a park entrance ticket, one night's lodging at the lake and a visit to the strange rock formations at Wuerhe Ghost Town, where the movie *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* was filmed. It's cheaper, easier and will give you the chance to make friends with Chinese tourists.

FRIENDSHIP PEAK 友谊峰

Standing on the glacier-covered summit of Friendship Peak (Yóuyì Fēng; 4374m) allows you to be in three nations at once. Presumably you won't need a visa for each one, but you will need a climbing permit, guide, ice axe, crampons and other appropriate mountaineering paraphernalia.

JÍMŪNǎI 吉木乃

The only reason to visit this town is if you're going to Kazakhstan. The border here is generally open, but come armed with a plan B in case you don't get through; check with Bù'ěrjīn PSB to make sure it's still OK to do this. The first major town in Kazakhstan is Maykapchigay, from where you can catch a taxi to Zaysan and then a bus to Semey (12 hours).

A couple of buses depart from the bus station and the main intersection for Ürümqi between 4pm and 5pm daily. The trip takes 14 hours and costs Y130 for a sleeper or a seat, although prices are negotiable with the private operators. There are two daily buses that make the dusty trip to Bù'ěrjīn (Y15, two hours).

There is no reliable public transport to the border, but a taxi will make the 30km trip for Y25. Coming the other way, you can share a taxi to Jimūnǎi for Y5.

TǎCHÉNG 塔城

In a lonely corner of northwestern Xinjiang, Tǎchéng is a relatively obscure border crossing into neighbouring Kazakhstan. Now and then the gates are closed; if you do make it here and can't get through, don't despair. Tǎchéng is a pleasant enough place to relax before catching a bus south to Ālāshānkǒu or north to Jímūnǎi.

Information

The post and telephone office (邮电大楼; Yóudiàn Dàlóu) is in the centre of town, on the corner of Xinhua Lu and Ta'er Bahetai Lu. The PSB is on Jianshe Jie. The Bank of China is south of here on Guangming Lu and can handle cash and travellers cheques.

Sleeping

Tǎchéng Bīnguǎn (塔城宾馆; ☎ 622 2093; Youhao Jie; 友好街; dm Y35, tw Y100-140) This hotel, tucked away in the northwest of town, has beds in a Russian-style building. The twins are reasonable and there's 24-hour hot water.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Daily flights operate between Ürümqi and Tǎchéng; you can purchase your tickets (Y390) from **CAAC** (中国民航; Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎ 622 3428).

BUS

There are two daily buses to Tǎchéng (Y132 to Y142, 12 hours) from Ürümqi, departing at 11am and 7pm. From Tǎchéng to Ürümqi the time and price are similar.

TAXI

Tǎchéng is small enough to get around on foot. If you're coming from Kazakhstan, take a shared taxi for Y5 into town.

YÍNING 伊宁

☎ 0999 / pop 240,000

Also known as Gulja, leafy and friendly Yining lies about 390km west of Ürümqi. The centre of the Ili Kazak Autonomous Prefecture, Yining is of primary interest as a stopover on the way to Kazakhstan.

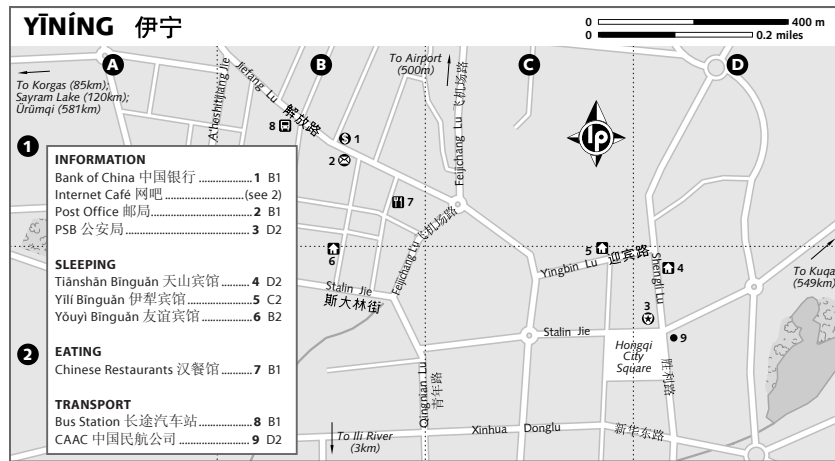
Looking at the city today, you'd hardly know it was the scene of violent separatist riots in 1997. Yining has since gone the Siniticised way of most frontier towns in Xinjiang, and many of the original Kazakh and Uighur inhabitants seem to have been swallowed up without a trace.

Even though the Chinese appear to currently dominate the border regions, there is no doubt that the easily accessible Ili Valley causes them concern. Yining itself was occupied by Russian troops between 1872 and 1881, and as recently as 1962 there were major Sino-Soviet clashes along the Ili River (Yíli Hé).

Bèijīng's major fear now is that separatist elements from the neighbouring Central Asian republics will continue to provide fuel to an ever-restless 'Uighurstan'.

Information

The **Bank of China** (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; Jiefang Lu; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4.30pm Sat & Sun), situated east of the bus station, changes cash and travellers cheques. The post office is located opposite; internet access (per hour Y2) is available on the 3rd floor. The **Public Security Bureau** (公安局; Gōngānjú; Stalin Jie) is opposite Yilítè Dàjiùdiàn (Yilite Grand Hotel).



Sights

Just to the south of town is a long line of **open-air restaurants** and **teahouses** where you can sit and watch the Ili River slide by. To get there, hop on bus 2 and get off at the last stop, just before the bridge over the river. They're only open when the weather is nice.

Sleeping & Eating

A taxi to any of the hotels below shouldn't cost more than Y5.

Tiānshān Bīnguǎn (☎ 802 2304; Shengli Lu; 胜利路; dm Y20, tw Y70) This small place is in exceptional

condition and is the only budget accommodation that accepts foreigners.

Yili Bīnguǎn (☎ 802 3799; fax 802 4964; 8 Yingbin Lu; 迎宾路8; tw Y140-400) Its rooms aren't always the fanciest, but the Yili certainly has character. Old Soviet buildings lost in a quasi-forest full of chirping birds, dance performances and puttering-about-but-friendly staff make this hotel the top choice.

Yóuyi Bīnguǎn (☎ 782 3111; fax 782 3222; 7 Stalin Jie, 3 Xiang; 斯大林街7, 巷3; tw Y218) A comfortable hotel with international standards, it holds up against more expensive competition.

THE GREAT ENERGY GAME

China may be pledging to cut back on coal consumption, but there can be little doubt that raw energy is something the country will need increasingly more of, not less. Xinjiang already sits atop 30% of China's oil and natural gas reserves and Běijīng in 2006 announced some extraordinarily ambitious plans to turn the province into a 21st-century Texas, and then some. Unsurprisingly, the vast oil and gas reserves in the rest of Central Asia are also one of PetroChina's principle targets.

In 2004 China and Kazakhstan finalised a deal to build a 3000km pipeline stretching from the Caspian Sea all the way through Ālāshānkǒu into Xinjiang. China's heavy investment in the Central Asian republics is generally regarded as an economic carrot, ensuring security both in and around the country's most unstable province. With the encroaching interests of neighbours Russia, India and Pakistan in the area, and military presence in Afghanistan, there can be little doubt that China is seen scrambling to establish itself as the big kid on the block.

And if you've begun to think Xinjiang is culturally and geographically more similar to a Central Asian state than China, you're not alone. Not only does Běijīng want to tie up the natural resources of its relatively new trading partners, it also wants promises from its neighbours to weed out Uighur separatist groups taking refuge beyond Chinese soil. The area's porous borders have previously seen large-scale migrations, and continuous persecution of the Uighurs has, at the very minimum, engendered little love for the PRC among your average Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Kazakh.

YĪNING BUS TIMETABLES

Destinations from Yining include the following:

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Almaty	US\$30	10hr	4 weekly	8am
Bòlè	Y39	4hr	3 daily	10.30am, 11.30am, 12.45pm
Kuqa	Y140	24hr	3 daily	noon, 3pm, 6pm
Ürümqi	Y120-150	11-14hr	8 daily	9am-9pm

There are plenty of street markets that set up stalls in the evenings around town. The first street west of the main traffic circle is home to the city's expanding collection of Chinese restaurants.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are daily (evening) flights between Ürümqi and Yining for Y740. The **CAAC office** (Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎ 804 4328) is inside the Yilìtè Dàjiùdiàn, opposite Hongqi City Sq (Hóngqī Guǎngchǎng). A taxi to/from the airport is Y20.

BUS

See the table, above, for bus times.

Buses leave Yining on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday for Almaty in Kazakhstan (this may change); visas are not available here. To Ürümqi, there are three choices: soft seat, regular sleeper or express. The first leaves in the morning, the latter two in the afternoon. Although numerous buses pass by Sayram Lake (three hours), they all charge full price; the best deal is the bus to Bòlè.

The spectacular bus ride to Kuqa (May to October) passes over Tiān Shān and through the small Mongolian village of Bayanbulak. This would be a good place to break the journey, but at last check the area was closed to foreigners. Amazingly, three daily buses also leave for Kashgar (Y246).

AROUND YĪNING Ili Valley 伊犁谷

The farmland of the Ili Valley (Yilí Gǔ) is home to some 20,000 Xibe (Xībózú), who were dispatched by the Qing government to

safeguard and colonise the region during the 18th century. This is the only place in China where you'll find a population capable of reading and writing Manchurian, which otherwise died out when the Manchus were assimilated into Chinese culture.

As intriguing as the Xibe sound, there's actually very little to see here. The Lamaist temple **Jingyuán Sì** (靖远寺; admission Y10), outside nondescript Qapaqal (Chábùchá'ěr), is hardly worth the admission fee, and generally speaking, the Xibe resemble the Han. If you're interested nonetheless, you can catch a minibus to Qapaqal (Y3, 30 minutes) outside the Yining bus station.

Sayram Lake 塞里木湖

The vast Sayram Lake (Sàilímù Hú), 120km north of Yining, is an excellent spot to explore the Tiān Shān range. The lake is especially colourful during June and July, when alpine flowers blanket the ground.

It's not hard to access the more pristine mountainous areas, and you could conceivably stop here for just a day hike. However, if you want to spend significant time exploring, it's best to bring a tent. While there is some food around, the selection is limited and prices expensive, so take what you need. In the height of summer, there are also Kazakh yurts (about Y30 per night, with meals) scattered around the lake willing to take boarders, although the PSB has been cracking down on unauthorised homestays.

Buses from Yining to Sàilímù Hú take about three hours, and drop passengers off at the 'yurt village' (consisting of fake yurts) along the main road. All buses between Ürümqi and Yining pass by the lake, so just stand by the road and wave one down.

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