



The Emin Minaret and Mosque, two kilometers east of Turpan, was originally constructed in 1777 to honor the great Turpan general Emin Khoja. The minaret rises to 44 meters, and the interior place of worship is supported by the original columns, crafted centuries ago of seasoned timber.



Desert Debonair

Faces of Turpan

Uyghur People



Flatbread Distracted



The Proud Beard



A Handsome Couple

# China's West through a Western Lens A Slice of Xinjiang

◆Text and photographs by Lowell Bennett

We were not moving as fast as I would have liked, down the desert highway, with not much to see just then, camera still stowed. But in the singular region of Xinjiang, pretty much always, it's best to relax, don't push it; take things as they come.

In the front passenger seat, my guide, a young lady of about 25, a university grad fluent in English, very charming, native Muslim Uyghur, turned to her associate, the driver and owner of the sleek Nissan sedan, a young Han guy, early 20s, with an affinity for Chinese classical string music, of the sort now filtering out of the sound system. They chatted a bit, the driver



Photographer on the edge, desert of Xinjiang.

shaking his head. I guessed it was about the Audi A-6s that had ripped by; three in the space of 10 minutes passing us doing a good 40 km faster. My driver watched them slip around us in the left lane and move off in a swirl of road dust, like perhaps he, too, would have liked to have hit the gas, raced them a bit.

But he did not. He stayed steady on the throttle – steady and slow, it seemed to me. At that point, a little restless, looking to the long road ahead, the more picturesque mountains and dunes far away in the distance, I would have sided with the drivers of the black Audis. We were on the 312, a straight shot of smooth asphalt slicing through the flat expanse of desert, on the way from Urumchi to Turpan, a run of just more than 180 kilometers. Another time, another place, I might have asked to take the wheel, opened the pipes on the small fast car, torn through this barren landscape.



Another sedan passed, way above the posted limit. This time I did not get the make. Mildly, the young Han driver grumbled in Mandarin a bit to his Uyghur partner, the two teaming up for the day to haul me out to this remote place.

About 50 km later, we passed through a toll booth. On the other side, there were the speedsters, stopped, pulled in a line between the lanes, police in attendance, writing them up.

The driver and guide enjoyed that, laughing big, and I joined in. And so it was, a sort of tricultural goodwill happened here, in this vehicle. United were we, relishing in the justice meted out, a few multinational, multiethnic laughs had at the expense of others.

**Travel Tip:** If you are ever motoring across the deserts of China's far west Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, look out for the camouflaged speed sensors and cameras.

## Around Urumchi

Perhaps no other region or province in China offers such wide-ranging and such exotically-flavored excursions as Xinjiang. In just this one particular corner of its 1.6 million square kilometers (the largest of China's provinces and regions), in a single day, if you were so inclined and so impatient, you could begin your day with breakfast in the modern metropolis of Urumchi, head off to a frozen high-altitude mountain lake, then onward, descending to the desert floor, bound for Turpan.

You could keep going, pass Turpan, put in another hour or two of driving, drop to 154 meters below sea level, reach the lowest and hottest slab of Earth in China. But, while that below-low-lying hotspot is noteworthy as a place to stop, get out of your vehicle, take a look around and later say 'I've been there,' you'll want to wander the green and cordial oasis city of Turpan.

For thousands of years a place where travelers from other lands lingered, Turpan has remained a place of rest and business since the ancient days of the Silk Road. In the neighborhood are the ruins of ancient cities, desert dunes, centuries-old mosques, traditional open-air markets, pristine springs, some of the juiciest grapes in the world, the wine those grapes produce, and more.

Driving for a day out of Urumchi, you can climb to the high frozen mountains, then descend to the low arid desert – easy.

Right, 10 km west of Turpan, are the ancient desert ruins of Jiaohe, constructed of earthen bricks 2,300 years ago. The city was once a place of great military and economic significance, and an important stop along the Silk Road. That ended in the 13th Century, when it was destroyed by the forces of Genghis Khan.

Below, cradled within the Heavenly Mountains, is Heaven Lake (Tian Chi), at 2,000 meters above sea level, 110 km east of Urumchi.



Big Brother Blues



Village Vector



Brotherly Bear Hug

Brothers  
of  
Xinjiang  
Kazak People

The few photos on these pages were shot in the general day-trip vicinity of Urumchi. Xinjiang is a much bigger place, with much to experience. If you get there, take your time – savor the sights, sites and sensations. If you proceed with haste, you'll miss out. Besides, they don't much like it when you rush, in those parts. 🇨🇳