

Kashgar Kocktail

Mixing It Up
On the Western Frontier

◆ *Text and photographs by Lowell Bennett*



Higher Perspective - by Rap

Travel Warning: Foreigners traveling to the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of Western China are advised that the city known variously as Kashgar, Qāshqār, Kaxgar and Kashi is considered to be high risk and potentially dangerous—

That is: If you shoot pool with John, the expat owner of FUBAR, while at the same time slugging down their signature cocktail. Kiwi John's house rules for the application of cue to ball on felt may befuddle, astound and perhaps even shock players possessing somewhat more delicate sporting sensibilities of the 'traditional' sort. And the napalm-like and (actually) flaming "Stinger" sears the esophagus all the way down to finally impact and

detonate in the stomach. Then, in the end, the dried scorpion at the bottom of the glass makes for a rather crunchy libationary finale.

Otherwise, if you survive those hazards, from what I observed, Kashgar and points west are safe, the land is completely captivating and the natives are friendly.

There are no direct flights from Beijing to Kashgar, and the connection in the regional capital of Urumqi is not the most certain, with no airlines offering an assured transfer, due, I was told, to regular delays caused by sandstorms. You may be better off stopping off in Urumqi, relaxing for a night or two, seeing what that vicinity

has to offer, then heading back to the airport for the 90-minute hop to Kashgar.

If you choose that more leisurely route, while in Urumqi stop in that city's branch of FUBAR. The proprietors, John, Manas and Hiro, are of New Zealand, Irish and Japanese descent, respectively, and you will find at least one of them manning the helm in Urumqi or at the Kashgar unit – the only genuinely Western-style joints in those cities – really, the only in all of Xinjiang. Besides a menu ranging from local mutton curries to pizza, pasta, burgers and fish and chips, also here are brands of booze sometimes hard to find in China, an amazing range of international beers and, perhaps most valuable (and free of charge), solid



High Battlement – View atop the ruins of Stone Fort, Tashkurgan, 2,000 years ago an important outpost along the Silk Road.



The world's tallest arch, at 1,200 feet, approximately the height of the Empire State Building, Shipton's Arch was located by Eric Shipton in 1947.

recommendations for accommodations, day trips, adventuring and honestly expert local guides.

A couple years ago, in Urumqi, the FUBAR network proved valuable in achieving several objectives. This trip, April 2009, at the far west branch of FUBAR in Kashgar, I connected with a guide for an off-road desert run via 4x4 and mountainous hiking to Shipton's Arch – at 1,200 feet the highest arch in the world

(the Empire State Building is 1,250 feet). The legendary and mainly solitary English mountaineer Eric Shipton (1907-1977) came across his now namesake formation in 1947, and not long thereafter it was listed in the Guinness Book of World Records – until they lost it. Years later, the publishers could not again verify its location. Guinness dispatched an expedition to find the remote site, but they were unsuccessful and the listing was dropped. Decades

later, in 2000, a National Geographic team rediscovered the arch, and this most extraordinary work of nature's abstract art reclaimed its highest-in-the-world status.

It was also while hanging around FUBAR with other Western wanderers one evening, a few of us pondering places to go, that I was motivated to head to Tashkurgan, 140 kilometers from the Pakistan border. The next day we traveled the remarkably smooth N-35, also known by the more appealing designation, Karakoram Highway. The highest paved international road in the world, the N-35 extends 1,300 kilometers from Kashgar to cross the border with Pakistan and reach Islamabad. Along the way, at 4,693 meters it crosses the Khunjerab Pass in the Karakoram mountain range. But you don't have to go that far to reach eye-filling objectives. Between Kashgar and Tashkurgan, the scenic high-altitude way of the road is spectacular, and you can take a break to stroll the shores of the world-famous Karakul Lake and wander the frozen plains alongside yaks and camels.

About 290 kilometers and four or five hours from Kashgar, assuming road conditions are good, Tashkurgan is worth a visit. There you will find the 2,000-year-old ruins of Stone Fort. Atop that massive mound of packed earth and rock, looking out across the broken but still recognizable battlements to the snowcapped mountains beyond, you can imagine perhaps the officials and merchants of ancient days negotiating their Silk Road transactions. Perhaps, two millennia ago, a minister of the Kingdom of Puli and a caravan-borne Persian merchant concluded their business and sealed their transnational deal over a chalice of wine distilled of Turpan grapes – thought to be the sweetest in the world. Perhaps they sipped their prized and potent nectar while gazing out at the vista that remains the same today – nearly surreal in its clarity, natural scenic drama and extraordinary beauty.

The very small but active Tashkurgan remains a pivotal place of trade between China and Central Asia, and merchants from both sides still meet downtown over a bowl of spicy noodles to conduct their business. But hotel accommodations remain limited. One recently installed



Beautiful Blond - Yak at about 4,000 meters.



School is Out - Tashkurgan, near the Pakistan border.



Sold - Livestock market, Kashgar



Kashgar Bangers



At Market - Kashgar



Street Gang - Kashgar

three-star hotel (quoted to this foreigner at 350 RMB / \$55 a night) now stands (somewhat incongruously) at the edge of the desert, and more modest accommodations are available.

But for me, this final town on the road to Pakistan was the end of the line. Currently, those not local to the border scene with verifiable business to conduct are officially discouraged from venturing further on. So, rather than securing accommodations in Tashkurgan, after scaling the ramparts of Stone Fort and sampling the local and very spicy noodles, we got back on the road.

Back in Kashgar, perilous pool and calamitous cocktails were waiting. 🇨🇳