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XINJIANG

A Traveler's Guide to Far West China

Free Planning Chapter



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By Josh Summers

Xinjiang: A Traveler's Guide to Far West China

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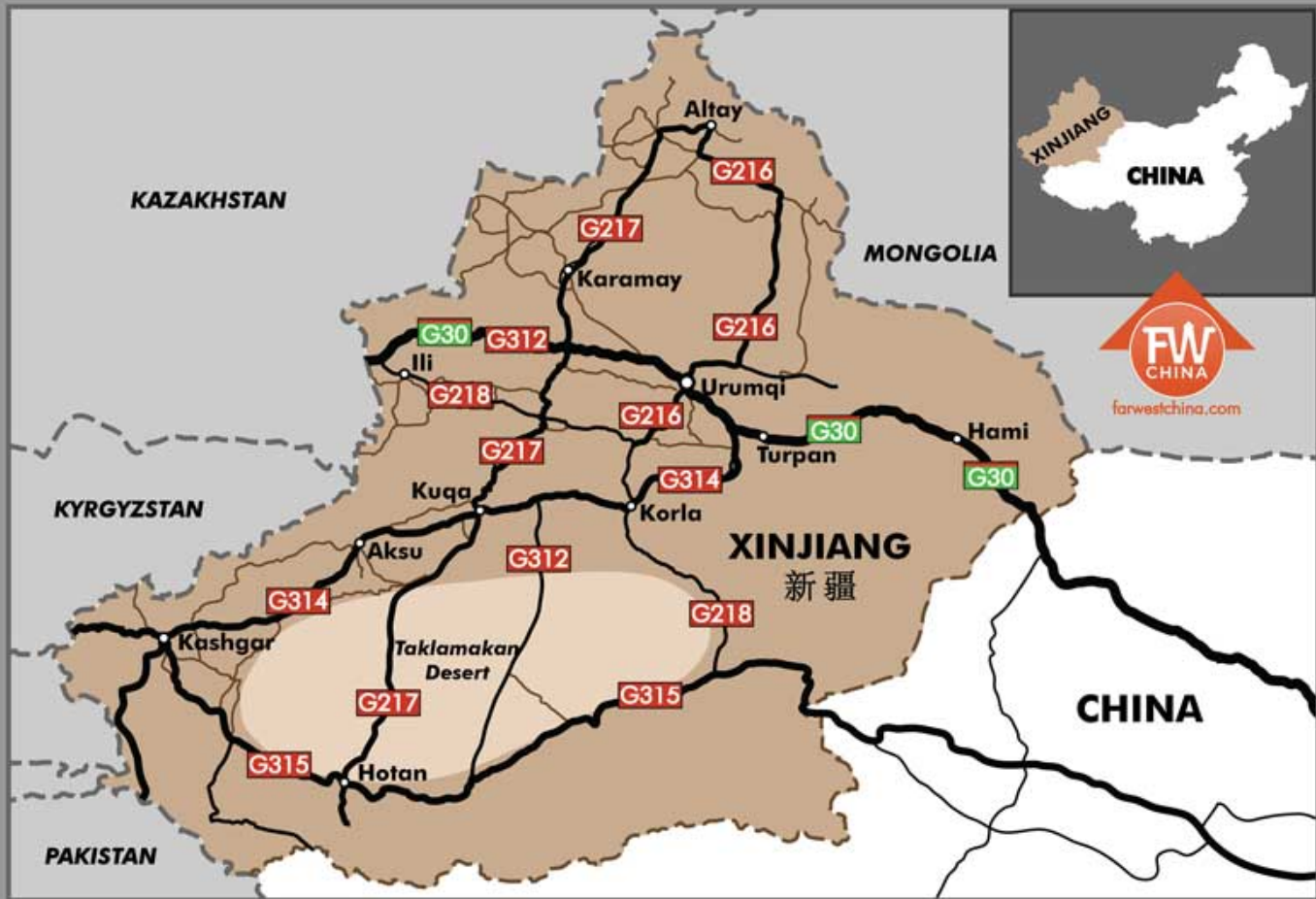
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ITINERARIES

One of the most common emails I receive regarding Xinjiang travel has to do with planning itineraries. Creating an itinerary for a place you've never visited is incredibly difficult, so don't be discouraged if you're having trouble!

There are three reasons that planning your travel to Xinjiang can be challenging:

1. **Xinjiang is bigger than you realize:** Unless you have the budget to fly everywhere you want to go, most travelers underestimate travel time when planning their itinerary. Taking a bus or train between Urumqi and Kashgar is at least 24 hours!
2. **Xinjiang is still developing:** Not all roads are smooth, or even paved for that matter. For this reason, throughout this guide you'll notice I am careful to use actual distances (i.e. 60 kilometers) instead of units of time (i.e. 1 hour) to address travel between two places.
3. **In Xinjiang, expect the unexpected:** Security checkpoints, sandstorms, rockslides and even a closed border crossing have all been the cause of travel delays for me. There are a number of things you just can't predict during your journey

to Xinjiang.

Again, don't be discouraged, just prepare yourself to be flexible with your itinerary.

For your travel, I want to list a number of itinerary options based on time and interest. Almost all of these itineraries can be accomplished whether you travel on a budget or with 5-star tastes, although the latter usually requires the assistance of a tour agency. I will address specifics of both luxury and budget travel in a further chapter.

For now, look through the itineraries suggestions below and use this to build your own custom trip to Xinjiang!



1st Time Visitor Itinerary

So let's say this is your first time to visit Xinjiang and likely the only chance you'll ever have to come. You want to experience the best of what Xinjiang has to offer but limited time to explore the massive region. If this describes you, here are my suggestions.

For most travelers, the three most important cities to put on your itinerary are **Urumqi**, **Turpan** and **Kashgar**. You don't need to plan to spend more than a day in Urumqi; however, I advise at least two days in both Turpan and Kashgar, if not more. This will allow time for a good dose of history as well as immersion into Uyghur

culture.

Beyond this, if you have extra time you'll not regret planning a trip along the **Karakoram Highway** where you will enjoy some of the best natural scenery that Xinjiang has to offer. Finish your trip with a visit down to **Hotan**, where the old town and market are reminiscent of the ancient Silk Road. From Hotan you can take a cross-desert bus back to Urumqi for your flight home.

For most travelers I don't even mention heading up north to Altay or Ili. While interesting to visit, unless you have the time to travel or money for the extra flights, they aren't convenient.

An example of a first-time visitor itinerary would be the following, which should be tweaked according to your preferences:

- **Day 1:** Arrive in Urumqi, visit the Xinjiang Museum.
- **Day 2:** Take the high-speed train to Turpan and explore within the city.
- **Day 3:** Hire a car to take you to see places outside of Turpan; grab an overnight train to Kashgar.
- **Day 4:** Train travel, arriving in Kashgar that evening (it's a 23 hour train ride!).
- **Day 5:** Explore Kashgar and wander through the Old City.
- **Day 6:** Hire a car to take you up the Karakoram Highway. Stay the night in a yurt at Karakul

- Lake.
- **Day 7:** Travel up to Tashkorgan where you can explore before heading back to Kashgar for the night.
- **Day 8:** Take a bus or train to Hotan and explore the city.
- **Day 9:** Continue to look around Hotan then take an overnight bus through the Taklamakan to Urumqi.
- **Day 10:** Arrive in Urumqi and prepare to head home.

You can shorten this itinerary by either flying between Kashgar and Urumqi or skipping a city altogether. While some people might be inclined to skip Turpan, I would recommend you consider Hotan be cut out of the itinerary first.



Silk Road History Itinerary

For those seeking to retrace the ancient Silk Road, most of your time should be spent in southern Xinjiang. **Hami** will be your first destination in Xinjiang followed by **Turpan**, both of which are most conveniently reached by train.

From Turpan you can head south through **Korla** where you have the option to choose the northern Taklamakan route or the southern Taklamakan route through **Ruoqiang**. The northern route is more popular

but the southern route is less developed and has a more authentic feel.

On the northern route you'll certainly want to make a stop at **Kuqa** with its caves and ancient city ruins. From here you can continue to **Kashgar** or take the cross desert highway to **Hotan**.

On the southern Taklamakan route you can leisurely make your way to **Qiemo**, **Minfeng**, and **Yutian** before you hit **Hotan**. While there are a number of ancient ruins around this region, most require a high permit fee and are very difficult for the average tourist to visit. For this reason, visits to these smaller southern cities should be considered more for the purpose of experiencing the culture and way of life. **Hotan** is where you can finally explore some Silk Road desert ruins.

Between Hotan and Kashgar there are a number of interesting stops including the cities of **Yengisar**, home of the famous Uyghur knife, and **Yarkand (Shache)** with its Old City and Sunday Bazaar. Visiting one of these bazaars should be a priority. Even if you won't be around on Sunday there are still a number of bazaars that occur throughout the week in and around Kashgar.

While a Silk Road itinerary can be approached from various directions with a number of different turns, here is one example that falls under 10 days.

- **Day 1:** Arrive in Hami, quickly visit the Tombs of the Hami Kings then grab the high-speed train

- to Turpan where you can stay the night.
- **Day 2:** Spend the day exploring Turpan.
- **Day 3:** Hire a car to take you to see places outside of Turpan; grab a train that night to Kuqa.
- **Day 4:** Arrive in Kuqa and explore the Kizil Caves.
- **Day 5:** Continue your visit in Kuqa until you can grab a bus that evening to Hotan.
- **Day 6:** Arrive in Hotan where you can explore and stay the night.
- **Day 7:** From Hotan take the bus or train to Yarkand or Yengisar to stay the night.
- **Day 8:** Continue on to Kashgar where you can explore and stay the night.
- **Day 9:** Hire a car to take you to a nearby bazaar depending on which day it is.
- **Day 10:** Depart for Urumqi and head home.

Obviously I've skipped a large portion of the southern Taklamakan in this itinerary; it requires more time than a 10-day itinerary can afford. Trains haven't yet extended along the southern rim of the Taklamakan so bus travel is your only option, which is time prohibitive.

Should you have two weeks or more, another option would be to essentially circle the Taklamakan Desert with a short detour along the Karakoram Highway while in Kashgar.



Scenic Nature Itinerary

If Uyghur culture and Silk Road history don't interest you as much as the the sight of beautiful mountains, verdant grasslands and barren deserts, you should probably take a different direction with your itinerary.

The natural beauty of Xinjiang is mostly found in the region's northern half, although there are still plenty of reasons to travel south. Areas around **Altay**, including a couple of Xinjiang's national parks, offer plenty of opportunities to hike and enjoy nature.

After Altay, the next top spot for scenic tourism is **Il**, where lakes, mountains and grasslands stretch for as far as the eye can see. During certain times of the year you can also be amazed by fields of purple lavender, pink apricot trees or yellow rapeseed.

In southern Xinjiang, the scenic nature itinerary would take you along the **Karakoram Highway**, although a number of different **poplar parks** around the Taklamakan are an excellent sight during the fall season.

Since I've already covered a couple itinerary options in the south, the example below focuses more on the northern side of Xinjiang, although I would certainly recommend adding a trip to the south if you can manage.

- **Day 1:** Arrive in Urumqi, visit the Xinjiang Museum and then get on an overnight train to Beitun (near Altay City).

- **Day 2:** Find your way to Altay City where you can explore and stay the night.
- **Day 3:** Hire a car to take you to Keketuohai National Park for the day, returning to Buerjin that night.
- **Day 4:** Travel up to Kanas Lake National Park where you'll stay the night near Kanas Lake.
- **Day 5:** Hike or take a bus from Kanas Lake to Hemu Village, returning to Buerjin for the night.
- **Day 6:** After a quick visit to the Five Colored Hills, get an overnight bus to Ili
- **Day 7:** Disembark the bus before arriving in Ili at Salimu Lake where you can explore and find overnight accommodation in a yurt.
- **Day 8:** Take a bus or hire private car to Yining City where you can explore and stay the night.
- **Day 9:** Hire a car to take you to the Nalati Grasslands where you can again stay the night in a yurt.
- **Day 10:** Return to Yining City where you can board a flight back to Urumqi.

A lot of time can be spent in both the Altay and Yili regions, but the above itinerary hits the highlights. The beautiful Barkol Lake and grassland near Hami may be a good alternative if you're entering by train from the east and don't have the time to head further north.



Photographer's Itinerary

A number of different Xinjiang expeditions dedicated to photography have become popular over the years. Most of these expeditions have a set itinerary with a private car and driver since the needs of a photographer are different than those of the average tourist.

For this reason I won't lay out a specific itinerary for photographers, rather I will highlight here some of the most beautiful photographic opportunities Xinjiang offers.

For nature scenery, some of the most interesting places include the numerous **Ghost Cities** (the one at Wuerhe near Karamay is the biggest and most popular), the **TianShan Grand Canyon** (similar to Antelope Canyon in Arizona), **Shipton's Arch** (the tallest natural arch in the world) and the **Five Colored Hills**, a wonderful mixture of rock, desert and water.

The **Keketuohai National Park** and the **Kanas Lake Nature Reserve** are both excellent places to hike about and take pictures, especially the nearby **Hemu** and **Baihaba Villages**. The area is home to a booming tourist industry that may hamper your ability to capture the natural environment but that's something you'll have to work around. The grasslands around Ili, including **Nalati Grasslands** and **Bayinbulak Grasslands** are both gorgeous, especially during festival season (June/July).

Speaking of seasons, there are certain months of the year that dictate the best places to visit. Springtime in Ili offers incredible fields of **apricot blossoms** (April/

May), **rows of lavender** (June), and **cultural festivities** (July/August). During the fall months, the golden yellow leaves of the poplar forests along the Tarim River are spectacular (see **Tarim River Park** in the Korla chapter), as are the changing colors present all throughout Altay and Ili.

For cultural scenery, wandering the streets of **Kashgar's Old City** - or any of the smaller towns along the southern Silk Road - is a gold mine of photo opportunities. I recommend visiting one of the many **bazaars** that happen around Kashgar (see Nearby Village Markets in the Kashgar chapter) since the Sunday bazaar and livestock market are often filled with tourists.

Finally, a word of caution for photographers: carrying a large camera isn't a problem but pointing it at any sort of local military can be an issue. I've known photographers whose entire memory cards were confiscated or wiped just because they decided to snap a picture of the military patrolling the street.

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LUXURY TRAVEL TIPS

A decade ago, the idea of luxury travel in Xinjiang was almost laughable. Now, it is not only possible to travel in comfort, it's surprisingly easy to do so if you have the money.

Lodging: Legitimate, internationally-recognized 5-star hotels exist in Urumqi (Sheraton, Hilton) and in Kashgar (Raddison Blu) while the less-expensive Chinese 5-star hotels can be found in most any other city.

Smaller boutique hotels exist in some areas such as The Silk Road Lodge in Turpan, offering comfort, air conditioning and breakfast surrounded by a beautiful grape orchard.

Transportation: The most comfortable luxury travel around Xinjiang will take place either in the air or in a private car. You'll want to steer clear of the buses and trains; even the best beds in a Chinese train may be considered uncomfortable by some standards. The new-high speed train is an exception in terms of comfort, although the experience of getting through the Urumqi train station is a nightmare you'll prefer to avoid.

It is possible to arrange a car that you can drive

yourself (see [Renting Your Own Car](#)) but I believe it is best to go through a travel agency to hire a car and driver who is familiar with the roads (see my list of [Approved Travel Companies](#)). Based on my experience I can tell you that it's very easy to get lost on these roads!

Sites: The majority of Xinjiang's tourism requires significant outdoor walking, which can be strenuous at times. Heat is always a concern, especially in summer. You will be grateful for an air-conditioned vehicle if you travel during this time of year.

For locations high in the mountains, tourist sites like Heavenly Lake, Kanas Lake and Keketuohao Park cater to the tourist who doesn't want to hike much. You can walk, of course, but there are buses and shuttles that are available in these areas.

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BUDGET TRAVEL TIPS

For most travelers, it's best to prepare to "rough it" during your visit to Xinjiang. That wild aspect of travel is part of the allure of this region!

Lodging: Xinjiang boasts a number of different hostels in cities like Urumqi, Turpan, Kashgar, Tashkorgan, Yili and more, all of which I detail in the individual city guides. Most of the travelers you meet will be Chinese and the facilities aren't always to the standard you'll find at other hostels around the world. Still, they offer a great environment and often an excellent location.

If possible, I would also recommend that you plan to spend at least one night in a traditional yurt. This usually costs the same as a hostel bed but allows you to experience Xinjiang culture in a unique way.

Transportation: Budget always comes at the expense of time no matter where you travel but this is true nowhere more so than in Xinjiang. Because the region is so large, travel other than airplane can mean excruciating hours spent on the road.

For this reason I always recommend that travelers try to plan overnight bus or train trips. Not only does this save

you the cost of a hotel, it also eliminates wasted time that you should be using to explore.

Having said that, don't be afraid to check airfare for each destination. There have been many times where a discounted flight is the same as a hard sleeper on the train, giving you even more hours to visit the next destination.

Sites: Unfortunately, the entrance fees to many of Xinjiang's tourist sites continue to climb and will often be the biggest budget expenditure. Not everything is worth the expense of its entrance fee, though. My recommendations should be helpful as you try to get the best value for your money.

For instance, in Kashgar there's no need to pay to enter the Id Kah Mosque when most tourists are perfectly content with a picture outside. Likewise in Turpan, you don't have to pay to enter the Flaming Mountains tourist site when a simple photo from the highway does the trick.

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TRAVELING WITH KIDS

Another common question is asked by those who will be traveling to Xinjiang with kids. At first glance, the region does not seem to be very “kid-friendly,” but I’ve known a number of families who have successfully traveled Xinjiang with kids including my own family with my 3-year old son.

Traveling with kids provides a new perspective on Xinjiang and a level of hospitality that you wouldn’t normally experience alone. The curiosity of kids and their ability to get away with asking candid questions are wonderful gifts to a traveling family.

To help make your travel to Xinjiang with kids more enjoyable, here are a few tips to consider:

- **Be Prepared:** Be familiar with the basic history of the region before arrival. For older kids, I think they might enjoy a book entitled Foreign Devils on the Silk Road. I also advise bringing a map or buying one when you arrive so as to allow them to keep track of where you’ve been and where you’re headed.
- **Understand Your Religions:** A rudimentary understanding of Islam and Buddhism will go a

long way here in Xinjiang. Temples and caves display the rich history of Buddhism and you will no doubt see many mosques where most of the ethnic groups currently practice Islam.

- **Be Aware of Etiquette:** There is a lot of forgiveness for foreigners, especially with kids, when it comes to cultural etiquette but this is a perfect opportunity to teach them what it means to respect somebody else's culture. For more details, read the chapter on Cultural Sensitivity or ask your tour guide.
- **Prepare Your Kids for Pictures:** My son gets photographed almost on a daily basis here in Xinjiang by locals who think his blond hair and blue eyes are just too cute to pass up. We've prepared him for it, though and he knows that all he has to do is say "no" and we will pull him away from any uncomfortable situation.
- **Prepare Your Kids for Dead Animals:** In Xinjiang, sheep can have their throat slit in the street and carcasses can be seen hanging in restaurants. This can traumatize children, so take appropriate measures based on the sensitivity of your child. One mom even suggested making it game of trying to figure out what animal each carcass used to be!
- **Appropriate Transportation:** Make sure you know what your kids can handle before getting on any mode of transportation. Trains can be comfortable but usually only offer squatty potties. Buses have bathrooms but even the locals refuse to use them in most cases and the bus can't stop for

emergency potty breaks. The fact is that planes and private cars are the best way to travel with kids if you can afford them.

- **Always Have Tissue Paper:** Buy a whole bunch once you arrive and keep it in their backpack. Most restaurants won't give you napkins and most bathrooms don't have toilet paper. You'll be surprised how often you use the tissue paper.
- **Bring/Buy a Ball:** Soccer is a universal sport, even here in Xinjiang. A ball will not only provide your child with entertainment, it often opens the door for interaction with the locals, both young and old.
- **About Clothing:** Although it may be hot in summer, wearing long pants isn't a bad idea for kids when outside the big cities. Not only is it culturally appropriate to wear long pants, your kids may notice the fact that nobody else is wearing shorts, causing them to shy away from local interaction.
- **About Hotels:** Chinese hotels are made for 3-member families (two parents and one child) and so they don't accommodate larger families well. You can ask for an extra bed if they have one, otherwise it's best to request two adjoining rooms.

Special thanks to Kim Boughey who graciously shared what she learned while traveling in Xinjiang with her kids.

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WEATHER IN XINJIANG

I have to laugh a little every time I receive an email from a traveler asking me what to expect in terms of weather in Xinjiang.

You see, Xinjiang is home to the world's second-lowest point in the world, the Turpan Depression, as well as the second-highest point in the world, K2. The difference in environment between these two places is almost as vast as the region itself! How do you answer such a question?

I'll dive into specifics in a moment but as a general rule the two best times to visit Xinjiang are May-June and September-October. These times work best with most any location you want to visit but don't be discouraged if you already plan to travel during a different season.

Here's a look at each season in further detail:

Spring Season (March to June)

The spring is a wonderful time to visit Xinjiang, with its cool weather and gradually longer days.

The beginning of spring can still be quite cold in many areas of Xinjiang, particularly up in the north and in the

higher elevations so you'll need to be prepared with warmer clothing. It is likely that snow won't be completely melted up north until well into April and sometimes even May.

In April, you begin to see a number of different fields bloom into beautiful seas of color, particularly around the Ili region. In late April into early May, the apricot blossoms fill the hills near the Nalati Grasslands with a beautiful shade of pink, while in June you'll see the lavender fields outside of Yining City burst with majestic purple.

The southern regions like Turpan, Kuqa, Kashgar and all around the Taklamakan Desert are excellent to visit during these months as they are usually the first to welcome spring. It does get windy, though, so don't be surprised if you get caught in a sandstorm.

Summer Season (June to August)

As you've probably heard, summer gets pretty hot here! Few regions of Xinjiang are exempt from this intense heat; although air conditioning is becoming more common, especially in hotels, you can't count on it.

Places in southern Xinjiang - Turpan, Kashgar, Hotan, etc. - will be even hotter than most places in northern Xinjiang that are at a higher elevation. When planning summer travel to Xinjiang, expect to do your sightseeing in the cool mornings and late evenings. Keep in mind that even the locals take a siesta during the heat of the

afternoon!

Despite the heat, travel during the summer will be rewarded with beautiful wildflowers and a tasty array of fresh fruits such as grapes and melons.

Fall Season (September to November)

The fall season is probably my favorite season to travel around Xinjiang, as it offers a wonderful mix of cooler weather, long days and colorful scenery.

There isn't a bad place to visit during the fall as long as you remember that temperatures can drop drastically in the evening and snow is always a possibility as the season progresses. The further you get into the fall, the more likely that many of the border crossings are at risk to suddenly close due to severe weather.

Winter Season (December to March)

Winter in Xinjiang is bitter cold and unfortunately very long. I've put December to March here, but the reality is that in some regions of Xinjiang winter begins in October and lasts into April. Transportation still runs and tourist sites are surprisingly still open, although you won't want to stay outside in the cold for long periods of time.

Skiing and other winter sports are an option (see *A Guide to Skiing in Xinjiang*). Since it's the off season, flights around Xinjiang can be had for a bargain.

Be advised that required clothing during winter includes long underwear, gloves, glove liners, a cap and sometimes even a face mask.

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FESTIVALS AND HOLIDAYS IN XINJIANG

One of my favorite ways to experience Xinjiang is through the festivals of its many ethnic groups. Often they are the only opportunities to get a glimpse into their culture and, thankfully, most people are very hospitable when it comes to foreigners joining their celebrations.



Major Holidays

Spring Festival (Chinese): As is the custom all across the country, everything in Xinjiang shuts down for a week every year during Spring Festival, also known as the Chinese New Year. Most ethnic minorities don't celebrate this holiday, but you'll hear plenty of firecrackers throughout the night in every city. This holiday, based on the lunar calendar, usually occurs sometime between January and February.

National Day (Chinese): This holiday marks the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. Don't expect celebrations you can join; expect more travelers to join you since they have time off. This holiday takes place each year on October 1-5.

Corban Festival (Islamic): The Corban Festival (also spelled “Korban” and known globally as Eid-al-Adha) is the largest and most important holiday celebrated by each of the Muslim ethnic groups including the Uyghur, Kazakh, Hui and others. During this time, truckloads of sheep are herded into the cities and sold for sacrifice. Although it can be bloody, it’s amazing to watch the sacrificial process. If you have the pleasure of an invitation into a local home, it’s a wonderful time of celebration between friends and family. Visit a mosque early on the morning of Corban Festival and you will see thousands, if not tens of thousands of worshippers will join together to pray. This is another floating holiday based on the Islamic calendar and will be celebrated in late September 2015.

Rosa Festival (Islamic): Immediately following the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, the fast-breaking festival of Rosa (also spelled “Roz” and known globally as Eid-al-Fitr) is a smaller festival celebrated by all of the Muslim ethnic groups in Xinjiang. The morning after the last day of the Ramadan fast, all Muslim men gather at the mosque for final prayer. The most popular place to observe this spectacle is at Kashgar’s Id Kah Mosque where over 20,000 people come from all over to worship. Following the prayers, families and communities celebrate together with massive meals and plenty of singing and dancing (where permitted). Like Corban Festival, Rosa is a floating holiday that will be celebrated around July 15, 2015.

Nowruz Festival (Islamic): The Nowruz festival is

recognized by all of the Muslim ethnic groups but isn't as large a celebration as Corban or Rosa. This holiday occurs in mid-March, usually on the 21st or 22nd.



Minor Holidays

Nadam Festival (Nomadic Peoples): The Nadam festival, which is a major holiday in Mongolia, is relatively small here in Xinjiang, but still celebrated among the nomadic groups of Kazakh, Mongol and Kyrgyz. For those travelers who will be near Sayram Lake, Nalati Grasslands or other parts of the Ili region during this late July/early August holiday, you can look forward to entertaining music, dance, horse racing, buzkashi, wrestling tournaments and even archery.

Grape Festival (Turpan): Every year toward the end of July and throughout the month of August, Turpan celebrates the Grape Festival. Grapes are so abundant during this season that clusters hang on vines in literally every corner of the city. Performances are held at the Grape Valley, mass Uyghur weddings are organized and vendors line the streets selling boxes full of grapes.

Migration Festival (Xibe): This minor festival celebrated by the small Xibe community near Yili occurs on the 18th day of the 4th lunar month (usually sometime between March and May). The celebration usually includes music, dancing and archery competitions.

Banjin Festival (Manchu): Only celebrated by the Manchu communities near Ili and Hami, the Banjin Festival occurs on the 13th day of the 10th lunar month (usually between October and November). Traditional clothing is worn, traditional dances are performed and folk songs are sung. It's mostly a government-sponsored event now, but is still interesting to observe.

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CROSSING THE XINJIANG BORDER

There are a number of travelers who use Xinjiang as a jumping off point into Central Asia where they will continue their adventure along the Silk Road. If this is you, make sure that you have your visas or permits taken care of before you arrive at the border.

There are numerous entrance/exit points for travelers in Xinjiang, three of them leading to other regions of China and the remainder passing into one of the eight other countries that border the region.

To Gansu: The Gansu/Xinjiang border is the largest entry/exit point, encompassing two major highways and two train lines. No visa or special permit is required and rarely do you encounter any checkpoint to cross here.

To Qinghai: The seldom used Qinghai entry/exit point follows Highway 315 along a southern portion of the Silk Road. There is no special visa or permit necessary to make this trip. You will need a private car to make this trip; a train is currently under construction for this route but will not be operational for a number of years.

To Tibet: I receive a number of questions from travelers who want to make the journey from Xinjiang

into Tibet via Highway 219 in Yecheng (Karghalik). This is not an easy journey nor is it cheap as it requires a 4WD and a special permit. Even with a permit, border guards who are having a bad day have been known to turn away travelers for no good reason. The best advice I can give is to contact a Xinjiang travel agent before considering such a journey.

To Kazakhstan: A cross into Kazakhstan can be made via the Alashankou and Horgas Ports, both of which are on the border of the Yili region. Other border crossings exist, including ports at Tacheng and Jeminay, but they aren't convenient, nor have they been reliably open (based on feedback from recent travelers). The Alashankou Port is the most widely used because of the train that passes through here, although the Horgas Port offers this quickest transfer to Almaty. Visas must be in order, unless the country from which your passport is issued has an agreement with Kazakhstan to offer a visa-free 15 day stay. There are a number of countries, including the U.S., where this is the case.

To Kyrgyzstan: Both the Irkeshtam Pass and Torugart Pass connect Xinjiang and Kyrgyzstan, although buses only travel through the Irkeshtam. A visa needs to be obtained prior to arrival or you will be turned back.

To Pakistan: The Khunjerab Pass, which divides the Karakoram Highway between its China and Pakistani side, is the highest border crossings in the world. Arrangements can be made to cross this border, although due to weather it is often only open between May and

October. A visa must be obtained prior to arrival.

***Note on Tajikistan:** While the Kulma Pass exists between Xinjiang and Tajikistan near Tashkorgan, it is still closed to foreigners who want to make the cross.

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ARRANGING TRANSPORTATION

When it comes to arranging transportation, I find that there are two types of travelers: those who like to have everything ironed out before they leave and those who prefer to be spontaneous for the sake of flexibility. Xinjiang travel tends to favor the latter, although it has recently become possible to make a larger number of reservations far in advance.

Below I will discuss the advantages of every available mode of transportation so that you can get an idea of what is possible here in Xinjiang.



Air Travel

Air travel in Xinjiang resembles air travel in any other part of China, or the world for that matter. Tickets can be purchased online using your foreign credit card and passport. The process of checking in luggage and boarding your plane, even in smaller airports, are exactly as you would expect.

While travel agents can arrange your tickets, I find that searching online can be just as easy and often cheaper. Instead of using well-known global brands like Expedia,

Orbitz, etc., search on China-based sites like Ctrip and eLong, both of which are favorites among the expats in China. You can view their sites in English and there are even English-speaking representatives if you have a problem and need to call.

Charter flights can be arranged through Chinese travel agencies if needed, although this is seldom done unless you're traveling with a group that doesn't mind paying extra.

Finally, please note that security is a bit tighter in Xinjiang airports, so expect to put your bags through metal detectors before you even step into the building, in addition to other possible security measures they may have in place.



Train Travel

Thanks to a new rule implemented in late 2014, purchase of train tickets can be made up to 60 days in advance, which makes planning your travel much easier. You can rely on your travel agent to arrange the tickets for you or you can opt to do it yourself.

Thankfully, it's not that difficult. My advice to any traveler in China is to download an app from China Highlights called [China Train Booking](#). The app is in English and allows you to find up-to-the-minute information on train schedules and available tickets. If you

like, you can even purchase the tickets through the app and have them delivered to your hotel (for a small fee), although the delivery option requires you to purchase at least 9 days in advance.

Special: *China Highlights is offering an exclusive 30% off their ticketing fee for readers of this book! [Promo code redacted. Available on the paid version of this guide]*

If you decide to purchase train tickets on your own there is a way to do it online, although you will need to be able to read Mandarin and have a Chinese debit card. For more details and a tutorial on how to do this, read my article online entitled [How to Buy Chinese Train Tickets Online](#).

Of course, you can always just stand in line to buy tickets at the train station ticket hall or at one of the many train ticket offices in each city. This is, for many travelers, the least-complicated option. The purchase of train tickets does require your passport, so make sure you have that with you.



Bus Travel

In some areas of Xinjiang, travel by bus will be your only option. Tickets can usually be purchased the day of your departure, although I recommend buying tickets one day in advance to be safe. As of 2014, you now need to present your passport to purchase a bus ticket.

The challenge with bus travel is that larger cities like Urumqi and Kashgar have multiple bus stations that service different locations. I will go into further detail in each city chapter, but you should check with your hotel or hostel to make sure that you're going to the right station.

Buses are usually prompt to leave, so be sure you arrive at least 20-30 minutes prior to your scheduled departure.



Private Car Hire

Transport by private car hire is another popular option and is sometimes not much more expensive than a bus. To clarify, “private car hire” is a car that goes from point A to point B and is usually shared by multiple travelers. If you desire to rent a vehicle, skip to the next chapter on [Renting Your Own Vehicle](#).

Private car hire is harder to book in advance, but it is possible. Most private cars can be found outside the bus station where you'll likely be bombarded by men shouting out the location where they want to go. You can negotiate for same-day travel or for a near-future date.

Private car hire is economical for people that travel in groups of 4 or less. As a single traveler, you might find yourself sitting in the private car waiting for up to an hour or more as the driver seeks additional passengers. Unless you hire the entire vehicle, you're at the mercy of the

driver.

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RENTING YOUR OWN VEHICLE OR BIKE

For those of you who have the budget and desire the independence, here are your options for renting your own vehicle in Xinjiang.



Renting a Car

I'm happy to report that renting a car is not difficult, but also not practical for most short-term travelers. If you're renting both a car and driver, it's especially easy and can be set up through most tourist agencies.

If you want to rent and drive the car yourself, the first step is to make sure you have a Chinese driver's license. It's a complicated process if you don't have it but if you've already obtained one, there are numerous car rentals scattered throughout Urumqi and various other cities (look for the characters “租车”).

I must forewarn you, however, that it's not a streamlined process here in Xinjiang like it is elsewhere. Before you plan to rent a car, consider this:

- **There are no “big name” rental companies:** Don't expect to find Hertz or Enterprise at the airport. Rental companies here are all privately owned.
- **Rental companies expect a sizable deposit:** I had to put down about US\$1,000 to rent a car...and it had to be cash, since I haven't found a rental company that accepts foreign credit cards.
- **Rental companies hold 2,000 RMB for 30 days after drop off:** They do this in case you get a ticket in the mail. I had to pick up my security deposit personally, but they can direct deposit into your Chinese bank account if you have one.
- **Rental cars have distance limits:** Every company I've come across here in Xinjiang limits cars to at most 300km per day, which isn't much considering the size of this region. Every kilometer over 300 will cost you 1 RMB.
- **Wrecks: it's always the foreigners fault:** This isn't a foregone conclusion, but I've seen it happen time and again with foreigners who own cars here in Xinjiang and get into a wreck. Just be extra careful.

That's the bad news. Here's the good news: If you use a travel agency, it is possible to rent a vehicle without distance limits using a foreign credit card. This will be more expensive and your car options are limited to what they own, but at least it's available.

For agency car hire inquiry, see my list of Approved

Xinjiang Travel Companies.



Bicycles and Motorcycles

I've owned a motorcycle and a bicycle here in Xinjiang for many years and have loved every minute of it. Unfortunately, it's not always the easiest option for a short-term traveler.

Motorcycles: The biggest hurdle to using a motorcycle is, again, needing a Chinese license. International licenses are not accepted and they are pretty strict about that here in Xinjiang. I was stopped numerous times on my motorcycle and asked to present proper documentation.

I get a lot of people asking me about motorcycle rentals or driving their motorcycle from outside the country into China through Xinjiang. The answer to the first question is that as far as I know there is no place to rent a motorcycle despite the plethora places to buy one.

As far as driving your motorcycle - or any vehicle for that matter - across the border into Xinjiang, you need to arrange that ahead of time with a travel agency that can run all the paperwork for you. It's a time consuming and expensive process, I'm sorry to say, but it is possible.

It's worth noting that some cities like Urumqi technically don't allow motorcycles on the road anyway.

Other cities like Kashgar are chock full of scooters, but have no place to rent them.

Bicycles: For tourists, renting a bicycle in smaller cities like Kashgar or Turpan can be done at most hostels and is a wonderful option. Urumqi isn't a very bike-friendly city and I have yet to find a hostel that rents bikes.

For those who are biking across Xinjiang, all three of these cities (Urumqi, Kashgar, Turpan) offer a number of stores to supply you with tires and any maintenance tools you might need. For more information, see [A Guide to Cycling in Xinjiang](#).

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SAFETY CONCERNS

It may come as no surprise to you that the #1 question I am most frequently asked by travelers is in reference to safety. *“Is it still safe to travel to Xinjiang?”*

Some people tend to shy away from visiting Xinjiang on the basis of safety concerns. Ethnic conflicts and health scares, the only two news items from the province to reach the international press, paint Xinjiang as a dangerous and crazy region. The truth is that traveling to Xinjiang is no different than travel to any other part of China.

Still, it is a good idea to be alert – not paranoid – about potential problems, and to take measures to ensure a safe trip to China. The following are a few ideas for travelers to Xinjiang or any other part of the country.

- **Take care of your belongings:** The most common problem you are likely to face in China is that of theft. If you are traveling by train, never leave your luggage alone. While at the hotel, take all your valuables along with you when you leave. Pickpockets are also the norm, so watch your wallet and bring along a purse that can be zipped closed or a special passport pouch.

- **Over-identify yourself:** There are only two ways

in which the average traveler has noticed a change in Xinjiang since the riots of 2009: more police and more ID checks. I recommend you keep a copy of your passport, visa, and the embassy contact numbers in case you need them, preferably in a different place than where you keep the actual documents. Carrying extra ID isn't necessary, but it doesn't hurt.

- **Watch where you point your camera:** The fastest way to get your camera confiscated or memory card wiped is to point it toward a group of military or police personnel. If you do run across any sort of protest or political gathering (which you probably won't!), resist the urge to pull out your camera.

- **It's hot, but be modest:** Although Xinjiang is predominantly Muslim, it is not necessary to fully cover your whole body and head when traveling. Be modest and you'll be fine.

- **Use common sense:** If it feels scary for you to walk outside at night, then don't. Chances are that in Xinjiang you'll be perfectly safe, but use common sense. Don't go out alone as a woman and keep your distance from any suspicious situations.

I also want to take a moment to address foreign travelers of Han Chinese descent. Many Han Chinese-appearing travelers have expressed concern over visiting predominantly Uyghur parts of Xinjiang, which I completely understand due to ethnic tensions.

I have not received any reports of Han-looking tourists being singled out over other tourists. What travelers do report is the feeling of being glared at or outright ignored,

neither of which presents any sort of physical safety concern.

My advice is not only to use common sense but also to smile. This simple gesture is one that gets lost in the ethnic conflict between Han and Uyghur and is often disarming even to the most cynical person.

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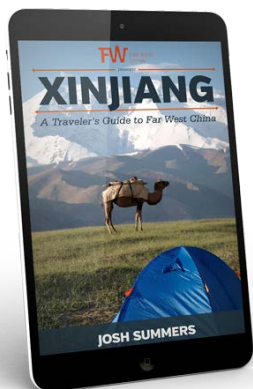
HAS THIS CHAPTER BEEN USEFUL?

If you have found this planning chapter of the FarWestChina Xinjiang travel guide to be useful, the remaining 400 pages of the full guide will knock your socks off!

In addition to having even more tips and tricks to help you prepare for your trip, there is detailed information on every corner of the region including Urumqi, Turpan, Kashgar, Altay, Ili (Yining), and more. Get up-to-date information on transportation to each city, what is best to see and recommendations on where to stay and eat.

Best of all, when you purchase this guide you'll also have access to exclusive discount codes on train ticket purchases, hotels and more! Not to mention some of the best Xinjiang maps tailored specifically for travelers. **If you're heading to Xinjiang, this guide is a must-have.**

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