



**EVER IMAGINE QUITTING YOUR JOB
AND STRIKING OUT TO SEE THE WORLD?
FOR LYNN AND GENE FRIEDA,
SUCH TALK WAS NO IDLE THREAT.**

THE WANDERING OLD SILK ROAD

TEXT AND PHOTOS
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Ruffling the feathers of chickens (opposite) raises the dust at the Kashgar Sunday Market in Western China. OU alumni Gene and Lynn Frieda (below), "somewhere in Siberia," prepare to reboard the Trans-Siberian Express on the first leg of a six-month journey that only can be described as off the beaten path.



Kashgar's narrow, winding streets were thick with smoke and dust. Donkey carts outnumbered bicycles. The savory smell of barbecued mutton was appetizing, but not enough to lure us into jumping off the back of our own donkey cart. We were only minutes from one of the world's most vibrant, yet isolated, markets and perhaps one of the last surviving remnants of the old Silk Road.

Thousands of years ago, exotic treasures of silk, linen and other riches began flowing from Eastern China to the Western world. The so-called Silk Road served as a conduit for East-West trade along various routes. Traveling west from China's old imperial capital of Xi'an, Chinese middlemen met merchants from Europe and Western Asia at the desert oasis of Kashgar. From there, caravans transported valuables west across Central Asia and Persia to Mediterranean ports, or south to Kashmir and India. The obstacles were formidable: barren deserts, treacherous mountains and bloodthirsty bandits. The ultimate prize for many was death.

Despite the hardships, the Silk Road flourished as the world's principal trade route from the days of the Roman Empire through the 13th century. Eventually it was abandoned as sea routes opened between China and the West.

Today, it is no longer possible to witness ancient caravan traffic, nor is the journey as long and strenuous as in the days of Mongolian conqueror Ghengis Khan or medieval explorer Marco Polo. Yet, to travel a portion of the vast distances once crossed by so many is to journey back in time through deserts dotted with occasional oases, where life seems uncomplicated, and surprises are hidden around every corner.

It was precisely the hustle and bustle of modern-day life in Manhattan that prompted my husband, Gene, and me to take six months off and escape from the "civilized" world, as we knew it, in search of our very own Shangri-la. In less than six weeks, we quit our jobs, filled our backpacks with enough film and medicine for an army and headed east. Our adventure, which took us along various routes of the old Silk Road, began in June 1998 as we boarded the Trans-Siberian Express in Moscow's Yaroslavski Station.

This was my second time aboard the legendary Trans-Sib. Many trains bound for Siberia depart Moscow daily, and to travel all the way to Vladivostok would take roughly a week. Instead, we opted to break our journey in Irkutsk, the unofficial

capital of Siberia, then continue south to Ulan Bator, Mongolia, and finally on to Beijing. We spent roughly four days and five nights on the train, not including the Irkutsk stopover, traveling to Ulan Bator.

I first rode the Trans-Sib in August 1991, just as Russia was opening its economy to the West. At that time virtually no food was available onboard, other than an unpalatable beetroot soup or borscht and stale bread sold in the dining car, along with potatoes and pickled cucumbers offered by peasants on train platforms. Westerners on that first trip were nearly as rare as the food was scarce.

Today, the same distasteful borscht is available on all trains, complete with greasy lumps of lard that float to the top of the soup bowl, and ample \$5 bottles of cold Russian

champagne. In addition to borscht, the restaurant cars on the Mongolian and Chinese trains offer slightly tastier rice dishes and plenty of mutton, but it is all relative. Chinese instant noodles are the novelty of today, sold in abundance by peasants.

Traveling roughly 3,800 miles across Russia to Mongolia took us over Siberia's boundless spans of land, ranging from swampy forest or taiga once reserved for exiled criminals, to dry barren desert. The term "express" is a misnomer, for the Trans-Sib only averaged 40 miles per hour on a good day.



Lynn Frieda snapped this photo of husband Gene, right, with OU graduate John Edwards, center, and his wife, Elaine, on the Trans-Mongolian train. The Friedas met the Australian couple during a five-hour visa check at the Russo-Mongolian border.

Still, the time passed all too quickly, offering a rare opportunity to sit back and peacefully absorb our unique surroundings. Truthfully, we were happy just to be on the train, as angry coal miners protesting unpaid wages were threatening to block rail links across Russia, a powerful indication of the failing economy.

Throughout our six-month trip, we were fortunate to cross paths with an eclectic crowd of people, locals as well as other adventurous wanderers. On the Trans-Mongolian portion of our train route—from Irkutsk to Ulan Bator—we met a vivacious group of people and witnessed trade on the "new Silk Road" between the Chinese, Mongolians and Russians. The corridors were jammed with passing boxes of various goods—from flour, fertilizer and cigarettes to cheap stereo equipment, tight tank tops and glittered, sequined blouses. These goods were sold to local Russians on the platforms at each stop, Russian guards permitting. On more than one

The Friedas found life in a traditional tent-like Mongolian yurt surprisingly livable.

occasion, traders hung out windows selling women's bras, underwear and hair clips. As we neared the Russo-Mongolian border town of Naushki, another form of bartering took place; goods were shifted among the various merchants to minimize customs duties.

One of our oddest and most surprising encounters on this traveling bazaar occurred during a five-hour layover at the Russian border, while the guards haggled with a few "chosen" passengers over expired or invalid visas. Siberia and Moscow are worlds apart, and different rules, or lack thereof, apply. One couple, Elaine and John Edwards, were charged \$240 for a visa that the Supreme Border Commander claimed had expired on the previous day. The Edwardses booked their entire trip through American Express and were assured that a week's grace period was in order. However, in the middle of nowhere and up against a former Communist Supreme Commander late at night, even American Express carries no clout. Another American was shipped back to Irkutsk, because his Moscow-issued visa was "invalid." We equated this harassment to a modern form of banditry along the new Silk Road.

Ironically, John was born in Tulsa and is a University of Oklahoma graduate. He received his B.S. in geology in 1957, followed by a master's in 1958. Approximately 20 years ago, he and his Canadian wife, Elaine, immigrated to Darwin, Australia, where they raised their 14 children. John and Elaine cherish their lifestyle Down Under, but every two years, they return to Oklahoma for their "reli run" (visiting relatives). Being adventurous souls, these Aussie transplants tacked on the Trans-Siberian/Trans-Mongolian to the end of this year's reli run. Who ever would have guessed, as we approached the Gobi Desert, that we would meet a fellow Sooner? Yet, stranger things awaited us.

After our Russian experience, it was a pleasant relief to reach the Mongolian countryside, which seemed far more civilized—though not exactly on most tourists' top 10 list. While extremely primi-



tive, we found life in the traditional tent-like yurt, made primarily of canvas and supported by a wooden frame strong enough to withstand the country's fierce winds, surprisingly livable. A stove in the center keeps a yurt warm and cozy. That it can be easily assembled or taken down makes the yurt essential for the nomadic Mongolians. Visiting several herdsmen's families and drinking the fermented mare's milk gave us one more reason to appreciate the daily conveniences of life back in the States.

The Trans-Mongolian train ended in Beijing. Here we found further evidence of the new Silk Road trade. As in days past, the flow of commerce moves from East to West. Near Ritan Park, Chinese proprietors of free-market stalls spent their days haggling with Russian customers over cheaply made clothes, shoes, leather coats, toys and other wares to be resold at inflated prices to consumers in Russia's material-starved markets. We spent a week in this inextricable Chinese city—dodging cars, buses, taxis and rickshaws by the thousands. On one occasion, we searched desperately for a recommended restaurant with the unlikely name of “Compare Past Misery with Present Happiness,” only to find the address contained nothing but a huge hole in the ground.

Then we headed south. Our jumping-off point for the desert trek along the old Silk Road was Xi'an, home to third century B.C. Emperor Qin Shi Huang's life-like terracotta army, ranked in battle formation and built underground, complete with weapons to guard the emperor's tomb. Today, over 1,000 figures of an estimated 8,000 have been excavated. Remembered as a brutal tyrant for his harsh laws, Qin Shi Huang also began construction of China's 3,600-mile Great Wall to fortify the country against foreign invaders.

From Xi'an, we took a 35-hour train journey to Dunhuang, where colorful Buddhist cave paintings and clay structures, dating from 366 A.D. to the 14th century, once formed a center of culture and art along the Silk Road. While many of the antiquities were plundered over the years by “foreign devils,” the Mogao Cave paintings (or Caves of 10,000 Buddhas) were the single most impressive site we saw in China. What made the caves so poignant was the fact that the remaining art treasures were in their natural environment, visible only by flashlight.

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This child in rural Mongolia seems a bit bewildered by the visiting Americans with their ever-present cameras.

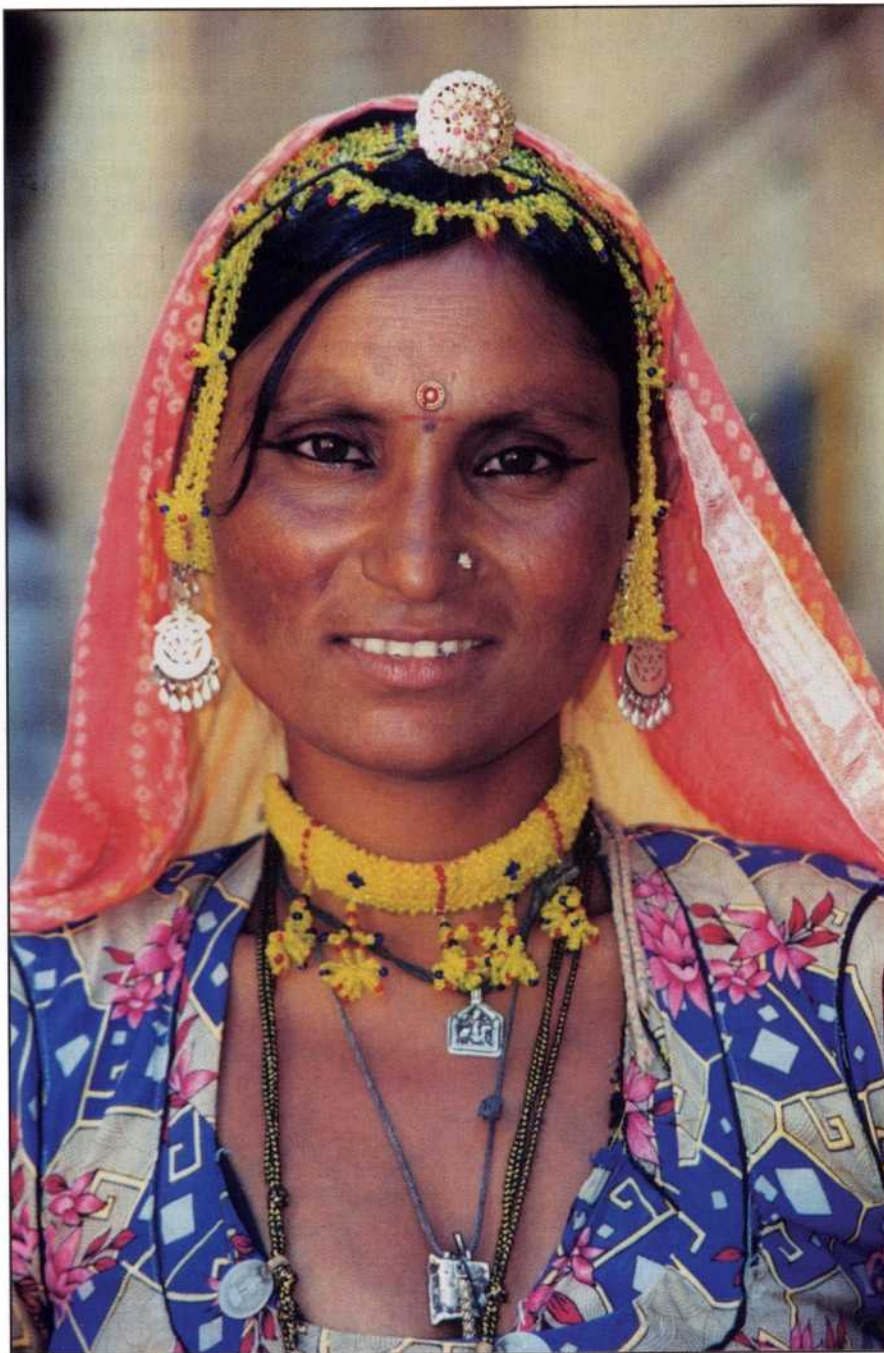
Our next destination was the oasis town of Turpan, which sits in a depression 80 meters below sea level. However, after reaching Hami, another former Silk Road oasis known for its mouth-watering melons and only five hours outside of Dunhuang, our train suddenly stopped for the night. The next morning, we were told by some Belgians, who spoke Chinese, not to worry; according to the Chinese authorities, we were stalled due to a rare “natural disaster”—a flood in the desert! We could have followed the lead of a Korean businessman and an army officer, who unearthed a taxi driver who “wasn't afraid to die” and set out to find an alternative route through the desert. However, we prudently opted to take the train back to Dunhuang after a horrific 20 hours in Hami and then flew west to Urumqi via a rickety Russian Tupelov.

Finally, we arrived in Kashgar, the westerly edge of the Taklamakan Desert near the Kyrgyz and Tadjik borders. Located some 2,500 miles west of Beijing in the Chinese province of Xinjiang, Kashgar is home to the ethnic Muslim minority group, the Uighurs. Thus the environment seems more like Central Asia than China. We spent hours wandering through back alleys and bazaars and up and down roads lined with tall poplar trees, which offered respite from the intense desert heat. At our hotel, formerly the Russian Consulate, we ran into another Oklahoman, Toby Thomas, from Tulsa. A college student in Wisconsin, Toby had spent the past year studying Chinese in Beijing.

The highlight of our stay was the famous Kashgar Sunday Market. Similar to the days when Kashgar was the strategic center for the Silk Road trade, today this fair often is referred to as the “mother of all bazaars.” More than 100,000 Central Asian merchants and nomads, mostly old men

with long beards and Muslim skull caps, come to barter various wares ranging from mountain goats and braying donkeys to decorative knives and hats. Where else could you trade a camel for a “magic” silk carpet or four chickens for eight-foot strands of garlic?

Kashgar was a medieval scene, where time had stood still for centuries—certainly not a city on the brink of the millenium. Yet a colossal white statue of Mao Zedong, towering over the new part of the city, was a strong reminder that today's Kashgar ultimately belonged un-



1,000 years. Though primitive in many aspects, Rajasthan is India's most colorful region.

Traveling the state by a series of harrowing bus rides, often with locals riding "upper class" on top of the roof, we visited numerous royal residences and desert forts. We encountered people ranging from maharajas (kings) comfortably ensconced in their own private palaces, to turbaned peasants driving camel and donkey carts laden with produce and other goods. Some women were adorned in facial jewelry and vividly colored bangle bracelets from elbow to shoulder, while the more traditional hid their faces with scarves under purdah (seclusion from public observation among certain religious groups like Muslims and Hindus).

Sacred cows sauntered aimlessly along dirt roads, eating selectively from trash piles and vying with wild dogs for shady spots to rest. There was no shortage of cow dung on which hordes of flies could feast. Impoverished child beggars wearing no pants or underwear yelled, "hello—chocolate, pens, one rupee?"

der China's authority, and thus it, too, had a place in the modern-day world.

Three months later after journeying through Southern China, Tibet and a good portion of India, we once again connected to another part of the old Silk Road. We found ourselves in one more arid region, the Thar Desert in India's State of Rajasthan, near the Pakistani border. Somewhere in this vast desert, India tested a nuclear bomb in May 1998.

Known as the Land of the Kings, Rajasthan is home to the Rajputs, a group of warrior clans who have controlled this northwestern corner of India for more than

To experience the Thar Desert firsthand, we embarked on a three-day camel trek, sleeping under the stars at night. As luck would have it, two other women were staying at our campsite, one of whom, Lesley Pulaski, received her degree in elementary education in 1968 from the University of Oklahoma. She and her Argentine friend, Ines Rapela, were continuing their Buddhist studies traveling to monasteries in India, Tibet and Nepal. The Silk Road not only was known for treasures; religion played a powerful role as well. In the first century A.D., the idea of Buddhism spread over the rugged Pamir Mountains from the Indian sub-continent to what is now western China.



A new dawn greets the Friedas as they conclude their get-away adventure by hiking on the Nepalese side of the Himalayas. One of the camels (below) that furnished transportation for the Friedas' three-day trek into India's Thar Desert takes a breather.



At a stifling 110 degrees Fahrenheit, we were nearly to the point of dehydration by the end of our camel trek, not to mention the trauma of black cobras and scorpions that lurked in the desert sand near our sleeping bags.

We spent the remainder of our trip hiking on the Nepalese side of the Himalayan mountains before heading back to the Western world. The trek provided further evidence of the daunting hurdles faced by some of the world's first global entrepreneurs.

Despite the numerous hardships along the way, our adventure was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Even though we witnessed extreme poverty, disease and frequent danger and contracted four rare parasites to boot, we would retrace our steps again tomorrow. The trip gave us a unique opportunity to witness how a majority of the world's population lives, to gain a clearer understanding of their cultures and to appreciate what we have in America. Some of the gentlest and most delightful people we met were some of the least-privileged the world could ever know, where material goods play no part in their everyday lives. Yet their simple ways seem to bring great happiness. Their kindness is unmatched.

Perhaps it is not a mere coincidence that we met three Oklahomans along the way, in three different deserts of Mongolia, China and India. Rather, I think it is strong evidence that we in the developed world possess a zealous desire to learn more about ancient cultures and the priceless gifts they have bestowed upon mankind. 