



# The SILK ROAD

Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran

A TRAVEL COMPANION

Jonathan Tucker

With a foreword by

PAUL THEROUX

I.B. TAURIS

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ROAD

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**Jonathan Tucker** is a former associate director of the Indian and Southeast Asian department at Spink and Son and has operated a gallery in St James's, London, with his wife Antonia Tozer since 2000. He is also a consultant for Bonhams and is a recognised authority in the field of Indian and Southeast Asian art, particularly in sculpture. He lived in Asia for eleven years and spent many years exploring the ancient trade routes between China and Europe, travelling the entire length of the Silk Road with the exception of Iraq. He is the author of *The Silk Road: Art and History* (Philip Wilson Publishers), an illustrated and annotated map of the Silk Road for Odyssey Travel Guides; *The Silk Road: China and the Karakorum Highway* (I.B. Tauris); and *The Troublesome Priest: Harold Davidson, Rector of Stiffkey*.

Praise for Jonathan Tucker's *The Silk Road: Art and History*.

'An enormous and beautiful book [...], the most informative work on the subject I have yet seen.'

*Literary Review*

'Jonathan Tucker's handsome and informative new volume fills an important niche [...] [It] conveys a palpable sense of place without losing the monumentality of scale and panoramic sweep.'

Annette L. Juliano, *Orientalism*

'This book is a Silk Road "bible", a well-constructed and beautiful collation of a mass of information and knowledge on a truly fascinating corner of the world. But be warned: read *The Silk Road* and you'll want to experience it for yourself [...] a feat worthy of accolades and to top it all off, the book is filled with excellent, and at times breathtaking, photography.'

*Geographical Magazine*

'A most handsome volume, admirable in scope and reliable in detail [...] it will serve as a treasured compendium.'

John Keay, *The THES*

'This is a book to fascinate [...] not only those interested in the past, but also those keen to understand the present.'

*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*

'This is a beautifully designed and produced work [...] undoubtedly one of the fullest and clearest – and certainly the best illustrated – introductions to this vast and bewildering subject.'

*Asian Affairs*

'An exquisitely produced major achievement [...] very highly recommended.'

*Minerva*

For Antonia, Jack and Grace

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# Foreword

## by Paul Theroux

When I first travelled to India and Pakistan in the 1960s, Afghanistan in the 1970s and China in 1980, each seemed ancient and fixed. How was I to know that nothing in this world is fixed? But with the passage of time, and more travel, I understood how change and decay are the rule. And seeking that understanding is one of the greatest reasons to travel. Though many travellers search for ancient splendours, and some find them, it is an illusion to think that lastingness is the condition of the world.

I like this description by Jonathan Tucker, in his marvellous book, of Hadda near Jalalabad:

One of Hadda's monasteries, Tapa-i-Shotor, escaped the ravages of the Hephthalites and until only a few years ago still contained large stucco sculptures of the Buddha flanked by attendants, with influences from the classical world. It did not survive the Taliban era, however, and today Tapa-i-Shotor consists of little more than a mound of earth and a few flakes of gold leaf.

Afghanistan was ruled by a gilt-edged king 40 years ago, and in his kingdom one of his subjects in Herat, upon seeing my gold watch, begged me to swap an old musket inlaid with ivory for it. It was impossible for me to make an international telephone call in India on their six pound bakelite telephones, though had I the money I could have bought a

brand new steam locomotive; or in the bazaar at Peshawar a Maitreya plundered from one of the Gandhara monasteries. Now India makes cell phones, and the Peshawar bazaar deals in assault weapons.

China in 1980 was ruled by Mao's chosen successor, Hua Guofeng – his portrait on every wall that I saw on my way down the Yangtze Kiang, along with Maoist big-letter slogans on canyon walls, 'Crush Imperialism', 'Serve the People'. China was threadbare, and joyless; everyone wearing blue suits and cloth slippers, many of them yoked to tables in factories where they made thermos jugs and bikes and small appliances. The Cultural Revolution was four years in the past, a nightmarish memory for all, too awful to discuss. What was going to happen next? Impossible to know, or even guess at. Six years later I returned, Deng Xiaoping the reformer was now in power, people were talkative, women's clothes more colourful, and under the cranes and bulldozers in Shanghai, a new city rising, I asked an American who'd lived there for many years what he thought was going to happen.

'I don't know,' he said. 'We didn't know this was going to happen.'

China is disaster-prone, and its history, like that of the Silk Road that linked it to the world, is filled with danger and uncertainty, as well as glory and riches. Aware of the cycle of catastrophes in their national past, the Chinese take nothing for granted. And this is why the Silk Road, so vital and detailed in Tucker's telling, has existed like a living thing, not merely sinuous and full of incident, but anfractuous and dramatic, where the only certainty is the unexpected.

All my travelling life, in Africa and Asia, I have encountered mud villages and rough stone walls and peasants grubbing the earth in fields. The modern conceit is that urbanisation has taken hold, that India is an economic miracle, that China is the next superpower. Tell that to the peasants in the villages of Africa and Asia. In populations of more than a billion there exist many anachronistic pockets of the old world. You can take a high-speed train, four hours, from Beijing to Xian, and a short drive into the rocky hills will introduce you to a village of rough huts, peasants cooking on wood fires or ploughing fields with water buffalo, a scene that would be familiar to any of the ancient travellers on the Silk Road recounted in this book.

Scholarly and detailed, this volume is a great reference as well as a guide-book, with portraits of the little-known travellers as well as the great ones – Marco Polo, Fa Xian, Xuanzang; and the poet Rumi

(Mawlana Jalaluddin Balkhi); the many twisting caravan routes, the marchers upon them, and the merchants. And it is up to date, remarking on the paradoxical revival of the Silk Road in our time, how after the attack on the World Trade Center, NATO vehicles, fuel and food aid, were passing along the fabled road; how one of the road's magnificent features, the great Buddhas of Bamiyan were blown up by the Taliban.

You could almost say of Jonathan Tucker, as he quotes an admirer in verse of the great fourteenth-century traveller Ibn Battuta,

He it was who hung the world,  
that turning wheel of diverse parts,  
upon the axis of a book.

# Preface

There was a rare and probably unique interlude between 1990 and 11 September 2001, when more-or-less all of the Silk Road was sufficiently safe and secure to explore. When I began travelling it in the early 1990s I sensed that a rare opportunity existed; with most of the countries along the route enjoying a period of peace, borders were open, the old sites still survived, cities and monuments could be seen and recorded, and the ancient ways still discovered. As I write these words today, some 20 years later, there have been wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, ethnic and religious upheavals the length and breadth of the Silk Road and a lingering threat of conflict with Iran over nuclear weapons. The great Silk Road cities of Damascus, Homs and Aleppo (including the great Al-Madina Souq and the Umayyad Mosque) are being shot to pieces; Palmyra and the Crusader castle of Krak des Chevaliers are under mortal threat; the Buddhas of Bamiyan are rubble; Baghdad and Samarra are bombed and blasted; Mosul and Hatra are occupied by ISIS militants; Samarkand is spruced up and characterless; and Kashgar's ancient quarter is all but gone.

The notion that these cities have been destroyed and rebuilt throughout history is a specious one: we are supposed to be part of an enlightened era in which the past is cherished and preserved, museums built, history re-enacted and celebrated on TV and in film. Two-and-a-half million people a year visit Pompeii, pre-revolution Egypt welcomed 14 million tourists in 2010, and last year, 5.5 million visitors graced the

polished corridors of the British Museum. There is no doubt that we revere the past, and yet the traces of the Grand Old Road are fading inexorably away. I implore anyone with an interest in the culture and history of East and West, and the exchange of ideas between them, to visit some of the places described in this book, and in its companion: *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway*. If current trends continue, a generation from now many of these places will be no more than a memory.

# Note on the Translation of the Poetry and Prose

When poetry and other forms of literature are translated from another language, the quality of translation is almost as important as the original text. When several versions of the same text are available I have tried to use the one that is the most evocative and best captures the atmosphere of the time or place.



**MAP 1**  
The Silk Road – land and sea routes.



