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An Adventure on the Old Silk Road

FROM VENICE TO THE YELLOW SEA

by John Pilkington

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Acknowledgements

It is one of those fondly held myths that solo travellers are loners. Mustering inner resources, plunging from one adventure to the next, they seem blessed with a natural self-sufficiency. But if such explorers exist, I'm afraid I'm not among them. I return from even the briefest of journeys thrilled and humbled by the generosity of both strangers and friends.

On this trip, much of what I carried in my rucksack – not to mention the rucksack itself – was provided by others. For basic equipment I am indebted to Vango (Scotland) and to Berghaus Ltd. My thanks, too, to David Plumb for help with film, and to Arran Poyser for a vital water filter. Margaret Percy, having persuaded the BBC to lend me some sound recording equipment, rose to the even greater challenge of teaching me how to use it. Hampshire's Marwell Zoo showed me how to handle Bactrian camels 'in case you should be unlucky enough to meet one'. I did, and was grateful for the training.

In Tehran, Nick Oundjian spent several hours at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, arguing the case for my Iranian visa. In Pakistan, Jill and Mark Dunham provided support from their base in Karachi; while John Hague (then Second Secretary at the British Embassy in Islamabad) willingly acted as expedition postman.

Back in London, my progress along the Silk Road was being closely followed. Anthony Lambert, my editor, provided dogged support, having already authorized a handsome advance to the charity Intermediate Technology, now known as Practical Action. They, in turn, backed the trip with the infectious enthusiasm that has become their hallmark.

Like a growing number of people, I had been following Practical Action's efforts in Asia, Africa and South America to help people work themselves out of poverty. By developing simple tools which can be made and maintained locally (rather than

complicated ones needing know-how and spare parts), the charity is taking the opposite approach to traditional 'aid': it is making people less dependent on charities. From fuel-saving woodstoves in Nepal to wind-driven water pumps in Kenya, it is finding practical solutions to problems that concern us all. The bigger charities, and even one or two governments, now acknowledge the value of Practical Action's ideas – although our donations are a drop in an ocean of need.

Many other people lent helping hands to the journey and to the book. Some of their contributions are mentioned in the text; others, I must leave to your imagination. I would particularly like to thank Ronald Latham and Penguin Books Ltd for permission to quote extracts from *Marco Polo: The Travels*.

Every good expedition has a Base Camp, and mine in north London was manned with quiet efficiency by Liz Berryman, to whom this book is dedicated.

1
A Meeting on a Hill

The Kirghiz turns his collar against the wind, and studies the distant approaching figure. From his craggy vantage point he can see that the man is younger and taller than himself, and alone. The stranger is walking briskly up the sunny valley, heading north towards the Buramsal Pass. What is his purpose?

Even in this remote western tip of China's Xinjiang Region, the Kirghiz is accustomed to strangers. Chinese soldiers, bitter and sullen, have been patrolling the area since he was a child. More recently, surveyors have come, talking about connections with the new motor road to Kashgar – a welcome proposition which has not so far materialized. Then there have been the dark-skinned people from the south, crammed into lorries on that same motor road, and telling of a land called the Punjab where it is warm enough to go naked all the year round. And his father speaks of even more exotic visitors in centuries gone by: merchants from the far west, beyond the stone tower at Khokand, who carried bronze jewellery, ceramics and mirrors in their caravans, and returned with cargoes of a curious material they called silk.

But this newcomer, still half a mile distant in the wide valley, nevertheless holds the tribesman's gaze. His keen eyes focus on the man's unusual apparel – a bright green cotton shirt; a jacket duller in colour but ample in proportions; a woollen hat; a full rucksack well hung with straps and buckles; and, most fascinating of all, thick leather boots.

The figure continues up the valley, and the Kirghiz creeps down the hillside to intercept him.

It is a week since I left Tashkurghan. The track, distinct in places

but almost indiscernible in others, has climbed steadily for the last eight miles. The pass for which it is heading is marked on my sixty-year-old map as 'Buramsāl-dawan, 14,940 feet'. Although the map is labelled 'Survey of India', it is many days since I stood on soil which has ever been part of India. In those far-off days of Empire, surveyors were less inhibited by frontiers than they would be now. But they were no less painstaking: time and again since reaching China, I have been grateful for the thoroughness with which they applied their dumpy levels to this unforgiving terrain.

I am anxious to cross the pass and find water, so my head is down and my thoughts elsewhere when the Kirghiz hails me. I look up with a start; I was not expecting to meet other people today, least of all so close to the pass. He stands squarely on the path, a thick-set figure in a vast greatcoat, arms akimbo, blocking my way.

I approach smiling but with some trepidation. It is only a few decades since caravans on this route used to vanish without trace, victims of Kirghiz and Tajik brigands armed with Russian or British rifles procured from previous raids. But this shepherd seems unarmed, and the face beneath the fur hat returns my smile. I relax a little, and greet him with the words he is most likely to recognize: *'Salaam alaikum!'*

The Kirghiz breaks into a broad grin. *'Salaam!'* he replies, extending a horny hand. We look each other up and down, each curious: I to inspect his hand-made felt moccasins and leather cummerbund, and he to know the feel of Gore-Tex and the contents of my Berghaus rucksack. After a few speechless seconds we laugh spontaneously and sit down on a pile of rocks.

Using grunts and signs, we tell each other a little about ourselves. I describe Britain as a country beyond the farthest western foothills of these Pamir Mountains. The Kirghiz, in turn, indicates that his family are camped in a grazing ground a few miles beyond the pass. Gradually, I realize that he is inviting me to eat and sleep with them. Delighted and relieved, I put away my map and we set off across the hillside, continuing our unorthodox but engrossing conversation as we walk. The possibility occurs to me that my new acquaintance, in forty years among the mountains, may never before have set eyes on a European.

2
Departure

Government of Pakistan

HANDOUT

SUBJECT:
KHUNJERAB PASS OPENS FOR FOREIGNERS

The Khunjerab Pass will be opened to the foreign nationals, wishing to travel by road between China and Pakistan, from *1st May, 1986*.

The foreign nationals wishing to travel through the pass will be required to obtain valid visas. This would apply even to nationals of the countries which have exemption agreements with Pakistan or China.

It may be added here that the 500 miles Karakoram Highway snakes through the rugged mountain ranges of Himalayas, Hindukush, Karakorams and Pamirs touching the Chinese territory at Khunjerab at 16000 feet (approx. 4795.06 meters) above sea level. The Highway has reopened the path which was trekked by Chinese pilgrim FaHsien in fourth century, Albaroney in 11th century and Marcopolo in the 13th century.

MUNEERUDDIN
Deputy Chief (Operations)
Tourism Division
Government of Pakistan
5.1.86

I must be dreaming. The news is scarcely credible. I look again at the unexpected handout which has been included, almost as an afterthought, in the Pakistan Embassy's reply to my enquiry about trekking. It is of course quite real, and goes on to describe in detail the intended arrangements for passport, visa, customs and health controls. A map shows the familiar route of the Karakoram Highway extended tantalizingly to the Chinese caravanserai of Tashkurghan. I settle down to scrutinize the flimsy pages, and slowly there unfold the beginnings of an idea . . .

Beyond the Karakoram, in the land that was once called Tartary, atlases show a great desert. Vaster than the Gobi, more remote than the Sahara, scorched by the summer sun and wracked by winter blizzards, this nightmare region offers travellers the choice of being baked alive or frozen to death. Not surprisingly, no one has ever had a good word to say for it. The explorer Sven Hedin called it the worst and most dangerous desert in the world. Sir Aurel Stein thought those of Arabia tame by comparison. Other descriptions vary from 'a land of death' to 'the very abomination of desolation'. Sandstorms, hurricanes and wailing demons are among the terrors reported by those who have survived a crossing of this 'Taklamakan Desert' – which means, in the local Uyghur language, 'Go in, and you won't come out'.

Why should anyone want to leave the comforts of civilization to pit their wits against such appalling conditions? If you had put this question to Central Asia's explorers through the ages, some would certainly have pointed to its precious minerals, such as asbestos and jade. Others might have cited its archaeological riches. Yet others would have spoken vaguely of the artistic splendours of Cathay. But whatever their particular lodestar, these adventurers would have concurred on the prime attraction of the land they called Tartary, wondering no doubt why you even needed to ask. For was not Tartary simply another name for Seres – the fabled land of silk?

The Romans thought silk grew on trees. As demand for it burgeoned among the middle classes of successive European empires, Chinese cultivators managed to conceal its true origins, and a lucrative trade developed through the Taklamakan oases. The Chinese caravans returned from Europe with glass, ivory, coral, amber and gold.

The so-called Silk Road was not one road but several: braided

and interwoven like plaited hair. After leaving China by the 'Jade Gate', one route followed the northern oases round the Taklamakan, another those to the south. After meeting again at Kashgar, one of its branches continued west through the Tien-Shan ranges towards Samarkand; another struck off south-west to Balkh in what is now Afghanistan. From Yarkand a substantial proportion of the trade went south, the caravans climbing to over 16,000 feet in the Pamirs and Karakoram before dropping down to the Punjab plain, southern Persia, and the *dhow* ports of the Arabian Sea.

Eric Shipton, the mountaineer and one-time British Consul at Kashgar, wrote in 1948: 'I am still amazed at the great good fortune that gave me the chance to know something of Sinkiang, and, having watched the recent turn of events, I shudder to think of the narrow margin by which I got that chance. For the Iron Curtain has already clanged down behind me, and it may be many decades before a Western traveller is free to travel there again.'

I read once more the handout, written nearly forty years after Shipton's prophecy. Of FaHsien and Albaroney I know nothing; but Marco Polo caught my attention at an early age when, by a quirk of chance, his thirteenth-century travels were given as the subject for a school essay. My childhood imagination was captivated, and the lure of Polo's adventures grew with the years. As a merchant's son, Polo was of course motivated initially by the prospect of trade rather than the spirit of adventure which fired later explorers. But during his seventeen years as an envoy for Kublai Khan, as he became familiar with more and more of what we now call China, his writing reveals a growing appreciation of travel for its own sake. Uniquely among the narrow-minded denizens of medieval Europe, Polo understood the call of faraway places, and the fascination of living and working among people whose ways of life were different from his own.

For years my admiration for Polo, and my interest in the forbidden places about which he wrote, have lain dormant. Now, for the first time in four decades, Westerners will once more be able to retrace the road he made famous. How much will have changed since Polo's journeys? And how much will still be as he described? The idea begins to take shape . . .

If it hadn't been for another quirk of fate, Polo's celebrated book, *Divisament dou Monde*, might never have been written. In

1292, returning to Venice wild-eyed and unkempt after twenty-six years of Asian travelling, he regaled his fellow-citizens with tales of civilizations beyond the known horizon – only to be roundly debunked. Fashionable Venetians, afraid of seeming naïve, made a show of dismissing the extravagant claims of this merchant turned vagabond, and nicknamed him *Il Milione* – 'Mister Million'. In spite of the wealth he had accumulated through skilful trading on his travels, Polo became less and less inclined to talk about the wonders of the East.

Then came war. Venice's supremacy in the Adriatic was challenged by the growing power of Genoa, and the fleets of the two city-states clashed time and again. Polo was appointed captain of one of the Venetian warships, and in 1296, at the Battle of Curzola, the Genoese took him captive. His next three years were spent in gaol, and to relieve the tedium he began recounting his stories again. As it happened, one of his fellow prisoners, a man from Pisa called Rustichello, had been a professional writer and storyteller before being captured, and he offered to write down Polo's tales. The work was finished in 1298, and became a bestseller among Italy's literati. Sadly, history does not record the reaction of the smug disbelievers in Polo's own city, but by the time he was released in 1299 he had become the talk of Venice. The vagrant was fashionable once more.

Although now a celebrity, Polo was still obstinately referred to as *Il Milione*, and this gives a clue to the narrow outlook of medieval society, for *Divisament dou Monde* was regarded by most as a work of fiction. Partly this was due to the romantic embellishments of Rustichello, which make the book read like a fairy tale. But mainly it was because so much of what Polo described was quite beyond the comprehension of the medieval mind. People who used banknotes rather than coins, and who kept warm by burning black rocks, were simply beyond belief. Even when a sample of Polo's 'wonder cloth' (asbestos) was brought to Rome, his countrymen continued to regard him with affectionate derision, and the nickname stuck for life. When, on his deathbed, the old man was asked if he would come clean and admit that his claims had been a little exaggerated, he replied: 'I haven't told the half of it.'

A few weeks after the unexpected news from the Pakistan Em-

bassy, another chance incident reminds me of the old Venetian. Near the floodlit turmoil of London's Smithfield Market, I am due to meet some fellow travellers in a pub. Arriving early, I pass the time by ambling through the Barbican, and find myself suddenly in Spitalfields – the decaying quarter behind Liverpool Street Station which was once the hub of Britain's silk industry.

Both the material, and the skill of weaving it, arrived rather late on British shores. In the thirteenth century, while Polo and his father were abroad in Asia, their compatriots in Italy were applying their inventive minds to the possibility of using machines to weave the exquisite but delicate strands. Over the next 200 years they brought their new techniques to Antwerp and western Flanders, and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the great Walloon migration carried them to Canterbury, Norwich, and this obscure East London suburb. The Walloons were soon joined by Dutch weavers at Billingsgate alongside the Thames, and later a wave of Huguenots came in, fleeing from persecution in the cities of the Loire. Overshadowed today by office blocks, the houses of these early immigrants still stand, their Franco-Dutch architecture perfectly complemented, on one of the lanes, by a sign which reads 'Fleur-de-Lis Street'.

The true origin of silk was one of the best kept secrets of the ancient world. About the year 2800 BC, an observant peasant in what is now the Jiangsu province of China noticed that the grub of an undistinguished moth extruded a fine but very strong thread. At first the unfortunate silkworms were ripped alive from their cocoons. However, this tore the yarn, so later they were killed by steeping in hot water: a method which, though hardly more humane, allowed the thread to be unreeled to its full length of more than half a mile without a join.

Shi Ling Si, Empress of China from 2700 BC and said to have been one of the most beautiful women in the East, put the infant Chinese silk industry on a firm footing by promising a painful death to anyone who revealed the secret of its origin. Her threat was never put to the test, but history records that a local princess, wanting desperately to take a worthy wedding gift to her fiancé, the Prince of Khotan, hid silkworm eggs among the flowers in her hair. (One can only hope that the Prince was worth the risk.)

For three thousand years, Shi Ling Si's great secret never reached the West, yet with the coming of the Roman Empire the

demand for silk soared. By the sixth century AD it was costing three-quarters of its own weight in gold, and the Emperor Justinian was being pressed to put an end to the Chinese monopoly. By chance, in the year 550, a pair of Nestorian monks arrived from the East, claiming to know how silk was made, and with the promise of a handsome reward Justinian induced them to smuggle some silkworm eggs out of China in a hollow bamboo cane. The gambit paid off: the monks returned safely with the eggs, and the monopoly was broken. Silk farms were soon thriving in Constantinople, and later in Greece and Italy. But the new cultivators, like their predecessors, guarded their methods jealously – not only on the matter of cultivating the worms, which eat only the leaves of the white mulberry tree, but also when it came to spinning. The Walloons and Huguenots of Spitalfields would have had to rely on silk spun in the Piedmont region of northern Italy; only in the eighteenth century did their descendants learn how to spin it themselves.

At a mere seven denier, silk is the finest of all natural fibres, and the technique of spinning it is quite different from those used for wool, cotton or flax. In 1717, tired of paying the exorbitant prices asked by his Italian suppliers, a London importer named John Lombe set out on an assignment which today we would call industrial espionage. Disguised as a local outworker, he infiltrated the Piedmont mills, and made off not only with their secrets but also with some of their staff. In 1718 John's brother Thomas was granted a British patent for the newly pirated design, and three years later silk was being spun for the first time on British soil.

Ironically this move, which brought about a golden age for the silk industry, was to be the downfall of Spitalfields. Spinning needed power, but in the eighteenth century the Industrial Revolution had yet to provide the choice of generating methods available today. Water was the only practicable source, and the Lombes' mill harnessed the fast-flowing Derbyshire Derwent. Others followed: around Macclesfield on the western fringe of the Peak District, and straddling the sedate but constant chalk streams of the southern counties. Many of the new mill-owners found it best to spin and weave in the same building, using country labour which, then as now, came cheaper than in London. The Spitalfields bosses hit back, cutting the wages of

their own staff, and causing such unrest that in 1744 Parliament passed a 'Spitalfields Act' which set minimum rates of pay. Within a decade, the silk industry at Spitalfields was dead – its few remaining weavers making a living of sorts by repairing old clothes, before finally quitting and moving out.

Strolling reflectively among the weavers' cottages, I am intrigued by the connection, remote though it may be, with the news from Pakistan. I decide, as a start, to visit one of the country mills that so brutally eclipsed Spitalfields. Twelve miles from my home in Hampshire I find one of the finest examples still working. There has been weaving on the River Test since Domesday times, but it was not until 1830 that the mill at Whitchurch first advertised for weavers and 'winders'. A dozen teenage girls were taken on, and by 1838 the business had 108 workers including 39 children under thirteen. The mill's first contracts were humdrum, supplying silk to insulate copper wires for an emerging electrical industry. Later, it won the honour of making the linings for Burberry's famous raincoats. Today it concentrates on special orders and some interesting short runs. Theatrical suppliers use Whitchurch silk to reproduce period costumes for stage, film and television productions; and when barristers 'take the silk' and become Queen's Counsel, many choose Whitchurch silk. So the wheel has turned full circle. As in Roman times, top people are impressing their peers with silk. And the material that feeds the looms of Whitchurch comes not from Como, or even Constantinople, but from China.

'So you're going after the old caravans?' chuckles Bill Carr, the mill manager, after listening to my half-baked plan. He eyes me mischievously. 'A sort of modern Marco Polo, eh?' Against a background of deafening looms, Bill speculates on this thought. Steadily, the waterwheel turns in the crystal stream beneath the building; and steadily Bill's face grows more flushed as the thought unfolds.

'Our silk comes ready-spun, you know – from Glemsford Mill in Suffolk,' he enthuses. 'But their agent buys it from the China National Textiles Corporation. Here, you see: the Chinese labels are on the bales.' He hesitates for a moment before coming to the point. 'I don't suppose you could find out where it comes from?'

This is just the challenge I have been looking for, and I accept it on the spot. Clutching one of the triangular yellow labels, I

follow Bill past three of the mill's great tappet looms, each nearly a hundred years old and clanking like a steam engine. The shuttles whiz back and forth like cannon shots, and the operators look up only briefly from their work. In his office by the mill race, Bill gives me a contact at the Suffolk mill, and the address of their importing agent. We agree to meet again before I leave. Stepping out of the mill and back into the twentieth century, I contemplate the puzzle he has unwittingly set. Will European silk once again, as in Roman times, turn out to come from the Chinese province of Jiangsu?

How can you prepare sensibly for a journey into the unknown? Judging from the records of other travel writers, the answer seems to be – you can't. John Steinbeck packed his bags ('about four times too much of everything') with a firm conviction that his *Travels with Charley* would never happen. Eric Newby began his *Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* with boots too small and wilderness experience amounting to a weekend in Wales. Redmond O'Hanlon and James Fenton prepared for Borneo by visiting the SAS, and nearly died of fright before the expedition began. Jonathan Raban bought an old sextant from a junk shop. Robyn Davidson began her preparations to cross the Western Australian desert by 'sipping gins on the verandah, making lists which got thrown away, and reading books about camels'.

On the other hand, some of the greatest achievements in exploration have been made by professionals who prepared for months, if not years, in advance. The first ascents of Annapurna by Maurice Herzog and Everest by Hillary and Tenzing were possible only because of prodigious back-up – including, in Herzog's case, the entire staff of the French Alpine Club.

For me, the best trips fall somewhere between the two extremes of military-style organization and blind chaos. I have never favoured the meticulous packing instructions where mint cake ('one doz pkts per six man/days') sits romantically alongside ice screws and rock pitons in the Advance Base Ration Box. But I do need some basis for deciding what to take on the Silk Road, so I scour my notes of previous journeys to see what I missed most. After several draft lists, some bare essentials emerge:

Clothing

Boots (Zamberlan, with Sorbothane insoles)
Woollen socks
Desert trousers
Jacket
Cotton shirt (long sleeved)
Woollen sweater
Helly Hansen salopettes
Hat!
Down sleeping bag (Blacks' Snowgoose)
Dachstein mitts

Cooking kit

Stove (Camping Gaz Globetrotter, modified to take C206 cartridges which are available in Turkey and one or two places in Pakistan)
Aluminium saucepan
Enamel mug
Teaspoon
One-litre water bottle
Three-litre water bag (the inner part of a wine box)
Water filter ('H_2OK')
Salt, pepper, instant coffee

Medical kit

Bandage
Blister pads (lots)
Adhesive plaster
Antiseptic cream
Water purifying pills
Herbal linctus (blackberry root bark/catechu/gingerine/cinnamon and clove oil: my pet cure for diarrhoea)
Slippery elm tablets (for stomach upsets)
Flagyl tablets (for if all else fails)
Fybogel and Dioralyte powder (to maintain body salts)
Buprenorphine and DF118 tablets (painkillers)
Aspirin/codeine
Paludrine malarial prophylactics

Other

Rucksack (Berghaus A.B.70 GT)
Tent (Vango Hurricane Alpha)
Foam sleeping mat (cut in half to save weight)
Moneybelt
Padlock
Universal sink plug
'Gaffer tape' (to secure banging doors)
Earplugs (for if Gaffer tape fails)
'Repel 100' mosquito repellant
'Tubigrip' bandage (to use as second moneybelt)
Washing kit (no towel)
Sewing kit
Safety pins
Maps of Central Asia (Survey of India, four miles to one inch, 1925–30 editions, copied in the Royal Geographical Society map room)

Zipped plastic wallets (for maps and documents)
Compass
Notebooks and pens
Headtorch
Army knife
Nylon cord (to hang washing, or to guy tent if stormy)
Camera (Pentax ME Super, in padded belt pouch)
Lenses (telephoto, standard, wide-angle)
Miniature tripod
Tape recorder (Marantz CP230, with AKG microphone, loaned by BBC)
Film; filters; cassettes; batteries
Candles and matches
Turkish and Chinese dictionaries
Letters of introduction
Postcards of home (to give away)
Duplicate address book
Passport
Money (US$)

In the whirlwind of last-minute preparations, the day of departure, 24th May, comes almost as a surprise. Seemingly without warning I find that farewells are being said; toasts drunk; I am being driven to London's Victoria Station; the clock shows almost 10.45 a.m.; and the boat train is pulling out. As its last carriage clears the platform, smiling faces accompany one last wave, then my friends turn to walk back to their everyday lives.

Since 1846 Venice, *La Serenissima*, the greatest island-city-state that ever was, has been approached matter-of-factly by a bridge. At first it was simply a railway bridge, a Victorian monster which the city fathers tried (and thankfully failed) to extend over the canals and palaces to Piazza San Marco. Today it is accompanied by a road bridge, and both road and rail terminate where the city begins. If you want to penetrate further you must use boats or feet.

Robert Benchley, who visited the city just after the Second World War, cabled home after his ill-prepared arrival: 'STREETS FULL OF WATER. PLEASE ADVISE.' One must presume he got no further than the station, for Venice has two distinct systems of circulation, one for boats and one for people, and you can reach all parts by both. The canals follow the lines of ancient rivulets, largely ignoring the needs of their users; from the Grand Canal to the narrowest *rio*, they twist in cocky defiance of where you want

to go. But Venice's alleyways are another matter. Products of neither planners nor Nature, they have grown by usage over the centuries, and can take you swiftly and exactly to your destination. Impractical though they sometimes seem (I have measured the Calle de Mezo and it is just six feet wide), these lanes are ideally suited to their purpose. Using them, you can cross the entire city in half an hour. Congestion there is, to be sure, when Venice's population doubles for the summer season, but 'people jams' are quickly sorted out. I have known it take longer to drive half a mile in London than to cross the whole of Venice on foot.

Jan Morris, in her eloquent study of the city where she used to live, described the essence of Venice as melancholia. You might not think so, grappling with the crowds in Piazza San Marco where, on summer days, there seem to be more people than pigeons. You would certainly find no lack of lustre in the blue eyes and banal smalltalk of the gondoliers, for they are showmen and have been practising their smiles for years. Morris found the melancholia most potent when she peered across the lagoon through the mists of a January dawn, when the city's sounds were muffled by a blanket of snow. In summer it is hidden – but only just. Strolling through the backstreets on the evening of my arrival, I come across a drunk, not scowling into an empty bottle as they do in other cities, but in full *sotto voce* celebration of the wonders of the world. I return later to make sure he hasn't fallen into the canal, and find him sleeping peacefully, head propped up against a cistern pump, his face creased in a hangdog look which seems to encompass the tragedies of fifty generations of Venetians.

As long ago as 1928, D. H. Lawrence noted the city's overabundance of everything. 'Too many people in the Piazza, too many limbs and trunks of humanity on the Lido, too many pigeons, too many ices, too many cocktails, too many menservants wanting tips, too many languages rattling, too much sun, too much smell of Venice, too many cargoes of strawberries, too many silk shawls, too many huge, raw-beef slices of watermelon on stalls: too much enjoyment, altogether far too much enjoyment!'

This tendency of Venice to overdo everything is one of its most trying yet endearing qualities. In summer, you can hardly move – you certainly can't relax – yet without such exuberance the city

would become strangled by its sheer impracticability. Its larger-than-lifeness is what keeps it going.

Like other admiring visitors for a thousand years, I could have explored Venice for weeks: poking down its alleys, nosing into courtyards, spying on the secret ways in which its people have adapted to their curious environment. But this is not supposed to be a pleasure trip. Riding on gondolas, clutching a red-ribboned boater, and joining the revellers from a score of countries in their communal singing, will have to wait until another time. My sole mission in Venice is to visit the home of its most celebrated citizen, and then be on my way.

Three hundred yards from my *pensione* on Calle delle Acque, not far from the Rialto bridge, an alleyway squeezes between two shabby buildings and underneath a third. The beams above the narrow passage – a *sotoportego* – are so low that I have to duck. But the effort is rewarded. I emerge into an L-shaped courtyard, quite plain, with archways forming an exit to my left and the sound of lapping water coming through another *sotoportego* ahead. The houses surrounding this undistinguished square are bare of decoration, except for some carved sheep and griffons over one of the arches, and a small painted sign opposite. The sign reads *Corte del Milione* ('Mister Million's Courtyard') – announcing in its deadpan way that I am standing outside the home of Marco Polo.

The place is dark but friendly. A black-clad woman grins at my wide-eyed stare as she lowers a basket on a rope, in the Venetian tradition, for the postman to pop in her mail. The two *sotoportegi* form a route linking other courtyards nearby, and passers-by break out in smiles as they catch me with tape recorder and microphone, recording the place for posterity. Tourists don't often come this way, although perhaps other romantics do.

The Polo family mansion has long since crumbled to dust, and the structures in front of me are mostly eighteenth century. I have soon sampled all there is to be had of the atmosphere of Mister Million's Courtyard, and, feeling slightly downcast, turn to go.

'Signor!'

The call comes from the old woman with the mail-basket. She has been watching from her doorway, and now she scurries over to clutch my arm.

'Signor, deve vedere la placca.' ('You must see the plaque.')

She leads me through the *sotoportego* to her house's canalside face, where a small tablet has been fixed by a first floor window. On yellow stone dappled in watery reflections, I read:

> *Qui furono le case di MARCO POLO, che viaggio le piu lontane regioni dell' Asia e le descrisse.*
>
> (Here was the house of Marco Polo, who travelled through the farthest countries of Asia and described them.)

The plaque's date, MDCCCLXXXI, suggests that *Il Milione*'s home town was rather late in recognizing him (six centuries late, to be exact), and its beguiling suggestion that this might have been his very house reflects a typical Venetian vagueness, or perhaps indifference. But the acknowledgement is there. As I note it down, my wrinkled guide tugs again at my arm. *'Mia casa è stata sua'* ('My house was his'), she smiles, sweetly perpetrating the lie.

Being seafarers, Venice's merchants naturally began their east-bound journeys by ship, setting their compasses first south-east through the familiar waters of the Adriatic, and then, rounding the Peloponnese, either east-south-east to Alexandria or east and north to Ayas, Antioch or Constantinople. But modern ferries are no way to recapture the thwack of a medieval galley's oars, so to begin my journey I take the route which approached Constantinople by land.

This ancient thoroughfare is also well known to modern travellers, from the hippies who nursed failing flower-buses towards Asia in the 1960s to today's tee-shirted lorry drivers with their 40-ton juggernauts. From Venice's Piazzale Roma it sweeps across the lagoon towards the massed industrial gadgetry of Mestre, then past Aeroporto Marco Polo (surely a misnomer, unless this is a reference to the millions of lire it cost to build) to that other former city-state – Trieste. These days the journey is simple: an *autostrada* whisks you through the vineyards of Friuli–Venezia Giulia and deposits you almost on the border of Yugoslavia.

I have managed to talk my way on to a Turkish bus, full of

migrant workers returning home from Paris. The driver pulls into Piazzale Roma for a rest stop, and pulls out with my remaining lire in his pocket and his last seat filled. Two hours later, we are coasting in late afternoon sunshine through the dainty limestone country of Slovenia, all forests and meadows, where women stand arms akimbo beside milking parlours, and men in braces scythe the edges of the fields. Although Yugoslavia now looks westward for her culture, her farming pattern comes from the north and east. European Community incentives do not apply here; the fields are small, animals draw the ploughs and carts, and the few tractors are likely to be made in Titograd rather than Turin.

There was a time when the cobbled *autoput* between Zagreb and Belgrade was said to be the most dangerous highway in Europe. Drivers are still thankful when they put this road behind them, but it is no longer cobbled, and some parts (to the relief of the local hospital staff, no doubt) have been converted into a wide dual carriageway. The horse-drawn carts of fifteen years ago have also vanished – embedded in the tarmac, perhaps. But the illusion of a modern Yugoslavia collapses when I look across a field and see a man raising water from a ditch, bucket by tedious bucket.

As our complement of passengers sense their homeland drawing closer, the mood inside the bus becomes tense with anticipation. What news there will be to exchange! What tales to tell. What reunions! After months of separation from their families, what hugging and backslapping. What parties! The atmosphere develops by degrees as we wind through the Nišava Gorge towards Bulgaria, thickening with emotion as much as with the output of thirty-two chainsmoking Turks.

It is hurriedly stifled towards midnight as we arrive at the Bulgarian border. Some of us have visas; some don't. I am among the latter. The guards here have a reputation for turning back visa-less travellers, even though every Bulgarian embassy in the world will assure you that visas are not needed for those in transit.

Two passengers are picked out and ordered off the bus. Predictably, one of them is me. A brief argument ensues.

'You don't seem to have a visa,' observes the immigration officer.

'I don't need one,' I insist. 'Look, this letter from your London embassy says so.'

'No visa, no entry,' replies the officer indifferently, and returns my passport with a shrug.

The trip has begun.

Inside her *yurt,* this Kirghiz great-grandmother plays a central and highly respected role in family life.

Letter-writers still do a brisk trade outside Xinjiang's post offices.

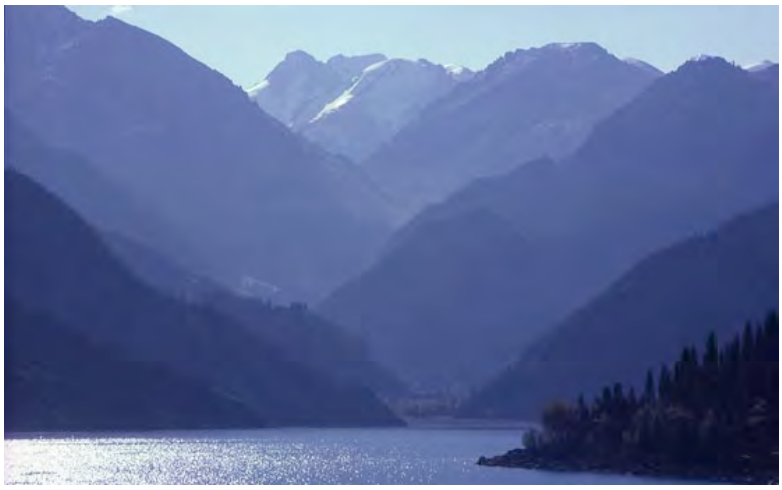
Left: A Bactrian camel is worth eight yaks, nine horses or forty-five sheep.

Below: Reconnoitring the route through the Pamirs.

Above: Close shave in a Kashgar side-street.

Left: Noodle-makers at work. Marco Polo introduced the noodle to Italy – where it became spaghetti.

Below: Tianchi ('The Heavenly Pool') leaves a lasting impression on the desert-weary traveller. At the head of the valley, Bogda Feng.



Right: My home by Lake Tianchi – a Kazakh *yurt*.

Left: Recording an interview in Turfan's bazaar. People were surprisingly candid in front of the microphone.

Below: The Great Wall in the Taklamakan Desert.

Below: Silk Road travellers entered China's heartland at Jiayuguan, the 'Jade Gate'. For the Chinese, it used to mark the westernmost outpost of civilization.

Left: The summit of Nemrut Dağı in eastern Turkey is littered with 2,000-year-old statues which lay undiscovered until 1881.

Above: A Kurdish shepherdess watches goats graze the grasslands near Mount Ararat, a landmark for Silk Road travellers since before the time of Christ.

Left: Burqqa-clad women in Peshawar.

Left: On Pakistan's North-West Frontier, a rifle is a man's most cherished possession, and is lovingly maintained and passed down from father to son.

Below: Fellow traveller on the Shandur Pass.

Left: Clinging to the cliff face, some parts of the old Hunza Road are less than two feet wide.

Left: The snows of Rakaposhi feed the streams of Hunza – the land James Hilton called Shangri-La. This was my last stop before China. In the Mir's palace, I speculated on the journey ahead.

Below: Even at low water, river crossings were sometimes hazardous and always cold. Here, a Hunza man approaches Passu.

Above: A Manchu fort dominates 2,500-year-old Tashkurghan, one of the oldest caravanserais on the Silk Road.

Tajik women – 'the most sumptuously dressed on the Silk Road'.

Descending the Karatash.

END OF SAMPLE MATERIAL