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HD **Taking the slow, (bumpy) road to China**
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Special to The Globe and Mail

KASHGAR, China

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KASHGAR IS CHINA'S westernmost city where several branches of the ancient Silk Road met. Seven centuries ago, Marco Polo came across the Gobi desert from Beijing. It took him almost four years.

Reaching Kashgar nowadays from Pakistan is not so arduous, but it is still tortuous and not for the faint-hearted.

Last spring, the Karakoram Highway across the 4,594-metre Khunjerab Pass was opened for visitors to reach this 2,000-year-old city, also known as Kashi. It is the largest city in the Western Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region formerly Eastern Turkestan. The people are mostly Moslems, their religion introduced from Arabia in the tenth century.

We flew from Islamabad to Skardu on a clear day, fortunate because four out of five times, the C130 can't land due to low cloud. I was on the right side to view forbidding Nanga Parbat, 8,107 metres, called Naked Mountain.

The K2 Motel where we stayed is appropriately named, because all international expeditions to that mighty peak, and others equally challenging, begin here. Last year there were 46 expeditions, only two successful.

The 511-kilometre drive along the highway from Skardu to Soest on the Chinese-Pakistan border is spectacular. The constantly changing views range from open-fronted Hunza shops to terraced mountainsides, gushing glacial streams, overhanging boulders as big as trucks and views of Rakeposhi, that rises 7,788 metres. Frequently there are memorials to the builders of this awesome road who were killed during construction.

Soest is an uninspiring border town. On the fully loaded bus to China, our companions were Pakistani men, 11 foreign travellers but only three women. We revelled in the changing mountain scenery and hollered "photo" when we saw camels. The driver obliged.

At Pirelli we crowded into a jeep that was returning the 399 kilometres to Kashgar. Sometimes there really wasn't a road. We passed construction crews working with shovels and occasionally, earth-moving equipment. Now there were wide panoramas of wind-blown tawny tufts of grass and occasional mud-brick houses protected by mud-brick fences.

We had come over the Khunjerab Pass. I had a headache from altitude. We drove through dust storms on bumpy roads to the poplar-lined street of Tashkurgan (population 26,000) which means Stone Castle, for there is one nearby. I spotted a candle-lit building where a man was rolling noodles. For 40 cents, his hot broth settled well in my empty stomach.

The jolts and bumps seemed even worse the next day. We did not realize the return journey would take twice as long and be far more uncomfortable.

After a full day at the unique Kashgar Sunday bazaar, we clop-clopped by cart to the bus for the 8 a.m. departure. We left five hours late, and stopped at a food stall within the hour. Two hours later we were still there. Rumors spread. Apparently the bus driver got a share of the food sales. On that unheated bus in the cold of winter we bumped along in dwindling light.

Finally we stopped beside three mud-brick huts. Twenty of us scurried in. A Uygur couple lived there with their little girl. A large felt quilt covered with skins was placed on the earthen floor and doubled over. The woman threw me a pillow and asked for two renminbi (about 80 cents). Fully clothed, including my fur-lined hat, I slept.

It snowed and the road was slippery next morning. Again it was rumored that the driver wouldn't leave until we'd eaten more. Finally, a truck came and reported that the road was passable.

Soon our bus was perched precariously on the edge of a rocky detour. The driver demanded, "Get out." Few complied. He flailed angrily. It was freezing outside. He drove at least a mile before stopping to pick up walkers.

We spent that night at a bleak outpost called Bulunkul. The bus that had left Kashgar 24 hours after ours caught up. Now there were about 120 passengers needing accommodation.

The tiny restaurant soon ran out of food. In one long, unlighted and unheated room, the floor spread with carpets, 60 of us bedded down under thick quilts. There were no washing or toilet facilities.

The next night's accommodation at the Pamir Hotel at Tashkurgan seemed like luxury, with its thermoses of hot water and an outside toilet.

Cheers rose from everyone when we reached Pakistan. With dismay, we learned of more landslides. But undaunted, within an hour, we negotiated a van to take us to Gulmit, a pretty alpine Hunza village which has been terraced to grow fruit, notably apricots, for which this valley is famous.

A porter travelled with us to the first major landslide near Karima- bad. The road was completely eroded away. We walked about 12 kilometres in two hours, climbing over more rocks. Finally, we reached a jeep that drove us to Gilgit. It seemed like home to be back at the Chinar Inn in Gilgit.

But more dismay! It had rained for days, no flights in or out for six days. Disappointed ticket holders returned to the hotel to try again tomorrow.

We decided to join two Swiss men, hire a porter, and walk out. At 5:30 next morning the rain had stopped. Our porter, Barkat Ullah, arrived. At the major slide, Barkat, in flimsy plastic sandals, carried our luggage across and dashed back to help. The slide area was extremely slippery. In the next 4 kilometres there were more boulders to climb.

Dirty, dusty and hungry, we arrived at the posh Shangri-la Hotel at Cilas on the back of a truck with 14 men. Within minutes, we were spotted by an **Encounter Overland** group. Yes, we'd share their Toyota mini bus to Rawalpindi.

It was dark when we reached a Pattan teahouse with charpoys (rope beds) . The rest houses were all full. Dozens of trucks and drivers were stranded. There weren't enough charpoys. I spent the night in fetal position trying to keep warm in the mini bus. By 5:30 with the first streak of light, everyone was ready for the eight-hour drive to Rawalpindi.

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