

Travelling Solo Along the Silk Road

I set out to visit some of the ancient sites along the Silk Road which is the way trade between East and West used to be carried out. My destination was China, where I would meet friends, but along the way, through Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan I was on my own: a 63 year old HIV positive woman (not that I told anyone this), who could neither read nor write any of the languages along the way.

The travelling was a lot easier than it would have been when camels were the fastest means of transport. I flew into Bukhara, and from there it was trains, buses, shared taxis and the odd bit of walking. My aim was to go all the way overland, but I was thwarted in this when the Chinese border shut down unexpectedly, so I had to fly over from Kyrgyzstan into Xinjiang Province in China. I had a month to make the trip, and though I had booked some parts of the journey, to stay flexible was my aim. Which was just as well as I discovered, not just when I couldn't get through land borders, but also when I did stupid things like not get off my train at Samarkand, ending up having to stay overnight in Tashkent and return the following day.

Of course, for anyone who travels alone, HIV positive or otherwise, the major concern is if anything goes wrong, will there be a way of getting help. As I was lucky enough not to get any health problems, and my policy is, when I need help to ask someone for it, which usually works fine. I got away with the chance I took and do feel the advantages outweigh the risk. Plus the bonus of travelling alone is that it is so easy to meet people, and on the Silk Road, the other travellers were an amazing, intrepid selection. I recall one evening sitting down to a meal with all five of us in the hostel travelling alone: a Taiwanese cyclist who had already covered 21,000kms on his bike, a young Japanese girl, a French Canadian social researcher, and an American on his way home after four years in Japan. In Samarkand I met a beautiful young Kazak businesswoman, who had flown down alone from the chilly north to have a few days in the sun, a group of 16 Australian musicians on a cultural tour, and a Russian motorcyclist who had come all the way across the empty spaces of central Asia, including the vanishing Lake Ural and was continuing on eastwards before heading back north. At the hostel in Osh, Kyrgyzstan Fernando prepared Spanish feasts for all who wanted to join in each evening, both local residents and international travellers, which meant both good food and great company.

For those who worry about having to carry medications around, and declaring these, I can reassure you that this was not a problem. I had a letter from the consultant which I only showed at one crossing (anyway it was in English which few people read) and when I was asked to produce my medicines, along with my phone and any books I had at the Uzbekistan border, the officious young customs woman picked up my tablets, looked at them and declared, 'Vitamins.' I didn't correct her!

One point of the trip was to see and experience, and that is easiest demonstrated by a few photos. These remind me of the time I spent, but they can't capture it for anyone else: there is nothing that beats actually being there!

Cathy - 2014

