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We, a group of 23 GSHK members, just completed a 16-day field excursion to North Xinjiang. While we are still immersing in the beauty and uniqueness of the area, Miss Carina Khan has quickly wrapped up a report on 'North Xinjiang Impressions'.

Miss Khan's report is focused on her personal impressions of the trip. More issues with details of geology and landscapes will follow.

Dr. Margie Chen

North Xinjiang Impressions: 18 July - 2 August 2009 by Carina Khan

We are happy to report that the 16-day 2009 North Xinjiang trip of the GSHK turned out to be a fantastic, unforgettable, and probably one of the best trips that many of us have ever had. For sure, it was a unique experience to go during this time, so soon after the unfortunate happenings of 5th July 2009, when many people died in Urumqi as a result of a confrontation between the Uyghurs and the Hans. Some of us did go through a tough decision making process of whether to go ahead with the trip as planned or not, as it seemed - to most of our friends and family anyway - rather rash to still visit Xinjiang after seeing shocking pictures from news reports on our TV screens. For me, it was a yes because Xinjiang, especially the northern route, has always ranked rather high on my list of places I would like to visit. Another contributing factor was I really like to travel with the GSHK, as participants generally share similar interests and we are all a great bunch of people!

It was shocking to read of the number of casualties and uncomfoting to learn there was so much animosity (for some anyway) between the two ethnic groups for the 5th July to occur. Ironically however, it was actually much safer than what conventional wisdom would suggest visiting Xinjiang during this time, as security was so tight. For a trip of our length

(16 days), travelling within China (expect the unexpected) and during this sensitive period in Xinjiang, I would say our trip went by extremely, or even unexpectedly, smoothly with only ad hoc minor hiccups. We did see intensive security measures in quite a few places. We had roadblocks, numerous identity checks etc. throughout the trip, but all that did not deter a single bit of our enthusiasm and excitement, as the sights, the experience were so completely overwhelming.

Although we were already forewarned by Margie and Felix to be prepared for extreme weather, the cold part did surpass my expectations by at least some 10°C. It was near 0°C in the morning of Day 6, when we rode horses to watch early morning sunrise at the beautiful village of Hemu (禾木). My fingers were completely numb. The other freezing experience was on the way to Glacier #1 on Day 12, at Victory Daban (勝利達坂) at an altitude of 4280 m. The wind chill effect was piercing. It turned out the pair of gloves that I bought just the night before at the small shop in Bayinbulak (巴音布魯克) was a life-saver, although a pair of ear-mufflers would have helped too! There were so many other memorable moments during the trip that it is practically impossible to list all. Let's look forward to our post-trip reunion.



Day 1: 18 July

Hong Kong 香港→Shenzhen 深圳→Urumqi 烏魯木齊

Day 1 was a day of transiting. It was a seamless transfer: Hong Kong to Shenzhen, then a 5¼-hour direct flight to Urumqi by Hainan Airlines. We were greeted by our six 4WD Toyota Land Cruiser drivers at the airport. Since we would be covering rather tough terrain, 4WD was the only feasible mode of transport for the next 15 days. Exciting. Xinjiang, here we go!

Day 2: 19 July

Urumqi 烏魯木齊→Qitai 奇台→Coal mine →Shiqian Beach 石錢灘→Dinosaur Valley 恐龍溝→Petrified Forest 硅化木森林

The only adjustment we made to our original itinerary in view of the recent events was to move our planned activities within Urumqi (Day 2) to Day 15. Everything else remained intact, just moved forward by one day. That's fine, so we took off from Urumqi and started our big anti-clockwise loop in North Xinjiang. We passed by Bogda Peak (博格達峰) (5445 m) at a distance on our way out of Urumqi travelling east. The first sight of a beautiful snow-capped mountain was breathtaking. Day 2 covered some 530 km in travel distance (~500 km is quite common by Xinjiang standards), visiting Dinosaur Valley and Petrified Forest. It is hard to imagine - seeing desert everywhere now - but the weather conditions millions of years ago were vastly different. Palaeontologists had excavated many dinosaur fossils from this area, hence its name.

It was also amazing to see huge trunks of petrified wood lying in situ in Petrified Forest - absolutely



beautiful. We also experienced our first blackout at

the hotel in Qitai in the evening, so torches came in handy. It was a first for me to have a shower under torch light! Only Day 2, what's more to come, I wondered.

Day 3: 20 July

Qitai 奇台→Beiting Ruins 北庭故城→Jimsar 吉木薩爾→Agate Bay 瑪瑙灘→Jimsar Five-colour City 吉木薩爾五彩城→Fuyun 富蘊

The main attraction for today was Jimsar Five-colour City. Yet another 540 km of travelling on the road. The first impression of seeing yadan landscape was



one of admiration. The colours of Five-colour City were very vivid. How can I not admire the artistic hand of Mother Nature? This was only Day 3 and we felt we had seen so much already. We also saw, for the first time, wild horses. Our leader driver in car #1, Mr. Li - a great guy, but with a foul temper - did have very good eyes. He spotted one from quite a far distance. It took us some tens of seconds later to focus on the dark spot in the background. Being city bumpkins, we of course requested for a stop over to take some photos.

Day 4: 21 July

Keketuohai Mine #3 可可托海礦場三號坑→Geological Museum→Irtys Grand Canyon 額爾齊斯大峽谷→Burqin 布爾津

Another 520 km today. We were now getting used to travelling 5 - 6 hours on the road. Luckily, it does not

get dark till well past 10 pm in the summer in Xinjiang, so our viewing time could be stretched. Being a GSHK trip, our itinerary included a visit to one of the largest open pit mines in China, Keketuohai Mine #3. I particularly liked the accompanying museum. Not only did it house many interesting rock and mineral samples, there were also many precious photographs which highlighted the colourful history of this mine (originally operated by the Russians in the 1940's, but was subsequently transferred back to China after 1949). We had a plentiful sample collection of muscovites, Nb-Ta and beryl (for some lucky ones) here. Our luggage was now becoming heavier by the day...

Day 5: 22 July

Burqin 布爾津→ **Hemu 禾木**

Today was actually the day when many parts of China could enjoy the view of a total solar eclipse. However, the umbra did not pass through Xinjiang, so no luck for us... Starting off from Burqin, we began our journey to the Kanas Lake (喀納斯湖) area. After much deliberation with the drivers of whether to switch the itinerary of Day 6 with Day 5, we decided to stick with our original plan as changing would be too difficult for logistics - telephoning the Urumqi agent, re-arranging hotels etc. So Hemu it was. Here, we had to switch from our 4WD's to local area coaches to get to the village. It was free time in the afternoon for us to walk around the village and the surrounding hills, which was rather pleasant. The accommodation in Hemu was quite basic, with only an hour of hot water supply in the evening. We had our first taste of a meaningful drop in temperature in the evening...

Day 6: 23 July

Hemu 禾木→**Kanas Lake 喀納斯湖**→**Baihaba 白哈巴**
→**Tuwa 圖瓦 performance**

One of the reasons to come to Hemu all this way was to watch its early morning sunrise. We did it in style

too, riding horses up the hills to the best spot overlooking the village. The only snag was it was



freezing cold! I was glad that the sun did eventually come out so that I could finally move my fingers

again. After leaving Hemu, we headed to the Kanas Lake area. We first visited Baihaba, the northwest frontier town of China. We could see the hills of Kazakhstan as we were heading towards this village. Being so close to Kazakhstan, there were understandably many Kazakhs living in this part of Xinjiang. Returning to Kanas, our group split into two. One group went for a walk along the Kanas River, admiring the postcard scenes of Crouching Dinosaur Bay (臥龍灣), Moon Bay (月亮灣) and Fairy Bay (神仙灣). The other group went to Guanyu Lookout (觀魚亭), and had a great view (so I was told by William, and now jealously reporting!) of Kanas Lake and Friendship Peak (友誼峰) (4374 m), the highest peak of Altay Mountains (阿爾泰山脈), bordering China, Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia.

Day 7: 24 July

Kanas Lake 喀納斯湖→**Burqin 5-colour Bay 布爾津五彩灘**→**Ghost City 烏爾禾魔鬼城**→**Karamay 克拉瑪依**

We were now heading south with our loop, visiting Burqin 5-Colour Bay, another interesting spot with yadan landform on one side of the Irtysh River (額爾齊斯河) (the only westward flowing river of China), yet oasis on the other side. Heading further south, we reached Ghost City. Although the redness of Ghost City was less intense than I had imagined, its scale was larger than I had expected. We had to drive within the compound to get to the different viewing points. I could also hear some eerie hollow

sound as winds blew over the ‘monstrous’ features, hence its name I guess. It was another day of heavy travelling, covering some 560 km in total, before we finally reached Karamay to stay for the evening.

Day 8: 25 July

Karamay 克拉瑪依→Black Oil Hill 黑油山→Mud volcano 獨山子→Kuitun 奎屯

Karamay is the “black-gold” city of Xinjiang. It was completely built from former undeveloped gobi-land to the present day city with clean, wide, tree-lined roads. You could feel the effect of wealth at the Xinjiang Oil Company’s headquarters. As we drove into the city the day before, we went past some 50 km of oil fields with endless oil production wells in sight on our horizon. It’s practically oil everywhere underground in this area. It’s a day of relatively relaxed travelling, “only” covering <200 km arriving into Kuitun. We even had spare time in the evening to explore the city and chose our own dinner.



border, but disappointingly, we were told in the morning that it was not possible to get there. Still, we did see quite a few large trucks with KZ number plates along Highway 312, so I guess it was fine for commercial vehicles but just not for us. Going into Yining, we had a different experience. Suddenly the atmosphere was a lot tenser, as many policemen were patrolling the city. Although we felt very safe, knowing that the chance of any disturbance was very slim, it was nonetheless a strange feeling that evening.

Day 10: 27 July

Yining 伊寧→Tekes 8 Trigrams City 特克斯八卦城→Kalajun Grassland 喀拉峻草原→Nalati Grassland 那拉提草原→Nalati 那拉提

The weather turned against us this morning, raining pretty hard. We nearly abandoned the idea of going to Kalajun as the driving conditions would be too dangerous, even for 4WD’s. Fortunately, the skies turned for the better and we were able to go as planned, although that meant we had to do with packed lunches. Being travelling enthusiasts, having a proper sit down meal was the last of our priorities. And, glad were we not, to make it to Kalajun! We had to walk up a hill by ourselves as the mud was too soft for cars to carry on further, but wow, the sight of an impressive range of snow-capped Tianshan in front of a huge piece of grassland was worth all the effort. I had never imagined I could be awestruck by the sight of a piece of grassland, but little did I know. It was



Day 9: 26 July

Kuitun 奎屯→Sayram Lake 賽里木湖→Fruits Valley 果子溝→Yining 伊寧

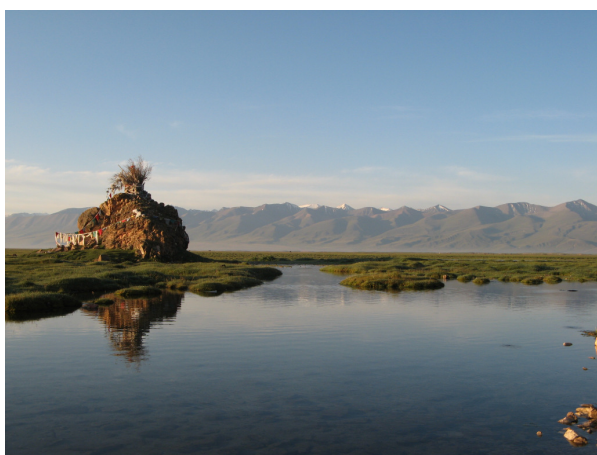
On reaching the half-way point of our trip, we started our way westwards, driving along the northern side of Tianshan (天山山脈). As we reached Sayram Lake, the largest alpine lake of Xinjiang, we were already at an elevation of 2073 m. Our original itinerary included a visit to Korgas (霍爾果斯口岸) at the Chinese-Kazakh

perfect to have our lunch there.

Day 11: 28 July

Nalati 那拉提→Bayinbulak 巴音布鲁克→Swan Reserve 天鹅湖

After only 4 hours of sleep, we had to get up at 4:30am to make our way on the road. The reasons were unconventional. Well, we had to rush through Highway 217/218 before dawn to get to Bayinbulak, i.e. before workers started work and they would have blocked off the roads completely! Logically, one would assume that if there were roadworks, there would be an alternative diversion, or the works would be done at night, letting motorists use the road during day time. But no, things were done differently here. So we had the pleasure of setting off under a starry sky, admiring the Milky Way as we left Nalati. Listening to the drivers' conversation through their walkie-talkies, it really felt like an adventure. We finally made it to Bayinbulak in time and watched a beautiful sunrise too.



After a leisurely rest at the hotel, we continued onto Swan Lake. Although we could only spot several swans at a distance, there were quite a few other birds displaying their feasting techniques, beautifully captured by our photographers, like Felix.

Day 12: 29 July

**Bayinbulak 巴音布鲁克→Victory Daban 勝利達坂
→Glacier #1 一號冰川→The Geographical Centre of Asia 亞洲大陸地理中心→Urumqi 烏魯木齊**

Having learnt my lesson, I (coincidentally with other fellow travellers from car #1) did some winter clothes shopping in the small village shop the night before, getting ready for the glaciers today. Now travelling further east and up the mountains, we could slowly feel the drop in temperature as we climbed our way there. On



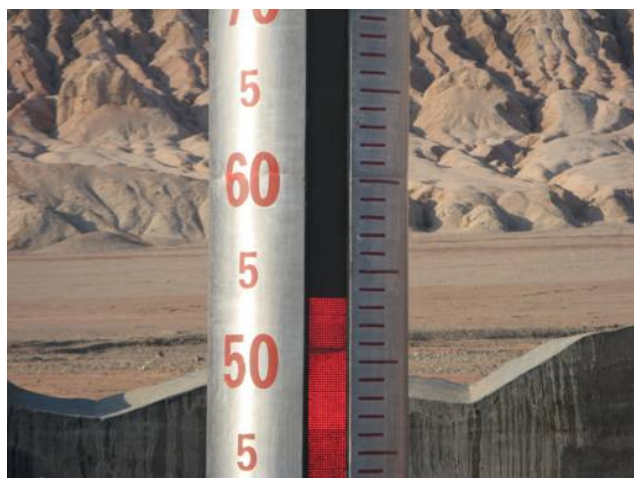
reaching Victory Daban at an altitude of 4280 m, we made our highest point of the trip. I had no idea what the temperature was at that point, only knowing the wind chill must have taken a good few degrees off the scale. We then made our way to Glacier #1. For those of us who walked to the foot of the glacier, we had to pace ourselves accordingly as after all, we were at an altitude of 3840 m and I found myself panting more than I would otherwise have been. On the way back to Urumqi, we stopped at the Geographical Centre of Asia. I have yet to find out how they defined Asia and what their methodology was in defining the centre...

Day 13: 30 July

**Urumqi 烏魯木齊→Windfarm→Turpan 吐魯番 (Grape Valley 葡萄溝→Tuyugou Canyon 吐峪溝大峽谷
→Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves 柏孜克里克千佛洞
→Flaming Mountains 火焰山)**

With only 24 hours' difference, we experienced a 50°C change in temperature on reaching Turpan, the hottest spot in China. Turpan is of course famous for its Silk Road history, but modern day Turpan is also renowned worldwide for its grapes production. We were able to try a large variety of dried grapes; each of us happily bought a good portion to bring home for friends and family. Although what remained now in the grottos of the Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves was only a fraction of the original murals in their hey

days, we were still able to appreciate the beautiful religious art carefully executed by early devoted hands. Our last stop for today was the Flaming Mountains. For those of us who are familiar with the Chinese epic novel *Journey to the West* (西遊記), the Flaming Mountains would have special meaning. Of course, there were no flames, but the huge thermometer there had a reading of 53.5°C! Ouch. We had an involuntary sauna at our hotel that evening too...



Day 14: 31 July

Turpan 吐魯番 (Emin Minaret 蘇公塔→Aydingkol Lake 艾丁湖→Jiaohe Ruins 交河故城→Karez 坎兒井)→Salt Lake 鹽湖→Urumqi 烏魯木齊

Still Turpan, our first stop today was the Emin Minaret. This was the first Muslim architecture we visited during the whole trip. Our guide, Ms Ma, a practising Hui Muslim, gave us an in-depth explanation of what her religion meant to her, which was most interesting. Aydingkol Lake, at an altitude of 155 m below sea

level, and now completely dry, was yet another interesting geographical feature of our trip. I think Xinjiang is really the best place to learn geography first hand! Last but not least, I actually liked our last stop best,



the Karez. The ingenuity of such a sophisticated water works system invented and built by the people of Turpan some two millennia years ago was really very impressive.

Day 15: 1 August

Urumqi 烏魯木齊

As planned, we visited Xinjiang Museum in the morning, although not as planned, we could not visit the Geological Museum! You can imagine how disappointed we all were, being geologists for most or at least at heart for some. Being good sports, we quickly got over it and visited Xinhua Bookshop instead. For the evening, we were able to go to the Xinjiang cultural dinner show at the Erdaoqiao Bazaar (二道橋大巴扎). Actually, the Bazaar and the surrounding area were closed immediately after 5th July. Although re-opened now and everyone was able to freely wander around, we were nonetheless under heavy surveillance. As for the evening performance, it was fabulous and we all had a great time, especially for those who danced on stage as a finale!

Day 16: 2 August

Urumqi 烏魯木齊→Shenzhen 深圳→Hong Kong 香港

Early morning set-off, reluctantly we had to say good-bye to Xinjiang, as we made our way to the Urumqi airport, each of us taking home a memorable experience forever cherished in our hearts. For me, I am so glad I came and I know for sure Xinjiang is a place I would like to come back again.

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