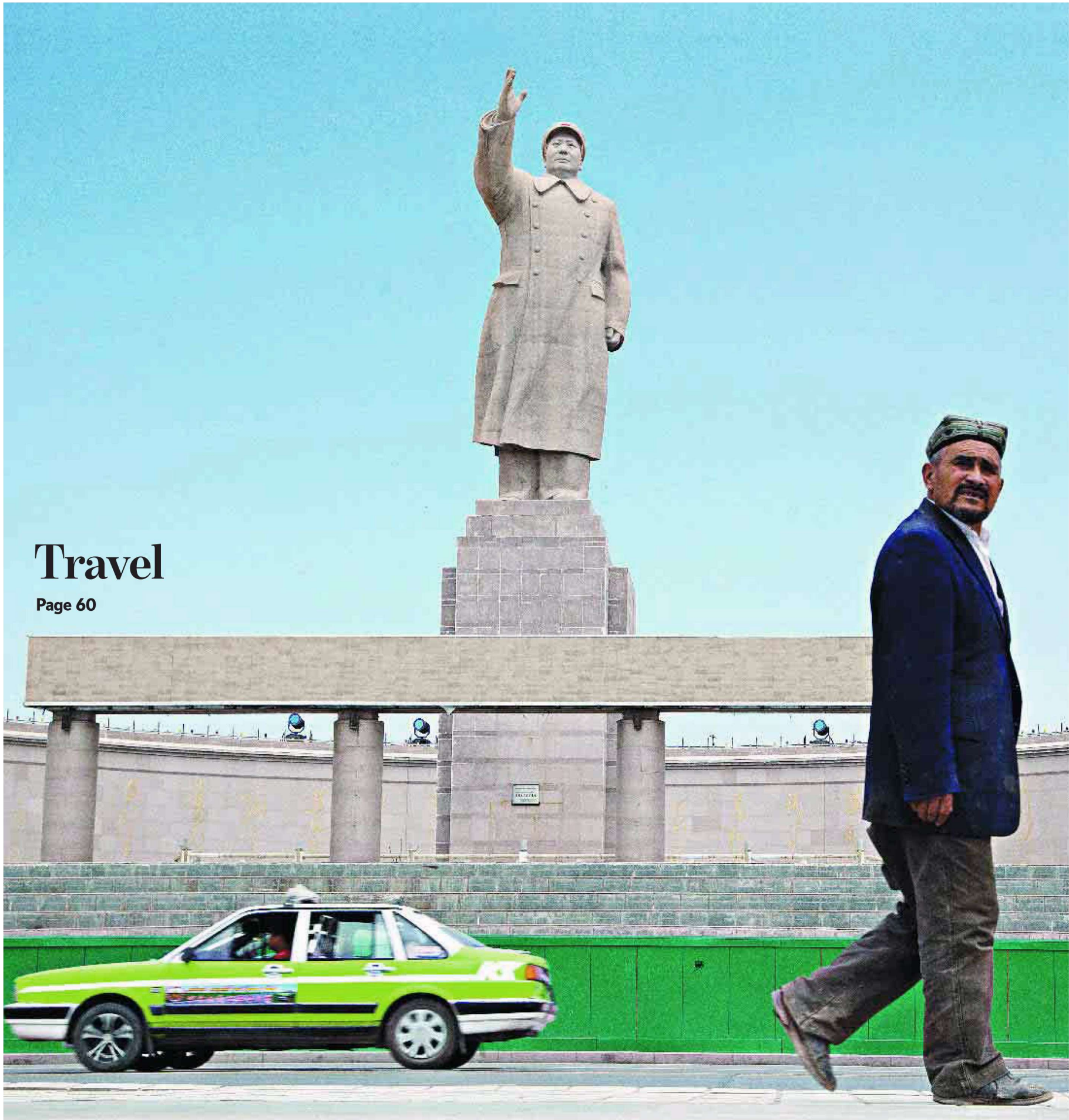


GoodLife



Travel

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DESTINATION

The Wild West

Kashgar's livestock market is a riotous throwback to the Xinjiang city's days as a Silk Road trading hub. Text and pictures by **Gary Jones**.



“Boish! Boish! Boish!” Hear that in Kashgar and – unless you don’t mind being trampled by belligerent bullocks, herds of steely eyed goats or even a Bactrian camel or two – you’d best take notice. When local herders, drivers and market traders shout “Boish! Boish! Boish!”, they mean it. They’re “coming through!”

Historically, fabled Kashgar, nestling immediately east of the snow-capped Pamir Mountains on the edge of the Taklamakan Desert, was a welcoming oasis. Here, Silk Road traders rested their caravans on overland odysseys between China, India and

the Mediterranean. Memories of the last jingle-jangling convoy of camels to take time out in Xinjiang province, however, have long been lost to the sands of time.

Today, an immense statue of Chairman Mao looms over the granite expanse of People’s Square in Kashgar’s modernised centre, and the city (population just 350,000) has succumbed to concrete, somewhat sacrificing its romantic allure.

But dusty pockets of mud-brick dwellings, handed-down callings and ancient ways remain. One is Kashgar’s riotous and unmissable livestock

market, which takes place every Sunday and where the visitor is transported back in time.

Before sunrise, dirt tracks north of the town are disturbed by farmers, shepherds and dealers travelling on foot, alongside motor-trikes, ass-drawn carts and any makeshift conveyance that might get animals to market. Fine desert dust, kicked up by the braying, neighing livestock, turns the dry air into a choking smoke. Parched throats rasp through the haze. “Boish! Boish! Boish!”

Trading begins even before the market is reached. Sheep are shorn in the shade of poplar trees, which

have been planted tightly along all roads to fend off the encroaching Taklamakan. A tall and flimsy old man checks a stallion’s teeth beside an irrigation ditch. Robust men haul stubborn cattle from the platforms of pick-up trucks. Potential buyers test-ride unruly horses, whipping at their hides with olive branches.

By 10am, the entire area is transformed into a vast open-air beast bazaar. Prices are argued over. Deals are made and hands are slapped together noisily, shaken theatrically. Brick-like red wads of 100 yuan notes are pulled from pockets. And always that frenzied “Boish! Boish! Boish!”

Kashgar is the urban home to China’s Turkic-descended Uygur minority. The Muslim Uygurs’ language and customs owe more to nearby Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan than to most of the People’s Republic. Shop signs are decorated with Arabic script. Uygur men have a penchant for facial hair, women wear scarves or veils in public, and all have a taste for aromatic mutton kebabs and chewy flat bread, which are up for grabs in every restaurant and on every street corner.

The city has embraced the push and shove of international trade for millennia. When Marco Polo passed through in the 13th century, he noted, “The inhabitants live by trade and industry ... [Kashgar] is the starting point from which many merchants set out to market their wares all over the world.”

With Polo’s observation in mind, we have employed the services of Ablimiti Ghopur, an affable Uygur agent who goes by the English handle Elvis (“I wanted a name that would make me sound more famous than something like John,” he said). His choice seems to have done the trick – Elvis is the king of Kashgar’s professional guides. He is also the go-to man for all-around good eggs.

Elvis leads the way on a whistle-stop tour of the labyrinthine quarter immediately south of the city’s lemon-hued Id Kah Mosque, arguably the largest Muslim place of worship in all of China, accommodating up to 8,000 worshippers at a time. Uygur handicrafts flourish in this compact area, including the fashioning by hand of carpets and tapestries, of embroidered hats and distinctive pocket knives adorned with coloured-glass beads.

Perhaps Polo took in the hubbub on Ostangboyi Kochisi, a single street in the old part of town where the wheels of cottage industry spin rapidly. In the Aysahan Musical Instrument Factory, a family business that’s been operating for six generations, proprietor Ablimiti Aysahan Hajim is putting finishing touches to a five-string *tambour* (a mandolin-like instrument with a long, narrow neck and

a bulbous, half-pear-shaped body). His teenage son strums a smaller, seven-string *rawap* adorned with grey snakeskin.

Across the way, four generations of another Uygur family squat on the pavement outside their workshop. They hammer and polish peculiar copper pots used in the preparation of morish Uygur ice cream.

“You put the pot in half of a wooden barrel filled with ice,” Elvis explains. “The milk goes inside the pot, maybe with some nuts, dried apricot pieces and honey, and then you just keep stirring.”

A three-wheeled vehicle approaches at speed. Looking like an automotive Frankenstein’s monster stitched together from discarded parts and hope, the contraption is piled high with kettles, woks and more pots. It belches diesel funk.

The driver, who sits on top, not inside his jalopy, is bellowing at the top of his lungs. “Boish! Boish! Boish!” Everyone grabs their stuff and darts for doorways and alleys.

Kashgar, of course, also has a substantial Han Chinese population, and – all politics aside – that group’s tastes and traditions are undeniably part and parcel of the modern-day Kashgar experience. Jade, from desert cities such as Hotan, southeast of Kashgar, has historically been abundant in the region. Hotan’s white “mutton-fat” jade is China’s most precious.

Elvis, through charm and gentle determination, manages to gain us access to a couple of backstreet jade workshops. In one cramped, windowless and dimly lit shoebox, its walls coated with a film of jade dust that clings to the clothes like icing sugar, six young Chinese artisans are hunched over benches. Helpful twenty-something Lanni, from Fujian province, meticulously carves intricate motifs onto a thumb-sized chunk of pale-green stone. The piece will take her two days to complete, she says cheerfully, and will sell on the street for perhaps 2,000 yuan (HK\$2,600).

Mini-tour completed, we finish up in a steamy and seen-better-days teahouse at the northern end of Ostangboyi Kochisi, joining a languid gathering of elderly Uygur menfolk sipping steaming rose tea from the balcony. It is a scene surely unchanged in centuries. Nimble pedlars in the street below, balancing baskets of braided deep-fried dough on their heads, weave expertly through the jostling crowds. Another hectic day of trade and industry in Kashgar is coming to a close, and the pedlars’ now-familiar cry rings out all around as Elvis refills our teacups.

Getting there: China Southern (www.csair.com/en) flies daily from Guangzhou to Kashgar, with a stop in Urumqi.