WIN AN ADVENTURE IN ARGENTINA

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In 1999 China completed the rail link around the north edge of the Taklamakan Desert: now you can take the train all the way between Kashgar and Xi’an, but it’s worth stopping off along the way.

Continuing through the Tian mountains, ancient Turpan is worth a look. The second-lowest place on the planet and with temperatures reaching more than 40°C, it is one of the hottest spots in China. Once a fertile oasis and key trade hub, Turpan is circled by a fascinating collection of relics from the Silk Road’s past.

After the flat, barren desertscape, Dunhuang on the eastern edge of the Taklamakan is a lush area with cultivated fields and sand dunes. It is the last great trading post for Chinese merchant traders leaving ‘civilisation’ behind. Traders, to bring luck to their expeditions, would dedicate statues to Buddha and this was how the Mogao Caves – grottoes housing hundreds of idols – were created. The Diamond Sutra (the world’s oldest printed book, pictured left) was discovered here – it now sits in the British Library.

Moving further east you come face-to-face with the western end of the Great Wall of China at Jiayuguan. The fortifications here, with the Gobi Desert behind, rival those outside Beijing. At Lanzhou you meet the mighty Yellow River, China’s second longest.

Finally, you reach Imperial China’s ancient capital, Xi’an. This is the country’s historic heart and traditionally marked the eastern end of the Silk Road. The old city is still intact with plenty to see within its fortified walls, while the Terracotta Army stands outside.

INSIDER TIP: Ziaul Haque (manager of Sitara Travel – www.sitara.com)

“For a good, half-day hike, get off the Karakoram Highway near Husaini and follow the track to Borit Lake. A sandy path leads to Passu (shepherd huts); this is now a stone path with Passu glacier on the side. Walk over the glacier to the other side and follow the trail downwards to Passu village – stop for a cuppa at Shispere Peak Inn.”

CYCLE THE SILK ROAD
Exploring the Silk Road on two wheels is an increasingly popular choice. There’s nothing like watching the world whizz by and being able to stop anytime you wish to feel and touch your surroundings.

Most roads are in a good enough condition to cycle. However, many cyclists are forced to camp at least some of the time and water can be a major headache. There are bike and repair shops in most big towns but local shapes and sizes tend to be incompatible with many foreign bikes.

Try the internet for the latest blogs from fellow cyclists, as these are far more useful than the information provided by local cycle groups. If you want to do it as a group, contact the organisers of the Tour D’Afrique. It is launching the first ever Silk Route Bicycle Tour (www.istanbultobeijing.com), pedalling from Istanbul to Beijing from August to November 2007.

One final note: tandem riders beware! Technically bikes in China are only permitted to carry one person. An over-zealous official determined to uphold the letter of the law once turned away a couple riding a tandem at the Chinese border.