

He Xi Corridor Trip

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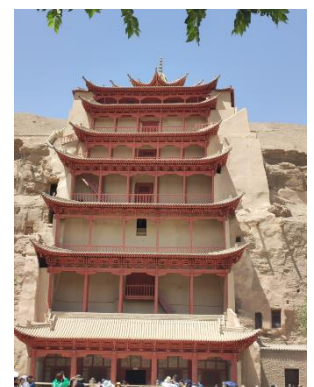
Our family trip to Hexi Corridor in the summer of 2023 was an unforgettable journey that encompassed culture, art, religion, natural scenery, and real-life experiences. Looking back on this journey, all the planning, processes, and experiences were very rewarding. Traveling to the northwest region of China had always been a dream of mine, but it always seemed difficult and far away. However, in this trip, all the difficulties and unpredictable changes were easily resolved. It was not just through my own efforts, but also through coincidence and luck. Whenever we encountered difficulties, a lucky fairy has always helped us, and everything went smoothly from the beginning to the end of this trip. I am grateful to all the people who helped us during our journey.

Preparations Before Departure

For any difficult task, once you solve the source of the problem, everything else will fall into place. When living and traveling in mainland China, the basic requirement is to have a mainland phone number, which you will need for everything and you can apply for Alipay or WeChat payment, with these payment platforms, traveling can be freely throughout the country. Of course, you will need funds to make payments. It can be troublesome to transfer money from overseas banks to a mainland bank, it is also the best way to transfer money directly to Alipay, where you can check your balance anytime. I had my relatives in mainland China deposit money into my Alipay account, and then I returned it back after coming back to Hong Kong. This was the most convenient method. I hope to continue using this method for future transactions, which will make my spending in mainland more convenient. In addition to a phone number and payment platform, a GPS navigation system is also necessary. It took me several days to learn how to use this system, but once I learned, it was very convenient. I was no longer afraid of getting lost when walking, taking taxi, booking tickets, or finding hotels. With GPS, I felt free and could travel all over the country easily.

The Caves in Dunhuang

In middle school, I learned about the Silk Road and the Hexi Corridor and how these two important places linked together China and the West, but I never knew where they were located. Up to now, I have this opportunity to experience the hardships and importance of the merchants, scholars, and artists of that time. During staying in Dunhuang, we visited the mural art of the Mogao Caves, Yulin Caves, and the Thousand Buddha Caves. These murals are comparable to the world's top art in terms of artistic creation and expression. For example, Leonardo da



Vinci's mural "The Last Supper" attracts many visitors from around the world, but the art in Dunhuang is no less impressive than "The Last Supper".

No wonder foreign scholars discovered the value of Dunhuang art a long time ago and some priceless artworks were stolen through unexpected means, leaving behind some residual works that could not be taken. When I saw those damaged works, I felt extremely sad. These enduring works left by our ancestors for thousands of years, not only suffered erosion from the environment and theft by ruthless tourists but also destruction by heartless politicians. These artworks not only reflect the superb artistic creation of ancient people, but also the prosperity of Buddhism at that time and reveal the incompetence and ruthlessness of the corrupt government later. Fortunately, someone preserved these great residual artworks. I will spend more time learning the creation concepts and painting techniques, hoping to benefit my own artistic creations.

I am fortunate to have been attended to Buddhism school. While I only spend one hour a week listening to the master's teachings and practicing meditation, they have greatly helped me to appreciate the sculptures, paintings, and Buddhist stories in these caves. There is still a long way to go in studying Buddhist scriptures, art and theory, but I am willing to spend more time learning this. This trip to the Hexi Corridor has made me more respectful of the depth of Buddhism and strengthened my belief in studying Buddhist art and philosophy.

Dunhuang's natural landscape

China has a vast and rich natural landscape, and the scenery I saw this time truly opened my eyes. In Dunhuang, I visited the "Danxia Devil City" and the "Mingsha Mountain". The "Danxia Devil City" is truly worthy of its name. In the vast black desert, nature has constructed various mysterious castles that seem to be the work of a skilled architect. This reminded me of ancient Roman architecture. For an artist to create a work of art, besides inspiration, they also need to put in hard work. However, it seems that nature can create such wonders with just a light breeze.



The desert scenery of the 'Mingsha Mountain' is something that I have only seen in movies and fantasy stories. The Crescent Lake that appears in the middle of the desert also adds a magical scene to the desert. Riding on a camel, I experienced the hardships of ancient merchants on the Silk Road. Looking up at the sunset slowly falling from the obvious contours of the sand dunes on the horizon, I realized that loneliness and desolation can also be a kind of beauty, a beauty that can only be appreciated by those who have personally witnessed.



The five-day itinerary in Dunhuang should have been more than enough, but it wasn't until the moment of departure that I realized I should have stayed for one more day to once again appreciate the morning scenery of the Mingsha Mountain, to savour the art of more caves, and to experience the local life. However, there is no perfect journey in this world, just like the journey of life. So, let's leave some content for the next time.

Zhangye

Another important stop in the Hexi Corridor is Zhangye. In order to have enough time to experience the local life and cultural atmosphere in Zhangye, we stayed for three days. We took a train from Dunhuang to Zhangye, which took about four hours. When we arrived, we were excited and hoped to check into the hotel as soon as possible, leaving us with plenty of time to explore the surroundings. However, we encountered some trouble during check-in. The hotel we booked did not have a license to accept foreign passports. We had to rebook, which made Jason very angry. Why do they accept bookings and charge fees online if they still have this kind of problem? The local hotel staff explained that the regulations are now stricter, and a license is required to receive foreign guests. I understood this issue since hotels in China vary in price from a few dozen yuan to thousands of yuan, it is normal for the restrictions on foreign visitors.

There is always a solution to problems. I remained calm and thought that perhaps we could rent a better hotel. Indeed, with the same price, trip.com helped us rent one of the best local hotels. Since Zhangye is relatively small, it only took a few minutes to switch hotels. Whenever I encounter difficulties, I always think of the Chinese story of "Sai Weng Lost His Horse", and my mind becomes much calmer.

"Food, clothing, shelter, and transportation" are the necessities of life. No matter where you go, you must first sort out these basic elements. Once the "shelter" issue is resolved, the others become much easier. With GPS, 'Transportation' also becomes very easy. You can simply tell your GPS app where you want to go, and the route map will clearly tell you how long it takes to walk, how much a taxi costs, and which buses can reach your destination. Although 'Food' is not a problem today, finding suitable food when traveling is also important. Since our digestive system is difficult to adapt to constantly changing food, it is important to consider our stomach's capacity rather than just satisfy our visual and taste needs. 'Clothing' is not a problem, as everything is prepared before departure. Once these four basic living conditions are met, we can start to explore the local life.

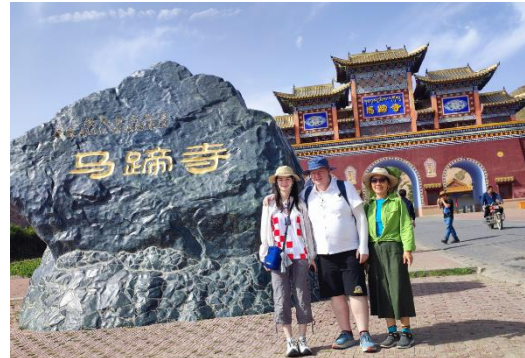
The natural landscapes of "Rainbow Danxia" and "Binggou Danxia" are the main attractions for tourists in Zhangye, and the cultural heritage left by Buddhism and the Silk Road is also a major feature of the local area.

In summer travel, it is very important to wake up and start the day early. Our family woke up at 6 a.m. and it took us two hours to prepare. We didn't get on the car until 8 a.m.

and told the driver to take us to "Rainbow Danxia". The driver was an experienced person who suggested: "It's already too late for you to go to there, by the time you get there, it will be around 10 a.m. and the weather is very hot. You won't be able to see much. You should leave at 5 a.m. tomorrow and arrive there around 6 a.m. to see the sunrise when it's cooler." I thought it made sense, so we decided to go to 'Mati Temple' instead.

Mati Temple

'Mati Temple' is similar to the 'Mogao Caves', they both showcase the murals, sculptures, and Tibetan Buddhist culture inside the caves. Although I have some understanding of Han Buddhist culture, I know little about Tibetan Buddhism. It takes over an hour to get from Zhangye to 'Mati Temple'. The scenery around this area is very pleasant. Standing on the high Buddha pagoda and looking around, the green grassland is surrounded by green mountains, and the snowy Qilian Mountains can be faintly seen among the clouds.



After visiting for several hours, what left the deepest impression on me was the devastating destruction of the murals and sculptures at "Mati Temple" during the Cultural Revolution. In the main hall, all the murals were scraped off, leaving only a Guanyin painting, which was marked as preserved by a scholar who paid 1,000 yuan. All the Bodhisattva statues were incomplete, reflecting the crazy political actions of that time. Why couldn't the Bodhisattvas intervene to stop those insane madmen? Why did people at that time lose mind and destroy all cultural relics? No one could protect these cultural relics with rational actions, which is something that I cannot understand.

Despite my disappointment, anger, and helplessness towards politics, we continued our visit. Our family climbed to the top-level cave after climbing more than 100 steps of stone stairs. These stone stairs could only accommodate one person at a time and were very steep. Although there weren't many visitors, sometimes we had to stand at the corner and wait for a long time before letting a group of people pass. It took us more than an hour to climb to the top-level cave and experience the hardships of those devout monks in the past. This made me wonder: why can religion give someone such great creativity and perseverance to complete such a difficult work? Does a firm belief really have such a powerful magic to enable a person to fully tap his potential? No wonder the ruling party today wants



to use all its strength to convince everyone to serve the party with their fullest potential as if it is a belief.

The one-day trip to "Mati Temple" not only made me think about the relationship between religion, politics and art, but also allowed our family to appreciate the pleasant scenery, breathe fresh air, challenge our physical abilities, and establish a harmonious family relationship. This was truly a rare opportunity in life.

Rainbow Danxia

The most famous attraction in Zhangye is the 'Rainbow Danxia'. According to the locals, all tourists who come to Zhangye for seeing the Rainbow Danxia. Since it's such a world-renowned attraction, we absolutely couldn't miss it. Following the driver's advice, we set off at 5 a.m. the next day. Our family



was also very excited, and we woke up at 4 a.m. We had never woken up so early before. At exactly 5 a.m., the driver was waiting for us downstairs. The scenery in the early morning was indeed charming, and we saw the soft orange-yellow dawn gradually climbing up the mountains along the way. We arrived at the 'Rainbow Danxia' around 6 a.m. just by looking at the square in front of the gate, we could tell how many tourists come here every day. It took about ten minutes to walk from the parking to the entrance. When we walked into the ticket office, there were only a few people there. I thought the gate may not have opened yet, but the ticket seller told us that it had opened at 5 a.m. In order to allow tourists to witness the magnificent and colourful 'Rainbow Danxia' in the early morning, the staff worked hard to serve the tourists.

Due to the vast viewing area, tourists need to take the park shuttle bus to different viewing platforms. At each scenic spot, whether it's a close-up or a distant view, every angle is a colourful landscape painting. I couldn't help but exclaim: "Nature is truly a miraculous artist!"



As the sun became more and more intense, by noon, the strong sunlight had also wiped out the colours of many mountains. It was like walking in a furnace, and it was unbearable. We had to sit in a comfortable restaurant, eat ice cream, and admire the works of nature. After satisfying our taste and eyes, we reluctantly left the park.

Binggou Danxia

Since Danxia landform is a local geological feature, they have also developed 'Binggou Danxia, which is about a 20-minute drive from 'Rainbow Danxia. We visited along the way, when we arrived at 'Binggou Danxia', the entrance did not live up to our expectations, and it was not as impressive as 'Rainbow Danxia'. No wonder there were not as many tourists. However, we only discovered its charm after we entered. If we were to describe it in artistic language, 'Rainbow Danxia' is like a landscape painting, while 'Binggou Danxia' is like a sculpture or ancient architecture, each with its own beauty. We all preferred the natural landscape and primitive appearance of 'Binggou Danxia' because there were not as many commercial elements added.

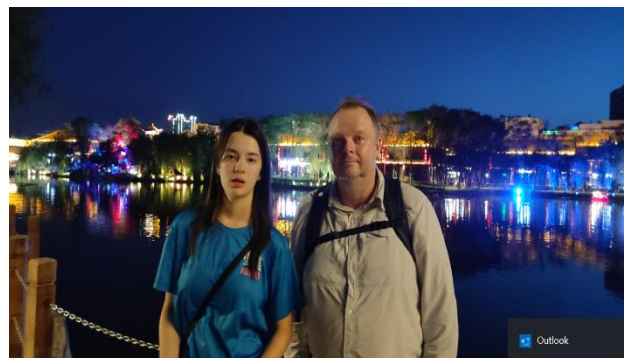
We not only broadened our horizons but also challenged our physical and mental strength. Just like the poem "欲穷千里目，更上一层楼"(if you want to see further, climb higher) by Wang Zhihuan, to admire the magnificent and magical works of nature, we need to climb seemingly unattainable mountains. I was willing to take the lead, and when I gasped for breath and reached the top, the indescribable feeling of joy overwhelmed me. When I waved to my family below from the top of the mountain, they started to move slowly and eventually reached the destination. We not only challenged ourselves physically but also believed that if we had firm beliefs and perseverance, we could successfully reach our goals.

A full day of mountain experience not only allowed us to appreciate the artistic works of nature, but also challenged our physical and mental strength. We also learned about the hard work that the local people put in to develop this scenic area. This made me even more aware that truly great works are the result of collaboration between nature and humans.

Zhangye City

Zhangye Old Town is small and full of historical and cultural significance, as well as romantic colours. Our hotel is in the new district and is relatively close to the high-speed rail station. Every time we wanted to stroll around the old town, we could walk there in just half an hour, but to save energy, taking a taxi was less than ten yuan. There are many taxis in the city, and they are also inexpensive, with a starting price of five yuan. In the city, the things that left the deepest impression on me were the "European-style street" and the "Big Buddha Temple".

Walking all the way from the "European-style street" to the Gansu Park inside, the lively atmosphere at night reminded me of the Pure Land in Buddhist paintings, which was so beautiful. The singing and dancing in the park, the romantic mood



around the small bridges, the colourful lights reflected on the lake, the laughter of people chatting and drinking by the lake, and the ladies in the park all dressed up, showing off their dance talent. It was just like the oriental impression described by Marco Polo. The old ladies there dressed up like upper-class Western women attending a gathering: tight-fitting tops, slender waists matched with long skirts, and wide-brimmed straw hats. No wonder this street is called the "European-style street". It must have been influenced by European customs on the Silk Road, leaving marks on the Western Regions.

'The Big Buddha Temple' is also an ancient Buddhist temple with a long history, and the most complete building preserved is the Big Buddha Hall, which integrates Buddha carvings and murals. What left the deepest impression on me were the wooden buildings. These structures are complex and have distinct Chinese architectural features, but they are also difficult to maintain and look very dilapidated.



We must ask ourselves: should we maintain the historical appearance or repair it? Any historical property cannot last forever and repairing it may damage the original appearance. It depends on whether modern technology can maintain the original appearance while stabilizing the structure. The wooden Buddha statue entering Nirvana, as well as the character sculptures and paintings from "Journey to the West", were also very touching. Our three-day Zhangye experience is about to end, and we must catch the 6 o'clock train to the capital city of Gansu, "Lanzhou".

Train Experiences

An unforgettable train experience. Due to a section of the track being out of order, the high-speed rail was not operational, so we had to take a regular train from Zhangye to Lanzhou, which takes six hours. When our family goes out for travel, no matter where we go, we always have a great time. On the old-fashioned train, we experienced the busy and crowded environment. Some people sat in seats, some stood at the entrance, and some sat in the aisle. This allowed Jason and Xiaojiali to experience that I had ride as a child, but it was much better than the trains I had taken before. Xiaojiali and Jason played cards together, which was a great time for father and daughter to have fun and laugh together.

Chatting with strangers on a boring train is a good way to learn about local life and pass the time. As luck would have it, a middle-aged man sat opposite me and was very interested in our transnational family. He was very proactive in introducing his background, and his daughter also married an American. At first, his wife was very opposed to it, but he strongly supported his daughter to get married and move to a foreign country. He also said that many of his friends are trying everything they can to immigrate to foreign countries, even to some very poor small countries, and they never give up any immigration opportunities. He

thought I was very wise and had the ability to foresee things, as I had moved out to the country twenty years ago. I was very interested in his insights, so I continued to ask him why these people left their own prosperous country and went to seek refuge in poor, small countries. His words revealed that this group of the immigrant population is very dissatisfied with the current government's policies and corrupt behaviour. He believed that the current government is moving towards extreme repression, authoritarianism, and centralization. These knowledgeable people are very concerned about their life and freedom of the next generation. If they continue to stay in their homeland, they are likely to be monitored and arrested. Their personal freedom and family property will soon be affected.

I didn't want to listen to more negative comments from him, nor did I want to agree with him. But when he said, "China's culture over the past thousands of years is all rubbish, and China's development has all been influenced by effective foreign systems." I had to speak up for our great nation's elites. The Chinese idiom that “去粗取精，去伪存真，古为今用，
洋为中用” (means to discard the dross and select the essential to distinguish truth from falsehood, to apply the past to the present, and to use foreign things to serve China) came to mind. So, I asked him, "Have you been to a foreign country?" "No," he replied. "Do you speak a foreign language?" "No." There are many people like him who worship foreign things but lack the opportunities to learn and explore abroad. They always think that "the moon in other countries is rounder than the one in China." Perhaps he was just in a bad mood and said such pessimistic things. I really don't know the current situation in the mainland, and I don't want to discuss it with someone I just met. Fortunately, the train arrived at a major station, and he was asked to change seats. However, he still wanted to add me on WeChat. WeChat is too powerful in mainland China, and anyone with a mobile phone uses it. Leaving it behind could affect their daily life. Although chatting on the train is inconvenient, there are no restrictions on WeChat. When I received his message, I saw many of his articles and poems. He seemed to be a thoughtful Chinese literato who was unable to fulfill his ambitions. I didn't leave any words for him, just silently read some of his interesting articles.

Lanzhou City

We arrived in Lanzhou close to midnight, and outside the train station, road construction was underway, making it challenging to navigate the chaotic area. We finally managed to find a taxi and a hotel to settle in, but it was already past 2:00 a.m. I didn't want the experiences and comments from the train to affect our mood for sightseeing, so I made up my mind to put aside those negative comments and experience the life along the Yellow River, which is known as the mother river.

Strolling along the tree-lined avenue by the Yellow River, I enjoyed the romantic scenery under the shade of the willows, and watched the idle people chatting and drinking on the lounge chairs. It formed a perfect combination of motion and stillness with the rolling waves of the Yellow River. I even told my family the incredible story of "The River God's Marriage." Long, long ago, the Yellow River often



flooded, posing a threat to crops and people's lives on both sides. The local government would choose a village beauty each year and throw her into the river to marry the River God, praying that the Yellow River would not flood again. This story made Xiaojiali very sad for the young girls who were thrown into the Yellow River. She continued to ask, "What happened later?" I suggested she read the story. Of course, they wouldn't continue to marry beautiful women to the River God. Instead, the water of the Yellow River nourished the residents on the bank like a mother's milk. Soon we arrived at the statue of the Mother of the Yellow River and vividly described how the Yellow River cares for the residents on its banks like a mother.

The Gansu Provincial Museum is also the most worthwhile and historically valuable museum for tourists to visit. I'm not sure if it's because of summer vacation, but admission was free, so there were crowds of people waiting in a long line to enter. The museum was already full for the day, but fortunately, the staff was very enthusiastic and helped us reserve tickets for the next day. We spent the whole morning at the museum next day. Those unearthed cultural relics, such as pottery and horse-and-soldier sculptures, were truly the most perfect and exquisite artefacts we had ever seen. In Lanzhou and its surroundings, apart from the Yellow River and the museum, there is nothing particularly worth visiting, as the taxi driver said: "There's not much to see in Lanzhou. We're just a transit point. Many tourists who come here just for transferring to other places by plane or train."

The ten-day trip along the Hexi Corridor has come to a perfect end. During this trip, we not only gained a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and Buddhist art, but also appreciated the vast and unique natural landscapes in China. We also experienced the warmth and sincerity of the people we met along the way, which gave us a new understanding of the recent development of the mainland. We hope to spend more holidays in the mainland in the future to learn more new knowledge and experience the local life.