

CHINA

My husband and I had made two trips to the China mainland and, since our first trip about six years ago, wished to visit the Silk Road cities. We had not

found a company responsive to our request for this specialized itinerary until we saw several letters in *ITN* about **ChinaPlus, Inc.** (320 Decker Dr., Ste. 100, Las Colinas/Irving, TX 75062; phone 972/887-9088 or visit www.chinaplustour.com). They responded to our e-mail within a couple of hours and had what we thought was the perfect trip.

We liked the itinerary, but we also liked the fact that both Chris and Ping Lee, the owners, were born and raised in China. Chris has been conducting tours of the Silk Road area for many years and was the guide for our trip, "Silk Road Plus Shangri-la," Sept. 21-Oct. 7, '04. We visited Urumqi, Kashgar, Turpan, Dunhuang, Kunming and Lijiang. The cost was \$3,698 per person, including air.

We planned to use frequent-flyer miles to upgrade to business class, which meant we would not be flying over with the group. The Lees made hotel reservations for us in Beijing and sent a card for us to give to the taxi driver at the Beijing airport to take us to the hotel.

Their instructions about how to get out of the Beijing airport and to the taxi stand outside (to avoid hustlers trying to "take us for a ride") were invaluable. We followed their instructions explicitly, and by brushing off the taxi drivers who jumped at

us as we cleared Customs, we spent \$11 for a taxi instead of the \$30 these men were asking.

As promised, we received in writing from Chris Lee, the night before we were to leave with the group, instructions about when and where to meet the group to leave for the airport to fly to Urumqi. Everything was on schedule. Returning home, we had the same note to get us from the hotel in Lijiang to the airport and from the Shanghai airport to the wonderful **Peace Hotel**, where reservations had been made for us. All of those arrangements went like clockwork.

Our Silk Road trip turned out to be spectacular. This is a most interesting part of the Marco Polo route. Every city is unique. Most fascinating are the Chinese minority peoples, whose looks, history, languages and customs are all different from those of the Han majority. The people were so warm, welcoming and charming, and there was so much wonderful art to see.

The Lees have exceptional contacts throughout China, so they know all of the things that should be seen (and we saw them, right down to the Kashgar animal auction!). They also have the contacts to provide the best-possible local guides in each city. The trip certainly met and mostly exceeded all our hopes and expectations for exploring the Silk Road. We cannot imagine anyone who could do a better job in arranging an itinerary such as this.

The pre-trip information specified that this trip was designed for people who had been to China before, and **ChinaPlus made certain that we were** ready in many ways. They sent a reading list so we could familiarize ourselves with the country's history, its customs, etc. They also sent a long list of questions people might have and the answers to those questions.

Most important was the caveat that this trip went to rural areas and would be a bit difficult in terms of some difficult walking.

In addition, we were advised that we would be staying in the "best available" hotels, not 5-star hotels. Of course, it is impossible to imagine ahead of time what is meant by "best available." If travelers are concerned about discomfort and want to be assured that things will be just like home, this is not the trip for them.

Itineraries could change as well, for any number of reasons. One must be flexible and "go with the flow." But whatever slight inconveniences there might be are compensated for by the wonderful people, experiences and places one encounters on this fabulous trip.

— *BARBARA EW BANK, Tucson, AZ*