

FLASHBACK FRIDAY: THE TURFAN OASIS

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The *Turfan Oasis* in East Turkestan is far older than the Silk

Road. Sitting in the Turfan Depression, second lowest on earth at over 500 feet below sea level) with a climate perfect for agriculture (like grapes for wine!), it was first settled by the Caucasian *Tocharians* some 4,000 years ago.

Over time it was absorbed into various empires ruling the Tarim Basin encircling the empty Takla Makan desert – proto-Mongols, the Tang Dynasty, the expanded Tibetan Empire at its height in the 700s AD, Buddhist Uyghurs, and Genghiz's Mongols. By the 1400s, the people of Turfan were mostly Buddhist or Nestorian Christian. By the end of the 15th century, they were ruled by the Moslem Moghuls who converted them to Islam.

Turfan was a key trading oasis on the Northern Silk Road which Marco Polo's father and uncle, Niccolo and Maffeo traversed in 1266 to meet Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan. (Marco's route with them in 1271 took the less-traveled Southern Silk Road underneath or south of the Takla Makan). I traversed both Silk Roads in 2008. Here I am at the Emin Minaret in Turfan. It's a fabulous place to explore. Maybe some day again? (*Glimpses of Our Breathtaking World #239 photo ©Jack Wheeler*)

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