



The Silk Road – Greatest overland route in history

Over many centuries, traders, nomadic warriors, prophets, emigrants and adventurers traversed the Silk Road that crossed much of the known world from Europe to the Far East, a 12,000-kilometer route through some of the harshest terrain on earth. But the huge deserts, endless steppes and towering mountains were only the physical barriers that the intrepid travellers had to surmount; there were also brigands, wars, unfriendly potentates, natural disasters and disease.

Commerce was the chief activity along the route and although it is known as the Silk Road, that precious commodity was only one of the many goods traded from the Mediterranean to the Pacific. Caravans loaded with everything from glass, furs, porcelain, perfume, gems, and carpets to slaves, livestock, spices, mirrors, paper, gunpowder and a thousand other things moved East and West along what has been described as the greatest overland route in the history of mankind.

Scholars say the first recorded mention of the Silk Road dates back to around 100 BC when a Chinese expedition set off west to purchase horses in Central Asia where they learned that the silk they had brought was highly prized in the bazaars. But it is believed that the route was already several thousand years old by then and Alexander the Great followed much of it during his eastern conquests.

Short Introduction to the Silk Road Programme

The concept of a Silk Road tourism project was first raised at UNWTO's General Assembly in Indonesia in 1993. Encouraged by renewed interest in the Silk Road – for cultural exchange, trade and tourism - UNWTO decided to revive the ancient routes as a tourism concept, uniting three continents once more in a project encompassing over 12.000 km.

Working closely with UNESCO, UNWTO Silk Road Programme linked 25 countries as diverse as Italy, Uzbekistan and Japan together, offering a travel concept focussed on cultural and natural heritage, and travel diversity (Land and Sea routes). Furthermore, it established a tourism concept which benefits both host communities (capacity building programmes, local empowerment, business networking, etc.) and travellers (by creating a more enriching travel experience).

Since the adoption of the Samarkand Declaration on Silk Road Tourism by the 19 countries attending the First International Silk Road Meeting in Samarkand, Republic of Uzbekistan in 1994, many milestone meetings, events and activities have contributed the development of UNWTO's Silk Road Programme. Over the years, additional countries have joined and new initiatives have been developed; nonetheless the guidelines, as outlined in the Samarkand Declaration, remain the same: a commitment to regional cooperation and stability; economic prosperity through sustainable development; the establishment of a high quality tourism brand, multi-stakeholder engagement; and the firm decision to link culture and tourism, in recognition of the immense natural and cultural heritage of the Silk Road countries. The strength of the Silk Road tourism project lies in its ability to promote this added value, while safeguarding important issues such as environmental sustainability, heritage conservation and respect to the interests of local communities.

Marco Polo, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane were other historical figures familiar with the great Eurasian highway. Lesser known were the itinerant priests, pilgrims and proselytisers who spread word of the principal religions of the world - Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Christianity and Confucianism – from one end of the Silk Road to the other.

And as the voyagers met in oases, towns and cities such as Damascus, Erzurum, Isfahan, Bukhara, Samarkand, Kokand, Xian and Nara, they swapped ideas on art, science, and philosophy from some of the greatest civilizations the world has ever seen - the Chinese, Indian, Persian, Roman, Greek, Byzantine, Egyptian and Mesopotamian.

These ideas were then passed on again and again, both to the East and to the West, in what was perhaps the greatest cultural exchange in the history of mankind.

The glory days of the Silk Road began to come to an end with the opening of sea trade between Europe and Asia in the late 15th century by explorers like Vasco de Gama. Merchants could now trade silk, spices, pearls and other goods directly, cutting out the middlemen who grabbed a share of the profits along the old land route. The sea route was also a faster and safer alternative.

With these new economic realities, the Silk Road began to fade in importance and eventually became a distant, yet fabled, memory highlighted only in history books, works of literature and legend.

But today, the Silk Road is open again for business, this time to tourists, thanks to new initiatives by governments, the private sector and organizations like the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), UNESCO and others.



Alaudin Lakes - Tajikistan

Within these guidelines, the efforts of the UNWTO Silk Road Programme are focused on three main areas:

- Marketing and Promotion
- Capacity Building and Destination Management
- Travel Facilitation

Marketing and promotion

The Silk Road Programme is working to strengthen the Silk Road brand by engaging with communications experts and promoting enhanced collaboration between the Silk Road Member States and stakeholders.

The Silk Road logo has been developed to unite all Member States, organizations and private sector stakeholders under a common visual banner. Communications workshops are planned to equip destinations with the skills and know-how to optimise the marketing potential and expand the reach of the Silk Road brand.

As user generated content becomes increasingly prevalent, UNWTO has been working to increase the Silk Road brand's presence online. Parallel to specialized Silk Road websites, UNWTO has Silk Road channels on the main social media outlets (Linkedin, twitter, vimeo and flickr). Designed as open forums for the exchange of information, it invites all stakeholders to participate, contribute and utilise these resources. Additionally, UNWTO, in partnership with Travelmole Vision, launched the "Silk Road Cities Website" in June 2010 (www.silkroadcities.com), a joint-marketing initiative designed to showcase key Silk Road destinations and products to the global travel trade, travel consumers and potential investors.

At the same time, UNWTO will continue to raise the Silk Road brand profile at the major International Trade Fairs. International trade fairs act as a major sales and marketing platform and are a global hub for the travel trade to network, market and conduct business. UNWTO has well established partnerships with the largest and most prestigious international trade fairs, which presents key opportunities for promoting and marketing the Silk Road brand.



Sher-Dor Madrasah – Samarkand, Uzbekistan

The Silk Road Today

In the present, the Silk Road is a rich tapestry of tourism destinations and products based on the unique and outstandingly rich heritage, nature, and traditions of dozens of distinct histories, peoples and cultures all along the timeless route now extending a warm welcome to visitors.

A modern-day silk worm farm in the small Greek town of Soufli; Egypt's Red Sea coast where ships from India once unloaded their cargoes of silk and that now boasts some of the finest scuba diving in the world; a the Muslim call to prayer from a mosque in the ages-old caravan city of Bukhara in Uzbekistan and the still bustling bazaar in the western Chinese city of Xian where Silk Road merchants have haggled for centuries.

All these experiences and many, many more await the visitor seeking to capture the magic of the old Silk Road, for adventure travellers who want an active holiday among the stunning natural scenery and tourists eager to witness at first hand the fascinating and exotic local customs.

To learn more over concrete initiatives underway at WTM-London, FITUR-Madrid and ITB –Berlin, as well as other marketing initiatives and opportunities, please visit the Silk Road Action Plan 2010/2011 available for download here: <http://silkroad.unwto.org/en/content/key-focus-areas>

Enhancement of capacity building & destination management

The Silk Road Programme organises and supports a number of international and regional conferences, networking events and workshops for Silk Road stakeholders covering a variety of subjects, including:

- Regional cooperation;
- Product development and destination management;
- Community-based tourism and heritage;
- Marketing and statistics;
- Communications and media.

These meetings provide a great frame for business to business opportunities and for networking. Member States can interact with other important stakeholders, such as tour operators, to create awareness and raise the profile of the Silk Road brand. UNWTO supports these efforts by providing organizational assistance and relevant know-how. Supportive measures include a wide range Silk Road studies, documents and working papers. These publications provide for an ideal working basis and help diffuse interest for the on-going tourism project (all Silk Road documents and studies can be downloaded from our website).

Travel Facilitation

One of the major concerns of Silk Road tourism is that, being a multi-destination product, there is an urgent need for encouraging facilitation of travel throughout the countries paying particular attention to the easing of cross-border movements.

It is understood that multiple barriers to the smooth cross-border movement of tourists make it difficult for tourists to undertake multi-destination tourism along the Silk Road. Inefficient travel formalities impede the growth and development of travel and tourism along the Silk Road. While some may see the visa question as a non-negotiable issue of security, the relaxation of certain visa issues can have very beneficial effects on the economy. The issue of visa facilitation is particularly relevant in the development of multi-destination tourist itineraries. There is no doubt that visa facilitation procedures would provide a significant stimulus to Silk Road tourism in these countries. One of our recommendations has been to encourage the establishment of a **Silk Road multiple entry visa** or other forms of visa facilitation to enable tourists to travel conveniently through these participating countries.

UNWTO has produced a number of detailed publications on the topic, including "A Strategic Approach to Visa Facilitation along the Silk Road" (2005) which contains a detailed analysis on the existing visa procedures and other border formalities in the Silk Road countries and comparing and contrasting these procedures with other regional visa facilitation processes such as the Schengen scheme, ASEAN, Caribbean and Mekong (the full Silk Road Visa study is available here: <http://silkroad.unwto.org/en/content/publications>). Furthermore, UNWTO will continue to hold meetings with Silk Road country Ambassadors and coordinate visa facilitation workshops in order to discuss the travel facilitation issues raised by the study.

