Silk Road: The Hexi Corridor

Lanzhou - Zhangye - Jiayuguan - Dunhuang - 9 days / 8 nights

Sample itinerary - Subject to availability

Travel style: scheduled

Overview

The corridor end to end: river city, rainbow hills, fort, grottoes.

The journey

Nine days down the Hexi Corridor, the thousand-kilometre passage between the Qilian snowline and the deserts that every caravan, monk and garrison had to use. Lanzhou's river city, Zhangye's rainbow hills, the wall's true western end at Jiayuguan, and Dunhuang's grottoes and dunes.

Highlights

- Mogao Caves on reserved tickets
- Crescent Lake under the Mingsha dunes at dusk
- Zhangye Danxia in low light
- Jiayuguan fort, the wall's western end
- The Giant Buddha Temple's reclining Buddha
- Zhongshan Bridge and the Yellow River, Lanzhou
- Shazhou night market, Dunhuang

Day by day



Day 1 - Arrive Lanzhou

Met at the station or airport and settled near the river. The evening is the Yellow River's: Zhongshan Bridge lit over the water, the old wooden waterwheel park, and the riverside promenade where the city actually spends its nights - tea from flasks, card games, the ferris wheel turning. The guide briefs tomorrow's beef-noodle protocol after dinner, and it matters.

Meals: - - Hotel: Lanzhou, city centre

Day 2 - Noodles by width, then west

Breakfast at a beef-noodle shop the local way: ordered before nine, by width from capillary to belt, with the chilli oil ladled at the counter. The Gansu Provincial Museum holds the Bronze Galloping Horse and the silk-road rooms that give the week its maps, then the afternoon high-speed rail to Zhangye across the corridor's first emptiness. The skewer streets run late.

Meals: B - Hotel: Zhangye, city centre



Day 3 - Danxia and the reclining Buddha

Into the Danxia Geopark at opening, while the low light does the work the hillsides cannot do at noon: ridge after ridge of banded reds and golds, boardwalks between the viewpoints. Midday back in town, afternoon at the Great Buddha Temple - Zhangye's 34-metre reclining Buddha, the largest indoor one in China, with the treasure's scriptures written in gold and silver ink. Evening free.

Meals: B, L - Hotel: Zhangye

Day 4 - Mati Temple, down the corridor

The morning at the Mati Temple grottoes, halls carved into the cliff above a valley that still moves with horses - a working monastery rather than a museum. Then the drive west to Jiayuguan with the Qilian snowline riding the horizon the whole way, arriving for the fort's late-afternoon light and a roast-lamb dinner in China's sturdiest garrison town.

Meals: B, L - Hotel: Jiayuguan, near the fort



Day 5 - The wall's western end

Jiayuguan explained as a system: the fort with its gate towers and the legend of the last brick, the Overhanging Wall climbing the ridge to the beacon platform, and the desert beacon lines that carried smoke signals to the horizon. After the tomb murals - Wei-Jin brick paintings of kitchen scenes and banquets, a thousand years of dinner - the drive continues to Dunhuang for the night market's first round.

Meals: B - Hotel: Dunhuang, near the dunes

Day 6 - The Mogao Caves

The week's centrepiece with reserved tickets: the eight open caves the research academy chooses, an academy-trained guide with the torch, and the Library Cave story told where it happened. Painted across a thousand years, the caves are the Silk Road's own diary - merchants, monks, and the pigments that travelled farther than they did. Afternoon at the Dunhuang Museum; evening free for the market.

Meals: B, L - Hotel: Dunhuang, near the dunes



Day 7 - Dunes and the crescent

Mingsha Shan at opening, while the sand is still cool: the climb to the ridgeline, the run down, and Crescent Lake below - a moon of water the dunes have circled for centuries without closing. Camels are available on site for those who want the caravan photograph taken properly. The midday is a rest; dusk belongs back on the dunes, when the light and the temperature both drop.

Meals: B - Hotel: Dunhuang

Day 8 - The deep desert

A full desert day west: Yumen Pass, the Han-dynasty wall's tamarisk-and-gravel core still holding its line after two millennia, and the Yadan wind-carved city at sunset - fleet after fleet of stone ships running before a wind that never stops. Long drives, few facilities, the strangest horizon of the week; the group returns after dark with dinner waiting near the hotel.

Meals: B, L - Hotel: Dunhuang

Day 9 - Depart

Transfer to Dunhuang airport for the direct flights east - Xi'an, Lanzhou, Beijing - or the through-rail for those continuing overland. The coordination team stays reachable until boarding, and the corridor links cleanly into a Xinjiang extension westwards or a Xi'an leg eastwards for the next brief.

Meals: B - Hotel: -

What makes this journey different

- The Mogao Caves on reserved eight-cave tickets with an academy-trained guide - not the four-cave emergency ticket.
- Zhangye's danxia at the low-light ends of the day, and the 34-metre reclining Buddha inside the Great Buddha Temple.
- Jiayuguan explained as a system - fort, overhanging wall and the beacon lines - not just a gate photograph.
- Fixed departures with our China delivery partners: shared guiding, accessible price, and corridor hotels set honestly.

Where you stay

Four-star in Lanzhou and Dunhuang; the corridor's best available in Zhangye and Jiayuguan - comfortable and clean, with five-star stock limited to Lanzhou and Dunhuang. We set expectations before booking, not after.

Food & local life

Beef noodles eaten the Lanzhou way - before nine, ordered by width - Zhangye lamb skewers and apricot tea, Jiayuguan roast lamb, and Dunhuang's night market: apricot-peel water, donkey-meat huangmian noodles and the grills.

Included

+ Accommodation in the agreed grade, with breakfast
+ Private guide and private vehicle on touring days
+ All internal transport between cities as stated - high-speed rail, internal flights and transfers
+ Entrance fees for the sites named in the itinerary
+ Meals as stated (B = breakfast, L = lunch, D = dinner)
+ Drinking water in the vehicle, and a 24-hour emergency contact while the group is in China
+ Mogao Caves reserved eight-cave tickets
+ High-speed rail Lanzhou-Zhangye

Not included

- International flights to and from China
- Chinese visa or visa-application costs
- Travel insurance, including medical and cancellation cover
- Meals not marked in the itinerary, drinks and personal spending
- Anything listed under subject to confirmation until it is confirmed
- Camel rides at Mingsha Shan (optional, booked on site)

To be confirmed with suppliers

- Mogao ticket quota for the dates - daily caps sell out weeks ahead in season
- fixed-departure dates and minimum group size
- Zhangye and Jiayuguan hotel inventories (limited four-star stock)
- Dunhuang departure flight or through-train options

Customisation

Every framework can be re-built around your client's dates, party size, hotel grade, pace and interests - or combined with scheduled small group departures where budget matters. Send us the brief and we will quote in writing.