

Genocide Tours

International Travel Companies in East Turkistan

By Henryk Szadziewski

August 2023

I. Key Takeaways

- Prominent international travel companies are currently offering guided tours to East Turkistan amidst genocide and crimes against humanity;
- Sites in Kashgar, Turpan, Ürümchi, and other destinations on tour itineraries are connected to genocide and crimes against humanity through repression of religious belief and expression, destruction of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as large-scale racial profiling, surveillance, internment and imprisonment of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples;
- Travel companies repeat and reinforce Chinese government narratives of an “exotic” people for the purpose of tourist consumption;
- Many of these tours provide perverse and problematic “experiences” for visitors, like visits to Uyghur homes, which families are not in a position to refuse, given an environment of securitization and state control. This constitutes a gross violation of privacy and perpetuates the surveillance programs that have been carried out in Uyghur homes;
- By bringing tourists to East Turkistan, these travel companies are implicitly supporting the normalization of genocidal Chinese government policies intended to destroy the Uyghur identity, and reinforce the complete denial of the Uyghur people to define “Uyghurness”;
- Seven recommendations to travel companies and trade associations call for ending tours to East Turkistan and for companies to meet internal, industry, and international environmental, social, and governance standards.

II. Introduction

This briefing calls on international travel companies to end tours to East Turkistan. It also calls on tourists not to take organized tours to a region during an ongoing genocide. As much as it would test ethical limits to take a tour to Rwanda, Cambodia, Rakhine State, and Darfur in the midst of the atrocities in these places, the same applies to East Turkistan.

Uyghur families have been torn apart by internment, imprisonment, forced labor programs, and enforced disappearances. Uyghur communities have been decimated by the destruction of their religion, language, and cultural heritage. Due to birth prevention policies targeting Uyghur women, the Uyghur Tribunal found that the Chinese government is committing torture, crimes against humanity, and genocide.¹

Travel to places of human tragedy is known as “dark” or “disaster” tourism. Visiting sites of ethnic cleansing, natural disasters, or war as a tourist is antithetical to the common idea of travel for leisure. Individuals who visit Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland and the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre in Cambodia may go with the intention of internalizing the lesson of “never again.” However, the travel experience to East Turkistan, as presented in the literature of international travel companies, is not about learning such lessons.

The tours amplify Chinese state narratives of Uyghurs as folkloric and lacking modernity. These narratives form part of the government developmentalist premise to “re-educate” Uyghurs out of their Uyghurness and into a compliant, economically exploitable, population. The depiction of Uyghurs in the tourist literature aims to convey a sense of authenticity. However, given the simulacra presented at tourist sites, the lack of ability to speak to Uyghurs freely, and the prevalence of Chinese government propaganda on conditions in East Turkistan, tours to the region are inauthentic.

Since the unwinding of pandemic restrictions on international travel, particularly with the ending of

Beijing’s zero-Covid policy in December 2022, tourism to China has been gradually rebounding. On March 16, 2023, *The Times of London* published an online article titled “Best Silk Road tours: China and the Stans of Central Asia,” that recommended two tours to East Turkistan, one offered by Bamboo Travel and the other by Intrepid Travel.² From the article, and from the evidence presented in this briefing, some international travel companies continue to offer tours despite evidence of atrocities. However, it is not too late to reverse this decision.

This briefing highlights tours to East Turkistan available through international travel companies for 2023–24. UHRP focuses on seven companies, detailing the destinations and sites included on travel itineraries. The briefing then explains how these destinations and sites are linked to aspects of the Uyghur genocide, particularly through internment, religious repression, as well as destruction of tangible and intangible heritage. We also scrutinize the extremely problematic activity of tourists visiting Uyghur homes as part of their travel.

As much as it would test ethical limits to take a tour to Rwanda, Cambodia, Rakhine State, and Darfur in the midst of the atrocities in these places, the same applies to East Turkistan.

The travel industry is eager to demonstrate a commitment to ethical standards of business practice. These are either internal, industry, or international standards, to which the travel companies presented in this briefing have agreed and supported. The gap between the values presented to the public and the ethics of traveling to East Turkistan on an organized tour are significant.

We argue that travel to East Turkistan through an organized tour enables the genocide in a number of ways. Whether it is through repetition of Chinese state narratives or participating in a commodified version of

Uyghur identity and heritage permitted by the Chinese government, to working with local partners linked to the Chinese state, there is little to suggest that a process of Uyghur empowerment is taking place.

We believe that in order to meet the standards on local empowerment expressed in their corporate and industry statements, travel companies should offer support to the Uyghur diaspora community. Uyghurs overseas do not have the privilege of traveling to East Turkistan without risk of disappearance or imprisonment. They have also become disconnected from their loved ones in the region. Beyond the purview of the Chinese state, this is a community with whom allyship is ethical.

We recommend travel companies and trade associations call for an end to tours to East Turkistan and to increase due diligence processes and human rights compliance in line with international standards. Travel companies have the opportunity to turn from selling “Genocide Tours” to becoming Uyghur allies through publicly canceling tours and condemning China’s crimes against humanity.

III. Methodology

This briefing was researched using desk-bound methods. Travel companies advertising in English and offering tours to East Turkistan were identified via an internet search in Google’s main search engine. In total, ten travel companies were identified with offices outside China. Of these, two companies (Intrepid Travel and Laurus Travel) offer set itineraries for 2023–24 directly on their website. UHRP, posing as potential tourists, emailed the other eight companies requesting further information on availability, possible dates of travel, and pricing for travel itineraries to East Turkistan. Of these eight, six companies responded, two (Martin Randall Travel and The Cultural Experience) did not, and one (On the Go Tours) currently does not include the region in itineraries. In total, seven travel companies offer trips to East Turkistan.

After collecting and archiving detailed itineraries of eight tours (Laurus Travel offers two), UHRP conducted a text analysis of the information. The

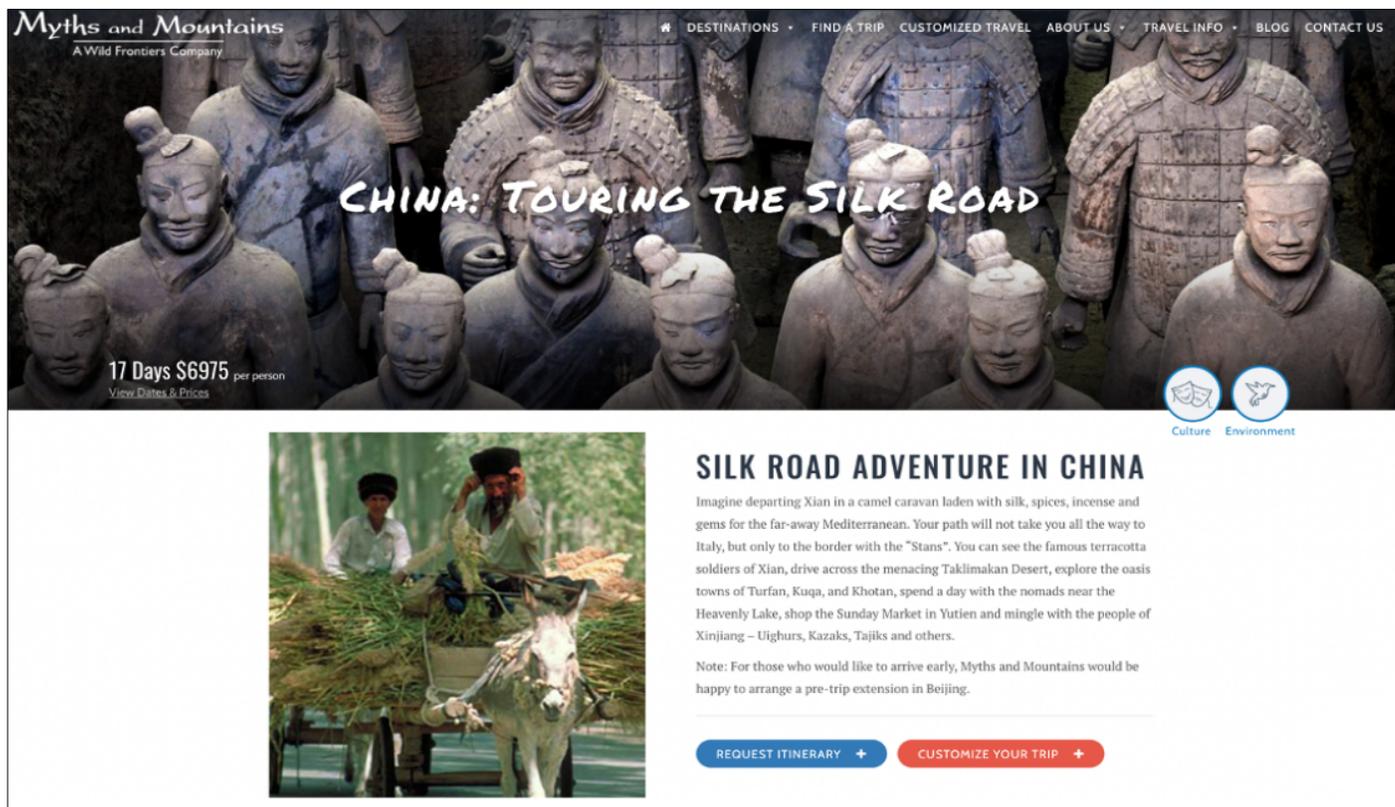


Image 1: Screen grab from Wild Frontiers Website

analysis consisted of two steps: the first, an initial reading of the information to record basic data such as name of tour, destinations in East Turkistan, available dates, etc., and the second, a critical reading to note tourist site descriptions, tour activities, and any standout quotes. These were all recorded on a Google Sheet. The scope of the research was limited to international travel companies; however, China-based travel companies are active in East Turkistan and there is scope to investigate their operations as well.

IV. Travel Companies and Tours to East Turkistan

The following table is an overview of tours to East Turkistan offered by international travel companies available between 2023 and 2024. Information in grayscale indicates companies and tours not included in the analysis. However, these are included for completeness of the research.

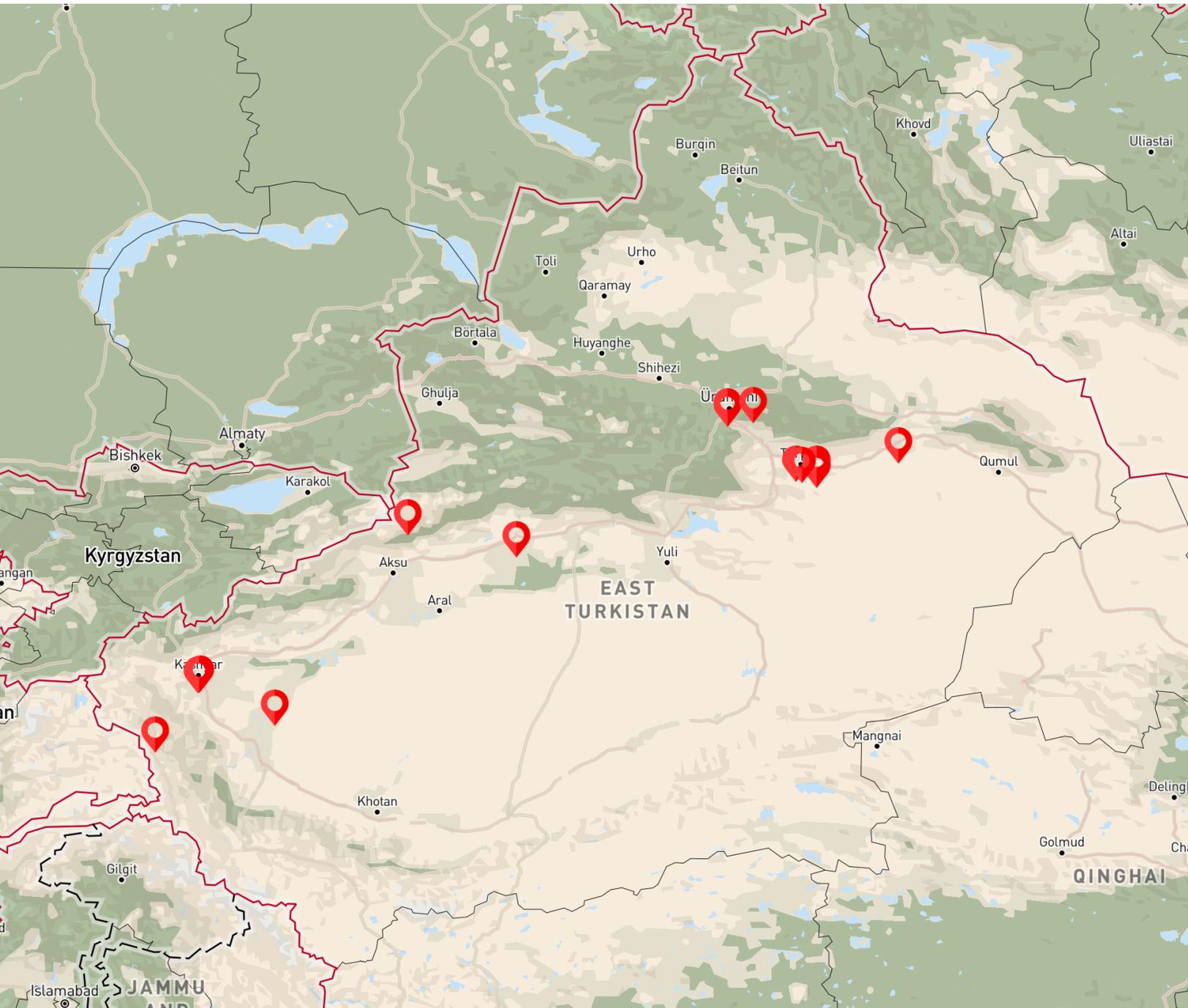
Company	Name of Tour	Destinations in East Turkistan	Dates Offered
Abercrombie & Kent	Silk Road tours & trips (website itinerary)/Tailor Made Silk Road (emailed itinerary)	Kashgar, Turpan and Ürümqi	Customized
Bamboo Travel	China's Silk Road By Train (website and emailed)	Karakul, Kashgar, Tengritagh, Turpan and Ürümqi	Customized
Geographic Expeditions	The Silk Road (website)	Kashgar	No tours currently offered
	China & Tibet Rail Discovery (emailed)	Kashgar Turpan, and Ürümqi	Customized
Goway Travel	Ancient Silk Road (website and emailed)	Kashgar, Turpan, and Ürümqi	Customized
Intrepid Travel ⁵	The Great Silk Road: Beijing to Tashkent (website)	Kashgar and Turpan	April to October 2024
Laurus Travel	Silk Road Adventure (website)	Karakul, Kashgar, Turpan, and Ürümqi	May to October 2023
	Ethnic Borderlands of China (website)	Karakul, Kashgar, Turpan, and Ürümqi	April to October 2023
Martin Randall Travel	China's Silk Road Cities (website)	Kashgar and Turpan	No response (last offered in 2020, no reason cited)
On the Go Tours	Silk Road Adventure (website)	Kashgar, Turpan, and Ürümqi	No tours currently offered
	Silk Road of China Westbound (website)	Aksu, Kashgar, Korla, Turpan, and Ürümqi	No tours currently offered
The Cultural Experience	The Silk Roads in China (website)	Kashgar and Turpan	No response
Wild Frontiers (Myths and Mountains)	Silk Road Adventure in China (website)	Khotan, Kucha, Niya Tengritagh, Turpan, and Ürümqi	This tour was not offered at time of research
	China Silk Road Taklamakan Adventure (emailed)	Aksu, Kashgar, Kucha, Mekit, and Turpan	Customized

V. Key Concerns

Tourism in Sites of Genocide

International travel companies predominately offer itineraries in East Turkistan that include the three cities of Kashgar, Turpan, and the capital, Ürümqi. In addition, travel companies offer visits to other cities and destinations, such as Kucha, Meket, and the

Tengritagh. The following section examines specific tourist sites within these cities and destinations on travel company itineraries. We go on to discuss how these sites are linked to the Uyghur genocide through the well-documented issues of religious repression, destruction of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as imprisonment and internment of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples.



Map of tourist sites in East Turkistan.

Kashgar

Kashgar is situated in the southwest of East Turkistan and has long been considered a Uyghur center of transcontinental trade, religious scholarship, and intellectual innovation. Given its past as a hub of the Silk Road and a crossroads of people and ideas, the city features on itineraries offered by all seven international travel companies under review.

Within the city, tour guides principally take visitors to four sites: the Afāq Khoja mazar (shrine), Id Kah Mosque, Old City, and Sunday Bazaar. Descriptions of these sites lean towards the folkloric and/or denial of Uyghur modernity that is familiar in Chinese state depictions of Uyghurs.⁴ For example, Abercrombie & Kent writes of the Sunday Bazaar:

A traditional event that dates back to the arrival of the first Uighur [sic] settlers (10th century) to the region, the bazaar is an invitation into a world unlike any other. The market site becomes a maze of stalls and shops with proud Uighur men dressed in great fleece coats and white turbans, crying out their wares each underbidding the other to lure the streams of buyers who flood into the area. There are proud leather workers who fashion fine boots; hat merchants who hand make exquisitely embroidered prayer caps; the livestock market where horse, cows and cattle are auctioned and the dozens of carpet and cloth stalls selling colorful rugs, many made from vibrant handcrafted felts.⁵

Similarly, Abercrombie & Kent repeats a description of the Afāq Khoja mazar as the “Xiangfei Tomb” that is common in Chinese discourse, a description that overlooks the sacred importance of the entire site to Uyghurs.⁶

Abjak Hoja's granddaughter, the ‘Fragrant Concubine’ is also buried here. The wife of an 18th century warrior, she was captured by the invading armies of the Qing emperor Qian Long and taken back to Beijing where she was noted for her great beauty. Refusing to become one of the emperor's concubines, it is said she died of a

broken heart. Her body was brought back to Kashgar where it now lies along with the sedan chair that carried her to her native land.⁷



Day 15 Makit - Kashgar

After breakfast we will continue across the Taklamakan Desert to Kashgar, an oasis city with approximately 500,000 residents. Kashgar's Old Town is a traditional Islamic city, though much of it has sadly now been destroyed by the Chinese. Kashgar sits today, as it has done for centuries, at a major crossroads of trade routes. We will of course see the somewhat controversial statue of Chairman Mao in the city centre, as well as visiting the green-tiled Abak Hoja tomb in the quiet suburbs. We visit the huge Id Kah Mosque, one of the largest mosques in Central Asia, is located in the heart of the city. There will be ample time for personal exploration of this ancient Silk Road city.

 Qinibagh Hotel or similar  Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Image 2: Excerpt from Wild Frontiers Itinerary

In addition to repetitions of Chinese state and society discourses of Uyghur people and spaces, there is little acknowledgement in site descriptions of the destruction of Kashgar's Old City and Islamic tangible heritage, as well as suppression of religious belief. As one travel company writes, “This afternoon we will discover the delights of the Kashagr [sic] Old Town.”⁸ Nevertheless, in its “China Silk Road Taklamakan Adventure” write up, Wild Frontiers does note how “Kashgar's Old Town is a traditional Islamic city, though much of it has sadly now been destroyed by the Chinese.”⁹ These rare contexts matter; however, the impacts of the demolitions need further exploration, especially given how entire neighborhoods and

businesses were emptied to create the tourist simulacrum that is now Kashgar Old City. UHRP has extensively documented these local displacements and the capture of the tourist industry by Chinese companies, such as Zhongkun Investment Group.¹⁰

Also included in tours to Kashgar is an opportunity to visit the Id Kah Mosque, a religious site described by Bamboo Travel as “Built in 1426, this is the largest mosque in Xinjiang and the centre of Muslim activities in Kashgar.”¹¹ The existence of Id Kah as a focal point for Islam in Kashgar throughout its history is undeniable; however, today, it also stands as Chinese state proof that Islam thrives in East Turkistan in spite of documented restrictions placed on imams, closure to worshippers, and removal of Islamic motifs.¹² Neighborhood mosques, where many Uyghurs worship, have not remained intact. In 2019, the head of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee in Kashgar told Radio Free Asia that in 2016, 70 percent of the mosques in the city had been demolished “because there were more than enough mosques and some were unnecessary.”¹³ Regionwide, a 2019 UHRP report concluded that 10 to 15 thousand mosques have either been completely or partially demolished, or had architectural elements removed.¹⁴

Expressions of religious belief and practice is one of the Chinese government's primary rationales for sending Uyghurs to concentration camps. Leaked documents, such as the Xinjiang Police Files and the Qaraqash Document detail the internment of Uyghurs for studying religion, or even having a household with a “dense religious atmosphere.”¹⁵ Furthermore, in 2021, UHRP compiled a dataset consisting of 1,046 cases of Turkic imams and other religious figures from East Turkistan detained for their association with religious teaching and community leadership since 2014.¹⁶

Turpan and Ürümchi

In Turpan, a city to the northeast of East Turkistan, travel companies generally take tourists to the ruined cities of Yarkhoto and Karakhoja, the Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves, Astana Cemetery, and Emin Minaret. Many travel companies (Abercrombie &

Kent, Bamboo Travel, Geographic Expeditions, Laurus Travel, and Wild Frontiers) also include the Karez, a series of subterranean channels dating from the 15th century that rely on gravity to convey water from the Tengritagh to the Turpan Basin. These channels play a crucial role in the ecosystem by supplying water for various purposes such as household consumption, agricultural irrigation, and supporting the habitats of indigenous plants and wildlife.¹⁷

There is little acknowledgement in site descriptions [by travel companies] of the destruction of Kashgar's Old City and Islamic tangible heritage, as well as suppression of religious belief.

The capital city of Ürümchi is mostly a transportation logistics hub that moves tourists via rail, road, or air to other cities in East Turkistan, as well as destinations in Tibet and China. However, some travel companies use the opportunity of being in Ürümchi to include a visit to the Xinjiang Regional Museum. The museum is a repository of state erasures of Uyghur history, culture, and identity, and scholar Anna Hayes notes that “the non-Han nationalities of Xinjiang continue to be marginalised within the official regional narrative contained within the Xinjiang Regional Museum.”¹⁸ Also included in Ürümchi itineraries is the nearby Boghda Kul (Heavenly Lake) in the Tengritagh (Heavenly Mountains).

The Karez and Tengritagh are recognized as important sites of cultural heritage among the Turkic peoples in East Turkistan. For example, not only do Karez systems provide a means of sustenance for local communities, but they also hold cultural significance as an amalgamation of history, culture, and the distinctive knowledge of its creators.¹⁹

However, at both sites, researchers describe serious issues of destruction and discrimination. Recent studies document the coercive relocation of Kazakh communities and the transfer of their ancestral

Urumqi



Urumqi is the most inland major city in the world, and over 3 million people live here, some 2,500km from the nearest coastline. A large and bustling city and perhaps not what you would expect to find on the Silk Road, Urumqi is a good place to access other more important sites in the region, as well as being notable for its excellent museum which paints a vivid picture of the region's history and for a couple of interesting markets. As the capital of China's Xinjiang province, Urumqi has a large Muslim presence. A major point on the ancient Silk Road, Urumqi still holds a vibrant mix of cultures and the food is famed throughout China.

Image 3: Excerpt from Bamboo Travel Itinerary

territories in the Tengritagh to Chinese tourist companies for commercial purposes.²⁰ Testimonies reveal that the expansion of tourism activities throughout the Tengritagh has resulted in substantial ecological harm and has deprived communities of their land rights.²¹ As noted in the UHRP report, *The Complicity of Heritage: Cultural Heritage and Genocide in the Uyghur Region*, the Karez has experienced a rewrite of its origins transferring what was an achievement of Uyghur knowledge and endeavor into the history of the Chinese people. Furthermore, environmental damage to the Karez from toxic waste and over-drilling of power wells has led to a situation where “90 percent of Karez in the Turpan Basin are on the verge of drying out.”²²

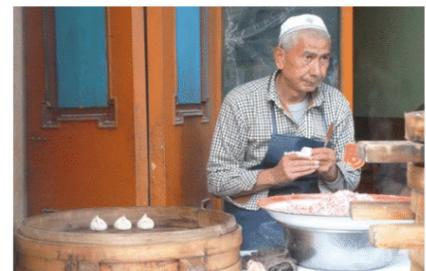
The authors of the UHRP report, Professor Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa Elkun, write, “As acknowledged by the International Criminal Court, acts of dispossession and destruction of cultural heritage are often the precursor to acts of genocide. Attacks on cultural heritage, from sacred architecture to community practices and customs, are inseparable from direct physical attacks on human beings. They are a form of cultural warfare aimed at the elimination of a people and their identity.”²³

Other Sites

Other destinations on international travel company arranged tours include the Altishahr cities of Aksu and Kucha, Mekit for the Taklamakan Desert, as well as Karakul, a lake southwest of Kashgar. According to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) there are six detention facilities in the immediate vicinity of Aksu City, including “Aksu Facility #3” in the city center.²⁴ An itinerary prepared by Wild Frontiers accommodates tourists in the Hongfu Jinlan Hotel, which is approximately two kilometers from Aksu Facility #3, where ASPI documented evidence of forced labor and “re-education.” Similarly, in Kucha, ASPI records three detention facilities, including “Kucha

DAY 12: IN & AROUND KUQA

This morning we arrive in the Uyghur town of Kuqa, part of an ancient Buddhist kingdom that was located along a branch of the Silk Route that ran across the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert. Birthplace of the 4th Century linguist Kumarajiva, one of Chinese Buddhism's most revered scholars, it prospered from the wealth of the trade caravans. Huge monasteries were built here and during the Tang dynasty it was one of the 'Four Garrisons' of An-hsi, the 'pacified west'. The extensive ruins of the ancient capital (Subash) lie to the north of modern Kuqa. On arrival we'll make a tour of the city, taking in the 2nd and 3rd Century ruins of Subash, as well as parts of the old town.



Lidu Hotel or similar



Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Image 4: Excerpt from Wild Frontiers Itinerary

Facility #3.”²⁵ According to the Wild Frontiers itinerary, tourists can stay at the Lidu Hotel, approximately four kilometers from Kucha Facility #3, a detention facility also linked to “re-education” and forced labor. Overland travel on the Wild Frontiers itinerary takes visitors past numerous other detention facilities recorded by ASPI.²⁶

In the immediate vicinity of Meket, ASPI locates five detention facilities. In 2020, Radio Free Asia, citing local sources, reported that Meket was designated as the site of a “restricted-access ‘residential area’ to relocate Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities released from internment camps.” The residential area would comprise a “guarded community of former inmates...ranging from several hundred families to 7,000 people.” The local source told Radio Free Asia that the area had only “one way in and out.”²⁷

It is perverse that overseas visitors on organized tours should visit Uyghur homes when Uyghur families cannot host their own family members who live abroad.

Between one to three million Uyghurs and other Turkic people have at one time been forcibly sent to concentration camps,²⁸ which are, in all practicality, large-scale prisons where detainees are confined in overcrowded conditions, with no fixed release dates and held on unfounded accusations. Disturbing accounts from former detainees reveal harrowing experiences of indoctrination, physical abuse, torture, sexual assault, and coerced sterilization.²⁹

Problematic Visits to Uyghur Homes

Several international travel companies include opportunities for tourists to visit Uyghur homes as part of their tours. Goway Travel offers to “Visit a local Uyghur’s [sic] Family at Old Town. Visit the Old Town of Kashgar, where we have our guests experience a local makeup.”³⁰ Goway Travel also advertises on its website that, “You’ll also meet with a local Uyghur

family while in Turpan, which gives you the opportunity [to] learn to make Uyghur foods and get in touch with this minority Chinese culture.”³¹ Also in Turpan, Geographic Expeditions describes how “We will then have a Uyghur [sic] Family Visit where we will enjoy the traditional Uyghur ethnic dancing and local snacks, experiencing real life and culture.”³² Laurus Travel details how tourists in Kashgar will “spend the afternoon visiting a local Uighur [sic] family and the extraordinary Sunday Bazaar where half of Central Asia seems to converge.”³³

In the context of an ongoing genocide, there is no possibility that Uyghur families can freely decline home visits from tourists, which could amount to accusations of extremism. It is perverse that overseas visitors on organized tours should visit Uyghur homes when Uyghur families cannot host their own family members who live abroad. Further, the presence of family outsiders in Uyghur homes has been a key tactic in the surveillance and exploitation of Uyghurs. In December 2017, the implementation of the “Becoming Family” policy involved the deployment of over a million Han Chinese officials who spent a week living with families, primarily in rural areas. Under this policy, referred to as “big sisters or brothers,” these officials typically stay with Uyghur families. As part of this initiative, close attention was paid to the minutest details of daily life, aiming to uncover any indications of external affiliations, such as religious beliefs like Islam, observed through actions like abstaining from pork consumption, smoking, or alcohol.³⁴

Apart from the intrusive “Becoming Family” policy, home visits and stays have also followed more usual practices of opening up family spaces to tourists. This shift from cadre-led homestays to those catering to tourists is evident in the tourism development plan for Kashgar Prefecture, spanning from 2018 to 2030.³⁵ The plan aims to encourage tourist home visits and stays as a means to improve livelihoods. One specific area targeted for homestay tourism is the Kozichi Yarbeshi (Gaotai) neighborhood within Kashgar Old City, which was largely evacuated and demolished. The presence of both cadre and tourist home visits and stays effectively created transparent boundaries within

Uyghur homes, enabling outsiders to peer into their intimate spaces.³⁶

VI. Standards of Business Practice

International travel companies are held accountable through internal, industry, and international standards. The norms outlined in this section are laudable and are public statements of commitment to people and places in which travel companies operate; however, travel companies fail to meet these standards by continuing to organize tours in East Turkistan. The gap between the concerns outlined in Section V and the standards identified in this section are not a comment on how travel companies run their businesses as a whole. Yet, they are a comment on the negligence of travel companies to conduct the due diligence required to meet their own and industry standards.

Corporate Social Responsibility Statements of Travel Companies

The international travel companies under review in this briefing make available on their websites corporate social responsibility (CSR) statements, or value statements on the ways in which they are good corporate global citizens and focus on the relationship between travel and local empowerment. For example, Bamboo Travel claims, “We work hard to ensure that our tours are beneficial to the local community and that your money goes directly to the communities you visit as much as possible. We work with carefully chosen locally run partners in all our countries, ensuring that our guests will be accompanied by local guides & drivers throughout, and staying in smaller locally owned accommodation wherever possible.”³⁷ Others, such as Geographic Expeditions, express how corporate values on diversity are linked to selective choices of business partners, stating that they “...explore other countries and cultures appreciating their different perspectives, carefully weighing where to invest and build relationships.”³⁸

Further, travel companies attach a range of values to statements of ethical behavior, from the protection of the environment to inclusion of local people to a sense of responsible behavior. Intrepid Travel writes on its website, “We’re all about sustainable, experience-rich travel. That means using our trips as a force for good, as well as good times. We’re genuinely connected to and invested in the places we go, the people we meet along the way, and the communities at the heart of every Intrepid experience.”³⁹ Similarly, Wild Frontiers states, “For us Responsible Travel coincides with Responsible Business, designing adventures with the local people, culture and eco-system in mind. We are very aware of the economic, ecological and ethical impact tourism can have on ancient cultures and fragile environments. We realise that taking clients through these regions can have a detrimental impact if not handled responsibly and as such, on all of our tours we go to great lengths to minimise the negative and accentuate the positive.”⁴⁰

Descriptions of these sites lean towards the folkloric and/or denial of Uyghur modernity that is familiar in Chinese state depictions of Uyghurs.

On some travel company websites value statements were not available, such as Gaway Travel. Abercrombie & Kent promotes philanthropic work “dedicated to improving lives and livelihoods in the communities where our guests travel...that focus on...Conservation, Education, Health and Job Creation — making for a philanthropic commitment unequalled in the travel industry.”⁴¹

Corporate Social Responsibility Statements of Trade Associations

The geographic distribution of the international travel companies considered here is global, including offices in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Industry associations exist in each of

these countries, each with their own standards of business practice for members.

Company	Office Locations
Abercrombie & Kent	“55 offices in 30 countries,” including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, United States (HQ), and United Kingdom.
Bamboo Travel	United Kingdom
Geographic Expeditions	United States
Goway Travel	Australia, Canada, Philippines, and United States
Intrepid Travel	Several locations, including Australia (HQ), Canada, and United Kingdom
Laurus Travel	Canada
Martin Randall Travel	Australia and United Kingdom (HQ)
On the Go Tours	Australia, South Africa, and United Kingdom
The Cultural Experience	United Kingdom
Wild Frontiers (Myths and Mountains)	United States

The United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA) lists Abercrombie & Kent, Goway Travel, Intrepid Travel, and Laurus Travel as members.⁴² Included in USTOA’s mission and goal statement is that “USTOA...requires members to adhere to the highest standards in the industry. Among these is the principle of ethical conduct, which requires members to conduct business according to a set of professional standards which include representing all facts, conditions and requirements relating to tours and vacation packages truthfully and accurately.”⁴³

The Association of British Travel Agents, now known by its acronym ABTA, includes Abercrombie & Kent, Intrepid Travel, and On the Go Tours as members.⁴⁴ ABTA, as a member of the Roundtable on Human Rights in Tourism, is part of a collaborative network

consisting of civil society organizations, tour operators, and travel associations. This alliance is committed to upholding human rights in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.⁴⁵ As ABTA states, “Relevant human rights in tourism include labour rights, child rights and anti-discrimination.”⁴⁶

Another UK-based entity is the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO), with Abercrombie & Kent, Bamboo Travel, and Wild Frontiers as members.⁴⁷ AITO focuses on the environmental aspects of sustainable tourism in a statement of principles, however, it also encourages travel companies to “Respect local cultures – traditions, religions and built heritage, [as well as] Benefit local communities – both economically and socially.”⁴⁸

The Council of Australian Tour Operators (CATO) lists among its membership Abercrombie & Kent and Intrepid Travel, and On the Go Tours,⁴⁹ and requires “Members of CATO pledge themselves to conduct their business activities in a manner that promotes the ideal of integrity in travel.”⁵⁰

Human Rights Standards

The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (GCET) is foundational in establishing a set of non-legally binding international standards for responsible and sustainable tourism. The code provides guidance to governments, the travel industry, local communities, and tourists. The primary objective of the GCET is to ensure that tourism maximizes benefits while minimizing any negative impacts on the environment, cultural heritage, and societies. Originally adopted by the General Assembly of the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in 1999, the United Nations officially recognized the GCET two years later.⁵¹

In 2011, the UNWTO introduced a Private Sector Commitment to the GCET, which was intended for private enterprises around the world to endorse. By signing this commitment, companies commit to upholding, promoting, and implementing the principles of the GCET.⁵² The Association of Canadian

Travel Agencies (ACTA) signed the pledge, of which Laurus Travel is a member.⁵⁵

In 2015, the World Committee on Tourism Ethics presented a proposal to the UNWTO General Assembly, suggesting the transformation of the GCET into an international convention. During the deliberations, the Working Group decided not to introduce significant changes to the fundamental principles of the GCET and the Draft Convention on Tourism Ethics includes them in a section titled “Ethical Principles in Tourism.” The English version of the Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics was approved by the UN General Assembly in 2019.⁵⁴ Article 7, Tourism, a user of cultural resources and a contributor to their enhancement, and Article 8, Tourism, a beneficial activity for host countries and communities, are most relevant to the protection of Uyghur communities from the destruction of tangible and intangible culture.⁵⁵

VII. Implications

International travel companies should not be offering tours to East Turkistan as the Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples undergo a genocide. This briefing has outlined how a visit to East Turkistan puts travel companies and their customers in a region where, according to the United Nations, China may have committed crimes against humanity.⁵⁶ Specific sites in Kashgar, Turpan, Ürümqi, and other destinations included on tour itineraries are connected to genocide through repression of religious belief, destruction of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as internment and imprisonment.

Furthermore, the repetition of Chinese government narratives of Uyghurs as folkloric and pre-modern in the literature distributed to potential tourists is, at best, naive. The long-standing repression of Uyghurs and the genocide is partially premised on a developmentalist Chinese state mission to “reform” Uyghurs. While the Chinese government maintains a narrative that Uyghurs were in need of “re-education” to keep them from “extremism,” the indoctrination in

the concentration camps was designed to erase the perceived backwardness of Uyghur identity and to assimilate them into Han society. Tour companies should not be reinforcing the idea of Uyghurs as pre-modern for tourist consumption of the exotic. Uyghur modernity is defined by Uyghurs and by Uyghur ways of knowing.

The Uyghur identity on display in East Turkistan is that which has been permitted by the Chinese state. What the Chinese state has left of public expressions of Uyghur identity has remained for commodification and exploitation not only by visitors on tours from overseas, but also domestic tourists.⁵⁷ By visiting these simulacra of Uyghurness, the travel company and visitor on an organized tour are complicit in the denial of the Uyghur people to define their own identity.

By visiting these simulacra of Uyghurness, the travel company and visitor on an organized tour are complicit in the denial of the Uyghur people to define their own identity.

In addition, tourism is a primary means with which the Chinese state territorializes and securitizes East Turkistan. The tourist presence coerces Uyghurs to perform a revisioned version of their culture, history, and religion as the security apparatus of the state maintains this fictional depiction. As Shani Brown and O’Brien write:

...tourism to Xinjiang is presented as a “success” of the camps and conscripted into the “Sinicisation” of the region and the secularising of minorities’ cultures. Places and practices are deconstructed as cultural heritage, and reconstructed to provide tourists with “exotic” experiences of “wonderful Xinjiang.” This transforms the “tourist gaze” into a “testimonial” one: tourists to Xinjiang are made into witnesses that “Xinjiang is beautiful” and Uyghurs are “happy.” In this, touristic

development and tourists themselves are key agents in the CCP's territorialisation of Xinjiang, the sinicisation of Uyghur culture, and the legitimisation of the violence of the camps.⁵⁸

Nothing under current conditions in East Turkistan aligns with travel company and industry commitments to protection and empowerment of local communities.

Nothing under current conditions in East Turkistan aligns with travel company and industry commitments to protection and empowerment of local communities. Indeed, one travel company accommodates visitors in Kashgar and Turpan in the Jin Jiang group of hotels, which is a state-owned enterprise. Seven years into a campaign of intensified repression and with free access to documentation about conditions, international travel companies operating in East Turkistan cannot say they are unaware of the crimes against humanity ongoing in the region. This neglect of due diligence is harmful to Uyghurs.

Travel companies and tourists on organized tours may argue that informational isolation of East Turkistan allows China's genocide to go on unobserved. If this is the case, there is nothing in the travel company literature that indicates travel to East Turkistan under this pretext. Information provided to potential tourists misrepresents conditions for Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan in contradiction to company statements on responsible tourism and industry standards.

VIII. Recommendations

For International Travel Companies

- Cease all tours in East Turkistan. There is no ethical way to conduct tourism in East Turkistan, a site of active crimes against humanity and genocide;

- Conduct thorough due diligence checks before offering tours and declare all local partners in tour literature. Consultation with Uyghur communities overseas is easy and demonstrates a commitment to ethical practices. Companies run the risk of legitimizing tangible and intangible cultural erasure when working with Chinese state-owned partners;
- Seek consent for home visits from homeowners only and under conditions where families can freely deny or accept offers without the threat of state retribution. Consent cannot be given where there is no capacity or framework for it, as is the case in East Turkistan;
- Commit to the highest of international human rights standards for the travel industry, the Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics approved by the UN General Assembly in 2019, and adhere to its articles through an annual review of operations.

For Travel Company Trade Associations (USTOA, ABTA, AITA, ACTA, and CATO)

- Review membership policies and environmental, social, and governance guidelines. These should be revised to include an end to offering travel to areas that are experiencing crimes against humanity and genocide, and where the local population is actively harmed;
- Ensure all member companies clearly state conditions about human rights violations in promotional literature. Besides the risk to companies, prospective customers are in danger of indirect complicity;
- Adhere to the Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics approved by the UN General Assembly in 2019 as the benchmark for ethical standards in conducting business. Assessments of company's human rights compliance should be conducted regularly and with a meaningful process toward improving performance.

IX. About the Author

Genocide Tours was researched and written by Dr. Henryk Szadziewski, Director of Research at the Uyghur Human Rights Project.

X. Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to UHRP staff Omer Kanat, Peter Irwin, Babur Ilchi, and Ben Carrdus who reviewed early and subsequent drafts. Any remaining errors of fact or judgment are the author's responsibility.

Cover image credit: Patrick Wack

XI. Appendix

On August 3, 2023, the Uyghur Human Rights Project [sent](#) an email to Abercrombie & Kent, Bamboo Travel,

Geographic Expeditions, Goway Travel, Intrepid Travel, Laurus Travel, and Wild Frontiers (also doing business as Myths and Mountains) informing them that their company had been named in a forthcoming report. The email addresses of the international travel companies are all publicly listed. On August 7, 2023, an employee of Geographic Expeditions acknowledged receipt of UHRP's email. After a sequence of communications, four members of UHRP's staff met with two representatives of Intrepid Travel on August 16, 2023. The Intrepid representatives informed UHRP that Intrepid Travel is currently conducting a global human rights assessment of its operations. On August 29, 2023, a representative from Intrepid Travel informed UHRP that all departures from 2023 have been canceled, and the advertised trip and any other trips that include the Uyghur region are now off the market.

¹ "Uyghur Tribunal Judgement," Uyghur Tribunal, December 9, 2021, <https://uyghur-tribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Uyghur-Tribunal-Summary-Judgment-9th-Dec-21.pdf>.

² Adrian Phillips, "Best Silk Road tours: China and the Stans of Central Asia," *TimesTravel*, March 16, 2023, <https://archive.ph/K49Uo#selection-1093.0-1093.57>.

³ On August 29, 2023, a representative from Intrepid Travel informed UHRP that all departures from 2023 have been canceled, and the advertised trip and any other trips that include the Uyghur region are now off the market.

⁴ Li Hao, "Local dance party unfolds at Xinjiang's food bazaar," *Global Times*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/galleries/4671.html>.

⁵ Abercrombie & Kent. Correspondent, email message to author, 2023.

⁶ Werner Haug, "Destruction of Kashgar Over Time," Uyghur Human Rights Project, March 9, 2022, <https://uhrp.org/kashgar-image-project/>.

⁷ Abercrombie & Kent. Correspondent, email message to author, 2023.

⁸ "The Silk Roads in China: Journey to the West," The Cultural Experience, n.d., <https://www.theculturalexperience.com/tours/china-silk-roads-archaeological-tour/>.

⁹ Wild Frontiers. Correspondent, email message to author, 2023.

¹⁰ William Drexel, "Kashgar Coerced: Forced Reconstruction, Exploitation, and Surveillance in the Cradle of Uyghur Culture," Uyghur Human Rights Project, June 3, 2020, <https://uhrp.org/report/kashgar-coerced/>; "Living on the Margins: The Chinese State's Demolition of Uyghur Communities," Uyghur Human Rights Project, April 2, 2012, <https://docs.uhrp.org/3-30-Living-on-the-Margins.pdf>.

¹¹ Bamboo Travel. Correspondent, email message to author, 2023.

¹² "China Focus: Diplomats from 14 countries visit Xinjiang," *XinhuaNet*, April 28, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230428/41b135fd2e0846bb9883cba809d52540/c.html>; Peter Irwin, "Islam Dispossessed: China's Persecution of Uyghur Imams and Religious Figures," Uyghur Human Rights Project, May 13, 2021, <https://uhrp.org/report/islam-dispossessed-chinas-persecution-of-uyghur-imams-and-religious-figures/>; Shohret Hoshur, "Historic Kashgar mosque open for tourists, but not worshippers," *Radio Free Asia*, July 3, 2023, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/id-kah-mosque-07032023144243.html>; Bahram Sintash, "Removal of Islamic Motifs Leaves

Xinjiang's Id Kah Mosque 'a Shell For Unsuspecting Visitors,'" *Radio Free Asia*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/mosque-05222020135801.html>.

¹³ Shohret Hoshur, "Under the Guise of Public Safety, China Demolishes Thousands of Mosques," *Radio Free Asia*, December 19, 2016, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/udner-the-guise-of-public-safety-12192016140127.html>.

¹⁴ Bahram K. Sintash, "Demolishing Faith: The Destruction and Desecration of Uyghur Mosques and Shrines," Uyghur Human Rights Project, October 28, 2019, <https://uhrp.org/report/demolishing-faith-the-destruction-and-desecration-of-uyghur-mosques-and-shrines>.

¹⁵ "The Xinjiang Police Files," Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, <https://www.xinjiangpolicefiles.org/>; "Ideological Transformation': Records of Mass Detention from Qaraqash, Hotan," Uyghur Human Rights Project, February 18, 2020, <https://uhrp.org/report/mass-detention-hotan/>.

¹⁶ Irwin, "Islam Dispossessed: China's Persecution of Uyghur Imams and Religious Figures."

¹⁷ Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa Elkun, "The Complicity of Heritage: Cultural Heritage and Genocide in the Uyghur Region," Uyghur Human Rights Project, February 9, 2023, <https://uhrp.org/report/the-complicity-of-heritage-cultural-heritage-and-genocide-in-the-uyghur-region/>.

¹⁸ Anna Hayes, "Space, place and ethnic identity in the Xinjiang Regional Museum," in *Inside Xinjiang*, (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 21.

¹⁹ Harris and Elkun, "The Complicity of Heritage: Cultural Heritage and Genocide in the Uyghur Region."

²⁰ Guldana Salimjan, "Camp land: Settler ecotourism and Kazakh dispossession in contemporary Xinjiang," *Lausan*, September 1, 2021, https://lausancollective.com/20_21/camp-land/.

²¹ Harris and Elkun, "The Complicity of Heritage: Cultural Heritage and Genocide in the Uyghur Region."

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

-
- ²⁴ “Aksu Facility #3,” Xinjiang Data Project, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, January 31, 2020, <https://xjdp.aspi.org.au/map/?cultural=none&mosque=none&marker=3525>.
- ²⁵ “Kucha Facility #3,” Xinjiang Data Project, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 30, 2020, <https://xjdp.aspi.org.au/map/?cultural=none&mosque=none&marker=3578>.
- ²⁶ “Map,” Xinjiang Data Project, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020, <https://xjdp.aspi.org.au/map/>.
- ²⁷ Shohret Hoshur, “Xinjiang Authorities Relocate Camp Detainees to Restricted-Access ‘Residential Area,’” *Radio Free Asia*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/relocation-08042020145526.html>.
- ²⁸ “The Xinjiang Police Files,” Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, <https://www.xinjiangpolicefiles.org/>.
- ²⁹ “UHRP Welcomes Survivors to the US to Give First-Hand Testimony on Atrocity Crimes Against Women Inside and Outside China’s Concentration Camps,” Uyghur Human Rights Project, March 22, 2023, <https://uhrp.org/statement/uhrp-welcomes-uyghur-survivors-to-the-us-to-give-first-hand-testimony/>.
- ³⁰ Goway Travel. Correspondent, email message to author, 2023.
- ³¹ “Ancient Silk Road: Xian to Urumqi,” Goway Travel, n.d., <https://www.goway.com/trip/asia/ancient-silk-road-xian-urumqi/>.
- ³² Geographic Expeditions. Correspondent, email message to author, 2023.
- ³³ “Silk Road Adventure (18 days),” Laurus Travel, n.d., <https://laurus-travel.com/china-tours/silk-road-adventure-18-days/>.
- ³⁴ “Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots,” Human Rights Watch, April 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting>.
- ³⁵ “新疆喀什地区旅游业发展总体规划(2018–2030年 [Plan for Tourism Development in Kashgar, Xinjiang (2018–2030)]),” Kashgar Prefecture Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism, n.d.
- ³⁶ Henryk Szadziwski, Mary Mostafanezhad, and Galen Murton, “Territorialization on tour: The tourist gaze along the Silk Road Economic Belt in Kashgar, China,” *Geoforum* 128 (2022): 135–147, accessed July 26, 2023, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016718521003328>.
- ³⁷ “Our Responsible Tourism Pledge,” Bamboo Travel, n.d., <https://www.bamboo-travel.co.uk/pages/responsible-tourism>.
- ³⁸ “The GeoEx Difference,” Geographic Expeditions, n.d., <https://www.geoex.com/geoex-difference/>.
- ³⁹ “Intrepid’s Purpose & Mission,” Intrepid Travel, n.d., <https://www.intrepidtravel.com/us/purpose>.
- ⁴⁰ “Responsible Travel,” Wild Frontiers, n.d., https://www.wildfrontierstravel.com/en_US/responsible-travel.
- ⁴¹ “A&K Philanthropy Partners with Local Communities to Empower Lasting Change, Abercrombie & Kent, n.d., <https://www.abercrombiekent.com/about-us/ak-philanthropy>.
- ⁴² “Active Member Directory,” United States Tour Operators Association, n.d., <https://ustoa.com/member-directory>.
- ⁴³ “About USTOA,” United States Tour Operators Association, n.d., <https://ustoa.com/about>.
- ⁴⁴ “ABTA Member search,” ABTA, n.d., <https://www.abta.com/abta-member-search>.
- ⁴⁵ “Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations ‘Protect, Respect and Remedy’ Framework,” Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf.
- ⁴⁶ “Human rights,” ABTA, n.d., <https://www.abta.com/sustainability/human-rights>.
- ⁴⁷ “AITO members,” AITO, n.d., <https://www.aito.com/aito-members>.
- ⁴⁸ “Sustainable tourism,” AITO, n.d., <https://www.aito.com/sustainable-tourism/ethos>.
- ⁴⁹ “Search CATO Tour Operators & Wholesalers,” Council of Australian Tour Operators, n.d., <https://www.cato.travel/our-members>.
- ⁵⁰ “Code of Ethics,” Council of Australian Tour Operators, n.d., <https://www.cato.travel/code-of-ethics>.
- ⁵¹ “Global Code of Ethics for Tourism,” United Nations World Tourism Organization, n.d., <https://www.unwto.org/global-code-of-ethics-for-tourism>.
- ⁵² “Private Sector Signatories of the Commitment,” United Nations World Tourism Organization, n.d., <https://www.unwto.org/private-sector-signatories-of-the-commitment>.
- ⁵³ “Homepage,” ACTA - Association of Canadian Travel Agencies and Travel Advisors, n.d., <https://www.acta.ca/>.
- ⁵⁴ “Ethics Convention,” United Nations World Tourism Organization, n.d., <https://www.unwto.org/ethics-convention>.
- ⁵⁵ “Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics,” United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2020, <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284421671>.
- ⁵⁶ “OHCHR Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China,” Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, August 31, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assessment.pdf>.
- ⁵⁷ Eva Xiao, “Investing in Tourism in Xinjiang, Beijing Seeks New Ways to Control the Region’s Culture,” *ChinaFile*, May 12, 2023, <https://www.chinafile.com/investing-tourism-xinjiang-beijing-seeks-new-ways-control-regions-culture>; Georg Fahrion, “The Three Worlds of Xinjiang,” *Spiegel International*, May 17, 2023, <https://rb.gy/h8xw5>.
- ⁵⁸ Melissa Shani Brown and David O’Brien, “‘Making the Past Serve the Present’: The Testimonial Tourist Gaze and Infrastructures of Memory in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), China,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 2022, accessed July 26, 2023, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/18681026221121828>.