

# The Silk Road

The Silk Road was not actually a road. It was not paved. It was not even a single route, but rather many smaller roads and pathways that were connected, and worn by the use of thousands of travelers over a period of hundreds of years. It was a 4000-mile trip. At one end was China. At the other end was Rome. Each had something the other



wanted. Rome had gold, silver, and linen. China had silk, spices, and ivory. Ideas also traveled along the Silk Road, ideas that affected everyone. The Romans were not surprised to hear of another great civilization hidden over the mountains. They had been looking for “the Silk People” for a long time. The Romans discovered pieces of silk from some of the people they conquered. Silk quickly became popular in Rome. But it was scarce. The Romans wanted more silk. But they did not know who was making this wonderful material. The Romans tried to find the traders as they came into the towns and villages. But the traders hid from the Roman soldiers.



They knew they had nothing to tell them. They also did not know who was making the silk. They only traded for the silk. They traveled a short way along the Silk Road and traded with the people they found.

In frustration, the Romans sent out parties of soldiers to follow the Silk Road, and find the source, the people who were making the silk. Most of the soldiers never returned. Those who did reported they could not find a way through the desert (the Gobi desert, Northwest of China). They had to turn back.

It was incredibly dangerous to travel along the Silk Road. You faced desolate white-hot sand dunes in the desert, forbidding mountains, brutal winds, and poisonous snakes. There was one nice section, called the Gansu Corridor, a relatively fertile strip that ran along the base of one of the mountains. To reach this strip, you had to cross the desert or the mountains. And of course, there were always bandits and pirates. Even the traders did not make the whole trip. They worked in relays. Each trader would go a certain distance, exchange their goods for other goods, and hopefully return. The next would move along the road, trade, and hopefully return. There were three main routes, and all were dangerous.

Northern Route – Westward to Black Sea

Central Route – Westward to Persia, Mediterranean Sea, Rome

Southern Route – Westward to Iran, India

The Silk Road took caravans to the farthest extent of the Han Empire. Sections of the Great Wall were built along the northern side of the Gansu Corridor to try and prevent bandits from the north from harming the trade. Over the centuries, the Silk Road developed a civilization of its own. Where possible, the Silk Road became lined with huge temples and booming cities. It became far easier to travel the road. But it was never easy. There were still vast stretches of deserts and mountains to cross, with no city or water in sight. The Silk Road would become instrumental in the development and expansion of trade and the accumulation of wealth in both China and Rome, as well as in Egypt and other nations.

