

On the Silk Route trail

The Silk Route was an unhindered stream of trade that built bridges between cultures, until it was broken up by the rise of national borders. A Russian plumber and a German nurse capture its romance by retracing the route. **Peerzada Ashiq** reports

Moored to the banks of the Dal lake in Srinagar, 'New Shahenshah' is not a fancy houseboat. An immersion rod hisses in a makeshift washroom set up on a wooden plank outside the houseboat. Tourists Roman, 47, a Russian plumber, and Anne, 31, a German nurse, are looking forward to their mid-day bath, and understandably so. Following heavy snow and landslides, they had been stranded for two weeks on the Zoji La, a pass which connects Kargil in Ladakh with Srinagar, their final stop.

When Roman and Anne met for the first time three summers ago in Tibet, they decided to do a special trip in 2018: retracing the famous Silk Route. They would explore the overland route that once connected Central Asia, Asia and Europe via the high mountain passes of the Pamir, Tian Shan, Hindu Kush, Karakoram and Kunlun mountain ranges.

Says Roman, "It was our dream to travel along the Silk Route, which was once an unhindered flow of different streams of cultures. Today it's a series of water-tight chambers due to national borders."

On a military truck

It was in the late 18th and early 19th century that British archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein organised the first major expeditions to explore what German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthoven had in 1877 named the 'Silk Road'. Stein undertook eight expeditions along the ancient trade route that links China and the Mediterranean. On at least one expedition, Kashmir was Stein's starting point for a journey to explore a second century Buddhist site in China's Xinjiang province. The excavations made by Stein between 1900 and 1915 helped throw some historical light on this part of Xinjiang, which was once a part of the mysterious Kroraina kingdom.

But in the post-colonial era, the consolidation of borders and hostility between neighbouring countries snapped the last remnant linkages of the Silk Route in the Kashmir region. The incorporation of Xinjiang into China in 1949 sealed it. But Roman and Anne managed to break through the 'sealed route' after 71 years, as they navigated through some of the world's toughest border posts.

In July 2018, Anne hired a military truck fitted with a modular kitchen and a two-bed arrangement in the back. It was a vehicle that could withstand temperatures as low as minus 50° Celsius. It was what helped Roman and Anne survive when they were stranded in Ladakh for 15 days. Recalls Roman, "Even the vehicle's fuel got frozen many times at the Zoji La Pass. If you stepped out, there was a good chance you'd freeze to death."

It was his idea to hire a military truck, preferably a World War II-era vehicle. He says, "Anne managed to find one with a 5,200 cc engine in Germany. We wanted a vehicle that could negotiate mountains of this height and magnitude and withstand its vagaries. Thankfully, it did."

Anne drove the vehicle all the way from Germany to Romania across many states of Europe, and finally to Ukraine. "It was a memorable journey. One could see the stark contrast between two kinds of lifestyles. On the one hand were people pinned down by the modern idea of life, and on the other, a whole set of communities untouched by modernity, living a comparatively primitive life on the mountainside," says Anne.

Roman had once travelled overland from India to Russia via Tibet. Now he was all set to drive down from Russia to Kashmir along the Silk Route. Commencing the Silk Route leg of their journey from St Petersburg, they took the traditional land route through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan, halting at the Silk Route's famous stopovers of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Badakhshan. From Kyrgyzstan, the vehicle made its entry into China.

Getting into Xinjiang

He adds, "This time, travelling to China was not easy. Our entry into Xinjiang took around 28 hours at the customs, where all the data from our phones and laptops was downloaded." Anne was unlucky. The Chinese customs officials spotted her pet cat – foreign animals are not allowed into China – and refused her entry.

However, this did not deter Roman from continuing his journey along the Silk Route in China. He drove the truck alone through the famous marketplaces of Urumqi and Kashgar of Xinjiang, before taking the arduous mountain stretches towards Karakoram in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). His road journey took him close to the famous Pangong Lake that straddles India and China in Ladakh.

Entering the Karakoram mountains through the Khunjerab Pass at an elevation of 16,010 ft, Roman steered his vehicle into Gilgit-Baltistan's Hunza valley in present-day PoK. Explains Roman,



Self-drive: "We wanted a vehicle that could negotiate mountains of this height and magnitude and withstand its vagaries. Thankfully, it did." Roman (left) and Anne in Srinagar after completing their journey along the Silk Route. *SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



"At the Balti Fort, I saw an 18th century Russian samovar (copper tea pot). Variants of it are used in Afghanistan and Kashmir." He decided to pick up a 100-year old antique Afghani 'samovar' (a word of Russian origin) from Pakistan's Peshawar. "Sam" means 'self' in Russian and 'Var' means 'cook', he explains.

Samovar is a copper teapot with a chimney at the centre for charcoal. While the Russian samovar has a knob at the bottom, the Kashmiri one has a teapot-like nose at the top. Roman adds, "This is a living example of how much we still have in common despite the borders that have come up."

Roman and Anne met up in Pakistan for the onward journey to India through the Wagah border at Amritsar, and from there to Ladakh via Manali in Himachal Pradesh. The Silk Route journey would have remained incomplete unless they covered Ladakh's Leh and Kargil towns, which were once bustling stopovers for silk-carrying merchants from China. Despite inclement weather in November (snow had already covered the passes connecting China with Gilgit-Baltistan and Himachal Pradesh with Ladakh, while the day temperature hovered below freezing point), Roman was determined to carry the antique samovar for the Central Asian Museum in Leh.

Says Roman, "I feel elated to have brought a samovar for the Leh museum. It would highlight the broken link. In Leh, I realised that the Russian word 'aksakal', which means 'white-beard' and 'wise man', had become the designation for the customs officer who used to check the caravans on the Silk Route in the past. The words and the utensils used here make one feel as if it was only yesterday that the region was open for trade."

A spark in the cold desert

The timing of Roman's offering of an antique samovar to the museum in Leh could not have been more opportune. Ladakh is sparsely populated. Its twin districts of Leh and Kargil have a combined population of just 2.74 lakh people (as in Census 2011) spread across a vast cold desert. Yet the region is astir with people's movements demanding a revival of the old trade routes. The setting up of the Central Asian Museum in Leh, in 2016, on the premises of a 17th

century mosque, stands testimony to the people's attempt to reclaim the past, with an eye on the future.

Back in 2004, in Kargil town, around 200 km from Leh, two brothers, Gulzar Hussain Munshi, 48, and Ajaz Hussain Munshi, 42, decided to sort out the artefacts hidden in their grandfather's inn. The inn had been set up in 1920 and was then known as the Aziz Bhat Sarai. The three-storey building also doubled as a depot for goods, with the ground floor accommodating a stable for traders' horses. The Munshi brothers converted the only surviving inn of the Silk Route in Ladakh into a museum. Gulzar became its director, while Ajaz is its curator.

Named the Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum of Central Asia and Kargil Trade Artefacts, the house of the Munshis has become a major attraction for tourists interested in learning more about the Silk Route. It houses over 30,000 artefacts from the 19th and the early 20th centuries. These include turquoise-studded silver necklaces and engravings from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Khotan and Kashgar, and 17th century carpets from the weavers of Yarkand and Kashgar in Xinjiang. There is also a 17th century gold-plated saddle strap from Yarkand. Early 20th century artefacts include western toiletries such as soap, toothbrushes, and shaving brushes dating back to 1903, 1905, 1926, and 1939 – all imported from England, Germany and the U.S.

Says Ajaz, "After reaching the Mumbai coast, these toiletries travelled all the way to Central Asia through Yarkand, the cold desert of Khotan, and

I am the first Balti woman to take up singing, as it is strongly discouraged by our conservative culture. One day I would like to meet my fans across the LoC.'

SHERINE FATIMA BALTI, Bogdang, Leh



A Kashmiri Samovar, at the Dal lake. *GETTY IMAGES

Kashgar. From the other side, silk and carpets would reach Indian and Western markets." His grandfather, Munshi Aziz Bhat (1880-1950), was a prominent owner of a Silk Route enterprise, Munshi Aziz Bhat And Sons. He adds, "It traded in a number of goods, including silk, rubies, gold, and spices, with its business extending 'in all the four directions'."

Says Ajaz, "I do not see my private museum as a mausoleum of the Silk Route. I see it as heralding a fresh start. The time has come for Kargil to open itself up to Baltistan and Xinjiang again. If travellers like Roman and Anne can make the travel happen again, why can't we, who were to the Silk Route what blood is to a body?"

Hajira Begum, the 104-year-old grandmother of the Munshi brothers, still has letters from 1933 containing details about the stocks of gold, rubies, and silk carried by the horses arriving from different directions. Says Begum, "One horse would carry 40 kg of gold dust. It used to cost ₹12 per kg. I can still smell the spices that criss-crossed these mountains."

The Munshis have already been approached by the Chinese Embassy in India for help in establishing a museum dedicated to the Silk Route. Says Ajaz, "China seems equally interested in re-creating the links. They are in touch with us for the museum."

Hunderman village, the nearest Silk Route point to Kargil town, still bears a great deal of resemblance to Kashgar bazaar in China's Xinjiang. It connects Kargil to Baltistan's Skardu area in PoK, which is less than 5 km from Kargil's main market. For the families here, retelling old tales and legends about trade and travel is a popular pastime on dark winter evenings. These stories, frequently told and retold, have also played a role in sparking the current political movement seeking a renewal of the Silk Route's old linkages.

Sheikh Nazir Mehdi Mohammadi, president of the Anjuman Jamiyat Ulla-

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AJAZ HUSSAIN MUNSHI, Kargil

ma Kargil, a local socio-religious group, is spearheading a campaign to reopen the Kargil-Skardu and Turtuk-Khapolu routes. He says the people of Kargil are being denied their due. Says Mohammadi, "People would be compelled to march towards the Line of Control (LoC) if the Kargil-Skardu and the Turtuk-Khapolu roads are not reopened."

With each passing day, the movement is gaining momentum and support. Feroz Ahmad Khan, chairman of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC)-Kargil, a body set up to administer the region locally, says the time has come to take the battle to the doors of power in New Delhi.

WhatsApp at the border

The advent of Internet and social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp have further strengthened the yearning of the local population to connect with their roots. For instance, Balti, a Tibetic language, is on the wane on the Indian side of the LoC, with only about 9,000 speakers in five villages of the Nubra Valley. But Sherine Fatima Balti, 23, a resident of Leh's Bogdang, a far-off village in the Nubra Valley, has emerged as a singing sensation for the 2.9 lakh Balti-speaking population of Baltistan on the other side of the LoC.

Says Sherine's father and a contractor, Ahmad Shah, 52, "My daughter is followed by 57,000 people on Facebook. Over 90% of her followers are from Baltistan." A comment from Manzoor Hussain Balghari and Ehsan Ali Danish, two well-known lyricists from Baltistan, on Sherine's Facebook page started an unusual musical jugalbandi (union) online. Says Shah, "Balghari and Danish now share their lyrics online with Sherine. She sings them and uploads the videos, which then go viral in Baltistan. Her songs are even aired on the local radio stations there." In January this year, Sherine was conferred the Jammu and Kashmir State Award for Performing Arts.

Adds Shah, "Other Baltistan-based lyricists have also started sharing their lyrics for Sherine to sing." One popular song written by Balghari and sung by Sherine is about the yearning to meet a dear one. "At the end of the day, the sky meets the earth; why can't we too," go the lyrics.

Sherine's songs, 'Grifshat Sula Beik' and 'Tsertragi Jusay Jusay', are runaway hits in PoK. Sherine says, "I am the first

Balti woman to take up singing, as it is strongly discouraged by our conservative culture. One day I would like to meet my fans across the LoC."

Sherine's family, like the 12,000 other families that got divided into Jammu and Kashmir and PoK after Independence, saw the boundary redrawn after the 1971 war. And families again got divided. Says Shah, "Baltistan is just 4 km from Bogdang village. In 1971, we were part of Pakistan for six months during the war before India won us back. It took many divided families 47 years to cover this 4 km distance. Our past is painful. Opening the Turtuk-Khapula road will go a long way in healing the wounds of war here."

Today, WhatsApp helps the divided families exchange videos and see each other by cell phone. It also heightens the longing for a real reunion. For instance, the family of Ghulam Hussain, 42, a social activist, belongs to Thyakshi village in the Nubra Valley. They became residents of India only in 1971, when the Indian Army annexed 804 sq km of territory from Gilgit-Baltistan. Ghulam Qadir, Hussain's uncle, got separated from his family in 1971 and stayed back in Ghanche district on the other side of the LoC, while his wife remained stranded here. Says Hussain, "It took over 12 years to secure a meeting between husband and wife. Now we rely on online video conferencing to see my uncle and aunt, which is not enough." For people in nearby Bogdang village, Hussain's Thyakshi village remained a "mini-Pakistan" for many years.

Locals want tourism to pick up at Turtuk too, like it has at the Wagah border. Says Hussain, "Opening the roads will liberate us. During the winter, it is easier to ferry vegetables from Baltistan than from Leh town."

Ironically, the twin routes of Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawlakote that were opened in 2005 for the divided families of Jammu and Kashmir were of no use for those in Ladakh. Pakistan treats PoK and Gilgit-Baltistan as two separate entities. Says Hussain, "The bus service was limited to the divided families of PoK. So we could not avail it to reach Gilgit-Baltistan."

Kargil saw another shutdown on February 8. Since the announcement of the decision last November to open the Kartarpur Corridor between India and Pakistan, there have been three major rallies in Kargil town, with the protesters pressing for similar arrangements in this region.

Meanwhile, Anne and Roman, having successfully concluded their Silk Route adventure, have already shipped their military truck back to Germany from a Mumbai port. Says Roman reflectively, "Traditions live longer than regimes. Culturally, it will mean a great deal if people are allowed to move freely. I'm sure it will happen sooner or later."