

## Traversing the Karakoram Highway To Karakul Lake

# Wild West Wonders

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Reflections at Karakul.



For many who visit southwestern Xinjiang, the journey to Karakul Lake from Kashgar is a high point, both literally and otherwise. And at 3,600 meters in altitude, the lake is breathtaking in more ways than one, although with a little planning the changeable weather and altitude won't affect one's enjoyment of this spectacular region.

Karakul Lake is situated close to the famed Karakoram Highway, which runs from Kashgar to Islamabad, capital of Pakistan. This awe-inspiring road, an adventure in itself, crosses into Pakistan at 4,800 meters, higher up and farther on from the lake. Many travelers to Karakul continue their journey in this direction, although in winter and early spring the highway is closed by heavy snow. Indeed, inclement weather means the best time to visit is from May to October, but be prepared for all eventualities, whatever the season.

If you dislike tours, then taxi or public bus are the transport alternatives. One daily bus leaves the Kashgar international bus station - the six-hour trip costs around 50 yuan. For those with more time and money, a two or three day trip by taxi is the best option. Negotiate a flat rate fee with a Kashgar taxi driver—800 yuan for the vehicle is reason-



Uygurs Talk Shop, Kashgar.

Upal Market.



able.

Leaving Kashgar, the imposing, snow-capped Pamir Mountains swing into view. As they rear up suddenly from the desert floor like silent sentinels guarding some hidden kingdom, you first appreciate the amazing feat of engineering that is the Karakoram Highway.

After an hour the highway reaches the village of Upal. Here there is an interesting local graveyard behind the tomb of Mahmud Al-Kashgari, a renowned Uygur writer of the 11th century. Situated about three kilometers from the highway, the graveyard is made up of a multitude of crumbling, earthen headstones and tombs of varying ages, and is well worth the short climb and minimal entrance fee to the tomb complex.

Continuing from Upal the highway slowly begins to climb, and the surrounding geology changes. Flanking the road are huge sandstone cliffs, long-eroded by the weather and twisted by unseen natural forces. The subtle red, black and grey hues of these impressive rock formations can be incredibly

beautiful, especially if caught in the right light.

Passing through the border checkpoint at Ghez (passports and border permits essential), the road winds and climbs sharply, and the air becomes noticeably cooler and moister. Gushing mountain torrents cascade from mist-shrouded slopes to accompany the road, and huge boulders balance precariously above on precipitous rock faces.

As the road levels out at the top of the climb, the scenery changes yet again. Clear pools and lakes, sweeping dunes and boulder-strewn plains are ringed by snowy peaks hidden in cloud. The highway is being reconstructed here, and camels and yaks vie



Kashgar kids.

with earth-moving equipment for space next to makeshift and permanent roadside dwellings. If the weather is clear you can catch glimpses of the twin peaks of Kongur (7,719m) and Muztagata (7,546m), which cradle Karakul Lake in their vastness, and give the area a stunning backdrop.

Enclosed by ice mountains, the still, translucent waters of Karakul reflect their surroundings with startling clarity. The color of the water changes according to the sky above—on a clear day Karakul resembles a giant aquamarine jewel descended from the heavens.

Although many visitors choose to overnight in the lakeside yurts, a far more reward-

ing and culturally authentic experience can be had by sleeping in the nearby Kirgiz village of Subash. The spartan nature of the mud-brick living quarters is easily offset by the charming and hospitable nature of the locals, who remain blissfully ignorant of the world outside. Nights around a glowing stove sipping yak butter tea with these delightful people will provide an unforgettable memory. Horses can be hired for a minimal fee, and are a great way to explore the area.

Those seeking tangible reminders of their lakeside experience can purchase some of the hand-made products offered by the villagers, such as rugs, blankets and jewelry. Bargaining is possible, although the nature



Upal Tombs.

Upal Market.



of the surroundings may incline many to loosen the purse strings a little. Sample a unique way of life in this pristine natural environment, and, irrespective of price, you'll feel suitably rewarded. 🇺🇸

Upal Market.

