Even in the Gobi Desert, the Party goes on

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A long plane trip to the far reaches of north-western China isn't far enough to evade frenetic Communist Party centenary celebrations.

To escape the self-congratulatory, fervent and, indeed, reverent adulation over the Communist Party of China's centennial celebrations, it seemed timely to go a long way from Beijing. We went far out west to Dun Huang, a town in the Gobi Desert, some 3½ hours by air.

Dun Huang holds some of the world's great artistic treasures. Its ancient networks of grottoes are still richly adorned with Buddhist frescoes and statuary.

From the fourth century it was a garrison town and staging post for the great caravans along the Silk Road. Outside the town, in the brutal, inhospitable Gobi Desert, the Silk Road bifurcated into its northern and southern arms.

Beyond the administrative complex of Yu Men Guan (Jade Gate Pass) was the deadly Taklamakan Desert, which the two arms of the Silk Road skirted, and beyond that, the barbarian lands of the west.

Late 19th-century European explorers compared the fine talcum powder sands and the massive, shifting, rolling dunes of the Taklamakan to the sea. At the staging post of Dun Huang, a tradition grew by which wealthy merchant traders decorated caves carved into cliffs high above a river valley. They believed that to do so would bring protection from the evil forces beyond. And those that returned decorated the caves to pay thanks for having survived and returned to civilisation.

For a thousand years, Dun Huang was, for the Chinese, the outer edge of civilisation. A section of the western Han Dynasty (206BC – 220AD) "Great Wall" built in about 120BC can still be seen, together with the ruins of massive granaries, armouries and beacon watch towers from the same era. The fortifications and defences provided security but were at times overrun by marauding Hun tribes, Tibetan armies and Islamic warriors.

This was my third visit to Dun Huang in 13 years. Three distinct sites can be visited, the most well known are the Thousand Buddha Caves, or Mo Gao Grottoes. On previous visits, the sites would be clogged with tourist buses disgorging Japanese and Koreans seeking the Buddhist origins of their faiths, as well as US and European visitors.

Today, visitors are mainly Chinese with only a smattering of foreigners who live in China's eastern seaboard cities. In the nine years since my last visit, Chinese domestic tourism has surged, as has interest in Buddhism, and Dun Huang is a must-see destination for believers. It was the start of the school holiday period and families were travelling in numbers.

Much has changed since my last visit. There are new reception centres, high-quality museums, and amenities. Access to the many grottoes is strictly controlled. Numbers permitted to enter are limited to ensure humidity in the caves, in this most arid of places, does not rise to levels that can damage the beautiful ancient frescoes.

In the hot summer evenings, Dun Huang's busy night markets continue to thrive. Beijing's many restaurants from the western areas of China have had to shut down their outside barbecues as part of the ongoing efforts to clean up the city, imposing a dull uniformity. But, in Dun Huang, delicious hot spicy lamb is still roasted outside on skewers and people sit in the lanes eating and drinking beer.

Deep wound

Modernity has also made its presence felt in this ancient Silk Road town. Some 25 kilometres out of the city to the west and visible from the rooftop cocktail bar of the Silk Road Hotel, is the world's largest "super mirror power plant", or Sun Tower.

Commissioned in 2018, it is designed to produce 390 million kilowatts of power annually and save 350,000 metric tonnes of carbon per year. The power lines connecting to the grid in China's east sweep across the desert into the horizon in undulating long ribbons of wire. In the desert's vastness, against the electric blue sky, it glows supernaturally like some alien presence reminiscent of the gleaming monolith in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Dun Huang is also the site of one of the most egregious episodes of European archaeological theft in a tawdry history of colonial powers stealing ancient treasures.

In 1907, the Hungarian-born British adventurer, Aurel Stein, bribed a local monk to gain access to cave 17 (as it is now known) which contained a mass of ancient manuscripts, silk banners, and other artefacts that had been sealed for more than 1000 years. The haul included the world's first known printed book, from the fifth century AD. These he loaded onto his camels and shipped to British India and then onto the British Museum in London.

From the late 19th century until the First World War, explorers of the old Silk Road from Britain, France, Germany, the US, and Japan raided artefacts long buried under the shifting sands of the Taklamakan Desert, carting off vast quantities of rare and precious frescoes, statues and manuscripts for their museums. It was a footnote to colonial geopolitical competition and arrogance.

It is a wound deeply felt in China. Curiously, in a time of heightened Chinese nationalism, the fine museum in Dun Huang simply notes the fact that the manuscripts of Dun Huang were taken by Stein. Our tour guides were much less restrained in their commentary.

Party time

Even in this remote corner of China, with its frontier history and far from the buttoned-down, assiduously choreographed celebrations of the Party's centennial in Beijing, the event was of course also being marked.

The day before the big event, in a corner of the open-air market, a choir was practising singing tributes to the Party. Behind them, large televisions were continuously showing patriotic films of Chinese resistance to Japanese occupiers. The late afternoon was hot and dry and plenty of long-neck beer bottles were open on the table at hand.

Even tiny, parched, sand-blasted hamlets in the Gobi Desert, had the same standardised signs and slogans, posters, and community events to celebrate the big occasion. The Party is everywhere.

Still, if one is to be stuck somewhere in the COVID-19-constrained world in which we are now living, then China is a pretty good option. The country is huge with a lifetime of rich, compelling travel experiences.

In China, as in Australia, face masks are mandatory on planes and in airports, as well as in shopping malls. It is also necessary to show a green QR code before

entering an airport and when checking in for a flight or hotel room. The QR code also identifies if you have been vaccinated.

The government claims to have vaccinated more than 1 billion of its citizens. The process is efficiently run. I've had mine with one of the three local vaccines.

As for their efficacy, it is something detailed studies will have to determine in time. Anecdotally, in my case, I had no side effects and despite the nurse's stern recommendation not to drink alcohol for 24 hours, I had some wine with lunch immediately afterwards with no adverse reactions.

Nonetheless, things aren't quite what they were before COVID-19. The airports and railway stations are nowhere near as crowded and jostling as they were 18 months ago. The planes and trains seem full, but clearly significantly fewer people are travelling. And China remains closed to foreign tourists.

Geoff Raby was Australia's ambassador to the People's Republic of China, 2007-11. His book, China's Grand Strategy and Australia's Future in the New Global Order, was published on 3 November by MUP. He is also an Associate of China Matters.