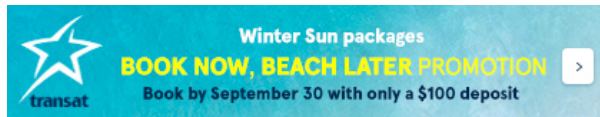




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## THE SILK ROAD

Secrets, legends, tea and porcelain

Steve Gillick

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02 MAY 2016: Huang Shougong, a wealthy landlord in the city of Quanzhou in Fujian Province looked over the orchard of mulberry trees that were integral to his lucrative silk production business. That night he had a strange dream. A monk approached to beg that the land be donated for the building of a temple. Shougong suggested, "If my mulberry trees bloom lotus blossoms, I'll grant you the land". And wouldn't you know it? A few days

later the mulberry trees were festooned with white lotus flowers, a Buddhist symbol of purity. The land was donated and the Lotus Flower Temple, later renamed the Kai Yuan Temple, still stands 1300 years later.



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And even the Temple's twin pagodas, a symbol of the city of Quanzhou, have their little secrets.

With the idea of viewing the pagodas from the heavens, the two towers were meant to resemble the eyes of a catfish; a creature known for never sleeping, and so the city would always appear to be awake, active and vigilant.

But also with the belief that evil forces could spread a net over the city, anchored to the surrounding mountains, the pagodas would serve the purpose of breaking through the net and allowing good luck and economic progress to flow down from the heavens.

And apparently it worked! We often hear about the land-based Silk Road, a network of trade routes

that stretched from China, through Central Asia and on to the Mediterranean, but with the growing sophistication of sailing ships and sailing skills, the seas became the highways of the ancient world, and the city of Quanzhou became one of the world's busiest ports during the Song and Yuan Dynasties (960 through to 1368 CE). Even Marco Polo set sail from Quanzhou on one of his adventures into Mongolia.

Trading on a global scale meant that people of all nationalities and religions arrived in Quanzhou, including Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists and more. The grave markers and tablets displayed in the Quanzhou Maritime Museum testify to this diversity. In fact it's the only museum in the country dedicated to the history of foreign cultural exchanges.

The museum also contains a fascinating collection of model and reproduction ancient ships and vessels, including the 13th century Junk that was discovered in 1973. It carried silk, china and tea from Fuzhou Province to Southeast Asia and returned with copper coins and a cargo of incense wood, before it foundered.

At an evening dinner sponsored by the Fujian Tourism Administration we raised our glasses to toast the city's 2100 year history before enjoying 'Buddha Jumping Over the Wall' Soup, made with chicken, duck, pork, seafood and mushrooms. A legend relates that when monks smelled the rich, delicious broth, they abandoned their vegetarian practices to try it. We tasted the soup and couldn't help but believe the tale!

We also had the opportunity to sample some of the products that literally put China on the map.

Jasmine tea, black tea, and oolong tea all originated in Fujian Province.

A visit to Xia Mei Cun (Plum Village) in the Mt. Wuyishan area revealed its past as one of the departure points for bamboo boats carrying tea to the north of China. The village is a time portal with 300 year old buildings, small bridges crossing the nearly dried up river way, groups of elderly men playing cards, and gatherings of women aggressively clinking mah jong tiles.

Our tea adventure continued with a visit to the Nine Dragon Vale, located in a park setting with massive mountain walls, tea terraces and gardens of Oolong tea plants. We were on a mission to pay homage to “The King of Teas”: Big Red Robe.

After a short walk we saw what looked like a hedge on a mountainside but was in fact the maternal tree (the motherlode, if you will) of where the extremely rare Big Red Robe Tea was grown for nearly 360 years. Our guide told us about the ‘almost’ Big Red Robe diplomatic crisis of 1972.

During the process of setting up the details for Richard Nixon’s visit to China, Premier Zhou En Lai gave Secretary of State Henry Kissinger some tea as a gift. Mao Tse-Tung figured that he had to give President Nixon something more impressive. At the time there were only 400 grams of Big Red Robe tea available in the country, and Mao decided to give Nixon 200 grams (worth about \$200,000). The story goes that Nixon looked at the small gift and was upset, until Zhou En Lai took him aside and explained the significance of Mao’s munificence! The potential tempest in a teacup was avoided.

In Fujian, we had the opportunity to climb Mt. Wuyi's Tian You Peak, a magnificent hike with great views, and then a few days later in neighbouring Jiangxi Province, we spent a day climbing the thousands of steps up and down Mt. Shanqingshan, an absolutely amazing adventure. Several hundred photos of fantastical pillars and peaks testify to the sheer beauty of the experience.

And it was in Jiangxi that our journey on the Maritime Silk Road made a dramatic splash (so to speak). While exploring the city of Jingdezhen we discovered that the original name of the city was "Changnan". If it sounds like "China" then you're correct. The city was the home of Chinese porcelain and to those with whom China traded, the name of the porcelain became substituted for the name of the city, and then transferred to the name of the country itself. This is where the name China originated!

In the city's historic Gu Yan ( Yao) Factory, we were able to get up close and personal with the china industry, as this is where porcelain has been made for over 1000 years—and continues to this day. We watched skilled craftspeople create vases, cups and bowls with artistic mastery, and then we visited the four historic kilns that represent the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, with each successive kiln becoming larger and more efficient over the evolution of the ceramics industry.

It was explained that historically, four criteria determined what was acceptable in the production of china: Be white as Jade, Bright as Mirror, Thin as Paper and Sound as Qing (a porcelain musical instrument that makes the same clear ringing sound as when you wet your fingers and run them around the rim of a wine glass). The entire

experience was fascinating.

Special interest (niche) travel is one of the key components that influences a client's decision to travel to, and engage with a specific destination. China's Fujian and Jiangxi Provinces are a real find for those seeking small villages, towering mountains, historic temples, fields of tea, stunning ceramics from ancient dynasties, memorable interactions with locals, delicious cuisine and breathtaking photo opportunities.

The next time a client asks about a waterways adventure, why not suggest something with a difference: a journey on China's Maritime Silk Road.

## The Silk Road



Passing the time in the ancient village of Xia Mei Cun



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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