



# **Journeys on the Silk Road: A Desert Explorer, Buddha's Secret Library, and the Unearthing of the World's Oldest Printed Book**

*Joyce Morgan , Conrad Walters*

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When a Chinese monk broke into a hidden cave in 1900, he uncovered one of the world's great literary secrets: a time capsule from the ancient Silk Road. Inside, scrolls were piled from floor to ceiling, undisturbed for a thousand years. The gem within was the Diamond Sutra of AD 868. This key Buddhist teaching, made 500 years before Gutenberg inked his press, is the world's oldest printed book.

The Silk Road once linked China with the Mediterranean. It conveyed merchants, pilgrims and ideas. But its cultures and oases were swallowed by shifting sands. Central to the Silk Road's rediscovery was a man named Aurel Stein, a Hungarian-born scholar and archaeologist employed by the British service.

Undaunted by the vast Gobi Desert, Stein crossed thousands of desolate miles with his fox terrier Dash. Stein met the Chinese monk and secured the Diamond Sutra and much more. The scroll's journey—by camel through arid desert, by boat to London's curious scholars, by train to evade the bombs of World War II—merges an explorer's adventures, political intrigue, and continued controversy.

The Diamond Sutra has inspired Jack Kerouac and the Dalai Lama. Its journey has coincided with the growing appeal of Buddhism in the West. As the Gutenberg Age cedes to the Google Age, the survival of the Silk Road's greatest treasure is testament to the endurance of the written word.

## **Journeys on the Silk Road: A Desert Explorer, Buddha's Secret Library, and the Unearthing of the World's Oldest Printed Book Details**

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## **From Reader Review Journeys on the Silk Road: A Desert Explorer, Buddha's Secret Library, and the Unearthing of the World's Oldest Printed Book for online ebook**

### **Sarah Purcell says**

Fascinating History that reads like a novel!

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### **Ryan says**

Journeys on the Silk Road recounts the rediscovery of a printed copy of The Diamond Sutra – a revered Zen Buddhist text – in a hidden chamber at the Mogao Caves in China's Taklamakan Desert at the turn of the 20th century. Printed in 868CE, this copy of The Diamond Sutra is the oldest known printed and dated book in the world, predating the Gutenberg Bible by 600 years and any wooden block printing in Europe by 500 years. It was also printed on paper 300 years before paper was ever used in Europe.

The Diamond Sutra recounts a teaching the Buddha gave a pupil in a garden near the ancient Indian city of Sravasti. It is about the importance of non-attachment and the emptiness of all phenomena.

Perhaps to a greater extent, however, this book is about Aurel Stein, an archeologist who brought this copy of The Diamond Sutra to England for study. Stein was born in 1862 in Budapest and got his PhD in the foreign languages of Greek, Latin, Persian and Sanskrit. He later immigrated to London, became a British citizen and took a job with the British Raj in India. Stein then began taking time away from work to explore the old Silk Road.

The Silk Road was first established in 100BCE by Zhang Qian who was sent on a disastrous and ultimately 13 year diplomatic mission by Emperor Wudi of the Han dynasty. Qian returned to China with tales of exotic foods and superior horses in far off central and south Asia, spurring interest in a trade route. Buddhism soon spread from India along the Silk Road and morphed and splintered in form along the way. Over a 1000 years later the Silk Road was abandoned when sea trade became dominant.

On his second multi-year expedition along the old Silk Road, Stein was racing against French and German competition because it was the era during which archaeological treasures were considered great colonial prizes of prestige. During this expedition, Stein discovered Buddhist art work in Miran in modern day China that was painted by a Roman artist and showed western influences such as angel wings.

Stein eventually reached the Mogao Caves – then known as the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas – near Dunhuang in 1906. The Mogao Caves were originally created when a travelling monk named Lezun had a vision of a thousand Buddhas in 366CE and carved a small cave in the cliffs to live in. As word spread, more caves were excavated and merchants passing through would pay for expansions and murals within the caves for good luck in their travels across the desert. The caves survived the persecution of Buddhism under Emperor Wuzong around 845CE only because the region was briefly controlled by newly Buddhist Tibet at the time.

Wang Yuanlu, a Daoist monk, rediscovered the long abandoned caves in the 1890s and committed his life to being their guardian and trying to restore them. In 1900, Wang discovered a small chamber in one of the caves that had been sealed up in the 11th century and was filled with thousands of ancient scrolls, including

Buddhist sutras and texts on astronomy, medicine, domestic disputes, funeral prayers and art. After years of unsuccessfully trying to gain interest in the scrolls by local government officials, Wang resealed the chamber.

Stein learned of the hidden chamber and convinced Wang to give him access and to sell him many of the ancient scrolls due to their shared admiration of Xuanzang, a monk who in 629CE traveled to India where he studied Buddhism for 16 years and returned with original Buddhist text for translation, including The Diamond Sutra.

Returning with his loot, Stein took a shortcut across the middle of the desert and he and his men nearly died of dehydration and hunger after getting lost. When crossing the mountains back into central Asia, Stein got frostbite in his toes, several of which had to be amputated.

Stein wrote a book about his adventures and was knighted, which was unusual for the time because he was a Hungarian born Jew. His "discoveries" are housed both in London and in New Delhi. During WWII, the London portion was hidden in a Welsh tunnel to protect them from German aerial bombardment. Stein died in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1943 at the age 80 and is largely forgotten today.

Other foreigners took more antiquities from the Mogao Caves after Stein and the White Russians fleeing revolution in the 1920s camped in the caves and did considerable damage. By the 1930s, the Chinese government prohibited the removal of archaeological artifacts and now, understandably, considers Stein a cultural thief.

The end of the book becomes a bit divergent as it discusses the rise of Buddhism in the west, including its influence on the beat poets of the 50s and writers like Kerouac whose favorite text was The Diamond Sutra. It also discusses modern efforts to preserve The Diamond Sutra and the Mogao Caves.

Despite the fact that the authors of this book apparently had a hard time deciding whether the focus of the book should be on Stein, the Mogao Caves generally, or The Diamond Sutra specifically, I really enjoyed it. I love the age of archaeological discovery around the turn of the 20th century and this story of adventure through the Taklamakan Desert which includes lost forts, hidden chambers and ancient Buddhist scrolls was thrilling for me.

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## Diane S ? says

3.5 I am not very familiar with Buddhism, but my son recently went on a ten day Buddhist retreat, and no he is not becoming a Buddhist but he wanted to get deeper into the practice of meditation. So when I saw this book I thought it would provide me with some history and some interesting idioms of their practice.

This journey made by Aurel Stein, was a major success, uncovering a library cave that was filled with scripts 10 ft. high. The cave and others were under the protection of a monk, so there was some smooth negotiating that had to happen. What he uncovered made history, but I won;t go into that here because it is stated in the synopsis.

I found much of this book fascinating, what it took to prepare for the journey, the history of Buddhism which covered much I never knew. Never knew the extent of coverage this religion had at one time. The negotiating and taking these massive finds home, protecting them from the Nazi's and so much more. For the most part this was easy to read, but at times it bogged down in details that I did not really care about. All in all a good and astonishing book.

## Tasia says

Though the beginning is a bit slow, once you get into the midst of discovery, things really draw you in. I had been under the impression that the first book coincided with the first printing press, but oh no-- the Diamond Sutra is indeed the first book. A very good read for anyone interested in archeology, anthropology, or who want to understand just what early twentieth century scholars were up against. And the Germans, man! I thought Indiana Jones was just making them into twisty-mustache villains, but they really were serious academic competitors. Gotta watch out for everyone else trying to make history as well.

My only wish is that we could better understand other parts of this story (the sides that aren't European), but with no written records made by those interacting with Stein, it's rather difficult to fully understand or portray their thoughts on the matter. Everything has to be inferred from Stein's letters and journals. Seeing as it can't be helped, I can't hold it against the writers.

Good book indeed.

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## Lynnet says

Interesting and engaging, but the western-centrism throughout the books becomes increasingly depressing in its final chapters.

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## Tatiana says

For those who like Central Asian or Great Game history, I recommend this book. It's a bit hard to describe-- it's part Buddhist History, part Great Game History, part museum collection descriptions. The story centers on the 1907 expedition of Sir Aurel Stein into Chinese controlled Central Asia and his discovery of a cache of ancient Buddhist manuscripts, one of which is the oldest printed book in the world (the Diamond Sutra). You not only learn about his journey, which is told in a very readable and captivating manner, but also the history of Buddhism in Central Asia, a bit on the Great Game in the early 1900s, and what happened to the vast treasures he brought back from his expedition.

Many books focus on expeditions as the climax of their narrative, then hurriedly close the narrative with a one to two sentence explanation of what happened next. This book dedicates several chapters to telling us how the Diamond Sutra was identified, where it ended up, and what happened to all the characters we had come to know--including the natives that made up his expedition party, which is so refreshing! A really wonderful read about a patrimony and time on European history long forgotten and archived in the bowels of European museums.

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## Peter Clothier says

We look askance today at what was done in the 19th century in the name of empire and world-wide dominion. The European powers engaged in the Great Game of colonial expansion felt free to wander the

globe appropriating whole countries, peoples and natural resources to enhance their political and economic power. By the same token, they swallowed up whole cultural heritages, plundering, crating up, and shipping artifacts back to the great museums in Paris, St. Petersburg, Berlin, London, and other capitals. Shamefully, my own country of origin was a leader of this pack of thieves. And America was no slouch. Take a stroll through the glorious Metropolitan Museum in New York City: it's impossible not to feel a pang of guilt along with all the indubitable aesthetic joys.

It is this history that forms the background for *Journeys on the Silk Road*, by Joyce Morgan and Conrad Walters. This is the story of Marc Aurel Stein's marvelous, often dangerous journey in 1906, as he followed the Silk Road across Asia from Kashgar to Dunhuang, the site of The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, plundering gaily along the way. His ultimate target was not the gold or precious art objects some sought, but rather a fabled stash of ancient scrolls, hidden away for centuries in one of those thousand caves, guarded at the time by a solitary abbot, Wang, who after much diplomatic persuasion, proved willing to sell a vast number of them for a handful of British pounds and shillings. He used the money, it seems, to further his own reckless and, to Stein, dreadfully tasteless "restoration" of the caves. The loot included the oldest dated book in history, a Chinese wood-block printed version of the Diamond Sutra, made in the year 868--a long, long time before Gutenberg and his Bible.

Stein was not alone in his quest. A part of the drama of this story is the race against competitors from France, Germany and Russia to be the first at the scene--much like the contemporaneous race between Scott and Amundson to reach the South Pole. There was national pride involved, along with the competitive spirit among males. It was the last great era of earth exploration--a spirit that now finds renewal in the exploration of space--and Stein, as he's portrayed in this book, was if nothing else an intrepid explorer. He sacrificed virtually every other aspect of life to this grand pursuit, and he devoted himself to it through every injury and illness, every frustration and disappointment, every roadblock and dead end. The hazards of travel on camel, horseback, pony and donkey are barely imaginable to those of us who are used to jet planes and motorized vehicles, and of course the ubiquitous comfort of modern hotels and restaurants. Morgan and Walters's narrative takes us through the sands of the Asian deserts, the occasional oases along the way, and the bustling cities where merchants ply their trade. It's an invigorating, sometimes humbling step back in time.

I have to say that the adventure does slow, at times, to a bit of a plod along these "Journeys." The book is at its best when it arrives at its destination, describing those thousand caves and the story of their centuries-long creation by a succession of Buddhist monks. The statuary, the murals, the paintings on silk are all a testament to their dedication to the Buddha's teachings and their desire to understand them better, and to pass on their knowledge and tradition to others. Successive invasions by Western archeologists and explorers like Stein have left them depleted; the depredations by a variety of marauders, including Muslims incensed by images of a different faith as well as thieves and vandals have caused damage that can never be repaired. Much of the ancient art and documentary remains are scattered, now, throughout the world, transformed from devotional to academic and aesthetic purpose. The caves are now under the protection of the Chinese government, their fragile integrity threatened by the constant stream of hundreds of thousands of tourists.

The book ends with a series of chapters updating the reader on the history of the documents thus "liberated" from the caves they kept hidden for so many centuries, including a fascinating World War II sojourn in a special cavern dug into the Welsh mountains near Aberystwyth. There is a good faith, co-operative international effort to bring all the scrolls back together "under one roof," as it were, on the Internet--a space where they are at once entirely protected from theft and vandalism and at the same time readily accessible to anyone with a computer. Meanwhile, of course, the Diamond Sutra exists also in the hearts and minds of those who love this gem of Buddhist wisdom, and who spread its teaching about the nature of reality and the truth of impermanence. A printed version made in ninth century China will remain a transient object, no matter the human efforts to preserve it. Assuming that our species itself survives its own insanity, the essence of its wisdom will outlast it.

Kudos to the authors, then, from bringing us this morality tale, reminding us at once of the nobility of the human spirit in its endeavor to seek truth wherever we can find it, no matter what the effort or sacrifice. And for reminding us, too, of how we can so easily go astray in our pursuit of what we assume to be the good--and end up causing more harm than we had intended.

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### **Viviane Crystal says**

Here is the account about Aurel Stein, the archaeologist, and his dog, Dash, and their astounding journey across what is known as the Silk Road, a journey traversing China, Tibet, India and more lands. Funded by the British government, Stein's job was to look for valuable pieces that would add to Great Britain's museum collection; but Stein's interests lay in a different direction. So he found no difficulty finding enough "gems," figuratively speaking to make his funders happy. But the rest of the story is magical and adventurous, and Morgan & Walters leave no stone unturned (literally and figuratively) in describing the preparation, journey, and eventual findings that riveted Stein. Indeed those discoveries are still touching the lives of millions of readers, explorers, adventurers, and tourists, professional and lay included.

The authors describe how Stein's first journeys to Central Asia led him to wonder where the first Buddhist writings could be found and how that religion was transformed as it began in India and evolved into its state in China. As the journey across deserts and mountains was so vigorous and life-threatening, the authors describe how selective Stein was in choosing his aides. Sometimes the decisions proved pivotal and once almost disastrous. The descriptions are so vivid the reader can feel the storms, heat, brutal cold and other forces of nature such as avalanches that defy the imagination but which were survived by Stein and his team.

Stein first is entranced by the artifacts inside Lahore Museum, ancient Buddhist statues, amazingly with decidedly Western features. Then the murder of the Scottish adventurer, Andrew Dalglish, makes Stein realize what treasures existed so that others would murder anyone seeking to find those treasures. Soon the competition of others and the need for funding fueled his desire to get moving on this treasure hunt to the mysterious settlement of Loulan that another adventurer, Sven Hedin, had discovered in 1899. The Buddhist images and wooden documents, as well as a form of early paper kindled Stein's fascination and goals.

The book also describes the writings of Xuanzang who taught Buddhism and wrote about these teachings on scrolls, all based on his journeys to India. This was the gold mine hidden in a cave which Stein was seeking and which he eventually found.

It is impossible to cover all the aspects of this topic for which Stein dedicated his life. Every chapter of this momentous book is an adventure story that will rivet any reader, whether or not he or she has any interest in this subject. Indeed it reads like adventure fiction as well as historical fiction. The scholarly reader will be as satisfied as well as the lay reader is with the depth and diverse approaches to this comprehensive subject. Morgan & Walters have created a classic work of archaeological study that will be relished inside and outside the academic and archaeological world. Superbly crafted, mesmerizing, and informative! A must read for those who love great books!

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### **Rachel says**

I absolutely loved this book that I randomly picked up in the new nonfiction section at the library! It was a narrative nonfiction about Hungarian/British explorer Sir Aurel Stein and his now famous discovery of the Diamond Sutra (the world's oldest printed book - a woodblock printed source from the 8th century) and a

secret library of Buddhist texts that he discovered in Dunhuang, China in 1911. The story is set in Chinese Turkestan and charts his journey to the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas, and back to India and then London (the British Museum). The colorful cast of characters that accompanied Stein included his Turkish and Indian workers (porters, surveyor, cook and camel-man) and Chinese translator, all of which are carefully documented in the book, along with photographs. I also liked that the authors included their entire extensive bibliographies, so I could get further information on the topic, several of which were also mentioned multiple times in the text. The book was definitely a nice trip to another land and time, an exotic locale to be sure, and one that I would love to hear more about. One of the coolest things mentioned was the creation of this international digital resource for Silk Road manuscripts/scrolls and paintings, The International Dunhuang Project ([www.idp.bl.uk](http://www.idp.bl.uk)), which has over 400,000 images including the Diamond Sutra itself (which had to be removed from the public eye of the British Library to be completely conserved, and created this project to deal in part with requests to examine it). The information on the British collections relate primarily to the Stein collections. Highly recommended, 5 stars.

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## **Bettie? says**

*Description: When a Chinese monk broke into a hidden cave in 1900, he uncovered one of the world's great literary secrets: a time capsule from the ancient Silk Road. Inside, scrolls were piled from floor to ceiling, undisturbed for a thousand years. The gem within was the Diamond Sutra of AD 868. This key Buddhist teaching, made 500 years before Gutenberg inked his press, is the world's oldest printed book.*

*The Silk Road once linked China with the Mediterranean. It conveyed merchants, pilgrims and ideas. But its cultures and oases were swallowed by shifting sands. Central to the Silk Road's rediscovery was a man named Aurel Stein, a Hungarian-born scholar and archaeologist employed by the British service.*

*Undaunted by the vast Gobi Desert, Stein crossed thousands of desolate miles with his fox terrier Dash. Stein met the Chinese monk and secured the Diamond Sutra and much more. The scroll's journey—by camel through arid desert, by boat to London's curious scholars, by train to evade the bombs of World War II—merges an explorer's adventures, political intrigue, and continued controversy.*

**Opening: An unforgiving wind blew clouds of dust and sand as if every grain were aimed at one tired man astride a weary pony. He urged his mount forward, determined to keep a promise. He had set out long before dawn, leaving behind his team of men and pack animals, knowing he would have to cover in one day ground that would typically take three. Traveling through the heat and glare of the Central Asian desert, he now looked on his vow—to arrive that day on the doorstep of friends in a distant oasis—as uncharacteristically rash. But for seventeen hours he pressed on across parched wastes of gravel and hard-baked earth.**

You can read the Diamond Sutra online [here](#)

Paul Pelliot (1878-1945), a French Sinologist translating.

From 2004: *The Diamond Sutra, which bears the date 868 AD, was found in a walled-up cave in Dunhuang, north-west China, in 1907, along with other printed items.*

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### **Samantha says**

A history of the discovery of the world's oldest printed book - the Diamond Sutra, and the Westerner who took the book from the Chinese and brought it to England. I wanted to read this book to learn more about the history of the Silk Road region. While the book did provide some of this history, it also provided a great deal of information on the history and spread of Buddhism. It was a bit on the dry side, but I did appreciate that the author was sensitive to the negative impacts of Western explorers taking foreign "treasures" away and devoted text to discussing the issue.

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### **Louise says**

I was a bit concerned on starting this book that, although there appeared to be lots of quotes, there was little referencing. However, on investigation, the authors had opted for endnotes, rather than footnotes. Relax of scholarly outrage!

Part biography, part history, part travel/journeys/exploration, this book centres on the discovery of the oldest, dated, printed 'book' - the Diamond Sutra. Starting with Aurel Stein's preparations for his exploration into the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts, the authors take you with Stein on his perilous journey through Turkestan and China.

The authors have chosen a delicate touch when dealing with the removal of antiquities, such as scrolls, statues, and even wall murals - by neither condoning nor condemning such practices - but explaining that the Western world of the time believed they were the only ones in a position to protect such history.

To date, the Diamond Sutra has survived a millenium sealed in a cave in the Gobi desert, riots and unrest in Dunhuang, a perilous journey to Britain and the British Museum, and evacuation to Wales during World War II.

A good book, well written, sensitive and informative.

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### **Susan says**

I liked it well enough. It took a few years to finish it, but kept putting it down. Well worth the effort of reading it though. I'd like to learn more about the Silk Road - this was a good introduction.

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### **Vidya Tiru says**

Books like this should replace history text books – this makes history oh so interesting. At least, excerpts from books like this should be included in the stuffy history books.

This book follows Aurel Stein on his greatest expedition – his adventurous journey across the famed, ancient, unknown Silk Road – in his quest for the past. Each chapter of this wonderful book relates an adventure, a story further into history, or a peek into the Stein's future after the momentous discovery of the Diamond Sutra as well as the future of the antiquities he had gathered. The reader gets a clear glimpse of the wonders, the hardships, and the preparation that Stein and his trusted group of assistants must have undergone as part of this epic journey.

The authors' vast and detailed research is evident in every page of the book. The authors' introduction of Stein in the first chapters of the book explains his actions and decisions to the reader in the later chapters. His dedication, determination, strength, his natural ability to work with people considering he was a very private man, as well as his amazing, almost super-human capability to work under any and all strenuous circumstances served him well in his travels.

Stein worked on tips from locals and trusted his instincts that finally led to the The Caves of a Thousand Buddhas after having crossed the Silk Road with his trusted team of men, and his faithful terrier Dash II. The Silk Road was definitely a road less traveled for the last few centuries and he overcame all the obstacles it threw at him to reach his destination. He recovered a treasure – scrolls, manuscripts, silk paintings, and more – by persuading the Abbott at the temple to part with them. Unknown to him, the treasure included the Diamond Sutra – now considered the world's oldest printed book.

The description of his journey to and from the caves, the journey of the treasures he obtained to Britain, the geography of the areas, and the history of the Silk Road and the caves are all fascinating – educational and exciting at the same time! The authors intersperse the book with interesting anecdotes from Stein's writings and this adds to the book.

The caves themselves are now under the Chinese government after having been literally asleep for centuries and the authors write, "But having awoken, the danger now is that the caves will be loved to death." The treasures, after long negotiations between the Indian government and Britain, now are displayed in museums in India and Britain. The Diamond Sutra and other manuscripts all remain in Britain. Stein himself, though, is barely recognized today but his work ensured that the Diamond Sutra, which was written to be freely available to all – today – it really is.

The book delivers generous doses of adventure and history, facts told like fantastic fiction, education and excitement with ease. Even if you have never heard of Stein, the Silk Road, or the Diamond Sutra, or feel no need to know about them, you should go ahead and read this book – you will be drawn in immediately. This is a must-read for everyone.

This is one of the first non-fiction books I have fallen in love with. A big thank you to Leyane Jerejian of FBS Associates for reaching out to me to review this book and providing me a copy of the book. This review of the book is completely my honest opinion after reading it and was in no way influenced by others.

And Aurel Stein turned 150 years old on Nov 26th!

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## **Suzanne says**

*"When a Chinese monk broke into a hidden cave in 1900, he uncovered one of the world's great literary secrets: a time capsule from the ancient Silk Road. Inside, scrolls were piled from floor to ceiling, undisturbed for a thousand years. The gem within was the Diamond Sutra of AD 868. This key Buddhist teaching, made 500 years before Gutenberg inked his press, is the world's oldest printed book."*

The above excerpt is the promo piece from Goodreads, and if that definitely sparked my interest in this book. During the early 20th century, treasure seekers were spanning the globe looking for antiquities of value. Aurel Stein was an archeologist and scholar employed by the British Government, when he set of on the ancient Silk Road, in search of fame and treasure. He found both when his investigations led him to this monk and the cave, which is part of the Mogao Caves (aka The Thousand Buddha Caves), and is today a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

I loved this book for so many reasons. Morgan's writing was both informative and entertaining. There was a real sense of place and a real sense of adventure here. I felt like I was struggling through the barren desert right along with Stein, and I felt the thrill of discovery as well. I took the time to Google the Mogao Caves and saw the photographs of this amazing religious site. I can only imagine what Stein must have felt. It was a tremendous find. 4 1/2 stars.

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