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Travel Scene

Iris Sanderson Jones editor

Road trip to China passes silks, spices

(AP)— A gorgeous district the size of Switzerland has been opened up by the Karakoram Highway, the highest highway in the world, running from Pakistan to China.

This highway at the top of the world runs 798 miles, according to an article in the current issue of Connoisseur, following the fabled silk route Marco Polo used to bring back to Europe the silks and spices of Cathay.

Alexander the Great overran the area from the northwest and Genghis Khan, from the northeast. It was here Buddha's early disciples found serenity.

The new highway ends the modern isolation of this remote area, encircled by three mountain ranges — the Hindu Kush, the Karakoram and the Himalaya. The best way to tour is with a car, driver and personalized itinerary.

The necessary tourist infrastructure exists. Inns are clean and comfortable; western food is served on request. The innkeeper, often a former local ruler, can help you pursue such interests as archaeology, polo, fishing and trekking.

The trip goes through a region off northern Pakistan, bordered on the west and northwest by Afghanistan, by China on the northeast and by India on the east.

For a taste of Moghul culture before embarking, spend a couple of days in Lahore.

The Lahore Fort was built by Emperor Akbar as a palace with hundreds of marbled chambers, staircases and passageways. Its Sheesh Mahal, or hall of mirrors, were the gilded quarters of the empress and harem.

Other points of interest include the Badshahi Mosque, the largest in South Asia, whose courtyard can hold more than 100,000 souls, and the Shalimar Garden.

Rudyard Kipling's father used to curate the contents of the Lahore Central Museum.

Shah Jahan, who built the Taj Mahal, erected Jahanghir's Tomb for his father.

The highway begins at Abbottabad and heads into the Swat Valley, crossing a bridge that spans the Kabul and Indus Rivers. They flow side by side, one coal black, the other bright blue.

In Saidu Sharif is the Hotel Royal Palace, once the summer home of the last ruler of the kingdom of Swat.

Until the 1960s, regions like Swat were feudal places ruled by rajahs. When Zulfikar Ali Bhutto rose to power in the 1970s, he confiscated the rajahs' allowances. The palaces, which had required enormous upkeep, were vacated and the male members of the royal families often became managers of inns.

The route then follows the rocky Swat River into the mountains and the town of Bahrain, where shawled or veiled women shuttle over the bridge onto the high street alongside tribesmen with rifles slung over their shoulders.

From Besham, on the banks of the roaring Indus River, the country is dry and barren and Nanga Parbat peak, at 26,600 feet one of the world's highest mountains, comes into view. It seems to dangle from the clouds like a shard.

In the town of Chilas, rock carvings look like ancient graffiti, bearing scripts from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages.

Gilgit, once the main transit center of the silk route, remains the most bustling town on the highway, mostly because of agriculture.

On to Nagar, where you can see three sets of mountain ranges. The Nagar region was the model of James Hilton's Shangri-La in "Lost Horizons."

"No, the people of the Hunza Valley do not live to be 120 years old," the Mir or rajah told Mark Ginsburg in Connoisseur." An Englishman spread that rumor 80 years ago."

From the Hunza Valley, the road enters China and ends at Kashgar.

Half Dome mountain in Yosemite National Park, Calif., rises almost 5,000 feet above the Yosemite Valley and Merced River. The granite domes are unsurpassed in number and variety.

Yosemite towers with snow-capped peaks to settle down in the valley

By Doris Scharfenberg
special writer

Doris Scharfenburg of Farmington Hills recently attended an environmental conference in Yosemite National Park. She and her fellow travel writer conferees met with a Sierra Club representative, the Yosemite Fund chairmen and executives of the Curry Company, which runs the Yosemite concessions. Here is her report on what she found in the Yosemite Valley during a single day: Yosemite's 100th birthday.

SEVEN A.M., Oct. 1, Yosemite Valley; I was stepping out into a perfection of mornings. Crisp air, towering pines, glimpses of wonder. The sun, coming from behind Half Dome, sent tides of light across the soaring cliff face of El Capitan, and there was even a pale Ansel Adams moon hanging over a high ridge.

The valley, core and soul of the vast Yosemite National Park, is the Sistine Chapel of the American outdoors. Today would be a special day.

By 7:30 a.m., you could feel the bustle. Campers and cars were deep into their ritual search and maneuver for parking spaces. Tour buses were loading at Yosemite Lodge and Ahwahnee Hotel; cafeterias were full.

On that morning, workers in Sentinel Meadow gathered to put up a speaker's platform and press bleachers. Centennial celebration ceremonies would begin at noon, remembering 100 years of Yosemite's status as a National Park.

One Hundred Years is a puny handle to place on a splendor left by glaciers and too timeless to grasp. This occasion was really going to be a tribute to the piece of legislation that established the park a century ago.

YOSEMITE HAD been a California state park since the 1860s, set aside when the U.S. population was about 60 million. In the early days, visitors needed wills of iron and stamina; it took a steamer, a stagecoach, pack mules and half the summer to get here.

The first car showed up in 1913. Now a million cars and coaches, air conditioned and foam-padded, make the one-hour (or so) drive to the Valley from park entrances every year.

I had to wait several minutes for the traffic to clear before I was able to cross the road and get to breakfast.

In the chatty cafeteria, not everyone was thinking about going to the ceremonies. Day packs hung over the backs of chairs, maps were on the tables. There was shopping talk.

ON MY walk to Sentinel Meadow, I headed in the wrong direction. Not too much of a mistake, since you can't go far astray in a valley only a mile wide and 11 miles long.

The trail I took edged other meadows, curved under canopies of oak, cedar, ponderosa, past tall yellow grasses of Indian paint brush along the Merced River, but never went beyond the sound of cars.

The barely moving stream was a flawless mirror, doubling the images of grandeur. I stopped to photograph and picked up beer cans and a pie tin held by tree roots along the bank.

Out of 18,000 visitors a day, some will have no concept of a sacred place, hallowed and special. These few raise maintenance costs considerably.

Up on one of the cliffs, I could see a bright red speck. Scores of climbers have gone up the sheer wall of El Capitan, and there are problems there, too. Along with the growing number of drill holes for their pitons, sometimes glistening hardware is left in high crevices.

Not all are conscientious about carrying out wastes; the foot of the cliff, they told me, is beginning to reek.

Finally turned around, I followed the road, hopping off the slim shoulder as cars came by. That's how I spotted disposable diapers shoved into a culvert.

It's easy to get mad about all this.

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Group of Seven

Artists explore dreamy landscape of Ontario

A couple of Danish Canadians named Robert and Signe McMichael loved the wilderness so much that they built a house of logs in the trees north of Toronto in the 1950s and filled the house with Group of Seven paintings.

KLEINBURG, Ont. — We are all shaped by our environment and the most important environment in the Canadian mind is wilderness.

Like many of us in Michigan, Canadians spend their childhood summers walking between high trees, paddling canoes across cold lakes, exploring the rock and tree country of the Great Lakes.

Several Canadian artists, known now as the Group of Seven, flowered on that landscape when they created the first real Canadian art tradition in the 1920s.

A couple of Danish Canadians named Robert and Signe McMichael loved the wilderness so much that they built a house of logs in the trees north of Toronto in the 1950s and filled the house with Group of Seven paintings.

The McMichaels were and are a generous people. In 1965 they gave their house, located in the small town of Kleinburg, their land and their art collection to the province of Ontario so that you and I could enjoy it.

This year they celebrate the 25th anniversary of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, appropriately set in a rock and tree landscape north of Toronto.

SURPRISINGLY, VERY few Michigan travelers see the collection because they don't know it is there.

It is a half hour drive north of downtown Toronto, or you can reach it while driving in on Highway 401 and turning north onto Highway 400. You will soon see two signs: one leads to a theme park called Canada's Wonderland, the other to the McMichael Collection.

As you approach the parking lot, you will see a group of rough cut rocks scattered across the top of a small grassy rise between the trees. Those stones mark the graves of five of the Group of Seven painters: A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, F.H. Varley and Lawren Harris.

The last surviving member, A. J. Casson, frail now at age 92, came into the museum this year to arrange his burial on that grassy knoll.

Walk on, through the trees, and you will see the current artist-in-residence at work in the Tom Thompson Shack, which memorializes one of Canada's favorite painters.

Thompson was still a young man when he died in a canoe accident while painting in Algonquin Park, north of Toronto, in 1917, leaving the world to wonder what might have been.

THE BIG log and stone building with the cathedral roof and a huge stone bear squatting out front is the museum that dominates these 100-acre grounds.

The original building was the McMichaels' private home, which has been expanded over the years to hold the world's largest collection of Group of Seven paintings and one of Canada's largest collections of Woodland Indian and Inuit art. Admission is $4 Canadian.

You might find a reception in progress in the high-ceilinged lobby, but what you will notice most is the view out the window. Big green trees soar out of sight, their branches layered back against the sky. A true Canadian landscape.

You will see the same thing on the walls of the introductory gallery, which displays one

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An artist in residence displays hot masks at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection.

IRIS JONES