

MOUNTAIN BIKING ... NEAR THE BEACH

Pack your bike and helmet and head to trail near Conway, S.C. **Page 3**

Travel

GREETINGS FROM ASBURY PARK

Love Bruce Springsteen? Then check out his New Jersey haunts. **Page 3**



The Charlotte Observer

DRIVE-TO DESTINATIONS

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She leads tours in Asia – by car

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENCE



JOHN BORDSEN

across central Asia.

Yue Chi, 48, is a native of northeast China who lives in Toronto. She and her husband, David Visagie, own and operate Drive the Silk Road (www.drivethesilkroad.com), which runs adventure expeditions

Q. Your trip is pretty unusual. How does it work?

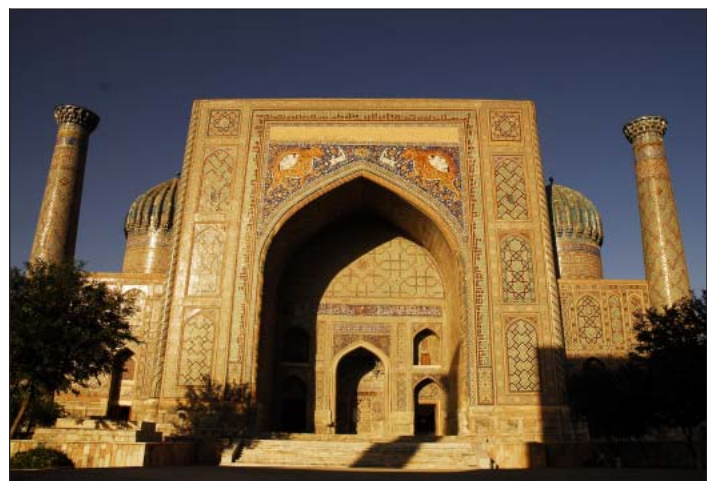
This is a drive from Istanbul to Beijing. Our trip along the Silk Road goes through six countries. It starts in western Turkey and covers Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and China. It takes 60 days and 15,000 km (9,320 miles). We've done this route for four years; the next trip is April 22, 2011. The biggest expedition

we've had was for 12 people, with three or four sharing each vehicle. My husband and I are in a lead vehicle with our local guides. We own five Landrovers, so we can take up to 16 travelers.

The trip costs \$26,000 U.S. That covers everything from the day you arrive to the day you leave – food, petrol, documents, sightseeing, staying in hotels and three camping days.

For accommodations, we stay in Western-style hotels with running water and comfortable beds.

SEE ASIA, PAGE 4



YUE CHI – drivethesilkroad.com

The Shir Dar Madresah (Lion's Gate School) is an emblematic site in Sarmarkand, along the Silk Road.

'HOW I SHOT MY SUMMER VACATION' PHOTO CONTEST

We hope you'll be back from your vacation before Sept. 10. That's the day we need a photo from your trip. Give us your best shot for our annual "How I Shot My Summer Vacation" contest.

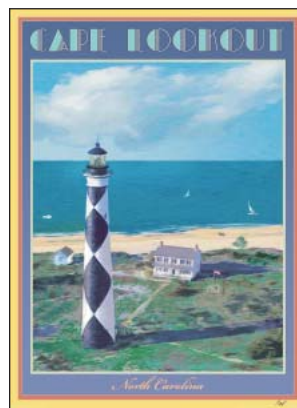
On Sept. 26, we'll publish some of the best images: Best All-Around Photo, Best People Picture and Best Scenic Shot. Our judges will select the top photos in each category; those three winners will each receive a duffel bag of goodies.

NEW THIS YEAR: We will accept high-resolution digital images (JPEGs) only.

BASIC RULES: Contestants may enter one travel photo per category. Images must have been taken after May 24, 2010. Cropping is allowed, but images cannot be digitally manipulated.

HOW TO ENTER: You'll find the entry form online, at www.charlotteobserver.com/travel. Follow the instructions to complete entrant information and upload photos.

Win a framed beach poster!



Last year, we ran an article about Aurelio Grisanty, a Delaware-based artist who created a line of stunning Art Deco-style posters of East Coast beach towns.

Observer readers flocked to his site – www.beachtownposters.com – to order 18-by-24-inch posters ... and to suggest places worthy of classic poster treatment. As a result, Grisanty created posters for Holden Beach, Wrightsville Beach, Bald Head Island, Emerald Isle, Sunset Beach, Ocean Isle and Cape Lookout. There are now 68 posters in the series ... and

the three winners of the "How I Shot My Summer Vacation" competition will each receive a Beachtown poster – framed. Retail value: about \$135 apiece.

Go online to charlotteobserver.com/travel to enter our contest; go to www.beachtownposters.com to see what you might win.



PHOTOS BY JIM HUFF – SANTEE COOPER

Rent canoes and explore the creeks – such as the surviving one-mile stretch of America's first true canal.

PADDLING PAST TIME

The Old Santee Canal is a living tale of 1700s life in South Carolina

BY AMBER VEVERKA
Special to the Observer

The canoe slips through the narrow channel of gray-green water, startling an osprey off her bare-branch perch and turtles from their submerged logs. We duck swinging skeins of Spanish moss and eye muddy banks for alligators.

The canoe is gliding down the remains of the Old Santee Canal, a narrow track of water near Moncks Corner, S.C., and in the slanted morning light, the short swamp trip is all about discovery: Herons, kingfishers, and – in sandbars – the pinprick tracks of deer.

But this serenity has been bought with time. More than 200 years before this morning, the air would have been thick with the sounds of men and women, almost all of them slaves, digging the 22-mile canal out of wild swamp, one shovel-load at a time.

Old Santee Canal Park is a 195-acre historical park that lets you hike or canoe your way through Lowcountry forest and swamp, straight into the past. The park, on the historic Stony River Plantation, 30 minutes northwest of



The Stony Landing Plantation House is a gracious circa-1843 home. It overlooks the Tailrace Canal, which was built in the 1940s to connect Lake Moultrie to the Cooper River.

Charleston in Berkeley County, preserves the last remnant of America's first true canal.

The park's interpretive center tells how, in the 1700s, merchants from the Carolinas upcountry struggled to get goods to the port of Charleston for export. Decent roads were few. Many farmers floated merchandise down the Santee River, then at the Atlantic Ocean loaded it onto bigger boats to venture

along a coast slammed by rough waves and riddled with shifting sandbars. For 50 dangerous miles, they inched along to Charleston.

Lowcountry business leaders realized they needed a better route to keep the Charleston port competitive. In 1785, they formed the Santee Canal Co., led by William Moultrie, newly elected S.C. governor. George Washington consulted on the project. Swedish engineer Col. Christian Senf oversaw the construction of what would eventually be a watery path through woods, connecting the Santee and Cooper rivers.

As many as 1,000 workers labored seven years to build the canal. Some were skilled tradesmen who constructed the locks that allowed for the 35-foot elevation difference between the two rivers. Most were slaves, whose owners were compensated \$120 a year for each man and \$100 a year for each woman.

No eyewitness record remains of these workers' experiences, but you can piece together a picture with facts that survive: Each worker was required to move 54 wheelbarrow loads of rock and dirt a day. Malaria killed dozens. And at the end of every day, the canal had inched forward by just a few feet.

Progress was made even slower by the opposition of land owners along the

SEE SANTEE, PAGE 4

Wildlife flourishes along the banks of the once-bustling – and long quiet – canal located between Columbia and Charleston.



HOW TO GET THERE, WHAT TO SEE, WHAT TO DO. PAGE 4



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ASIA

■ from II

Q. Camping?

One night in the middle of the desert in Turkmenistan, with camping gear we provide. One night is in Iran: We charter an old caravanserai (tent ground) we "found" in a village. There are no quality hotels in the area, so the villagers bring clean bedding and towels. The other night we stay with families in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan. We know families who have clean houses, so our group is scattered among them. These area great experiences.

Q. This is where Marco Polo went, right?

Roughly. The Silk Road is a network of different roads that connect East and West. Polo traveled the network several times on different routes. But the main route is the central Silk Road, one of the oldest major trade routes in the world. It was the ultimate route in that it connected people, knowledge, religion and ideas. And merchandise, of course.

Q. How long does it take you to prepare for this expedition?

About two months, including finalizing all hotel bookings, guide assigning, taking care of border documents and

Crossing borders

Q. There have been international incidents concerning Americans who stray into or are passing through Iran. Do you have Americans on this trip?

Every year. Our experts work out getting the tourist visas to Iran. Iran doesn't have an embassy in the U.S. You send the application form and photocopied pages of your current passport to Tehran. When the visa is authorized, you take your passport to a visa agent in D.C. They usually send the passports and forms to the Pakistani embassy, which is authorized to issue Iranian visas.

Q. Do the various border crossings work the same?

The longest time is crossing from Turkey to Iran and Iran to Turkmenistan. It isn't because authorities are giving people a hard time: Because they're not as skilled with foreign visitors and foreign vehicles crossing their country, the paperwork takes a few more hours to complete.

Border crossings are part of the preparation work. We don't cross unexpectedly: We send our local representative ahead to the border with our documents. By the time we pull up, there are no big surprises and the paperwork is being taken care of. We've never had someone say, "We can't let you cross; you have to wait a couple weeks." Nothing like that. We've gotten to know the border people, and they know us.

Our first crossing into Iran took six hours; now it takes three.

preparing the vehicles – which we have to ship from Canada to Europe. The shipping itself takes a month. Then we have to drive to Istanbul from Western Europe, usually Germany.

Q. What do you personally pack when you leave Toronto?

We ask people to take just one major suitcase for their clothes; this isn't a black-tie type of trip. It's rugged clothing, and you're not changing

every now and again. You pack comfortable pants and shoes.

I pack my clothes, vitamin pills, daily accessories and a toiletry bag. I have a pair of running shoes and a pair of sandals. I also carry a medical kit if an emergency would come up.

Q. Where's the best stretch of road?

When it comes to quality, Turkey and Iran have the best. They're easy to drive and not



YUE CHI - drivethesilkroad.com

Bibi-Khanym Mausoleum, in Samarkand: The city was the capital of Mongol emperor Tamerlane (1336-1405). He's buried in this famous building.

much of a challenge. To kill the boredom, we'll have the driver go off the beaten track – on some dirt road to see a village – for the fun of it.

Turkmenistan is a desert country; Kyrgyzstan is mountainous. We're facing maybe 50 percent asphalt roads. But their roads are not at all difficult for the average driver to manage.

Drivers face a couple challenges. It's crowded traffic in Iran, especially Tehran and the surrounding cities. People drive differently. Farsi (Persian) and Chinese are the most difficult languages for Westerners to understand, and it can be hard to understand what road signs mean. But we overcome these and other issues.

Q. China's western frontier is

high in the mountains. Where do you enter?

On a particular pass in Kyrgyzstan, the Turugart Pass. It's about 3,600 km (11,811 feet) above sea level and is covered with snow even in mid-June. It's beautiful scenery.

You then reach Kashgar, the westernmost city in China. It's known for its big Sunday bazaar.

That part of China is Muslim. The culture is very different from that of main China.

Q. So cultures don't stop and start at international boundaries. They blend?

There are gradual changes from culture to culture. You can feel that on the ancient Silk Road the world was one big globe people could travel freely and feel the threads of other

cultures.

You see that cultures mix a lot. There are nomads in eastern Turkmenistan and western Iran, and in their heads there are no political boundaries. But at the same time, there are extended families divided by political borders.

Q. Favorite city on the Silk Road?

I'd say Samarkand, in the center of Uzbekistan and the halfway point. It was renowned as an ancient kingdom of Central Asia and is surrounded by deserts and mountains. There are beautiful palaces and unbelievable mosques, bazaars and markets. Samarkand has a rich history of cultured people. When you sit on the square of Samarkand, you look around and know that's what it's all about.

It feels like time stands still. Forget the 21st century. It's like you're back in medieval times and could be just standing next to a camel.

Q. How many languages do you speak?

Mainly Mandarin Chinese – my mother tongue – and English. Growing up near the Russian border, you get so you can speak enough of it to ask how much petrol is in the tank or how much something costs when you're negotiating a price. The central Asian countries are Russian-speaking. I handle the same basic questions in Turkish and Farsi.



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SANTEE

■ from II

canal route. "In a healthy state of society," wrote S.C. historian F.A. Porcher in his late-1800s history of the project, "every lock would loom up in the eye of the speculative proprietor as the site of a future flourishing town." But, Porcher said, many planters regarded the canal as "an intolerable nuisance."

"This was one of the consequences of slavery," he wrote. The planters worried that slow-moving boats passing through their estates might tempt slaves to escape.

Four miles of trails through the swamp to the surviving one-mile section of the canal give a glimpse into the world the workers faced in their toils. Bald cypress trees, sweet gum, redbud and laurel oak grow along the black water. Copperhead and water moccasins, along with less-menacing snakes, make their homes here. Alligators are year-round residents.

When the canal opened in 1800 as the nation's first "summit canal" – a canal that connects two watersheds – it was considered one of the crowning engineering feats of the new nation.

"At the time, it was the most modern form of transportation," said Mary Bell, education coordinator for the park. "This was the fastest way to get from one place to another."

The canal operated smoothly the first 16 years and began to show a profit. Dried up by droughts for a few years, the canal later saw its peak traffic in 1839, when it carried 700 barges and boats, most loaded with cotton.

A railroad stitching together Camden, Columbia and Charleston spelled the end of the Santee Canal. Later, flooding of swamp to create Lake Moultrie buried much of it. Fishermen on the lake can pick

Swamp fling

BASICS

Old Santee Canal Park is open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily; closed for major holiday. The Interpretive Center closes at 4:30 p.m.
Admission: \$4; \$2 for 65 and older; 6 and younger, free.
Details: 843-899-5101; www.oldsanteecanalpark.org

DIRECTIONS

From Charlotte, take Interstate 77 South to Columbia, then I-26 East to Exit 194 (S.C. 16/Jedburgh Road). Turn left on S.C. 16; follow that and S.C. 6 East into Moncks Corner. Turn left onto U.S. 52; the right onto Stony Landing Road. Follow it to the park.

The trip takes about 3 1/4 hours (199 miles), one way.

Things to do

The Interpretive Center features a reproduction limestone cave that shows films about local wildlife. A larger theater shows a film about the canal's history. Displays in the center include alligator skulls, live reptiles, and a scale model of "Little David," a semisubmersible Confederate torpedo boat.

Besides the four miles of hiking trails and boardwalks that stretch across the swamp, you can rent canoes for \$3 per half hour.

The park also houses the Berkeley County Museum, which tells the story of 12,000 years of the region's history, including exhibits on Native Americans, colonial life, Gen. Francis Marion ("The Swamp Fox") and the Civil War. Museum hours: 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, 1-4:30 p.m. Sunday. Admission included in the price of park admission. Details: 843-899-5101.

Also at the park: The Stony Landing Plantation House, a gracious circa-1843 house that overlooks the Tailrace Canal, built in the 1940s to connect Lake Moultrie to the Cooper River. The house is occasionally open to tour groups by arrangement.

up the locks on their electronic fish locators.

Today, Santee Cooper, the state-owned electric and water utility, operates the park and preserves the southernmost section of the canal. That feeds into Biggin Creek, and then the Cooper River. Limestone cliffs, exposed near the boardwalk trail, edge the creek. These cliffs were built from the bodies of microscopic plants and animals that swam in the ancient sea once covering this region. The cliff walls smell damp, like the basement of

time.

As the cliffs give way to swamp forest, the meandering creek merges into the canal. But for the canal's straighter edges and signs for visitors, it would be hard to tell the natural waterway from the man-made. The men and women who built the canal, the planters and businessmen who profited by it, and the early leaders of a young nation that celebrated its creation all are gone.

And nature has taken it back.

Destinations

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