





# JEWEL OF THE DESERT

With more than half a million visitors a year, the Mogao Caves in China's remote west are in danger of being loved to death.

**Joyce Morgan** reports on the international effort to save one of the world's greatest art treasures.

**Desert dreamer:**  
(left) the mid-Tang dynasty  
Sleeping Buddha from  
Cave 158.

Photograph **Dunhuang Academy**

**A**T THE DAWN OF THE LAST CENTURY, A MONK WAS CLEARING sand that had been blown from the Gobi Desert into a meditation cave when his glance lighted on a wall. Just across the threshold, where sun gave way to flickering lantern-light, was the outline of a doorway. Plastered over and painted, it had been deliberately concealed for nearly 1000 years.

What he had already found in the honeycomb of caves in China's remote west had prompted the itinerant Taoist monk to abandon his wandering and appoint himself their guardian. Frescoes in lapis, turquoise and malachite covered the walls and ceilings in nearly 500 temple grottoes hand-carved into a 1.6-kilometre-long cliff face. There were images of the Buddha, celestial musicians and angels, as well as 2500 saintly statues that had once provided solace for travellers along the ancient Silk Road. The contrast between the desert beyond and the meditative art within must have resonated with the contemplative monk; like a teaching on the aridness of the outer world and richness of the inner.

When Abbot Wang Yuanlu ordered the hidden door opened in 1900, he found a storeroom, little bigger than a walk-in pantry, filled with more than 50,000 scrolls. They contained details of everyday life: the price of a donkey, the exchange of a slave girl for silk, the earliest known image of a gun. The medicinal and religious texts, poems and silk paintings had lain untouched in the dark, dry chamber. Most precious of all was the world's oldest known printed book, the Diamond Sutra, dated 868. The Buddhist scripture, which likens our fleeting existence to a bubble in a stream, is six centuries older than the Gutenberg Bible.

As word of the find in the Mogao Caves reached the West, foreigners arrived and convinced the unworldly monk to part with much of his treasure. Wang's accidental discovery would throw the international spotlight on the sacred caves that for centuries had been abandoned and largely forgotten. It seems incredible now that the grottoes could be overlooked: as improbable as the art of the Louvre and the books of the British Library slipping from memory and into a sleep lasting centuries. Indeed, the greatest danger to these caves today is not that they will be neglected but that they will be loved to death.

ON A CHILLY AUTUMN AFTERNOON, THE LAST OF THE DAY'S VISITORS WALK past Abbot Wang's burial mound en route from the caves to the car park. There, tour buses wait to make the 25-kilometre trip to Dunhuang, once a key fork on the Silk Road between China and the Mediterranean, along which came not just goods but revolutionary ideas and religions.

The oasis remains a cultural crossroads. In its market, Muslim hawkers grill sticks of mutton over charcoals, a Tibetan in a cowboy hat sells medicinal dried snakes, animal horns and paws, while a Han Chinese man carves gourds with images of apsaras, the flying angels that adorn the frescoes. Today, tourism to the caves is Dunhuang's mainstay, bringing cash into one of China's poorest provinces, Gansu. From a trickle 20 years ago, 580,000 tourists visited the caves last year. And the numbers keep growing. About 90 per cent are Chinese, the result of the country's booming economy. But this year's Beijing

Olympics are expected to prompt a jump in foreign visitors, says Wang Xedong, deputy director of the Dunhuang Academy, the organisation that has cared for the caves since the 1940s.

“One of the most challenging issues we face is the rapid increase in tourists and the influence created by people,” says Wang. “One needs to balance enabling visitors to come and enjoy the site, but at the same time not having any destructive influence on it. This is easy to say but difficult to do.”

Difficult but increasingly urgent. Which is why the academy is working with the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles and Australian heritage specialists to find that balance. The Getty team, led by conservationist Neville Agnew, is assessing how many visitors the caves can sustain, the Australians how best to manage the hoards.

**T**HE CAVES, CREATED BETWEEN THE 4TH AND 14th centuries, portray 1000 years of life along the Silk Road when Mogao was a religious, cultural and artistic mecca. The frescoes depict musical instruments the modern world had forgotten, medieval armour of Chinese warriors, bandits robbing a caravan, a big-nosed foreigner loading his camel. And they reveal how Buddhism, the most influential idea to travel the Silk Road, evolved as it migrated to China from its Indian birthplace, adopting features from Gandhara (present-day Pakistan) and Tibet en route. Buddha’s changing face is literally on the walls. But it exists on the most fragile, slender surface – thin mud plastered over sandstone.

Many temples are entered by fresco-covered hallways in which only a couple of people at a time can walk abreast. At the entrance to one such cave, a guide unlocks a metal door. She walks ahead through the hallway that opens onto a grotto little bigger than an average lounge room. Her flashlight rests on a hunting scene in which a galloping horse is invested with the energetic confidence of Picasso. She unlocks another small 6th-century temple in which a morality tale unfolds about a prince devoured by tigers – to the hair-raising horror of his brothers.

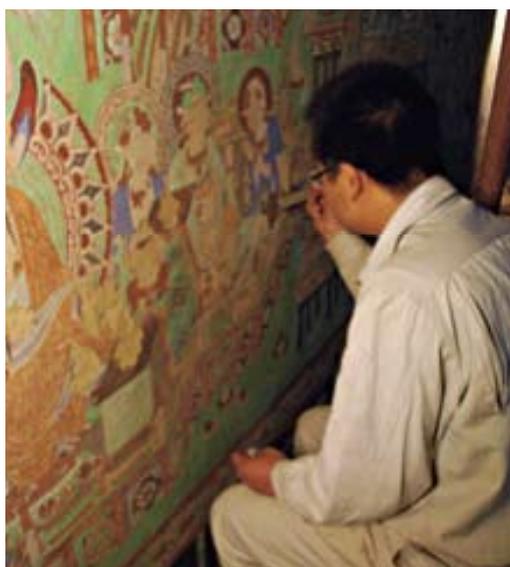
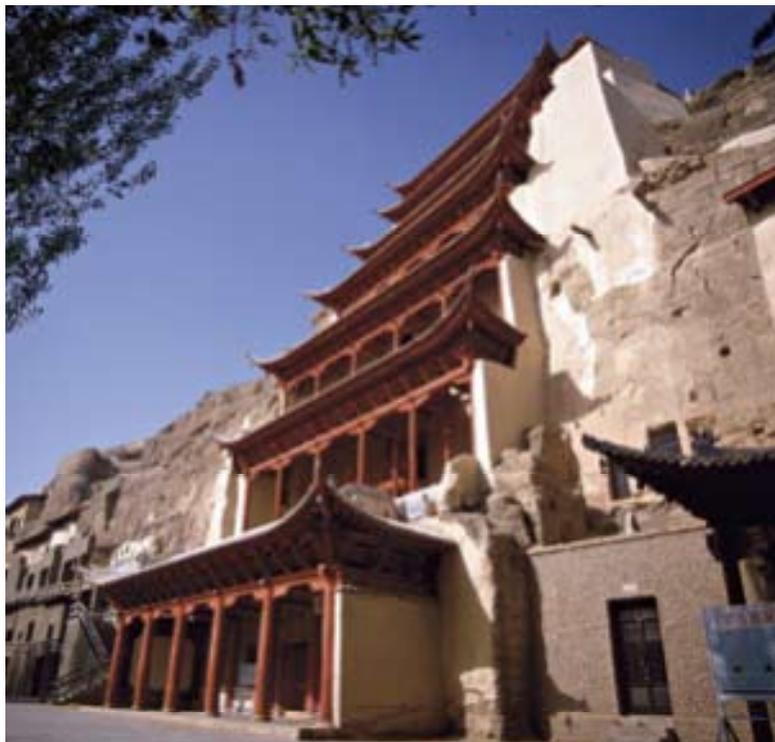
Locals have dubbed some of these tiny shrines the “falling down” caves. The cause isn’t Stendhal syndrome – the sense of being overwhelmed by the beauty of art – but the result of too many people in too small a space breathing too little air.

Breath from visitors, and sudden changes of temperature and humidity each time the doors open, are the greatest threats to the artwork. Humidity activates salt in the walls, which causes flaking and peeling of the frescoes – wiping far more than the sublime smile from the Buddha’s face.

Every cave presents unique problems, says Agnew, a former head of conservation at Queensland Museum. His team is measuring the build-up of carbon dioxide from visitors and assessing how many people each cave can accommodate, under what circumstances and for how long.

He and the academy have recently completed a 10-year conservation project on a large Tang dynasty cave. Scaffolding still obscures the frescoes within Cave 85 with its portraits of the wealthy patrons who commissioned it in 862.

The cave’s domestic vignettes are what resonate most with Australian heritage expert Professor Sharon Sullivan. “There’s one lovely scene of a butcher cutting up meat with three dogs waiting under the table,” she says. At the end of a long day at the caves, Sullivan, a former head of the Australian Heritage Commission, joins the international team in a makeshift common room at the academy. A water jug boils on the floor amid



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a tangle of flexes and laptops. “No fly zone,” reads a sign on the way in. It’s a reminder to close the door and keep out the desert’s irritants, rather than a warning to the aircraft that now fly into Dunhuang from as far as Japan and Korea.

Sullivan was overwhelmed by the combination of the landscape and the artwork when she first visited Mogao in the mid-1980s. And she was impressed to find a site that was well-run by the Chinese standards of the time. That was essential, she says bluntly: “There’s no point going into a total basket-case site.”

She was first invited to teach a rock art management course at Mogao in 1992, a course she’d also taught at the Getty based on her experience with Aboriginal sites. Since then there has been growing recognition that conservation and visitor management are intertwined – that a decision taken in a manager’s office can affect the frescoes as much as any conservator with a scalpel.

In looking at ways to manage visitors, Sullivan has turned to Tasmania’s most popular historic site for answers. For more than a decade, Port Arthur has served as a model for the Dunhuang Academy and hosted its senior staff.

Sublime ancient meditation caves in Central Asia have more in common with a 19th-century convict hell-hole than may initially be apparent. Both are remote sites with peak tourist seasons. How to spread visitors across the year is just one area engaging Sullivan and her colleagues. Most tourists visit Mogao in the northern summer and during two national holidays in May and October, known as the Golden Weeks. At these times, the

guides struggle to cope, tourists are unhappy with the crowding, and the fragile frescoes, some protected by glass screens, are most vulnerable.

“During Golden Week, when the caves are very full, a small percentage of people touch the paintings,” says Sullivan. “And although it’s only about 2 per cent or 1 per cent, if you do the sums over a year, that’s a lot of people touching the paintings.”

Some, though, have done more than touch. The late artist Sidney Nolan and Edmund Capon, director of the Art Gallery of NSW, made a wager over who would be first to see the famed caves. Whoever made it would leave a sign in Cave 96, known for its 33-metre Buddha statue. When Capon arrived in 1984 and walked behind the massive statue, the bet was settled. Scratched into the base of the Buddha’s throne was a tiny image of Nolan’s trademark: a masked Ned Kelly.

The Big Buddha cave is among the most visited, but Mogao’s star attraction is the Library Cave, the niche where Abbot Wang found the hidden treasure. No one knows why the chamber was sealed in the 11th century, but fear of hostile Islamic invasion is one theory. The Library Cave stands empty now except for a small statue of a 9th-century monk. Most of the scrolls and silk banners were spirited away by foreign adventurers, notably Britain’s Sir Aurel Stein and France’s Paul Pelliot, who transported their hauls to Europe, where the documents have been preserved in the British Library and Paris’s Guimet Museum. America’s Langdon Warner, who followed, made off with a dozen murals, peeling great slabs from the walls.

**S**TANDING ON A RIDGE ABOVE THE CAVES, IT is not hard to imagine what drove their creation. Ahead is pancake-flat nothingness. Behind are the rolling Mingsha Shan, or Dunes of the Singing Sands. In certain winds they create haunting music; little wonder some feared evil spirits lived there. Two deserts meet near Mogao, the massive Gobi and the Taklamakan, which translates as “go in and you won’t come out”. Any traveller would want to give thanks for surviving a journey across such forbidding terrain, or pray for protection before embarking on one.

Although the dunes are eerily silent on this windless day, fierce sandstorms have threatened the caves since the first was carved in 366 by a wandering monk, who, legend says, saw a vision here of a thousand Buddhas. In the centuries since, many temples have filled with fine abrasive sand blown over the cliff face. Drifts of sand lie up to a metre high along a fine-mesh fence that stretches four kilometres along the ridge. The wind fence, one of Agnew’s first projects at Mogao, has cut windblown sand by 65 per cent.

On the ridge, beyond the sound and sight of the tour groups below, the solitude invites reflection on the waves of earlier travellers who have paused here: the holy men and wealthy merchants, the Mongol armies, the “foreign devil” treasure-seekers, the fleeing White Russians whose fires blackened the temple walls. The caves bear the scars. But they have survived, despite the earthquakes and shifting desert sands that have buried so many other ancient sites along the Silk Road.

But with travellers arriving in unprecedented numbers, the tensions between tourist dollars and protecting these ancient caves can only increase. The next few years will be critical to ensure that the world’s greatest gallery of Buddhist art, which has survived for nearly 2000 years, is not sacrificed for fleeting gain. As fleeting as the Diamond Sutra’s bubble in a stream. **GW**

**Along the Silk Road:** (from top) the nine-storey pagoda that houses the Big Buddha sculpture; a conservator at work in Cave 98.