
Chapter – 8

Silk Road

The author chronicles the challenges and hardships he faced in the Silk Road regions as they are now. The reader finds it refreshing to traverse such vast tracts of physical geography, expanses of the natural world that remain largely untamed.

As a trade route, the Silk Road has been less a single highway and more a network of overland routes linking Europe with Asia, making trade possible between those with a passion for silk, horses and exotic fauna and flora. Just about every transaction imaginable has occurred along its many trails over the centuries.

Middleton's particular passion consists of exposing himself to nature's vicissitudes like facing oxygen starvation in Tibet as he climbs towards the "navel of the universe," and other hardships during the journey.

The author is an adventurer, but at heart more a meticulous academic than a daredevil. Researching the different forms of altitude sickness, he is alarmed to discover it can lead to swelling of the brain or to the lungs slowly filling with fluid.

Having no religious inclinations himself, he begins to speculate on Tibetan Buddhism as a prerequisite for survival at such an altitude, yet makes the classic Western error of putting bodily discipline before mental striving.

This account of the Silk Road, with its contrasts and exotic detail, certainly describes the challenges and hardships Middleton faced. However, if he had sacrificed some of the sense of his own heroism, and introduced instead more of a sense of wonder or of the absurd, the book would have proved a more entertaining read.