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SPECIAL REPORT

Xining

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Xining - A City at the Crossroads of History

An introduction by Zhang Xiaorong, Mayor of Xining

It is a tremendous honour for me to present this City Guide of Xining to the readers of Euromoney.

Xining is a city with a rich past and a brilliant future. It is the capital of Qinghai province in northwest China and is known throughout the country as the 'cool city' because of its climate and high altitude. We have a thriving industrial sector, a wealth of natural resources, and we are visited by 14 million tourists a year who come here to enjoy the spectacular natural beauty on our doorstep.

What makes our city so special is its unique geography on the edge of the vast and enchanting Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. Xining is the gateway to Tibet and, critically, a hub city on the New Silk Road that has given us a colourful history and made our city a melting pot of nationalities and religions. We are a city where Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists and people from 35 different national and ethnic groups live and work side by side, in harmony.

Our city's character and prosperity has been shaped in part by our illustrious visitors. In the seventh century, Princess Wencheng of the Tang Dynasty travelled through Xining on the Silk Road to marry King Songtsan Gampo of Tibet in a union that introduced Chinese culture to Tibet and opened up the Silk Road to centuries of flourishing trade.

Today, Xining faces a new challenge of history. We are working tirelessly to enhance our infrastructure and upgrade our industry and commercial sector for our role as a hub city on the New Silk Road. Across Xining today, you will see new homes, new roads and new transportation links such as our dazzling new railway station catering to the high-speed rail network that opened in December.

We are focusing our efforts on making the best use of our natural resources and developing our key industries such as the production of lithium batteries for electric vehicles and the production of Tibetan carpets, which are being sold everywhere from Sydney to Berlin to the US.

As the city's mayor, however, I am determined that as we modernise, we safeguard our ecology and ensure that we create a green, liveable city for our citizens and for the many people who will come to Xining from China and abroad in the years to come. We have taken effective steps to reduce air pollution, plant trees, clear our roads of polluting vehicles and create green spaces across our city in recent years and will continue that mission. Our city will only prosper in future if it cares for and nurtures its ecology and environment.

In Xining today, we stand at the crossroads of history. We have in our hands a historic opportunity to be part of an exciting new chapter in the story not just of China but of trade and commerce across the continents. Our responsibility is to rise to that challenge and play our place in a world of exciting new commercial and cultural connections along the New Silk Road.

Many of you picking up this City Guide to Xining – a city thousands of miles away from your offices and workplaces overseas – may have heard little or nothing about our city. As you will discover, however, we are much closer than you might imagine and we have an extraordinary future ahead of us, where our destinies are intertwined.

The New Silk Road offers us a way to overcome the barriers of geography and nationality and hold out the hand of friendship across continents. Xining is opening up to the world, and I hope you can join us on the journey of discovery and opportunity that lies ahead.
CREATING A LIVEABLE, GREEN CITY

Xining is a centre for culture as well as for commerce – and its leaders have seized on the importance of creating a liveable, green city for its residents.

At the Grand Theatre in Xining, the ticket office is doing brisk business as it takes bookings for a remarkably diverse line-up of events that includes a performance by an Australian company of Mozart’s Marriage of Figaro and the ballroom dancing sensation Burn The Floor.

Entertainment of this cosmopolitan kind would have been hard to imagine before the striking new theatre complex covering 36,000 square metres, including a concert hall, theatre and multifunctional hall opened in 2010 with a Mandarin-language version of the Broadway hit Mamma Mia.

It was a runaway success, and the theatre has since been serving up a rich international diet of entertainment for the residents of Xining that will this autumn and winter include the operas Carmen and La Traviata.

Local heroes

Not all of the imported shows attract sell-out crowds, one of the theatre managers conceded. “The market is still growing and it still has a long way to go,” he says diplomatically as we tour the complex. “People in Xining still like to see the Chinese stars most – famous pianists for example – when they come to perform here.”

But the venue is a community venue and has a multitude of uses. As we tour the complex, the stage of the Grand Theatre is being prepared for a Teacher’s Day performance that will see some 800 students from the city perform to a guaranteed sell-out audience.

The building of the theatre complex is one of a number of steps taken to upgrade the living environment in Xining in recent years, transforming it from a relative backwater to a frontline city on the New Silk Road. That transformation is being handled with an overriding imperative in mind to ensure Xining is a green and liveable city as well as a commerce hub for the new wave of business with Central Asia and beyond that the ‘One Belt, One Road’ policy will bring.

Green spaces

A quiet example of the policy at work is in the wetland park spanning two sides of one of three rivers running through Xining. The park with lush riverside walkways, trees and picnic spots runs along a 2.4km stretch of river and cost RMB300 million to create.

Li Dongbing, a warden at the park which opened two years ago and is the biggest urban wetland park in Qinghai province, says it has become a much-loved recreational resource for the city. “It was built as part of our city government’s goal to make Xining a happy, liveable city. When you come here, you can breathe easily and breathe in fresh air. You can feel the air is full of oxygen. It is a very good environment for people living and working in the city. When they come here they relax and feel good about themselves.”

As he speaks, a procession of young couples walks through the park to have photographs taken ahead of their weddings. The park has become one of the favourite locations for wedding shoots since it opened.

Cleaner air

Xining’s progressive mayor Zhang Xiaorong is adamant that creating a cleaner, greener environment is critical to the city’s future prospects. “I don’t believe Xining will attract investors without clean air or a beautiful environment,” he tells Euromoney. “As a city set on a high latitude, we see ecological conservation as a priority. We are in the west of China and the climate is dry and we have a low level of green cover.

“A beautiful city should have good green cover and clear air and that is why we make ecological conservation a priority. The competitiveness of our city depends on our ecology. As mayor, I intend to plant trees and tackle pollution.”

Because of its climate and setting surrounded by mountains, Xining used to rank as one of the most polluted cities in China, but policies of recent years have triggered a remarkable change in the quality of the city’s air. In 2013, Xining recorded clear air days for just over 60% of the year. In 2015, the city expects to record clear air days on an impressive 83.5% of the year. “Pollution levels are much lower than before,” says Zhang. “We have shut down many heavy polluting industries. We have also adopted some measures to control the dust pollution in construction areas. We are taking 88,000 cars with excessive pollution off the roads every year. And our wintercalefaction is now natural gas instead of coal.”

These measures – combined with the continual upgrading of the city’s facilities and cultural venues – are aimed at ensuring that Xining is a city where people want to live as well as to work.
SMALL CITY IS TOWERING GIANT OF NORTHWEST

With nearly 2.3 million residents, Xining is a relatively small city in Chinese terms. But its influence is immense and its contribution to the region’s economy far outweighs its size as a world of new opportunity opens up along the New Silk Road.

It is the most spectacular view in Xining and arguably one of the best views in northern China. From the revolving restaurant on the Pearl of Plateau tower high above the city, you look out over a strikingly unusual and distinctive metropolis.

It takes the restaurant one hour and forty minutes to do a complete revolution. Start on the right table and you can tuck into your first course while gazing out over a bustling cityscape spread out in the bowl of a mountain valley with high-rise tower blocks and a maze of ultra-modern roads and infrastructure. By the time you get to dessert, you will be looking out over magnificent and almost deserted grasslands rolling towards the horizon – the beginning of the great Qinghai-Tibetan plateau that stretches out from the very edges of the city of Xining.

This breathtaking contrast – seen from the RMB50 million tower donated by the Shanghai municipal government in 2008 and designed by those responsible for the famous Oriental Pearl TV Tower in Shanghai – is the key to understanding the uniqueness of Xining.

This is a city set amid the most extraordinary geography with a wealth of natural resources on its doorstep and an economic and social chemistry unlike anywhere else in China.

Provincial heavyweight
Xining is the capital of Qinghai province. It accounts for just 1.06% of the province’s area but 43.2% of its population. The Xining population accounted for 46.8% of the province’s GDP in 2014. This year, the figure is expected to rise to more than 50% as the city’s dynamic growth continues apace.

GDP grew at an impressive rate of between 13.5% and 15% a year from 2011 to 2014. This year, city officials predict GDP growth of 10% – lower than in recent years but comfortably higher than the national average and 2-3% higher than the rate for the rest of the province. Consumer spending in Xining accounts for 67.2% of spending for the whole of Qinghai province.

When you look out from the Pearl of Plateau tower at the forbidding expanse beyond the city’s borders, it is clear why there is such a concentration of economic power within the metropolitan area. The city sits at 2,200 metres above sea level while most parts of Qinghai province are around 3,000 metres, making Xining a relatively comfortable and liveable city compared to the harsher highlands surrounding it.

Beating heart
Xining is the beating heart of Qinghai. It is the centre of politics, economics, technology, culture, transport, medicine and education. All the universities of Qinghai province are in Xining, as are all the major hospitals.

Made up of four districts, three counties and a national-level economic-technological development area, Xining has a total area of 7,665 square kilometres, an urban area of 380 square kilometres and a resident population of 2.29 million.

Because of its altitude and climate, it is known nationally as the ‘summer city’ or the ‘cool city’ – a powerful draw for domestic tourism – and enjoys unique advantages because of its rich natural resources, abundant hydropower potential, salt lakes, minerals, oil and natural gas.

Most significantly, Xining is a transport hub not just for the province but for the western channel of the New Silk Road. With the Qinghai to Tibet and the Lanzhou to Xinjiang high-speed railways completed, Xining’s gleaming new RMB2.6 billion railway station – which opened in December 2014 – can handle a freight volume of 73 million tonnes a year. When a further high-speed line to Chengdu and Kunming opens as the next stage of the network’s development, that volume will climb to nearly 100 million tonnes.

Xining’s international airport has a passenger throughput of 8 million and handles 24,000 tonnes of cargo a year. It operates 59 domestic flights to all major cities across China except Lanzhou, as well as flights to Bangkok, Seoul and Taipei. It is the most important airport in northwest China.
The Xining expressway connects Lanzhou in the east, Geermu (Golmud) in the west, the Sanjiangyuan region in the south and the Hexi corridor in the north. With the Beijing-Tibet expressway, two national roads and 12 other highways, Xining is a road hub for the northwest of China with 120,000km of road around it connecting the region to central, western and southern Asia.

Natural bounty
Few areas in China or the region are blessed with such a wealth of natural resources. A total of 129 minerals have been found in the province, and the mineral resources of the province are valued at RMB17 trillion – 13% of China’s total mineral resources.

The most striking feature of the province is its astonishing salt lakes, which provide China with rich reserves of sodium chloride, potassium chloride, magnesium salts, lithium chloride and strontium ore – accounting for 90% of national reserves. Potassium salt in Qinghai accounts for 79% of national reserves and magnesium salt accounts for 93.5%. Qinghai’s lithium reserves account for one third of the world’s reserves of saline lake lithium resources, while lithium chloride accounts for more than 90% of proven national reserves.

Qinghai also boasts rich reserves of copper, lead, zinc, cobalt and gold as well as the country’s leading reserves of asbestos, quartzite and limestone. Oil and natural gas resources rank 13th and eighth respectively in the country. Qinghai has one of the top four gas fields in China.

Qinghai is the source of three major rivers – the Yellow, the Yangtze and the Lancang – and has a wealth of hydropower resources as a result, particularly on the Yellow and Yangtze rivers. Estimates put the total hydropower reserves of the province at 3.3% of the national total.

Industrial muscle
The industrial muscle of Qinghai is concentrated in Xining, which has developed a network of industrial zones in recent years including Ganhe industrial park, Nanchuan industrial park, Dongchuan industrial, biological science and technology industrial park and Beichuan industrial park.

Xining has concentrated its efforts in eight pillar industries: new energy, new materials, non-ferrous metal smelting and processing, special chemicals, deep processing of plateau animals and plants, Tibetan carpets, wool spinning, equipment manufacturing, new building materials, energy conservation and environmental protection. Xining also serves as an important producing base of special steel, electrolytic aluminium, Tibetan carpets and numerical control machines for the whole of China.

Xining has an annual output of 3,750 tonnes of li-ion battery cathode materials.

The metals industry is also extremely well developed in Xining. The city has an output of 2.2 million tonnes of electrolytic aluminium, 1.3 million tonnes of special steel and 1.2 million tonnes of steel, making it a major domestic metal smelting and deep processing base.

New horizons
With its meticulously planned strategies for economic development and its heady pace of growth, Xining will continue to rise in prominence as it enters a new era of commerce under the national ‘One Belt, One Road’ policy. That policy makes the pace of development and the sense of vision critical in reshaping the city’s infrastructure, economy and industrial base to meet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead on the New Silk Road.

As its modernization and development continues, the view across the city for visitors to the revolving restaurant at the top of the Pearl of Plateau tower will become even more dazzling and impressive.
MAGICAL APPEAL OF TIBETAN CARPETS

The traditional handicap of making Tibetan carpets has been transformed into a multi-million-dollar industry in Xining – and the opening of the New Silk Road will see the carpets flying to new markets throughout the world.

In a vast aircraft-hangar sized workshop on the southern outskirts of Xining, hundreds of women toil on gigantic imported mechanical looms as fine carpets of every imaginable size, colour and design are slowly woven together.

Outside the factory gates, thousands more women in homes across Xining use small hand looms to make individual carpets, expertly working the wool as they produce the exotic and unique carpets that have been made by their ancestors in Qinghai and Tibet for centuries.

Meanwhile, more than 7,000km away in St Petersburg, customers line up to buy the carpets in one of the first of a chain of overseas shops that cater to global demand.

These three threads – the factory and homes in Xining and the shop in St Petersburg – tell the colourful story of the successful commercialization of a traditional skill that is now spreading from Qinghai’s capital Xining around the world. In a hi-tech world where business is done at the push of a button, it is the refreshingly old-fashioned story of the continuing appeal of a commodity that is as much in demand in homes today as it was centuries ago. A beautiful carpet to cherish for life.

And in a fitting twist to the story, the carpets being made in Xining today are following the same route from Qinghai around the world as they have done throughout the centuries – along the Silk Road. The difference today, of course, is that with the help of 21st century infrastructure and communication networks, they go much faster and further and arrive on doorsteps in Russia, the US, Europe and Asia far sooner.

Weaving wonders

It is Qinghai’s unique geography that makes the carpets so special, says Ma Xin Min, general manager of the Tibetan Sheep Carpets Group, as he proudly shows off a collection of ornately patterned hand-made rugs in his factory’s showroom. “The art of Tibetan carpets goes back 2,200 years and this area is renowned around the world for weaving carpets. The Qinghai-Tibetan plateau is 2,500 metres above sea level and the hair of Tibetan sheep grows to 22cm in length. They are sheared only once a year, between June and August.”

The unique material provided by the sheep from the plateau provides a particularly hardy and fine wool for the manufacture of the carpets. His factory also produces carpets made with yak hair, which is renowned for its softness but comes at a premium: three times the price of sheep hair.

Ma’s factory employs more than 12,000 but 70% of them weave carpets in their homes, working to designs and using looms provided by the company. The rest make carpets on modern machines at the factory imported from Europe since 2008.

The factory turns out a staggering 1.68 million square metres of carpets a year and sells in countries and territories including the US, Germany, the UK, Russia, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong. It also makes Muslim prayer mats that are sold throughout Asia and the Middle East.

The appeal of Tibetan carpets is global and growing, Ma says there are powerful reasons for their popularity. “They are principally made by hand and the weaving technique is very unique and idiosyncratic,” he said. Tibetan carpet making in particular uses a knotting method not used in other countries and regions.

“They aren’t just carpets – they’re works of art. They are very special and they have a different feel to them. The other element is the Tibetan culture that gives the carpets their distinctive design and

“The carpets being made in Xining today are following the same route from Qinghai around the world as they have done throughout the centuries – along the Silk Road.”
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Domestic surge
The Tibetan Sheep Group encompasses 13 enterprises and produces 48 types of hand-made and machine-made carpets. One of its objectives is to make Xining the centre for Tibetan carpet production.

The carpet factory in Xining was founded more than 50 years ago and moved to its current home in 1996. Until 2008, all of its carpets were exported but since then there has been a surge in demand from the domestic market. “There is a tremendous amount of potential in China,” says Ma. “In 2008, the economic crisis hit the US and Europe and demand slowed down. In China, though, demand is growing rapidly. There are a lot of people who want carpets for their homes. People are going up in the world and demand is rising.”

“The economy in China is getting better day by day and living standards have improved. People have money and they can afford to buy high quality carpets. China is now the number one country in the world for buying carpets as well as the number one country for making carpets. That is why we are paying more attention to the domestic market.”

On a guided tour of the huge workshop, one of the factory managers points out a loom producing brightly coloured large floor carpets. “These are for Xinjiang province,” she says, referring to the neighbouring far northwest province of China. “People there have large houses and it is cold so there is a long tradition of using carpets in their home and now that the area is more prosperous, we find more and more business coming from Xinjiang and other northern provinces.”

Before 2008, the company’s chief business was hand-made carpets for export. Then it imported its giant industrial looms from Europe, allowing it to expand into machine-made carpets which have opened the door to a whole new world of trade. Being less labour-intensive, they produce carpets that are less expensive than the hand-made ones. “As a result, many more people can afford them,” says Ma.

Westward bound
The New Silk Road has turned the focus of Ma’s company to Central Asia, as road and rail links put Xining within easy reach of a host of new markets. “We want to increase our business there,” Ma says. “We want to open our own shops to sell carpets there. Qinghai province is very important to the ‘One Belt, One Road’ policy. The old Silk Road crossed this area. It carried Muslim culture and Buddhist culture around the world. You can see the Muslim culture expressed in the carpets that travelled along the Silk Road from Iran. Another route crossed Tibet and took a totally different culture around the world.

“There are two main types of carpet in the world now. The first one is Persian rugs. The second is Tibetan rugs. Persian carpets have a history of 3,000 to 4,000 years. Tibetan carpets have a history of more than 2,000 years.”

Ma’s target markets with the opening up of the New Silk Road are countries such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, which have traditionally sourced their carpets from Turkey. The opening of the corridors of communication will, he hopes, persuade them to turn their eyes eastwards.

As well as its shop in St Petersburg, the company has three shops in Moscow, two in Kazakhstan and one in Belarus. The aim is to expand that network significantly as the New Silk Road branches out across Central Asia.

Unbroken thread
A traditional handicraft has become a global phenomenon as the appeal of Tibetan carpets continues to grow. From Sydney to San Francisco, there are customers for the Qinghai Tibetan Sheep Carpet Group as well as a flourishing domestic market.

It has, however, become a truly international operation. The company is holding talks with companies from Berlin to talk about setting up outlets for its carpets in the German capital. Meanwhile, it has drafted in experts from overseas to teach its employees new skills.

In an interesting meeting of different cultures within the same industry, experts from Pakistan have been brought to Xining to teach hand stitching of carpets to employees. Meanwhile, experts from Belgium have visited to train staff in the use of the vast imported looms used for machine-made carpets.

Globalization has clearly made its mark on a traditional industry that has always held a fascination for foreigners looking in on one of the less visited corners of China. But it has done nothing to dim the mystique of Tibetan carpets.

More than 100 years ago, a European traveller on the Tibetan plateau described his wonder as he stumbled across “a courtyard entirely filled with the weaving looms of men and women workers” making what he described as “beautiful” rugs.

Today, as ‘One Belt, One Road’ opens the way to new opportunities, the future for Tibetan carpets looks certain to be every bit as exotic and colourful as their past.
RISING TO A HISTORIC CHALLENGE

Xining has a historic opportunity to raise its profile and become a hub city with the creation of the New Silk Road under China’s visionary ‘One Belt, One Road’ policy. Mayor Zhang Xiaorong tells Euromoney how the city is rising to the challenge.

Mayor Zhang Xiaorong is a man who feels the hand of history on his shoulder. A native of Qinghai province, he has taken office at a time when Xining has an unparalleled opportunity to raise its profile and become one of China’s key cities.

As he outlines his vision for the future of his city, Zhang speaks with awe and excitement at the size of the task ahead to ensure that Xining rises to the challenge. “In the 30 years since the opening up of China, much of the development has been in the east of the country,” he says in an interview with Euromoney in the city’s atmospheric Qinghai Hotel. “Cities along the coast have developed very quickly and people’s lives have been improved immeasurably. Our city stands at a very important point strategically in the Silk Road. It is a hub of the eastern cities along the Silk Road, so in the future we have to make sure that we are ready to play the role of a hub.

“We have to accelerate the development of logistics and the concentration of human resources and green finance and new materials in our city. Xining has a very big role to play in the future development of culture and commerce along the Silk Road.”

The crackle and energy of Zhang’s rhetoric mirrors the frenetic buzz of the city around him. There is a fierce urgency and a sense of restless purpose in every quarter as new highways, new power networks and new buildings take shape at an extraordinary pace. The hum of building work continues night and day. This is a city waking up to a new economic reality and a new world of opportunity that most of its citizens and businesses have not yet fully grasped.

Global connections
Zhang, who took office in May, bubbles with enthusiasm as he shows the map of high-speed railways that pass through Xining. The lines, extending thousands of miles in all directions, make Xining a key node city in the vast area known as the Silk Road Economic Belt.

The most important connection along the New Silk Road, says Zhang, is the Lanzhou-Urumqi express railway — the longest railway in northwest China running nearly 2,000km from Gansu province to Urumqi in Xinjiang and passing through Xining.

The half-century-old line has been upgraded to a high-speed line, meaning it now takes only 10 hours to travel from Xining to Urumqi — a connection that opens up a wealth of opportunity for trade with neighbouring Central Asia. Simultaneously, a Xining-Golmud-Korla railway connecting China to Pakistan is now under construction. These two railways not only complement the existing rail network of Xining, but bring historical opportunities for resource integration and common development with Central Asia in this process of accelerated opening up.

Another key link in the New Silk Road is the Qinghai to Lhasa line which opened in 2006 to great fanfare as the world’s highest railway line, climbing to 5,072 metres above sea level as it crosses the Tibetan Plateau. That spectacular line has already been extended to Shigatse in Tibet and, if extended to Nepal in future, will open the door to huge commercial possibilities through the collaborative development of Xining and southern Asia.

Meanwhile, high-speed railways linking Xining to Chengdu and Xining to Kunming among other lines are being planned — all of which will reinforce Xining as the key strategic city in China in connecting the country to western, central and southern Asia.

As well as its rail links, highways throughout western China to Xining...
are being upgraded and built to improve connections with the rest of the country and westwards to the borders of Central Asia.

Xining’s international airport is meanwhile becoming an increasingly important hub for the region, the mayor said. It handles some 8 million passengers and 24,000 tonnes of cargo a year with 57 domestic and overseas routes. There are direct flights to every major city in China except Lanzhou and direct flights to Bangkok, Seoul and Taipei.

By the end of 2015, there will be direct flights to Hong Kong and there are plans for further direct flights to Istanbul in Turkey and Bishkek in the strategically important neighbouring country of Kyrgyzstan.

Zhang believes that as well as a transport hub, Xining will again become a hub of commerce on the Silk Road. “We will trade goods here from other cities and areas near Xining and these links mean that the distance to central and southern Asia is less,” he says.

Infrastructure is only part of the recipe, however. Having the right environment and the right cultural mix are also factors that Zhang believes will be essential to Xining’s future prosperity.

“It will be convenient and easy for businesses to reach these markets through Xining. We also have the advantage of climate, because the climate in Xining is very similar to that of south Asia,” he says. “Furthermore, we have mosques and the Islamic faith and so much halal food.”

Tourist mecca
The introduction of more direct flights to overseas cities has the potential to provide a major boost for the city’s tourism. Although it is a key resort for domestic tourists – who know it as the ‘cool city’ because of its altitude and climate – Xining is currently only visited by around 50,000 overseas tourists a year.

The figure is remarkably low considering the stunning natural beauty of the surrounding Tibetan Plateau, and the wealth of scenery and places to visit around Xining including the breath-taking Qinghai Lake, the Ta’er Lamasery, the Chaka Salt Lake and an astonishing variety of national parks and forests.

“We have abundant tourism resources,” says Zhang. “We have magnificent mountains and rivers. The mountains around us are known as the Roof of Asia. We have wetlands and the largest nature reserve in China and a salt lake known as the Mirror of the Sky.”

Spreading the word about Xining’s tourism potential has been made easier by the internet. “The internet is changing our life and our minds,” he says. “We don’t have to send delegations to foreign countries to promote ourselves any longer.” The internet can also help Xining overcome the challenges presented by its geography. “We are not so advantaged by geography but with the internet, the advantage can be with us.”

Cultural appeal
Zhang’s vision for Xining is of a dynamic city that will take on a new high-profile role as a hub along the New Silk Road but without losing its sense of history or culture. “We have a very long history – a history of more than 2,100 years,” he says. “There are 35 different nationalities in Xining living together in harmony. It is a melting pot for religion with different cultures and different nationalities. That is something we are proud of and something we must preserve.”

The key to success in the hugely important and challenging years ahead, says Zhang, is confidence – and the mayor is a man with an unshakeable belief in Xining’s significant position, both in China’s remarkable past and in its thrilling future.
A TASTE OF THE HIGH LIFE IN CHINA’S ‘COOL CITY’

Xining draws competitors from around the world for one of the most spectacular – and exacting – sporting events in Asia, the annual Tour of Qinghai Lake. It also has world-class sporting facilities and the potential to become a magnet for global tourists as well as international sportsmen and women.

Flag-waving crowds line the streets and cheer in excitement beneath crystal clear summer skies as scores of bikes ridden by some of the world’s top cyclists flash past in one of Asia’s most grueling and fiercely contested sporting events. For 14 consecutive summers, Xining has hosted the Tour of Qinghai Lake – an elite cycling contest covering nearly 3,000 kilometres and passing through some of China’s most spectacular scenery, including the serene beauty of Qinghai Lake. In 2015, the competition was staged over 14 days from 5-18 July and attracted 22 teams and 154 riders battling it out for prize money and performance fees of more than $1 million.

The race follows a route through three provinces – Qinghai, Gangsu and Ningxia – and is the leading road cycling race in Asia. Past winners have come from the US, Croatia, Italy, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Iraq and Kazakhstan. Some of the world’s top cycling teams take part.

It is a truly international event and one of the ways in which Xining and Qinghai have promoted themselves as a top sporting and tourism destination not just for China but for competitors and visitors from around the world.

Exhilarating highs

There is a distinctly festive atmosphere to the Tour of Qinghai Lake, organized by the Qinghai provincial government in association with the General Administration of Sport of China, and the State General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television. Since its launch in 2002 it has attracted interest from road cycling fans around the world because of its distinctive geographical features and the diverse range of cultures along the route. For Chinese fans, it has become a massively effective platform for promoting the sport within their country.

The features that make it so special for overseas riders are the extraordinary altitudes and the astonishing scenery along the route. Former competitors write with awe about the experience of taking part. Australian Jono Lovelock, from the Marco Polo Cycling Team, described it in an online blog as the “premier race” in the Asian road cycling calendar.

“It is at Qinghai Lake where the hardest, fastest and most painful racing takes place,” he wrote.

“Teams spend large parts of their time and budgets getting prepared to assault the high altitude and come away with the spoils.” Describing the stages around Xining as relatively comfortable at an altitude of 2,200 metres, Lovelock says the route out to Qinghai Lake includes “brutal climbs that often just fall shy of 4,000 metres”. “We are taking serious altitude – ear-popping, headache-inducing heights that mean even when climbing at gradients of just 2-3%, your legs, lungs and in my case your lower lumbar all burn like never before,” he wrote.

For the world’s top cyclists, of course, those conditions are not a deterrent but a challenge and an opportunity to test their physical fitness to the limit. And the international coverage and video clips of the annual race have helped make the incredible scenery of Xining and Qinghai Lake known around the world.

Known throughout China as the ‘cool city’ for its climate and altitude, Xining welcomes 14 million domestic tourists a year but only around 50,000 foreign tourists. The success of the Tour of Qinghai Lake is beginning to even out the imbalance between foreign and domestic tourism.

Sporting chance

One of the most striking architectural sights on the first day of the Tour of Qinghai Lake through Xining is the city’s ultra-modern sports centre, opened to promote healthy lifestyles with the best sporting facilities possible.

The centre – with a distinctive wall of brilliant silver hexagonal shapes – opened in October 2014. It has an indoor sports hall with 7,500 seats for badminton, basketball and table tennis, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, tennis courts, gymnastics area and a full-sized international standard football pitch with artificial turf – one of only two pitches of its kind in China, the other being in Ordos in Inner Mongolia.

It is a venue that seems to symbolize Xining’s modernity and ambition, and in July it hosted a special event – the Silk Road International Football Tournament 2015, which saw a Shanghai team square up against a team from Bishkek, the capital of China’s Central Asia neighbour Kyrgyzstan.

The players from both teams – who are used to playing at far lower altitudes – had to prepare carefully for the showdown at 2,250 metres above sea level, spectators said, and Shanghai emerged winners of the inaugural competition with a
SIX MUST-SEE TOURIST DESTINATIONS IN AND AROUND XINING

1. Qinghai Lake
The largest inland salt lake in China covers 4,500 square kilometres and is famous for its mists and blue water. It is surrounded by atmospheric grasslands where sheep, cattle and horses graze and has a bird sanctuary that is habitat for 100,000 migrating birds.

2. Sangjanyuan National Nature Reserve:
This is the largest and highest natural wetland in China, covering an area of 150,000 square kilometres and with inhabitants that include Tibetan antelopes, gazelles and yaks.

3. Mengda Nature Reserve:
This reserve is just over 100km southeast of Xining and is famed for its scenery and mild climate. Set up in 1980 it features waterfalls and the Mengda Heavenly Lake.

4. Dongguan Grand Mosque
This mosque in Xining has a 600-year history and is the largest in northwest China, covering an area of nearly 12,000 square metres. Its prayer hall can hold up to 3,000 people and it is famed for its architecture which features a mix of Islamic and Chinese styles.

5. Ta’er Monastery
This monastery is said to be the birthplace of Zongkaba, the founder of the Gelugpa Sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Located on a mountainside 25km southwest of Xining, it dates back to the 13th century and includes scriptures halls, lamas’ residences and pagodas among a vast complex of more than 9,000 structures.

6. Huzhu Tu Ethnic Tourist Area
In the northeast of Qinghai, this area allows visitors to see the people and cultures of the Tu ethnic minority, famed for their singing and dancing and colourful traditional costumes. The area includes the Beishan National Forest Park, which is home to many rare birds and animals.

Healthy challenge
As he shows us around the facilities on a cloudy Monday afternoon when the majority of visitors are indulging in the less demanding sports of badminton and table tennis, Guo says: “When I first came here I felt very tired when I exercised. It’s normal when you are not used to living at high altitude. Now I am more used to it and in the summer I can walk 10km a day. In the winter, though, when the air is thinner, I can’t do it and I have to go shorter distances.”

The centre nevertheless encourages residents to do regular exercise. Banners around the complex tell them to exercise for a stronger body, to be healthy in middle age and reminds them that a healthy body is a happy body.

To encourage more people to take up sport, the centre offers 1,100 free hours a year of sports centre use to Xining residents – enough for about three hours’ exercise a day for every man, woman and child in the city.

The sports centre is some 8km from the city centre in an area of new and unfinished housing blocks but has become increasingly popular; Guo says: “Many people have two apartments – one in the city centre which they use during the week and one out here where they live at weekends.”

“The air here is cleaner. Other people are choosing to live here because they find the environment is better. Also many younger people are choosing to live out here because apartments are less expensive than in the city centre. In the evenings we have a lot of young people here and we cooperate with schools to encourage young people to do more sport.”

Like the cyclists who travel from around the world to race across the province in one of the toughest sporting challenges on the planet, residents who take up sport and use the facilities provided for them will find that the gain is worth the pain.

As Tour of Qinghai Lake competitor Jono Lovelock concludes in his blog after recalling the agonies of competitive cycling at high altitude: “If you ever have the chance, go to Qinghai Lake. It really is breathtaking.”