

## Biking in Taliban Country (sort of) (Aug 07)

An account of one of my mountain bike rides in the hills of Mansehra, including encounters with donkeys, goats, a camel, kids both shy and bold, loads of beautiful scenery, and an oppressed ice cream man. Lots of pictures!

This afternoon I went on a bike ride that I wanted to be long and leisurely. I was going to leave at 1:30, but didn't until 2:30. This made the ride less long and less leisurely, though the spirit of those two things still held. I packed my camera and a writing pad - I thought I might take time to stop somewhere along the way and journal - into a small, navy blue backpack. I pulled on a light pair of camping pants to cover my legs (shorts are not acceptable gear in this country) and a short sleeve T-shirt (my cultural sensitivity does not extend to wearing long sleeves for a bike ride in ninety degree heat, thank you). Filling my water bottle and slinging the backpack across my shoulders, I ventured out the front door.

I keep my bike in the living room sometimes, but mostly it lives in the tiled front courtyard of our low slung but high ceilinged Pakistani house. The house is surrounded by a five foot high concrete wall, with a metal framework in the shape of vines and leaves atop it. Two gates fill two holes in the front wall, a small one for those who enter by foot and a larger one for those who enter by vehicle, though a few ill-placed columns prevent any but the smallest cars from actually coming through the gate to find parking inside. This leaves plenty of room for my bicycle, however, sheltered from the weather by an overhang that covers most of the courtyard. I do not fear to leave it there, for the gates and a guard protect it, and besides there is very little theft.

Other than the occasional presence of my bicycle, the front courtyard is the domain of the guards - the graying, gentle, slightly stooped Mohammed Bashir at night and during the day a tall, upright man whose name I do not know. He has a sober but kindly face and a short, dark, curly beard. Their "home" while at work is a square dais just to the side of the front door. This is where they set their things, sit to eat their meals out of a round metal carry-container, spread their prayer rug toward Mecca five times a day, or lie down (without sleeping, supposedly) at night. It must be a dull job - most of the house's inhabitants go out in the morning to work and come home at night, and even I only venture out once or twice a day. They entertain themselves by listening to the radio, doing small chores around the compound, and squatting to talk with friends on the grassy strip in front of the house.

The day guard, who is always the one to let me out when I go for rides, and I have a ritual. I appear at the front door. He stands up and watches me put my helmet on, my biking gloves. I try to keep my sunglasses off till I am outside, to seem more personal and less aloof. I give my bike a once over, checking the tire pressure, making sure my under-seat bag is secure, doing the drop test and listening for telltale rattles. I move toward the gate and he opens it, standing to one side and smiling as I walk my bike out the narrow opening. Shoving on my sunglasses, I push off.

Going left out of the gate dead ends me into the deep gully that runs diagonally behind the house, so I go right. At the corner of our lane a yellow can always overflows with trash. Actually it is less overflow and more that no one really puts their garbage in the can - tossing it near is enough. Then the dogs and chickens, even cows sometimes, come along and poke through the rubbish, scattering it further. My wheels crush empty chip bags and a few milk cartons as I turn right at the end of the lane.

Winding through the narrow streets of Ghazikot, suburb of this mountain town of Mansehra, I say salaam aleikum to men standing outside their compounds and to children channeling and damming the small trickle of water running beside the road. Today I see a dark-skinned man with a large, bushy beard selling ice cream cones from his bicycle. The ice cream he keeps in a round metal container slung on the back rack. Stacks of upside down cones stick two feet or more out of a white plastic bucket mounted in front of the handlebars. This was to be a leisurely ride with time for photo stops; I determine to make this my first one.

"Photo, teek hai?" I ask, shorthand for, "Is it ok if I take your picture?" He does the little head twitch that I'm never quite sure if it means yes or no, then stands there and poses so I know he means yes. I snap a few shots. I want to show the pictures to him on my digital camera's display, a small reward that usually excites my willing subjects. A blue mini-Jeep is coming down the street, however, honking for effect, and is about to run me over.

The driver must not have been in that much of a hurry, though, because he stops to talk to me. "He not from Pakistan," the drivers says, pointing to the ice cream guy, who is now hurrying his bicycle away. "He Afghanistan." I could not tell if the mini-Jeep driver meant anything negative by this, but it seemed so, otherwise why would he have stopped to point this out? "Ah, Afghanistan, Pakistan," I say, "we are all brothers." And I got back on my bicycle and pedaled away.

My preferred route out of Ghazikot and onto the Karakoram Highway (KKH), the main road that runs through town, is via a small alley. This alley begins where the paved street becomes a dirt footpath. Its stony, uphill climb is sometimes too difficult to negotiate without stopping. A thin trail of stagnant water and the smell of buffalo pies makes the alley an unsavory place in spots, but the obstacles help me concentrate and the hard pedaling warms up my legs.

On this day I navigate the narrow alley without incident, except that I step in a buffalo pie when I get off to take a few pictures. At the highway I turn right up the hill, away from Mansehra City. I plan to ride a short distance on the Karakoram to the town of Sheribagh, where a dirt lane that begins there winds away into the hills further than I have yet explored.

The KKH, as always, hums with traffic, everything from tiny, Chevette-size, black and yellow Suzuki taxis to massive lorries with every inch of their four sides covered in brightly painted decorations. I've been a city biker since I was small, so the traffic does not usually faze me much. I have had to learn to tolerate vehicles passing me much closer than I would allow in the States, though. At least drivers usually honk before passing, something I used to get mad at (quit honking at me, you doofus!) but now understand as an act of courtesy.

The scariest bit happens when an oncoming vehicle moves into my lane while they are passing a slow-moving, oncoming truck. Suddenly, then, the two lane road is full of two vehicles side by side and heading straight towards me. The passing driver, anxious to be on their way, is accelerating, whooshing past me scant feet away. Sometimes they hog so much of my lane that I have to hit the shoulder. This is common practice here - drivers expect each other to share the road for mutual advantage in ways we wouldn't even consider in the States - but still quite unnerving. I sometimes think about holding my ground in the face of an onrushing minibus, just to prove a point, but it is, frankly, not worth risking life and limb to uphold a foreign idea of road do's and don'ts.

Biking up the KKH, soon I turn right onto the dirt lane that leads to Sheribagh. Where on the highway I was part of the flow of traffic, here suddenly I have become a curiosity. Not many people ride bicycles in Mansehra, because of all the hills I expect. The typical Pakistani bike is a solidly built one-speeder more suited for hauling large loads on the back rack than for climbing hills. I stick out by the simple fact of my white skin, but now here I am in all my whiteness with a strange looking mountain bike and a helmet on my head (something no Pakistani biker would imagine putting on), eyes masked behind dark glasses. I probably resemble an alien from another planet. Men stare at me as they walk on the dirt road, or lounge in a small group on a pile of stones, or relax on a charpoy (a bed made of ropes wound tightly round a wooden frame) in front of a store. Women duck their heads when I approach, but their eyes follow me from under brightly-colored dupattas after I pass. Children shout when they see me and run to follow.

I bike through the town, stopping on the far end to take a few pictures of the Mansehra valley spreading out before me. Three boys have tailed me out of town. Now they gaze at me and at my bicycle while I snap. They wear beige shalwar kameezes and handmade leather sandals with rubber soles. My horn, a plastic cow head (Bessie, she is to me) that gives a rubbery toot when squeezed, fascinates them particularly. The youngest, maybe seven, whispers to his older brother as if he does not want me to hear what he has to say. He holds a red streamer in his hand. Below us, a buffalo grazes on green grass.

Pedaling on, I pass a huge K&N chicken house ("Safe and Healthy" is their motto), then through another small village. The road begins to wind downward over the shoulder of a ridge as it drops toward a small stream valley that cuts its way between scattered hills. I attract continued attention from kids as I pass family homesteads. At one cluster of houses, three girls join the usual group of boys who come out to greet me. At another, a young teen leads his boyish followers in a downhill run toward me. His arms windmill wildly as he careers down the hill, enjoying making a spectacle of himself.

It's a nice day, the heat of the afternoon sun shaded behind a thin screen of high clouds. It rained early in the morning and so the air is not as hazy as usual. I enjoy the feel of gravity pulling me down toward the stream bed at the bottom of the hill. Since the day is fine and I know I have plenty of time, I stop to take more pictures: a suckling donkey sipping milk from its mother, men troweling mortar onto bricks as they build a wall.

The stream valley, when I reach it, runs wide and cool and green. A shallow watercourse winds its way over a gravelly bed. Hills rise on either side. Across the stream two boys, who have been playing in the water, pull pants onto their bare legs. The road I have been following continues along this wide stream valley, so I follow the valley, too. I ride slowly, gazing about. From time to time I guide my wheels through inches of flowing water where the path's two tire tracks must dip into the actual stream bed to find a way forward. Almost I could be in the hills of Montana following a meandering brook in the mountains.

But this is Pakistan, and I do not really know where I am going, now, since I have never been this far on this road and the stream leads me away from the places where I usually ride. I feel no fear, however, for one can never really get lost here where the hills stand as landmarks clearly seen for miles. As long as you keep a sense of where the sun is, for direction, and study the contours of the land as it opens before you, you can always find the way. I have nothing to fear, either, from the local villagers, who greet me with openness and hospitality, though admittedly they could be speaking negative words that I cannot understand. I get the feeling I make their day; perhaps they will talk for years about the time the gora cycled past with his expensive looking bike and strange hat.

Following the stream bed for a kilometer or two I come to a mosque tucked into a hollow between hillside and water. Leafy trees along its outer wall shade a wide front courtyard. A lone, white minaret reaches for heaven like a soul seeking solace in the painted sky. From the inner courtyard comes the sound of children at play. Several boys appear along the wall and call out to me. I wave and ride on.

Soon the stream-bed track ends at a bridge through which the stream continues toward unknown destinations. A steep ramp of concrete plunges down from a paved road to the water on one side of the bridge. A man washes a covered mini-Jeep in the shallow pool at the foot of the ramp. I am surprised to see a mini-Jeep beside a bridge with a paved road running over it here in what I figured would be rural country, where I expected to find only dirt lanes and narrow footpaths. Absorbing this unexpected sight, I guess that taking this paved road to the left will eventually bring me back to the Karakoram Highway that I left behind high up on the hill at Sheribagh. I ride up the ramp, then, to the amusement, or amazement, of the man washing his Jeep and the boys dangling their legs over the bridge's low wall, and turn right. I still have time for some adventures before taking any turn that hints of heading back toward home.

The road rises in a long arc out of the shaded stream bed, climbing a green bowl in an almost-270-degree circle. At the top I look out over a wide, green valley. Here and there clusters of mud huts gather; occasionally a larger concrete house rises above them. Close at hand I can see the steep drops and eroded brown sides of the deep gorges that score the landscape; further on the gorges and the hills blend into a seamless sweep of scenery. A tall mountain ridge rises against the horizon.

Soon after passing this vista the road loses its pavement, silly surface to speed us on our way, and becomes the slow dirt I love to follow into unknown places. Then it is all grassy hills, rural villages and homesteads, fields of corn rising chest high, women carrying water on their heads in large pots with bell-shaped tops, men working in the fields or driving buffalo home from their daily pastures.

At a deep bend cut into the side of a hill, the rock that lurks just beneath soil shows through. Here the rock has been left uncarved across the path, and its jagged pits are too deep for me to navigate even with my sturdy mountain bike. I dismount and walk across. Soon the road I follow is a two-track lane no longer, only a wide and dusty footpath. It takes a short, rocky drop. Putting one foot to the ground, I fishtail down the slope into the shade of small trees.

Around a bend, a boy rides a donkey toward me. The boy carries a long stick. The donkey stops, uncertain of this two-wheeled, white-skinned wonder suddenly appearing on the path in front of him. I move as far to the side as I can, but still the donkey stays. The boy whips it with the stick; the donkey will not budge. Finally the rider dismounts and leads the donkey, both staring at me as they pass. The boy smiles; if donkeys could, I'd say it was smiling too.

Then a man appears suddenly out of the bush. He is friendly and extends a hand to greet me. It seems he simply wants to make sure I am ok, a stranger where few strangers ever come. When I tell him I have biked all the way from Mansehra, he looks surprised. He joins the boy, who has now got the donkey almost to the top of the slope. I debate turning around. If the path takes more falls like this I will spend too much time out of the saddle pushing my bike over unrideable obstacles and not enough in the saddle enjoying myself. I decide to press on, at least for a bit. Still not ready to turn around.

To my delight, the path stays rideable, not too stony and not too narrow, as it cuts through corn fields and along the top edges of low terraces. At a small homestead I stop. The path goes on, but I decide to turn around. The adventures waiting ahead will have to wait a little longer.



The house that I have stopped behind is built into the side of a hill. Its corrugated metal roof, scattered with large stones to weigh it down, does not rise above my knees. As I look out over this roof to the valley, taking in the scene, a goat trips lightly across the metal to greet me. Regarding me quizzically for a moment, it puts its head down to sniff my bike seat. Two girls come out of their house and peek shyly around a corner. They want to see the stranger, too, but are not as bold as the goat. I try to take a picture of them, but they duck, giggling, behind the house every time I aim the camera their way. Soon one of them appears with what must be a mobile phone. She holds it up, aimed my way as if using it to take a picture. Two can play the photo game, I guess.

Finally I'm ready to go. I ride toward them, and they run. Retracing the path, I push my bike up the slope where I met the donkey, navigate the corner with the jutting rocks, and, back on the paved road, whiz down the circular bowl into the green stream valley. At last I come to the bridge over the stream where I had made my decision to press on into adventure rather than cut back to the highway. The mini-Jeep is still there in the middle of a shallow pool, gleaming and clean, though neither the man who was washing it nor the boys watching him are anywhere in sight. I take the road that I hope will lead me back to the Karakoram Highway.

After that it is a much less eventful ride. I have explored long enough that I am not sure if I can get back home by my six o'clock goal. Putting my head down, I concentrate on going fast rather than on looking around me. I do stop for a few more photos in a small town, though, when I come across a camel being led down the road toward me. Two young boys guide it. They have piled a large bundle of long grass on its back. Camels are quite unusual here; everyone along the road stops to watch as it passes. When the load of grass starts to slip, the younger boy climbs on top and leans to the other side to balance things out.

Soon I do indeed come out to the highway that I sought, in the middle of a bustling small town that I am going to call Calendarabad, for that is what it sounded like the man said when I asked him where I was. (I would not think of asking a woman any such questions, if there were any to be found in such a public and busy place, since a strange man forcing interaction with a woman would be quite unwelcome, and besides the odds are much slimmer that a woman would be educated and thus know a little English.) Seeing some vegetable stands with better-looking produce than we usually get in Ghazikot, I fill my backpack with tomatoes and potatoes and cilantro and ginger, all the while the center of a small throng of boys curious to follow this stranger around.

Now it is really time to be heading home. Dodging slow trucks and oncoming mini-buses, I bike the four miles to Mansehra smiling at the full adventures of today's ride. Stopping at the store where I always stop to get a post-ride 7-Up, I see the shopkeeper looking tired.

"Long day?" I ask him.

He nods. "How are you?" he asks.

"Yesterday was not so good," I say, "but today I have had a good ride on my bicycle, and so I am happy."