

## Pakistan's Stupendous Mountains (Oct 07)

In case the news gives you the impression that Pakistan is nothing but political turmoil and suicide bombers, and I've given you the impression that Pakistan is nothing but bearded men and covered women, read about Jules and my trip along the marvel-of-engineering Karakoram Highway to the stupendous Northern Areas, home of apricots, spectacular October foliage, and awe-inspiring 8,000 meter peaks.

Ok folks, forget for a few moments everything you've heard from me about Pakistan thus far: forget the news of suicide bombings and honor killings; forget that it's a contentious nation with an uncertain political future; forget about the men staring and the women excluded from public life. Come with me now, instead, to the north of the country, to the beautiful Himalayan region of mighty rivers and majestic peaks. Then perhaps you, like me, will gain a new perspective on this land that has lately surprised me with its diversity.

For the last year I've been hearing about the wonders of the Northern Areas of this Muslim nation, a place where snowy peaks rise above high alpine meadows that are but a two hours' trek from the road. Every long break that Jules and I have had, however, we've wanted to travel out of the country and get away from the constrictions of Pakistani culture. For last year's Eid-ul-Fitr, the holiday celebrating the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, Jules and I escaped to Bangkok. This year, since we had just been to Nepal scarcely a month before, we decided to do some traveling in-country. (pics below: left - Hunza Valley peak; right - view of Nanga Parbat, world's eighth highest mountain)

Eid was forecast for Saturday and Sunday October 13 and 14, with government holidays to follow on Monday and Tuesday and Jules' office closed that whole week. Making the most of our time, we flew from Quetta to Islamabad on the afternoon of Friday the twelfth. Last minute planners that we tend to be, I had only purchased our air tickets two days before, and when we flew we had yet to finalize our transport north.

The quickest, but not necessarily the best, way to get north is to fly from Islamabad to Gilgit, a city smack in the middle of the Northern Areas' tourist and transport options. The flight offers forty-five minute conveyance from Islamabad to the glories of the mountains, with stunning views of 8,000 meter peaks along the way. It is, however, subject to unpredictable

mountain weather at its destination, often gets cancelled, always has a long waiting list, and is booked manually using an archaic system that does not guarantee you a seat until you are actually sitting on the plane.

The other way is to go overland via the Karakoram Highway, or KKH, a road that Pakistanis call the eighth wonder of the world, which follows the old Silk Road trading route from China to the subcontinent. It is not a "highway" as we would think of it in the US. Far from being the well-maintained, properly-graded, sleek three-lanes-each-way thoroughfare that we think of when hearing the word, the Karakoram Highway is a one-lane-each-way road sporting grinding traffic humps and seemingly bottomless ruts as it creeps through towns. Where it crosses scree-filled slopes prone to landslide it narrows to one lane total. Large, decorated Pakistani trucks ply the highway at a snail's pace, slowing traffic further and providing plenty of white-knuckle moments as drivers cut it way too close passing them in front of oncoming traffic. A good average speed for a 4 wheel drive SUV traveling its length might be thirty miles an hour.

Jules and I debated flying or driving. While a quick flight sounded blissful, we did not want to have our short time available made even shorter by delayed flights. Besides, we like road trips and relished the thought of the scenery along the way. When Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) announced that it would not offer the Gilgit flight on the days of Eid, precisely when we wanted to leave, we knew that we would answer the call of the road.

Arriving in Islamabad, we finalized arrangements for a vehicle and driver. We ended up with a Toyota Land Cruiser - a boxy, four passenger SUV - and a tall, thin driver named Nasir who was from the Hunza valley, one of our destinations. "Why didn't you just drive yourselves?" you might ask. "Are you so uppity now that you need to be chauffeured around?" Well, no, we actually like the independence of driving ourselves. But think about the state of the road as I described two paragraphs ago - the landslide areas, the deep ruts through strange towns, the large trucks hogging the road and the reckless passing. Then think that the road runs over some of the wildest terrain on earth, a cliff on one side, a straight drop of sometimes hundreds of feet to the Indus River on the other, and no guard rail; through inhospitable mountains populated by inhospitable tribes which the government has little control over; where there is no cell phone coverage, no AAA tow trucks, no real towns or service stations for hours at a stretch, and if anything went wrong we couldn't communicate with the local populace. Thus, the vehicle and driver.

At 6 a.m. Sunday morning we set out. The first part of our drive we knew well - we were heading up the KKH toward Mansehra, a drive we made countless times while living there. Leaving Islamabad we went west then wound our way through the Margalla Hills on a back road. Over the plains then through Haripur, through Havelian, the official start of the KKH, until we reached our first real climb up into Abbottabad. From that point northward mountains surrounded us.

It happened to be the first day of Eid. The beginning of the holiday is dependent upon a bunch of mullah's sighting the new moon, then announcing the end of Ramadan. The moon was supposed to have been seen on Friday night and Eid start on Saturday, but somehow the official mullah body missed it, so Eid did not start till Sunday. (In a section of Pakistan close to Afghanistan they did see the moon on Friday night, so the country had two different Eid beginnings, depending on where you lived; this seems to happen every year.) It was like driving on Christmas morning - we were practically the only vehicle on the road. All morning we drove through small towns where all the men had come together for special Eid prayers. Often the praying rows of the faithful spilled out of the local mosque onto the road itself, sometimes a whole lane taken up by men and boys kneeling in supplication, their sandals in small piles between them. In Battal the road was lined with vehicles and hugging men; we saw hundreds, probably thousands of men lined across a terraced hillside in front of the tiny mosque as they prayed (emphasis provided by Jules, who adds, "Not a woman in sight").

After that I was in new territory - Battal was where I had turned around on my one long bike ride north from Mansehra. A few hours later - after we had left the Siran River and begun to follow the mighty waters of the Indus - we passed through Besham and Jules too was in new territory. The Lonely Planet guidebook we brought with us went on and on about the geology of the land, how millions of years ago the mountains formed when the Indian subcontinent drifted into the main Asian plate, and told us where to look for the different kinds of rock and the borders of these plates. Mostly, though, we just peered up at the mountains stretching increasingly higher above us and down at the milky gray-green waters of the Indus as it thundered its centuries-old way below, and were happy to be on vacation driving into unknown lands.

On the first day we drove ten hours, making good time because of the lack of traffic on the roads, from Islamabad to Chilas. Sometime after Besham we had our first sighting of a snow-topped peak. By then we had entered a landscape completely unexpected to both of us. The green mountains that we were used to seeing around Mansehra were no more, replaced by an increasingly dry and barren, almost desert-like line of hills that tumbled down in steep, sometimes broken-rock, sometimes sandy sides to form an often-narrow gorge for the Indus waters. It was scenery on a vast scale, a bare moon-scape that appeared to support little life.

And yet here and there small tree-sheltered towns cropped up on the plateau above the river where clear mountain streams ran out of small canyons, life-giving water from glaciers perhaps miles away. As we trained our eyes we could also distinguish death-defying roads and footpaths that ran high on steep rock walls or switch-backed up the sheer sides of mountains in shapes like a child learning to doodle lightning bolts. These paths looked like trails to nowhere, but, we surmised, must lead to settlements hidden behind the river-flanking hills. Apparently, the landscape was not as inhospitable as it appeared to our Western eyes.

Above Besham, in this sparsely-settled landscape of Kohistan, it is not recommended for foreign travelers to stop. Going through one town our driver said to me, "These bad people. Taliban mix here." We spent the night in Chilas, inside the more hospitable borders of the Northern Areas themselves. Clouds held off our first sight of Nanga Parbat, one of several of Pakistan's 8,000 meter-plus peaks. When Monday dawned with only scattered clouds, the mountain graced us with a virgin appearance; our sights of it only got more majestic as we drove north in the early morning to meet it.

Our first real destination was Fairy Meadows, a high alpine rest area that, almost in the shadow of Nanga Parbat, is accessible only by footpath. Driving to Raikot Bridge, one of the few places where the KKH crosses the Indus, we got out of our trusty SUV and into an old-style Jeep 4x4 for the drive up to the mountain town of Tato, the jumping-off point for the hike into Fairy Meadows. The road runs across private land, the Jeeps driven by enterprising townsmen who also maintain the road, charging tourists a hefty price for the trip.

The Jeep ride was an event in itself, and well worth the fifty dollars even if you would go and then turn around again without continuing to Fairy Meadows. Crossing a sandy plateau the Jeep takes a switchback then starts to churn up a sketchy road that you saw from the car and prayed would not be your path. Soon you are high above the valley floor. Turning a corner you enter a narrow gorge that leads into the high mountains behind the hills that flank the Indus and the KKH. You go up and up, the road an impossibly narrow cut into the side of an immense slab of stone that slopes sharply down to a roaring mountain stream hundreds of feet below. Actually, you find, the road is less a cut into the side of the mountain and more built right onto it; in most places a retaining wall of small, hand-placed stones, back-filled with gravel and dirt, makes the one-vehicle-wide path possible.

Soon you are pushing back panic as you look over the side of the Jeep straight down into what must be a thousand-foot drop, the Jeep wheels at times scant feet from certain death. You try not to think about the poor state of vehicle maintenance in Pakistan nor imagine what would happen if the brakes failed or the steering column came loose, all the while reassuring yourself that surely the driver has done this hundreds of times and won't make any fatal mistakes. Then comes an outside corner after a steep section where your vehicle must keep up its speed to keep the wheels going through the rutted road; all you see is the deep drop-off framed against blue sky while the driver down-shifts around the bend, and you white-knuckle the side of the Jeep and push down that pesky panic again.

Since Jules is afraid of heights (a phobia she confronted more than once on this trip), I got to sit on the side over the drop-off. Once I relaxed it was quite fun. Soon we had ever-nearer glimpses of Nanga Parbat towering over the landscape at the high end of the gorge in front of us. Behind, a line of snow-capped peaks emerged as we climbed above the lower hills that had previously hid them from view. All in all it was one of those experiences that, even if you've read all about it in the guide book and think it can't be all that, really is all that and more.

Fairy Meadows itself was similar. After a two-and-a-half hour hike through a yellow-tree, high mountain fall landscape, helped by a friendly guide-turned-porter who charged us too much money, we arrived at this fabled meadow breathless from the trek but completely awed by the stupendous Nanga Parbat peak (pics below) looming over this high camp ground. Imagine waking from a night of heavily-blanketed slumber to a cold but crystal clear morning. You roll over in bed in your rustic wooden cottage and there, right out your window, is the eighth highest peak in the world glistening in morning sun. This was our treat for two nights and mornings. Such views were more than adequate compensation for the scary Jeep ride, the steep hike, and the cold fall nights that put a skin of ice on any standing puddles. (Understand that this statement means even more coming from Jules, given the afore-mentioned height phobia and the fact that she really doesn't like the cold, wearing three layers when I made do with one.)



The place we stayed, Raikot Sarai (pic above right), offers rustic cottages, safari tents, and basic camping from May through October. On the tail end of the season, we had the place almost to ourselves and were nearly the last tourists to visit. Even the goatherds were going downhill, driving their flocks from the high meadows to warmer pastures below for the winter. In between basic meals of daal (lentils) and vegetable curry, we hiked, read by the stove in the 'warm room,' and spent plenty of time simply admiring the massive bulk of Nanga Parbat with its many peaks, snow and cloud swirling around its head as if it were a god. Our day hike two hours further up the gorge gave us awe-inspiring views of the mountain, its glaciers, and of the heads of the snow-caps in the line of Himalayan mountains to the north (pic above left). There is nothing quite so sweet as standing on a high bluff listening to a glacier crack below you, watching a killer mountain (it is one of the most dangerous high mountains to climb) above you, all the while breathing clean mountain air and taking in a sweeping alpine landscape tinged with the yellows and reds of fall.

(pic right: A mountain breakfast)

Our two nights went by too quickly, and on Wednesday morning we left the camp, trundling down the sometimes-thin trail with our full packs, on our own this time, to repeat the crazy Jeep ride back to the Indus valley. Meeting our driver once again, we continued north on the KKH for five hours to one of the other famous northern Pakistan destinations, the Hunza valley.

(pic below: Mountain men)

Announcement: Everyone, and I mean everyone, should visit the Hunza valley in the fall. This means you, people! Make your plans now for next year, and if you're lucky we'll still be here and can accompany you.

The Hunza valley is a fairy tale land, the sort of place that makes you think of Disney World until you realize that Mickey's realm is just a cheap imitation of this, the real thing. In the middle of the valley the gray-green Gilgit River. On either side, above a low plateau over the rushing water, a shallow plain rises to meet steep granite mountainsides in a graceful arc of simple houses, terraced fields, and irrigated orchards. Behind the granite cliffs, to the north, brood the craggy Ultar peaks, while to the south the snowy dome of Diran reflects the sunlight from all angles. At the western end of the valley tall and massive Rakaposhi (pic left) tussles with the horizon, snow blowing off its high summits, and at the eastern end a line of triangular, pointy, snow-flecked crags rise exactly like the mountains you would see in a book of fairy tales. Another one of those better-than-the-guidebook-can-say sort of places.

Reaching this idyllic land around sunset on Wednesday evening, we took a winding, climbing road to the tourist town of Karimabad perched high above the river valley. (pic right: Our hotel in Karimabad, Ultar Peak lofty above.) Left to itself, the Hunza Valley would not be much more fertile than the arid landscapes of Kohistan that I described a few paragraphs ago. Centuries old water channels, however, bring glacial water from Ultar Mountain to stone-walled fields and orchards terraced into the sides of any available hill. This irrigation system has transformed a harsh landscape into a region famous for apricots, apples, mulberries, and walnuts.

During our two-night visit the valley was alive with fall color, yellows and reds and burnt oranges flaming from the tops of trees, maize drying on the cement roofs of houses, pumpkins piled in compound corners. We went both evenings to a local restaurant to partake of the bounty of the land - apricot soup, creamy potatoes, tumoro and walnut tea, dense mountain-berry bread, leaf-paste curry, and tasty local cheese spread between apricot-oil-fried chapatti. At the Cafe du Hunza we sampled the world's best walnut loaf - a caramelized walnut center surrounded by a dense, sweet pastry crust - and Jules had her first coffee of the week.

Other than enjoying the good food, the beautiful valley views, and the relatively (for Pakistan) relaxed mountain atmosphere, we spent most of our one full day on a six hour trek up to Ultar Meadow, a high alpine pasture similar to Fairy Meadows. We had heard from several sources that the way is steep and hard to find, so we decided to hire a guide. A last minute phone call by the hotel manager on Thursday morning produced a fourteen year old boy who, he assured us, knew the trails and had just taken some foreigners up yesterday. We shouldn't have doubted - this kid cruised the whole way while we sweated, barely loosening his hoodie on even the steepest sections, his wide skater-style shoes clumping nonchalantly down sandy declines that took us tedious minutes to navigate. He appeared rather bored the whole time, waiting for us unconcernedly with hands shoved in his pockets while we pondered the deadly results a fall could bring on the sometimes cliff-edge trail.

The hike started innocently enough as we climbed up steep, cobble-stone streets toward a historic fort that keeps watch over the town. Soon we were walking through sun-dappled orchards over ancient, stone-walled paths scattered with yellow leaves. Beside the path irrigation channels rippled with glittering, mica-flecked mountain water. We were heading toward a canyon cut deep into the mountainside, however, and the path did not stay easy for long. After a few tough rock scrambles that had Jules and I panting for breath, we came to what was physically the easiest but mentally the most outrageous section of our climb - a path that followed a water channel deep into the canyon toward the water's source, the brooding Ultar Mountain.

The path itself was quite ordinary, a gravel, three-foot-wide, fairly level trail. What was extraordinary was the five hundred foot drop beside it. The water channel itself was cut into the sheer rock face that formed one side of the canyon, the path built up beside it with hand-placed stones. It was very similar to our Jeep ride into Fairy Meadows, only this time there was no comforting vehicle superstructure to grab onto while we sat back and enjoyed the view, there was only our feet to trust not to stumble and our eyes to control to keep them from lingering too long on the sheer gorge opening hundreds of feet below us. (Did I mention Jules is afraid of heights?)

This panic-inducing path took us a long way up and into the canyon. In the upper reaches of the gorge, Ultar mighty above us, the trail became less frightening but more steep, as we scrambled up a sandy path that often required the agility of a goat. Finally we reached the Ultar Meadow (pic left) and were treated to a high amphitheater of awesome, snowy peaks, with the thunderous echoes of glacial ice-falls booming now and then off of the surrounding rock. We ate some lunch and enjoyed the view, trying not to think about the difficult path down. After an hour we retraced our steps, breathless with relief when we safely reached the comfortable, stone-shod paths of the town.

After sleeping in Friday morning, the only day we stayed in bed past eight (such early mornings nearly unheard of for us when on vacation!), we began our drive back to Islamabad - four hours to Chilas where we again stayed the night, then twelve hours on Saturday from Chilas to Islamabad. We thought about flying back, choosing the one hour flight time over the sixteen hours of driving. "But it just wouldn't seem right," Jules said, "to hop in an airplane and suddenly be in Islamabad." I had to agree that there was a certain poetry in the symmetry of the overland up-and-back, and so we drove. It wasn't as bad as I feared, since there was always good scenery to look at and good company in the car. In Islamabad, we spent an evening running around then flew out for Quetta early Sunday morning.

(News note: Self-exiled ex-prime minister Benazir Bhutto returned to the country on October 18th with a view to guiding her party in the upcoming elections and trying for a third term in office. "Something's going to happen when she lands in Karachi," Jules kept saying in the weeks leading up to this much-publicized event. Sure enough, we turned on our hotel TV Friday morning to reports of over one hundred dead in a suicide bomb attack on her welcoming procession. While we mourn the lives lost we are thankful that the violence has not spilled over into other parts of the country, and Quetta seems quite unconcerned with the hubbub of Benazir's return. While the political future remains uncertain, daily life - except for the appropriate national grieving - continues as normal.)

(pic right: A desert sunset)

Back here in this desert town, I have a new respect for the majesty and diversity of this sometimes-trying country. It changes one somehow to know that, even in this turbulent nation, there is a mountain retreat with clear air and water and majestic peaks, where gently practiced, centuries-old traditions have turned a harsh, inhospitable valley into a welcoming tourist spot and even the most uptight expats can sample the sweetness of Pakistan, forgetting (mostly) about the tribulations of the land.