

Wet Snow in a Dry Land (Jan 08)

It's been fifteen years of drought, says a Quetta-ite, since the city has had a good winter snowfall, and I was here to see it! I traipsed around a giddy city, my sneakers soaked but not minding the wet, caught up in a morning of delight in Pakistan.

Last night it snowed in Quetta. Imagine the delight! Winter always brings snow on the mountains that surround this city, but rarely does it reach down to the valley floor.

A 7:30 am phone call awakened Jules and I. Any call that early usually means bad things, but this one had a happy message. "There is snow outside. All night it has been snowing, and it is snowing still." Too groggy to bite at the please-close-the-office today pause that followed, Jules said, "Thank you," and hung up.

Sure enough, window curtains parted on a winter wonderland. "Sleigh bells ring, are ya listenin'?" I started to sing. The birds outside weren't quite so happy, so cold they didn't leave their window-side shelter even when I tapped the screen.

Downstairs in the kitchen, as soon as the kettle was on, I grabbed my camera and rushed outside.

Juma, our guard, greeted me with a smile as he cleared the front walks with a long-handled squeegee. "Snow!" I said, throwing my arms wide to encompass the scene. We laughed. I took pictures of the front yard, of the snow-filled trees melting their winter lining onto my head, of Juma standing under a tree by the generator. He actually encouraged me, by pantomime, to climb the rickety ladder to the roof, a startling development given that the last time I was up there he made me come down. I declined, however, since the makeshift rungs were still icy, and besides, the kettle had to be near boiling.

As soon as Jules left for work I threw on an extra fleece and went outside for a long photo walk. The mood of the day was exuberance. Everywhere men delighted in the new snowfall. Pedestrians threw snowballs at one another and at men crowded onto the back of passing mini-Jeeps. The roofs of buses held mini snow-parties, the men clustered on top not minding the cold, throwing snowballs at the men waiting by the side of the road for their rides to work. I used my camera with impunity - no one objected to a gora taking their photograph on such a lucky day.

Even Jules got in on the fun, a text coming through to me as I made my way up Airport Road: "Just had an office snowball fight and pic. Everyone is so giddy. No work will get done today..."

I wandered the roads, then, taking pictures of the lower slopes of the mountains when they appeared beneath the heavy cloud cover; of the men riding their bicycles to work, undeterred by the snow; of children playing; of the silent Ferris wheel at Askari Park, ringed in white.

I even put my camera away long enough to accept a snowball-fight challenge from a young man at the side of the road. I neglected, however, to put enough distance between us before I threw the first sportingly tepid, desultory strike. He immediately winged one at me with all his might. As it flew past my face, I took to flight. He got me once, square in the back, before I learned to look back and watch his throwing arm, the better to duck the missiles that pursued me. He gave up the chase when a man on a passing mini-Jeep, assuming it was open season on the running white guy, got me full on the side of the face. Ouch. Pakistanis, it seems, don't know how not to play rough. I accepted no more snowball challenges.

Circling back toward home, I cut through an open field where a group of gypsies have apparently ceased their wandering life for the relative advantages (though they seem few) of a rag-tent village. First taking pictures of a few boys, then a few men whiling away the morning on a small hillock of snow, suddenly I was surrounded by fifteen men, and as many kids, all wanting me to take their picture. I was happy to oblige, until it seemed as if the whole community had clustered around me. Everywhere I turned suddenly there was a new face, the man's friends insisting that I snap him, too. I made a more or less graceful getaway before the crowd grew large enough to hem me in.

Paying my ten rupees to enter nearby Askari Park, I found a group of men making a snowman. They rolled a huge ball of snow, picking up blades of brown grass and a few discarded orange peels as they went. They were happy to snap a few pictures of the foreigner standing atop the snowy mound before heaping two smaller balls on top to make the figure. It was nothing but fun and camaraderie in the snow as they experimented with adornments for their creation - arms, hair, a baseball cap, sunglasses, even a cigarette.

Nearing home, my feet wet from slush but a smile still on my face, I stopped at the Pakistan Hotel for a cup of tea. This chai joint, just outside the lane that leads to our house, consists of a twenty foot square dirt yard covered by a metal awning. It looks a bit shady, as if someone ran an illicit business there, selling chai as a front. It's a popular place, frequented exclusively by turbaned, bearded, craggy-looking men, these days given a female touch by the blankets wrapped around their shoulders. Whenever Jules jokes with coworkers about the possibility that she, a Western woman, might sit there to sip some tea, they answer, dead serious and with horror on their faces, "No! They would kidnap you."

I had never sat down here for a hot cup, slightly fearing the place. But that morning as I went out on my photo safari the snow broke down the boundaries, and a waiter insisted I sit down and have some chai. "Wapaas," I said. "I'll come back."

And come back I did, to the same smiling waiter who promptly sat me down in a plastic lawn chair at one of the plastic folding tables and whisked a hot glass of sugary, milky tea in front of me. It was good. I sat there watching the clientele, watching the waiters carry trays of steaming tea to cars pulled at the curb, watching one man in a red-checked scarf drink straight from the communal water pitcher set out on his table.

My visit, and my snow-walk, ended as charitably as it had begun, even if my exuberance was a bit tired by then, as the waiter refused to accept money for my drink.

The snow disappeared rather quickly, I'm afraid. When I went out at five to get a few more photos it was gone, the roads dry. It still clings to the lower slopes of the mountains, their heads in the clouds.

This snow mania was a good madness in Quetta, for a change, a nice chance to feel some brotherly love on the streets. Bring on the winter storms (and duck those snowballs!).