

Pakistan's Stupendous Mountains, One Last Time (May 09)

As a farewell tour of Pakistan, we visit the northern mountains once more for two weeks of hiking, camping, and severe beauty.

Before moving to Burundi, we decided to have one last fling in Pakistan. The place appeared to be falling apart, but we knew better - this country makes its living teetering on the edge without ever actually falling off. Still, it seemed a good time to be getting out.

But like a lover you know is bad for you but you just can't leave, we wanted that last fling.

The trip began to look doubtful when, just a couple weeks before our scheduled beginning-of-May start date, the Taliban moved into the district just next to the northern-leading Karakoram Highway, which we were planning to drive. Um, we thought, all it takes is one Taliban checkpoint at the wrong place, and we're making headlines.

We didn't want to make headlines. We flew instead.

There's some crazy mountains, and beautiful, don't you think?

We landed in Skardu, where the usually narrow Indus River canyon widens into sand-dune plains. Here's me sitting on a rock above the Shigar River valley, just outside Skardu.

Heavens, I love that view.

One feels so small on these sandy plains surrounded by indescribably rugged and large rocks, like time will simply pass over you and leave you as insignificant as the silica grains upon which you stand.

That's our 'car' in the photo, by the way, which we rented, including driver. Trust me, in a land of narrow and potholed roads that run cliff-side, sans guardrails, hundreds of feet above roaring rivers, you don't simply want to go to the nearest Hertz, get a car, and drive yourself around. (There is no Hertz, by the way, nor Budget, nor Avis, nor any of the others...)

There is plenty of stunning scenery, however.

And of course kids who like to play.

And men enjoying the evening by the riverside. (Nope, no women - this is still Pakistan, though the north feels, almost, like a different country.)

I suppose it's good to know that, in a nation making headlines for upheaval, serenity is still available.

As are burgers, apparently, in this local version of McDonalds.

No, I didn't get a burger there, though I would have if I had been hungry for one!

Unfortunately I lost most of my photos from the place we went next - Fairy Meadows, a high pasture just below the 8th-highest-in-the-world Nanga Parbat massif, where there are rudimentary summer huts to stay in and men to cook for you

if you can survive the 45-minute cliff-hanger Jeep drive and the two hour hike. We spent two days there, but left early since the snow (which was reportedly the most in 30-odd winters) prevented us from hiking any higher. If you want to see photos of this must-visit place, go to the post from our first trip to the Pakistan north, which was Fall 07, I think.

Here's Rakaposhi, not quite an 8,000 meter peak but almost, lording it over the fabled Hunza Valley, where we went next.

Hunza's brooding peaks, ancient forts, stunning hikes, and spring-and-fall color can easily wow even the jaded traveler.

The Passu Glacier is an easy day trip north of the valley. Here's our driver, Noorud Din, leading us on a shale-slab path to a high viewing point, with the glacier below.

And, after an hour or so of scrambling, me enjoying that view.

As we walked up and up, we kept thinking we were going to the middle of nowhere. Then, lo and behold, there was a man walking up the trail behind us and, when we got to what we thought was the 'top,' a shepherd's hut. Of course the trail ran on; we stopped.

Here's a taste of the mountains around Passu, which are spectacularly craggy in this most beautiful way that I had never seen before. Jules is walking on a path beside an ancient waterway that brings glacial melt from on high down to the otherwise barren valleys below.

In this photo, back in the Hunza Valley, you can see how irrigation from such watercourses transforms bare mountainsides into fruitful fields.

The whole system of farming in these mountains, with terraced fields watered by these centuries-old waterways, is really worth going to see just in itself.

Having enjoyed ourselves in Fairy Meadows and the Hunza Valley, both places we'd been to before, we decided to add a new place to this trip and visit Tarashing, a town way up a canyon that bends around to the 'back side' of Nanga Parbat. We took a fork off the already-desolate Karakoram Highway and headed into what looked like a dead-end stream canyon. But the road kept winding steadily upward, and after awhile the canyon opened up like this.

As we got higher and higher not only fields but whole towns appeared. We got to Tarashing, relaxed for a night, then hit the trail the next day.

The great virtue of the town of Tarashing is that you can ride in a Jeep to within a day's walk of the base camp of an 8,000-plus meter peak. We wanted to get to the base camp for Nanga Parbat (8125 m), where we could see the mountain's full south face, which is hidden from Tarashing town.

The hike included a very easy but still glee-inducing glacier crossing.

Here's Jules passing stylishly by a hole where the glacier exposes its innards.

We walked, then, over high plains and through even more remote towns only inhabited half of the year. Considering that Tarashing itself can have up to ten feet of snow laying over it in the deep of winter, that's probably a wise way to do things.

Walking beside us were many local people going from towns lower down, where they spend the winter, up to their high summer huts and pastures. It made the trip kind of interesting, continually passing or being passed by herds of goats, old women riding horseback, groups of uncooperative cows, and donkeys loaded with everything from food to household goods to chickens to small calves.

These boys kept us entertained, part of the way, with their local songs and their goat-herding antics.

The high pasture at Herligkofer Base Camp, when we reached it, was cold and mostly covered in snow, but thankfully there was a large rock behind which we could shelter from the icy wind coming off of Nanga Parbat. We rather enjoyed watching our guide (mandated by local law) and porter (ya gotta travel in style when ya can!) set up our campsite for us while we rested and tried to catch some rays from the feeble sun.

As I said before, the whole point of hiking these five hours to the base camp was to get a view of Nanga Parbat's famous Rupal Face, supposedly the largest chunk of sheer granite anywhere on earth, or some such stuff according to Lonely Planet. Effectively, we had to walk around a spur of mountain that shielded the Rupal Face from view in the town of Tarashing. Having duly walked around it, when we got to the base camp, however, all we could see was this.

Yes, there's a peak up in those clouds somewhere...

And after a cold night in a tent, hoping hoping the morning would be clear, all we could see was this.

We couldn't even make out the ridge a hundred yards from our campsite, much less any peak thousands of meters up. But we only had enough time to stay one night. We had to hike out.

It was still worth it, though. We got to cross a glacier, see an avalanche on the lower part of the mountain (avalanche frequency is why they call it Killer Mountain, and it's one of the most difficult to climb), and spend a night in a snow-covered base camp just below a famous hunk of rock.

And we can say we did it all through a snowstorm.

Well, it did actually snow all night, as I'm showing off a fresh layer on the trees here. But it was just a snow drizzle, not a storm.

Here's our trusty guide/cook (left) and porter (right), back in the relative comforts (very relative) of Tarashing. For us, the guide is famous for cooking us French fries in camp. Yes, French fries camping!

And we'll remember the porter for looking like he was sixty years old or something.

It's not necessarily an easy thing for a Western conscience, loaded with liberal guilt, to watch a man old enough to be your father take a large pile of your belongings, wrap them rudimentarily in a much-knotted piece of expedition-castaway climbing rope, then shoulder the whole load for five hours of up.

It's even harder on the conscience when you see him walking through the snow in molded plastic sneakers (yes, really, molded plastic; in my memory they even have a little shoelace pattern molded into them to make them look more like sneakers...). And when he asks you for some ointment because the rope has made a deep gouge in his so-rough-it's-hard-to-look-at-them hands. But it's extra money for him, especially with few tourists coming these days, and we couldn't have carried it all ourselves, so...

Of course, the next morning was clear! But it wasn't like we could hike the five hours back up to base camp real quick. So we had to enjoy the view from Tarashing town.

The highest peak in the photo, the one toward the left, is actually the top of Nanga Parbat. It's just that only the tippy-top is the peak itself and the rest is that pesky lower mountain in the way...

It's amazing to me that folks live in these high villages directly beneath indescribably spectacular mountain ridges like this one.

It was spring planting time while we were there, and everybody was out in the fields working, even the women. (Apparently, while relaxing by the stream isn't women's work, real work of course is.)

You know, they're still plowing with oxen and wooden plows up there. Except for the modern-packaged-goods litter and the occasional electricity line, it can seem like the medieval days. A hard life, and a very different one to witness. Yes, go, be a good tourist and go! It'll be hard travel but you'll love it!

And finally, the good face of our driver, who safely navigated us over the crazy mountain roads. Including a time when the Karakoram Highway was closed at one point for hours for construction, so he took us some back way that he knew that wound us high on precipitous tracks to see pink cherry trees flowering just below the May-melting snow line (yes, I lost those pictures too, darn it) and still got us to our destination safely before dark. That was one of the fave parts of our travel. Thank you, Noorud Din! Din, Din, Noorud Din!

So there's nothing else to say except:

GO TO NORTHERN PAKISTAN, PEOPLE!!!

The end.

(We'll miss you, Pakistan, we really will.)