



There's something about Pakistan

Words and images: Liz Keily • Suzuki DR650

Twelve countries, twelve months on the road and 37,000kms later, there are many stories to tell. Monsoon floods, landslides, broken bones, police chases, breakdowns, remote tribes and unique landscapes. But when I think of our overland trip from Melbourne, across Asia to the Middle East, there is one country I can't get out of my head.

Pakistan was the one stumbling block in our route planning from home to London. Stories of 'honour killings', kidnappings, terrorists and ill-treatment of women plagued me. Family and friends were fearful for us and implored us not to go. My 19 year old son asked, "Aren't there terrorists there?"



There were many things I was fearful of before this trip; if I had listened to those inner voices of doubt I wouldn't be on this trip at all!

There was also something alluring about Pakistan. It is home to a conglomerate of the highest mountain ranges in the world, the biggest glaciers, fabled mountain passes such as The Khyber and the eighth wonder of the world; The Karakorum Highway leading to China.

It is difficult to choose one defining moment when I knew I had fallen in love with the Pakistanis and their country, for there were many. Maybe it was at the traffic lights, within minutes of the lengthy border crossing from India. Lost in my private thoughts and marvelling at the comparative lawfulness of the traffic, a man wound down his car window asking me in perfect English if I was going to London.

"Well, yes I am," I answered, wondering how he knew that was indeed our destination.

"Oh to see the Ashes," he laughed, as his wife leaned over to smile at me.

"Where are you staying?" he asked. Within that first hour in the country, I had a policeman steady the bike as I dismounted, at the same time as a stranger stopped to see if we needed any assistance, and indeed phoned our 'host' for us.

Or maybe it was when a member of The Motorcycle Association of Pakistan (MAP) contacted me and said that he was to be our host whilst in Lahore. Or maybe it was when I received 1,000 hits on my blog; Pakistanis all over the world desperate to read positive things about their country. Perhaps it was when the butcher across the road from our hotel in Islamabad, who beckoned me in with his upside down wave to share a cup of tea, in silence. Or was it our dream ride of The Karakorum highway, towards the border with China?

Being part of the Pakistan Independence Day motorbike rally with MAP, opened my heart to the people, as the streets were alive with whole families on motorbikes, faces proudly painted in their national colours of green and white.

Reflecting upon my previously held fears that very nearly prevented us from including this country in our overland route, I felt pangs of guilt on that day of celebration in Pakistan. These were just normal people; normal families enjoying their national holiday. Starved of foreign tourists, they were jubilant to see us celebrating their nationhood. This was their chance to show the 'real' Pakistan to visitors. From that day onward, we were embraced as part of the family of Pakistan.

Riding north on the Karakorum Highway towards Khunjerab Pass and the land of giant mountain passes, glaciers and high altitude plateaus, I knew we had made the right decision to visit this amazing country. We left Lahore and Islamabad armed with hotel recommendations and phone numbers of families ahead. We were being passed through the country like a special delivery parcel.

One day north of Islamabad and we were already in the world of 'high passes' and on dream roads of twists and bends. I became addicted to watching the GPS altitude figures climb with each bend taking us another 50 metres higher. I always smiled when it surpassed the 2,000m mark and I was higher than the highest mountain in Australia! Babusar Top at 4,173m was just a practice run on our way to the Khunjerab pass of 4,693m, into the realm of the highest motorable passes in the world.

Following the Old Silk Route of ancient traders, I constantly cast my mind back to imagining the days when this was just a donkey trail perched precariously on these young and crumbling mountains. This is the world of centuries-old trade routes, leading from China to Pakistan and Afghanistan. They were not always countries plagued by war, but friendly kingdoms welcoming travellers from afar. Had Marco Polo travelled these very mountains?

Villages are nestled along the deep river valleys that were once the cradle of civilization. The Father of Rivers, the Indus, was there before the mountains. The old man's tributaries, the Hunza and the Gilgit are home to some of the most hospitable people we met on our world travels. The contrast of green against the backdrop of the brown crumbling giant mountains is a shock to the senses. Glacier-fed irrigation systems, hand chiseled into the mountains, are the green arteries winding down to the lush orchards and small farming plots, producing sweet, fresh foods. Dried apricot soup, freshly baked naan bread, fresh apples, mulberries and almonds awaited us in every village.

Ancient forts such as Altit and Baltit in the Hunza Valley, perch atop mountains peering down at the old silk route, as they did 1,000 years ago.

The most amazing part of the Karakorum Highway experience was that the more remote we were, the better the road surface became and the more spectacular the mountains became. The old silk route has been transformed from that old donkey trail to a paved, sweeping highway. You can relax, look up from the road and enjoy the biblical views above. The beautifully engineered tunnels carved straight through the mountains, and bridges of international acclaim provide variety and some fun for the intrepid biker.

Images of small wooden boats transporting vehicles across Attabad Lake have become iconic to the KK Highway experience. In 2010, a massive landslide blocked the Hunza River, slowly flooding nearby villages and forming a burst of turquoise colour amongst the barren mountains. Farmers became boatmen, providing the only link, across the lake, to the adjoining Highway.

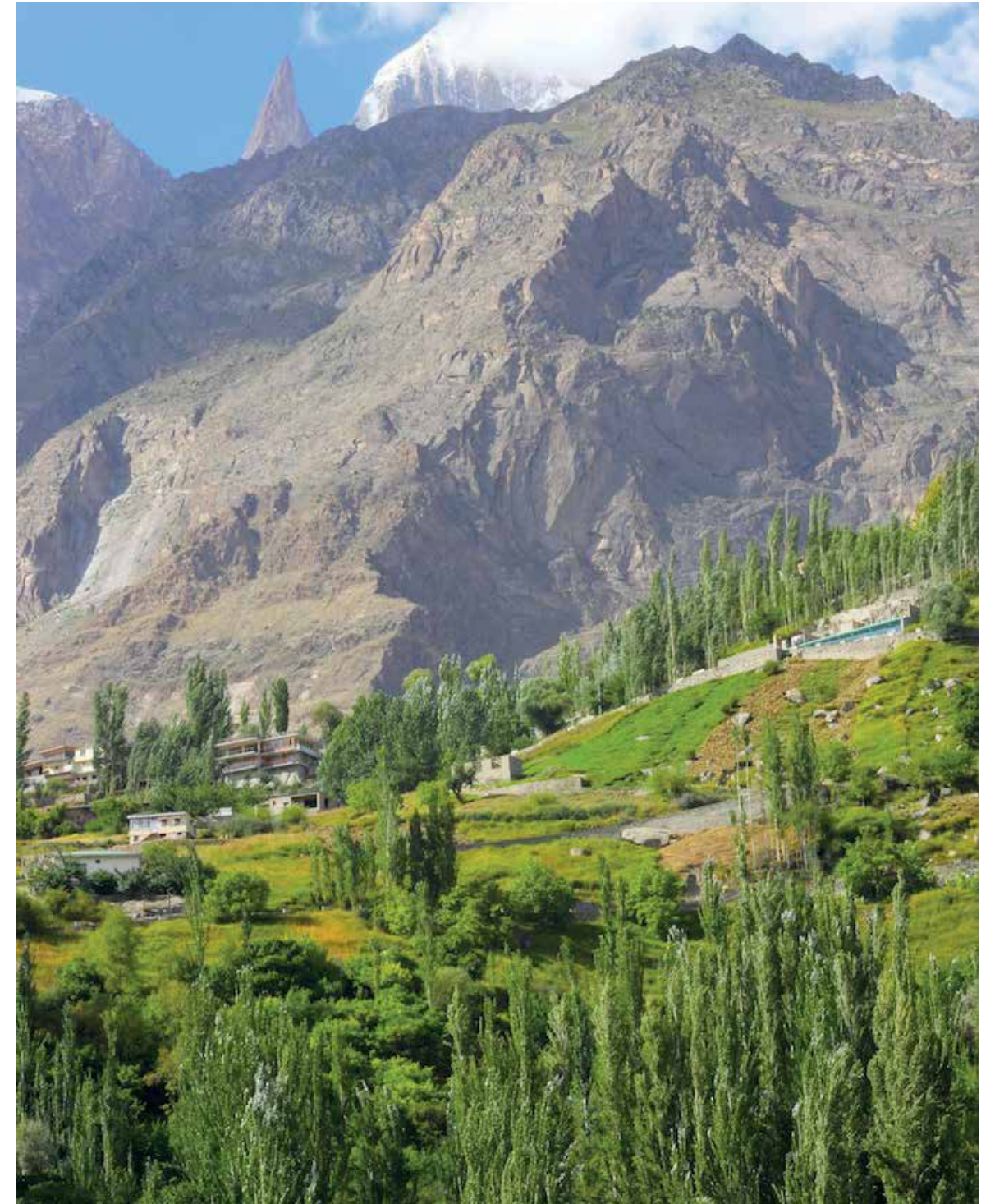
We were one of the last to enjoy this adventure of perching our bikes on the planks balancing abreast the colourful boats. The improvised transport systems would soon be just another tale in the ancient story of this mighty trade route, as the new 'Pak-Chinese Friendship' tunnel system bypassing the lake was opened just days after our visit.

Nearing the Chinese border, my DR650 Suzuki was losing power, I was getting colder and colder yet I dared not stop. If I stopped to put on my warm down jacket then there was the danger I might not start the bike at this altitude. At 4,700m we were close to Khunjerab Pass (4,900m) and so I made the decision to push on rather than dressing more warmly.

With every hairpin bend, I was gaining a significant amount of altitude and I was shivering from the ever-increasing cold. But the shivers were also from the feelings of being surrounded by these incredible towering mountains. This is the place where tectonic plates have clashed, creating the magnificent Himalayas, the Hindu Kush and the Karakorum Range. Skirting around them, on the road carved into their sides, they looked less like mountains than piles of rocks and dirt, barely holding together, ready to crumble at any time. And they do, blocking the way with landslides larger than two-storey houses, slashing through the road, taking it with them to the valley floors far below.

But not on our run, this was our dream ride. Rather than feeling afraid, I felt powerful, very powerful as I rode to one of the highest passes in the world; the highest paved road in the world and the highest border crossing in the world.





Soon, the hairpin bends wound their way to a vast snow-plain, with glaciers feeding its streams; a place of incredible beauty and truly humbling. In the distance was the distinctive archway across the road, engraved in Chinese characters; I was on the border of Pakistan and China!

But we were not crossing the border this time, as ours was a return journey down the Karakorum Highway and I was excited about doing it all again. After ten days in North Pakistan having ridden the Karakorum highway, having camped on the second highest plateau in the world at Deosai Plains and having experienced the unparalleled hospitality of the Pakistanis, we were warmly welcomed back to Islamabad's 55th Street and 'my' butcher greeting me with a smile from his window. As we rode into our hotel, I felt like I was at home and amongst friends.

I still can't get Pakistan out of my head. I want to shout to the world to visit there. I want to shout to the world that if you visit Lahore, Islamabad and north Pakistan then the locals

will treat you as a special guest. Hospitality is a crucial part of their Islamic culture and a responsibility they give priority to.

Tourism in Pakistan is trying to overcome the negative media images that have plagued the country since 9/11. The people are saddened by the fear that people have for their country and are desperate to be seen in a more positive light. They are like the naughty child placed in a playpen to protect the other children from his fabled aggression. But get into that playpen and you will find a gentle, misunderstood child, starved of company.



Yes, there is a strong military presence in the country and many, many checkpoints along the way. There are internal conflicts going on still and places you won't want to go in Pakistan. And there are earthquakes and landslides. Earthquakes are the brush of the artist that creates this land of giants. You can hire motorbikes in the major cities in the east and join a tour, or ride independently. Or you can include Pakistan in your own overland route. Adventure companies abound ready to assist with a guide or just free advice.

So where would you start planning your own trip to Pakistan? Start with social media as the Pakistanis love it. Gain one Pakistani friend and your friend list will increase exponentially in a short amount of time. Contact The Motorcyclists Association of Pakistan and they will assist you with all things related to tourism. Do the ground-work and you will have friends awaiting you before you even enter the country.

Seek advice from these locals about where to go, or hire a reputable guide. There are other travellers out there, even solo western women. But expect to be overwhelmed with people wanting to speak with you and photograph you as their guest.

As an overlander, Pakistan was the country of which I was most fearful, but the country which has become part of my soul; a land of mountains, glaciers and rivers; a land of exhilarating roads transporting me through a land of people with giant hearts ♦

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